

**Impact of Art Educators: Artistic Practices, Political Advocacy and Pedagogy of Frida  
Kahlo and Faith Ringgold**

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### **Abstract**

Throughout the accomplished careers of Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) and Faith Ringgold (b. 1930), both women produced intimate autobiographical art that was exhibited in major institutions such as The Museum of Modern Art, The Whitney Museum of Modern Art, and The Louvre. Beyond their art, I present an analysis of their commitments to work as political activists and arts educators which reveals their prioritization of the social, political, and economic advancement of their respective communities. I argue that their pedagogy, as a culmination of personal and cultural interrogation and celebration, produced measurable success in impacting future generations of diverse artists and should serve as case studies for institutions that carry the responsibility of educating children.

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## Introduction

Women artists Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) and Faith Ringgold's (b. 1930) respective artistic expressions, predominantly with painting and textiles, reflect intimate autobiographical art that simultaneously speaks to the strife, joy and everyday experiences of women in their generations. Their accomplishments as artists manifest in their ability to dedicate their lives to making and exhibiting their art in major institutions such as the New Museum, The Museum of Modern Art, The Whitney Museum of Modern Art and The Louvre and maintain relevance over the course of decades. Few artists can hope to enjoy these markers of success, let alone those with marginalized identities. What makes their success all the more extraordinary is that Kahlo and Ringgold both earned acclaim while they actively prioritized the advancement of their respective communities rather than outward recognition of their artistic prowess. Despite their prolonged commitment to political organizing and art education, however, they are almost singularly applauded for their artistic successes. These scarcely acknowledged aspects of both Kahlo and Ringgold's lives provide points of interrogation that illuminate the circumstances of their early life and political consciousness and how they informed their introduction to teaching, their pedagogy, and the measurable impact they had on their students.

Ample academic, artistic, and multimedia sources are available for consideration in the effort to understand their upbringing and social position, personal politics, and cultural heritage of Frida Kahlo and Faith Ringgold. Kahlo's paintings "Mi Nana y Yo" (1937) and "Dos Desnudos en el Bosque" (1939), for example, serve as generative opportunities to investigate her effort to expand on themes of mestizx identity, heritage, queerness and femininity. Photographs of Kahlo offer evidence of formative events in her life as they unfolded and of how she presented within these contexts. The 2002 biography of her life *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo* by

Hayden Herrera and the 2005 documentary film *The Life and Times of Frida Kahlo* hold art historical analysis, archival research, and interviews with her peers that are additional sources of insight. In all, these sources help construct a holistic view of Frida Kahlo's lived experiences and training and how they manifested in her approach to teaching. Similarly, the documentary *Faith Ringgold: The Last Story Quilt* (1991) supplies archival documentation and oral history interviews that speak to Faith Ringgold's upbringing and political advocacy and how these factors influenced her artistic practice. Her story quilts *Matisse's Chapel* (1991) and cloth painting "Of My Two Handicaps" (1972/1993) are striking representations of how caring and protective she is towards her family and community in the midst of systemic oppression and her commitment to upholding legacy of craft as an artistic practice. These themes intersect in the story quilt *Woman on a Bridge #1 of 5: Tar Beach* (1988) and her book *Tar Beach* (1991) which illustrate art's potential to simultaneously encompass personal elements and larger sociopolitical implications that resonate with ancestral struggles and generations to come. The introspective work of analyzing individual positionality and personal experiences to inform critiques of larger social and political issues is difficult in and of itself, and even more so when expressed through layered artworks. Both Frida Kahlo and Faith Ringgold manage this balance skillfully and seamlessly in many facets of their lives. They make no clear demarcation between their identities as women of color, political organizers, and educators because they are all equal core elements of their personhood. As such, Kahlo and Ringgold are case studies of the power teaching artists hold when they draw from their layered identities and the mutual support of community to inspire others through the works and teaching environments they create.

