

FLYING ABOVE THE CITY



Name: _____

In 1988, the artist Faith Ringgold created a beautiful textile piece called "Tar Beach." This artwork is special because it is a "story quilt"—it uses colourful fabric and painting to tell a story, just like a picture book you can hang on a wall! The story is about a young girl named Cassie Louise Lightfoot growing up in New York City. In the painting, Cassie is lying on a blanket on the rooftop of her apartment building. To Cassie, this rooftop is her "Tar Beach," a magical place where she can dream.

Look closely at the quilt and list what you see.

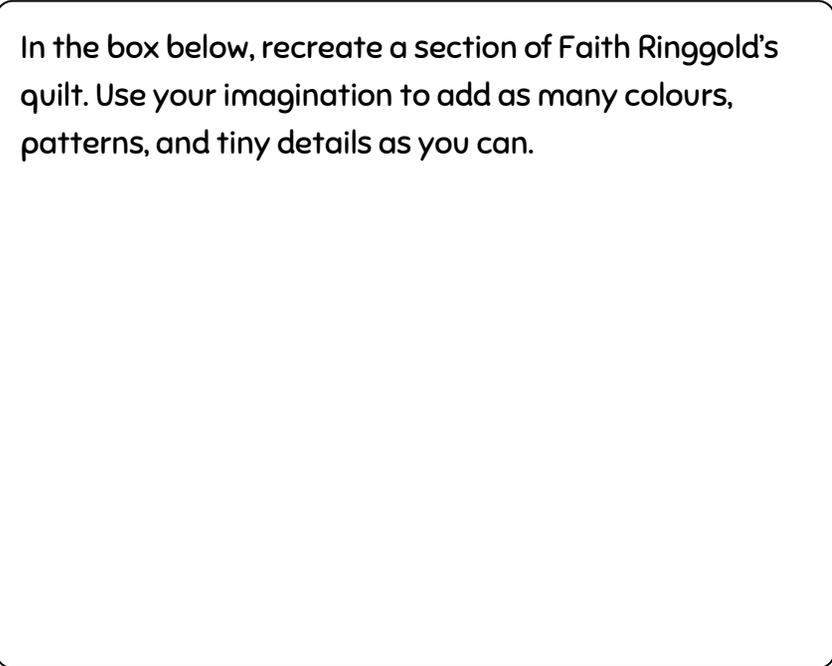
Look closely at the people on the rooftop. What are the adults doing while Cassie and her brother are lying on the blanket? How does this make the rooftop feel like a real "beach" for the family?

Faith Ringgold didn't just use paint; she used fabric and stitching to make a "story quilt." Why do you think she chose to use a quilt to tell this story instead of just painting on a regular piece of paper?

In the artwork, you can see Cassie flying high above the George Washington Bridge. If you could fly over your own neighbourhood like Cassie, what is one beautiful thing you would want to see from up high?

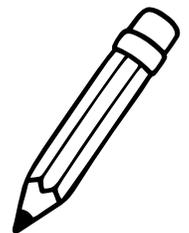


In the box below, recreate a section of Faith Ringgold's quilt. Use your imagination to add as many colours, patterns, and tiny details as you can.



In the space, create your own story quilt drawing.

- The Center: Draw a picture of a place where you feel free or a dream you would like to have.
- The Border: Faith Ringgold used fabric patterns and writing to frame her art. Create a patterned border around your drawing using shapes, colours, or even words that tell a story about your life.



Teacher's Guide: Faith Ringgold's "Tar Beach"

This guide is designed to help you lead a classroom through Faith Ringgold's Tar Beach. This work blends African American history, autobiography, and magical realism through the medium of a "story quilt."

Suggested Grades: 3 to 5 Core Themes: Freedom, imagination as a tool for justice, 1930s Harlem history, and the Great Depression.

Phase 1: Leading the Discussion

When discussing Tar Beach, use the "See, Think, Wonder" method. Start by having students write down a list of every detail they observe in the image before moving to interpretation.

- **See (The Observation List):** Have students look at the artwork for two minutes in silence. Ask them to list at least five to eight specific objects or people they see. (Expect: The bridge, the laundry, the watermelon, the stars, the sleeping children, the adults at the table).
- **Think:** Based on your list, why do you think the family is on the roof instead of inside? Why call a tar-covered roof a "beach"? What does "flying" represent if you feel trapped on the ground?
- **Wonder:** I wonder what Cassie's life is like when she isn't flying. I wonder why the bridge is the most important landmark in her view.

