



"Anyone Can Fly"

This MLK Jr. holiday, we celebrate King's unbounded spirit of dreaming and the belief that 'anyone can fly' with a fun art project based on American artist and author Faith Ringgold's [Tar Beach](#).

Tar Beach is a story of 8-year old Cassie Lightfoot, who flies through the sky on a summer night in 1939 Harlem and dreams of a life of possibilities beyond her surroundings. Click [here](#) to view a beautiful video book narrative of Tar Beach.

Use this lesson with your child to celebrate the storytelling through art. Talk with them about how artists use art to tell us stories about the world they live in. Through art we can smell the sweet green grass, feel the oncoming storm from a graying sky or taste the cold of an ice cream sundae.

As you talk about *Tar Beach* and Cassie's story, ask you child what stories they might want to tell to get them ready for this fun lesson.

Art in Action is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization
dedicated to bringing art to children for over 30 years.

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Artist Background: Faith Ringgold



Faith Ringgold in front of Tar Beach 2
photo by Grace Matthews

- Faith Ringgold, born in Harlem in New York City, started her artistic career as a painter. She is best known for her quilts that combine painting, fabric, and storytelling. She is a feminist and activist advocating for the rights of African American women in the arts.
- She has received more than 75 awards, fellowships, citations and honors, including the Solomon R. Guggenheim Fellowship for painting, two National Endowment for the Arts Awards and 23 honorary doctorates. Ringgold's work is inspired by history, people's stories, and art forms from other cultures as well as her own African American heritage and life in Harlem, New York City.
- Her first book, *Tar Beach*, based on her quilt with that title, was a Caldecott Honor Book and winner of the Coretta Scott King Award for Illustration. She has written

and/or illustrated 14 children's books (soon to be 15 with the release of *The Harlem Renaissance Party* from Harper Collins).

- Tar Beach refers to the tarred rooftop “garden” where Faith and her family relaxed in the evenings when she was a child. In the quilt, Faith recalls her memories of the rooftop where she watched the stars and imagined she could fly over the George Washington Bridge.
- Faith Ringgold paints her artwork on fabric, then sews it like a quilt, a women’s tradition since ancient times. The pictures are realistic but stylized, and the people and objects represent real memories of Faith’s life.
- Before the Civil War, quilts were used by African Americans for warmth, preserving memories, and as “message boards” to guide slaves to freedom. Symbols, signs, and codes were used in quilt patterns to transmit important information to slaves planning to escape on the Underground Railroad. The quilts were hung out to air without being noticed by the plantation owner, yet their patterns told fugitive slaves where to go, hide, or get help in their escape.

Art Discussion: *Tar Beach*



Tar Beach, Faith Ringgold, 1988

What are the people doing on the roof?

The little girl, Cassie Louise Lightfoot, is imagining that she can fly. In the words at the top and bottom of the quilt she describes how she sees herself flying over the bridge even though she is only 7 years old. She is proud of how clever she is to figure out that she can do anything she wants to do, at least in her own mind.

Who are the other people?

Cassie is lying on the quilt with her brother, Be Be. She describes his floodlight-like eyes watching her fly. Her parents and the neighbors, the Honeys, are also at Tar Beach. Cassie's Daddy is a construction worker, but he sometimes has a hard time finding work. Some people don't like him because he is half Indian.

What are they eating at their picnic?

Cassie's mom brought roasted peanuts and chicken for their adventure, and her father brought home a watermelon. What do you like to eat on a picnic? Mrs. Honey brought an old green card table. A basket covered in a red and white-checkered cloth sits under the table. Perhaps there is a cake or another surprise in it. Cassie would like ice cream every night for dessert. Could there be ice cream in the basket?

What is the weather like in Tar Beach?

It is a hot night. Cassie is barefoot and her father is wearing a cool shirt. Laundry is drying on a clothesline, and bright stars fill the sky. What is the weather like where you are?

Where are rectangular shapes repeated?

The quilt is rectangular, and the rows of quilted fabric inside the quilt form rectangular frames. Rows of buildings in the background repeat the shape, but on Tar Beach there are many circles and round shapes. The heads, basket, watermelon, and bottles are round. The long curving line of the bridge is rounded, and the repeated dots of stars are round.

What is the main color?

Dark blue, almost black, fills the sky and the tar rooftop. What colors do you see? In contrast to the dark color, the white quilt, clothing, and stars help tell the story. How would this picture be different if Cassie were lying on a green quilt?

Art Project: Story Quilt (50 mins)

Materials:

- 9" x 12" cardboard
- 9" x 12" felt in assorted colors
- 3" x 3" felt squares in assorted colors (6 ea.)
- fabric scraps
- ribbon strips
- foam shapes and foam beads
- buttons
- scissors
- glue
- yarn (12" ea.)
- stapler

At-home Supplies Variation:

Use squares of construction papers, magazine cutouts, and/or personal drawings.



Instructions:

Attach yarn to back of cardboard by stapling ends of yarn in top right and left corners. Leave yarn loose to hang quilt story. Glue 9" x 12" felt to front of cardboard.

1. Cut 3" x 3" squares into other shapes such as triangles, rectangles, or smaller squares working from sketch.
2. Arrange felt shapes on 9" x 12" felt background. Position shapes in geometric patterns, such as diamonds, triangles, or rectangles. Align edges so patterns are straight.
3. Arrange various colors and shapes to make a unified and balanced quilt pattern. Corners of shapes may touch but should not overlap. Glue shapes to background.
4. Layer smaller pieces of felt, fabric scraps, or ribbon pieces on first layer of quilt to create additional patterns. Place second layer pieces so shapes below are partly visible.
5. Glue down pieces with small dots of glue. Lift each piece, add glue, and press down gently.
6. Add buttons, foam shapes, and foam beads with glue to help tell quilt story.

We hope you enjoyed this special-edition celebration lesson. We encourage you to visit our website, www.artinaction.org, and try a free, more in-depth sample lesson.