The nuanced study of Frida Kahlo and Faith Ringgold and the paths they traversed requires introspection of the identities I hold and the paths I have followed as well. My lived

experiences lead me to identify with elements of Kahlo and Ringgold's upbringing in a way that may influence my consideration of the biographies and self-reflections of their lives at face value. As a researcher, I approached this paper with methods from history, art history, and gender studies which affects the forms of evidence I evaluated and formation of my argument. Additionally, my professional experience with nonprofit organizations that offer educational art programming may influence my defense of the work of teaching artists and their impact. These methods and subjective positionalities produce a paper that will highlight elements of Kahlo and Ringgold's lives that are typically not presented in conversations about them. Ultimately, curated presentations of a culture, identity, people, political movement will always exclude many others. Notoriety for a few does not inspire hope for sustainable change in arts institutions. The spotlight on these two women, however, does allow an opportunity to examine their impact on young people interested in art. Kahlo's work with students in Mexico for many years and Ringgold's career as a children's book author and illustrator point to the value of art making for the opportunity of self-expression, confidence, and community building. Outside of the validation that an institution can offer, it matters that Kahlo and Ringgold dedicated themselves to facilitating access to art for children.

## Part I: Frida Kahlo

### Childhood and Artistic Foundation

Frida Kahlo was born in 1907 in Coyoacán, Mexico amidst a changing cultural and political landscape. Her father Guillermo Kahlo (born Carl Wilhelm Kahlo) was a German-born photographer who moved to Mexico City, sponsored by his father to start an independent life abroad in the developing economy of Mexico's capital city (Herrera 5). Guillermo Kahlo met Matilde Calderon, an illiterate, devout Catholic woman at a jewelry store where they worked together for years before they married. The societal and cultural standards during this time idolized fair-skinned European people and their contributions in the form of social hierarchies informed by ethnicity and the nuclear family structure that enforced strict gender roles. As the Kahlo family developed roots in Mexico City, these cultural notions were adopted but modified in several formative moments in young Frida's life.

Evidence of the strict social hierarchies present at large in Mexico were evident in the microcosm of the Kahlo family early on when she was breastfed by an Indigenous wet nurse. This short-lived dynamic is immortalized in her 1937 painting titled "Mi Nana y Yo," which translates to "My Nurse and I." Since her mother Matilde was unable to breastfeed, an



Image 1 Frida Kahlo (1907-1954). *Mi Nana y Yo* (1937). Oil on metal.



Indigenous wet nurse was hired to take over the responsibility of nurturing baby Frida (Herrera 10). The nurse, whose name is not acknowledged in the painting itself or elsewhere, is further concealed with an Indigenous mask that covers her face entirely. The aesthetic choice to depict the wet nurse with exposed breasts and golden milk flowing out from an interconnected, root-like system in her body positions this woman as the physical manifestation of Mexico's Indigenous idols, plants, and other elements of heritage (Herrera 220). Collectively, Kahlo's depiction of herself and her wet nurse in "Mi Nana y Yo" embodies the post-Mexican Revolution cultural shift from the late 19th to early 20th century that placed the mestizx population of Mexicans in the position to inherit an Indigenous past and represent the future of the country.

There is a well-documented disconnect "between the celebratory narratives of mestizaje (social, racial, and cultural hybridity) as a formation of the Spanish colonial collision with Indians in the Americas and...the literally unspeakable violence that characterized the borderlands in the nineteenth century and early twentieth" (Guidotti-Hernández 3-4). Rather than rely on transmission of cultural practices from one generation to the next through maintained interpersonal connections, Indigenous people within and across Mexican borders were met with abuse and violence and subsequently endured flattened narratives of their lives. The mutable relationship Mexicans have to colonialism and its systemic patterns of violence is evident in Kahlo's inclusion of the nameless wet nurse that says nothing about her as an individual while attempting to say everything about her rapport with the laborers her family hired (Guidotti-Hernández 3). In this painting, Kahlo develops a narrative in which she stakes her claim to this intergenerational transmission of culture and the connection it brings. As such, Kahlo fails at her attempt to demonstrate a legitimately tender relationship with the wet nurse in "Mi Nana y Yo"

because it is an inauthentic representation of her, instead only offering a mythologized Indigenous person.