Phase 2: Analyzing Art Elements & Principles

Ringgold uses specific artistic choices to convey the heat of a New York summer and the logic of Cassie's journey.

- **Medium (Story Quilt):** Discuss the use of fabric, quilted borders, and acrylic paint. The texture of the quilt suggests durability, home, and tradition. It reminds us that art can be something functional and cozy, like a blanket, as well as a painting.
- **Colour & Contrast:** Notice the dark "tar" of the roof contrasted with the bright, glowing lights of the George Washington Bridge. The bridge acts as a focal point, representing a connection to the rest of the world. The yellow lights against the dark sky make the city look like a "jewelry box."
- **Perspective:** Ringgold uses a "bird's eye view" for Cassie, but a flat, side-on perspective for the adults on the roof. This separates the world of adult reality from the world of childhood imagination.
- **Pattern & Rhythm:** Look at the repeating geometric shapes in the quilted border and the patterns on the fabric. This creates a visual "beat" or rhythm, similar to a song, and honours the history of African American quilt-making as a way to tell stories.

- **Line & Movement:** Compare the straight, rigid lines of the bridge's steel cables to the soft, flowing lines of Cassie's dress as she flies. The straight lines represent the "heavy" physical world, while the curved lines show the freedom and "lightness" of her flight.
- **Scale:** Notice how large Cassie appears compared to the tiny buildings below her. By changing the scale—making a child look bigger than a skyscraper—Ringgold shows us that Cassie's dreams and spirit are more powerful than her surroundings.

Phase 3: The Worksheet Questions

Use these questions to help students reflect on the art and their own lives.

1. **Observation:** Look closely at the people on the rooftop. What are the adults doing while Cassie and her brother are lying on the blanket? How does this make the rooftop feel like a real "beach" for the family?
2. **The Medium:** Faith Ringgold didn't just use paint; she used fabric and stitching to make a "story quilt." Why do you think she chose to use a quilt to tell this story instead of just painting on a regular piece of paper?
3. **Creative Connection:** In the artwork, you can see Cassie flying high above the George Washington Bridge. If you could fly over your own neighbourhood like Cassie, what is one beautiful thing you would want to see from up high?

Phase 4: Historical Context for Teachers

To guide the conversation effectively, keep these key historical pillars in mind to help students connect the "magic" of the story to the "reality" of the era.

- **The Artist: Faith Ringgold (1930–2024):** Born in Harlem during the Great Depression, Ringgold grew up surrounded by the creativity of the Harlem Renaissance. She was a lifelong activist who fought for the inclusion of Black and female artists in major museums. Her "story quilts" were a revolutionary way to combine her training in fine arts with the traditional crafts she learned from her mother, a fashion designer.
- **The Great Depression & Harlem:** The story is set in 1939. While the rooftop is a place of community and "beach-like" relaxation, it is also a practical necessity. During this time, many families in Harlem lived in cramped conditions and lacked the funds for travel; the "Tar Beach" was a creative way to find fresh air and peace in an urban environment.
- **Labour Discrimination & The Union:** Cassie's father is a skilled construction worker who helped build the George Washington Bridge, yet he is excluded from the labour union because of his race. This meant he had no job security or fair pay. When Cassie "flies" over the bridge and "claims" it, she is symbolically reclaiming the labour and dignity denied to her father, asserting that his work belongs to his family, too.

- The Tradition of Quilting: In African American history, quilts served as more than just bedding; they were functional archives used to preserve family history, share secret messages (as seen in the Underground Railroad), and provide warmth.
- Statistics of the Era: In the 1930s, nearly 25% of the American workforce was unemployed, but for Black workers in cities like New York, that number often exceeded 50%. Quilting became an essential way to upcycle fabric scraps into something beautiful and necessary.
- Elevating "Women's Work": By using fabric and thread, Ringgold challenged the 20th-century art world, which often viewed "fine art" as only oil paintings made by men. She proved that communal craft and folk art—traditionally passed down by women—deserved a place on museum walls.
- The "New Deal" Context: 1939 was the end of the "New Deal" era. While massive infrastructure like the bridge was being built, Black Americans were often the last hired and first fired. Cassie's flight represents a "New Deal" of her own—one where she has the freedom to go anywhere and own anything she desires.



Ringgold, F. (1988). Woman on a bridge #1 of 5: Tar beach [Story quilt; acrylic on canvas, tie-dyed, pieced fabric border]. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY, United States.