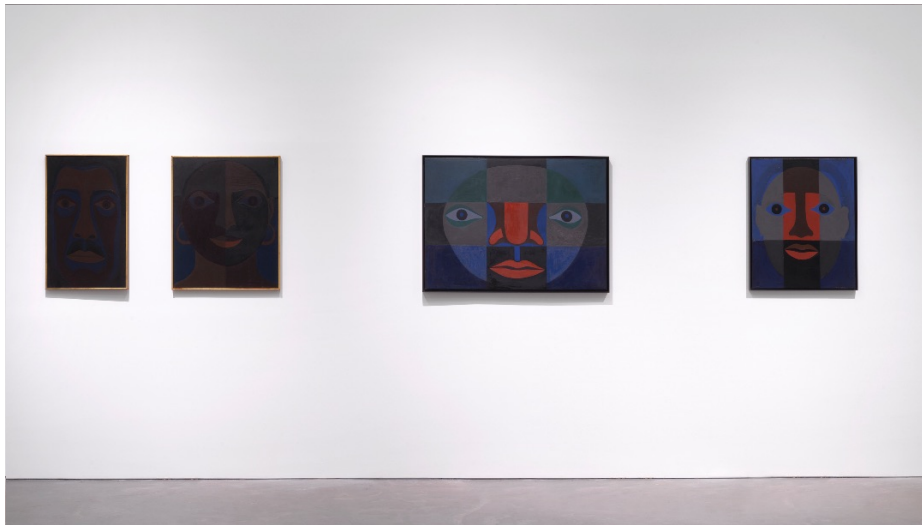


**NEW
MUSEUM**

**KIDS
MENU**

COLOR SYMBOLISM: PALETTES OF POWER

New Museum Kids Menu provides families with activities to learn about contemporary art and ideas at home.



Faith Ringgold (b. 1930, Harlem, New York, NY; lives in Englewood, NJ)

“Faith Ringgold: American People,” the artist’s solo retrospective currently on view at the New Museum, spans nearly sixty years of Ringgold’s career. The works in the exhibition demonstrate the depth of her engagement with a variety of materials and the breadth of her cultural influences, including African American quilting traditions, West African textiles, Black Power and protest movements, and Tibetan *Thangka* paintings. An African American artist born in Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance, Ringgold began making art during the civil rights movement, creating forms of storytelling, performance, painting, and textiles. She also exhibited her work in unconventional ways, through artist-curated exhibitions, children’s books, and displaying her famed story quilts on college campuses.

Among Ringgold’s innovations are the *Black Light* paintings—which avoided the use of white pigment—depicting people and using words to create protest images. The first in this series, *Big Black* (1967), utilizes a matte black ground, and creates a pattern from a grid of dark green, blue, and gray. Within this grid, Ringgold used bright red to delineate a nose and mouth, which contrasts with the dark green, blue, and gray hues. The pattern and colors in *Big Black* were inspired by West African masks and textiles, and a desire to express solidarity with both the self-reliance and self-determination of newly sovereign African nations and the Black Power movement in the United States. The near omission of white paint was a symbol of Black autonomy, while the dark hues allowed Ringgold to depict subtle undertones in African American skin through loving portraits of Black joy, love, and family life.

Placing African Americans front and center in museums, galleries, and other public spaces long dominated by white people and mostly shuttered to Black people changed the face of the art world. These paintings also gave Ringgold a voice within the women's rights and Black Power protest movements, where African American women were often silenced and invisible:

"My own need to feel a sense of personal as well as public power was in direct contrast to a world that ignored women of all races," she remembers. "For me the concept of Black Power carried with it a big question mark. Was it intended only for the Black men or would Black women have power, too?"