In reality, the Indigenous wet nurse made a short-lived contribution of gendered labor to the Kahlo family and their social distance from the laborer class makes it impossible to grasp the limits of her connections to them. This was by design of Mexicanidad, a cultural ideology that flourished in the process of reconstructing a national identity after the Mexican Revolution. Mexico's social rankings systematically exploited the Indigenous population while indoctrinating mestizos and creoles to yearn for the cultural richness in pre-Columbian times. This hypocritical pattern celebrates incidents where people like Kahlo, arbiters of taste as determined by their class and ethnicity, appropriate Indigenous symbols under the premise of cultural visibility. Meanwhile, dehumanizing contempt is reserved for Indigenous people who embody their authentic aesthetics, practices, and language. With regular exposure to each other, the mestizx and the native continuously reinforce the other's position in the social hierarchy. In an effort to grapple with this disenfranchising system, and her complicity in it, Kahlo paints in a visual language that speaks for her wet nurse. In this voice, she eagerly assures her audience of other new-generation mestizos that they are all entitled to claim an Indigenous heritage and adopt the Indigenous aesthetics—wear braids and ribbons in their hair, dress in clothing with intricate embroidery, and incorporate Indigenous motifs in their creative works. Kahlo succeeds in the sinister endeavor of idealizing the native people of Mexico and perpetuating the mythology that indigeneity belongs to the past, ripe for the consumption for people who signal the future, people of European descent.

In her early upbringing, Kahlo's environment and primary caregivers further generated her ability to manifest a reality where she could express herself as she wished. At the age of 6,

she became infected with polio which caused her severe pain and mobility issues due to the virus weakening the muscles in her right leg (Herrera 14). After a period of isolation to ensure she would not infect others, Kahlo enjoyed access to a treatment regimen that prioritized her healing over gender roles. Her doctor recommended physical exercise that would strengthen her affected leg, so her father ensured she participated in soccer, boxing, wrestling, swimming, and biking despite the fact that these activities would have been considered too violent for her to participate in, especially being from a middle-class family in early 20th century Mexico (Herrera 15). The decision to encourage her participation in these activities, despite the pressures of presenting propriety and femininity, reflect the privileged position of existing outside of regimented social expectations. This experience empowered Kahlo with the knowledge that her community was invested in her process of self-discovery and expression. Given the tools to imagine a meaningful life for herself early in childhood, Kahlo manifested the values and identities that were important to her in her everyday life and creative practice.

In a 1927 family portrait of the Kahlo family, Frida's unabashed self-expression is evident in her decision to wear one of her father's suits. Within the standards of this time period, young women were expected to adhere to the styles of the time which involved dresses, heels, makeup, among other styling elements. Most importantly, it is culturally significant that Mexican women embody a timid, modest attitude that demonstrates respect to others around them including elders and men in her family. This is primarily demonstrated by taking on a subservient role that prioritizes the needs and comfort of others. In making this clothing decision, 19-year-old Kahlo asserted that she was not going to meet the expectations of how she should behave, dress, or think despite the societal standards forced upon women of her time. It is also a signifier of her lifelong investment in representing her identity through the aesthetic she

developed using clothing, hairstyles, and careful posing. Her disregard for conformity and tradition carried into the fluid romantic and sexual relationships she experienced throughout her life.

A few years after that family portrait was taken, Kahlo married the famed muralist Diego Rivera and in a myriad of ways they were a traditional couple. In the early years of their marriage, they traveled together for the advancement of Rivera's art career and yearned to have children together. Within her marriage, Kahlo continued to express her bisexuality by openly engaging in relationships with men and women (Herrera 199). In her 1939 oil painting "Dos



*Image 2 Photograph of Frida Kahlo with her family (c. 1927).*

Desnudos en el Bosque" ("Two nudes in the forest"), Kahlo and a female lover are portrayed naked and holding each other tenderly. They sit in somber serenity, as the tan woman tenderly offers comfort to the fair woman by caressing her hair and holding her head in her lap. Their nudity, indicative of the vulnerability and intimacy the women share with each other, is also framed as an erotic gesture as

indicated by the onlooking spider monkey (a symbol of lust) sitting at the edge of the forest (Herrera 198). Kahlo gifted this intimate painting to Dolores del Río, a Mexican actress who is recognized as the first woman to enjoy a successful career both in Mexico and Hollywood. Given

the conservative ideals regarding gender and sexuality at this time, and the high-profile status both women became accustomed to as their careers launch, there is little recognition of their

affair. Her creative decision to depict this relationship as they are nude in a forest fits into the national move towards naturalist themes and her interest in expressing her sexuality. In a discussion about the painting, in which she is supposedly represented as the fair woman, del Río