— Faith Ringgold, interview in the exhibition catalogue, **Faith Ringgold: American People**

To learn more about Ringgold's life and work, watch this **video**:



KEY WORDS

- **palette:** a selection of colors used by an artist, which can symbolize or represent complex ideas as well as depict people, landscapes, and other imagery.
 - **symbol:** colors, shapes, or other visual elements that stand for or represent a word, phrase, belief, idea, movement, or group of people. For instance, Ringgold uses black, red, and green colors in her art to reference the Black Power movement. A **raised fist** is another symbol of this movement.
 - **Black Power:** a movement that arose out of the 1960's civil rights movement that was intent on achieving greater freedom for African Americans and uniting and empowering people of African descent. The term Black Power was first coined by Stokely Carmichael in 1966. Symbols of the movement include the Pan African colors black, red, and green, which Ringgold used frequently in her work, including her *Black Light* paintings.
 - **pattern:** colors and/or shapes that repeat to create a noticeable or regular rhythm.
-

START WITH ART: FAITH RINGGOLD



- How would you describe the palette of this painting? How dark or light are the colors and overall painting? Which colors do you notice the most?
- What shapes do you notice? How are these shapes arranged and repeated to create a pattern?
- How does Ringgold disrupt the pattern of squares to create a face? Which colors does she use to create the features?
- Ringgold's *Black Light Series* has been described as the visual accompaniment to the Black Power movement, with her *Black Light* palette becoming a form of symbolism. What mood, feeling, or message do the colors in this painting convey to you?

Ringgold uses shapes and **symbolic** colors to create **patterning** within a

portrait. How can her work inspire us to make a portrait with a symbolic **palette** we choose?

MAKE ART

Let's create a portrait using colors and/or shapes we select for their personal or symbolic meaning.

Materials

- Plain paper
- Pencil and eraser
- Coloring tools you have available, including markers, tempera or acrylic paint, colored pencils, crayons, or oil pastels
- Optional: brushes and a small cup of water if painting
- Optional: a photograph or reference image of a person or people to draw
- Optional: access to the internet to research colors representing a place, feeling or idea
- Optional: a mirror, if you decide to make a self-portrait

Making

1. Start by deciding which colors to include in your palette. These might be your favorite colors, the colors of a flag that represents your heritage or place of birth, family colors, or colors that remind you of a season, a specific place, mood, feeling, or time of day.
2. Once you've selected your palette, think about who you would like to draw. This might be one or more people you know, yourself, or a portrait of one or more imagined people. If you're drawing people you know, look for photographs you can reference. If you choose to make a self-portrait, find a mirror where you can comfortably draw while viewing your face.
3. Think about the shapes that compose the face or faces you plan to draw. If you are drawing from photographs, try to pick out shapes you can identify in the person's features and the structure of their face, including their chin, forehead and cheeks. You can also look for shapes in your own face.
4. Using your pencil, experiment with drawing these shapes in a pattern or grid similar to the grid of squares in *Big Black*.
5. Experiment with adding a drawing of a face within this pattern of shapes, thinking about where and how to overlap features and colors to create your portrait. Alternatively, draw the face of the person you'd like to portray, and consider adding a pattern over the face or in the background around the face.
6. Ringgold chose a palette to emphasize the range of undertones in dark skin and to symbolize Black Power. Think about how the hair, skin, facial expressions, and features of the people in your portrait relate to their identities. How can you use your palette and shapes to represent their identities?
7. If the colors you've chosen are not conducive to making realistic skin

tones, think about how you can use color to represent the personality, moods, or feelings of the people in your portrait. For instance, if you associate blue with being calm, you might choose different shades of blue for the skin or hair of someone with a calm demeanor.

8. You can also blend or overlap colors to create new tones or effects, and consider how different colors look next to one another. You might want to experiment with placing different areas of color next to one another, and blending or overlapping colors on a separate paper before adding them to your portrait.

Reflection

- How did you choose colors for your palette? Do they reflect a country of birth, heritage or affiliation, or mood, time of day, or other personal meaning?
- Did you use color in a new or unexpected way?
- How did patterning show up in your portrait? What do your choices of colors and shapes symbolize or represent?
- If you were to make another portrait with a limited palette, which colors would you choose? Were there any colors missing from this palette that changed the way you depicted the face?

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Images (top to bottom): "Faith Ringgold: American People," 2022. Exhibition view: New Museum, New York. Photo: Dario Lasagni; Faith Ringgold, *Black Light Series #1: Big Black*, 1967. Oil on canvas, 30 ¼ x 42 ¼ in (76.8 x 107.3 cm). Pérez Art Museum Miami, museum purchase with funds provided by Jorge M. Pérez, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. © Faith Ringgold / ARS, NY and DACS, London, courtesy ACA Galleries, New York 2021

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