Image 3 Frida Kahlo (1907-1954). *Dos desnudos en el bosque (la tierra misma)* (1939). Oil on metal.

shared the insight: “the

indigenous nude is solacing the white nude. The dark one is stronger” (Herrera 199). In sharing this insight, she challenges the narrative that this minimized their dynamic to a platonic relationship or a superficial, short-lived tryst and furthers Kahlo’s statements on her art making practice.

Although Kahlo’s work is often described as surrealist or within the realm of magical realism that Mexican artists are so well known for, this painting exemplifies her effort to simultaneously reflect her introspective self-identification and larger cultural ideals in Mexico in her art. In response to public reception of her work, Kahlo stated: “They thought I was a surrealist, but I wasn’t. I never painted dreams. I painted my own reality” (Art Gallery of NSW).

While her paintings cannot serve as accurate reports of reality, she crafts a narrative that reveals

her understanding of unfolding events in her life. Kahlo openly engaged in many meaningful romantic relationships with women and had difficulty being taken seriously when it came to authentically expressing the multiple facets of her identity, especially by those who were most intimately connected to her. A prime example of this is reflected in Diego Rivera's attitude towards her affairs. While he enthusiastically encouraged her relationships with other women, he was intolerant of her relationships with men, going so far as to threaten to kill her male lovers (Herrera 1999). In revealing his double standard for his wife's affairs, it is clear that he was not affected by the presence of another woman in his marriage because he did not deem them to be serious enough as to threaten the integrity of his bond to Kahlo. It is difficult to reconcile this double standard embodied by her community with claims that Kahlo was understood and embraced as an individual with strong convictions of her personal values and how they drove her art and public engagements.

## **Political Advocacy**

As the Kahlo family established itself in the late 19th century, Mexico underwent massive political transitions that shaped its cultural and political identity. The fundamental political ideologies that shaped the national identity were instituted by dictator Porfirio Díaz over the course of his 31-year presidency. As part of his political agenda, Díaz dissolved the local and regional government systems and strategically enforced allegiance to him to secure unchallenged power across the country (“Porfirio Díaz”). A defining feature of the Díaz regime was his tactical division of mestizos (miscegenated population) and the elite Spanish Creole class into positions of different rankings within the political hierarchy he established while the Indigenous population was ignored altogether (“Porfirio Díaz”). The structural inequality and abuse of power caused social and economic unrest that culminated in the Mexican Revolution beginning in 1910 (“Porfirio Díaz”). Over the course of the following ten years, Mexican revolutionaries fought to transform Mexico into a country that reflected the values and needs of the forgotten working class who were building the country’s economic wealth. The massive changes in Mexico’s political, cultural, social and economic structures had prolonged impacts on its citizens.

One significant impact on the family is evident in Guillermo Kahlo’s ability to support his family financially. As in any traditional Mexican family, he was exclusively responsible for providing for his wife and children. As he established himself after immigrating to the northern region of Mexico, Kahlo gained employment with the state. During his four-year contract, he photographed the colonial and Indigenous architecture of Mexico, which was the first of its kind and earned him recognition as the “first official photographer of Mexico’s cultural patrimony (Herrera 7). The project ultimately terminated as the Mexican Revolution unfolded and the

Kahlo family experienced financial difficulties as opportunities for other government contracts vanished and individual commissions for photographs were limited (Herrera 12). Her parents were financially burdened by the changes that the war brought, Frida felt deeply connected to the revolutionaries and what they represented. She often claimed that she was born in 1910, not 1907, because she wanted her birth to coincide with the birth of the movement that shaped Mexico into the country she loved (Stechler 0:10:00). Surrounded by the developments of battles within the war, and embedded within the conversations that informed the cultural and political ideologies that surged in response to it, Frida Kahlo was a Mexican woman enamored by the vision of a country redefined by a peasant revolution moving towards a more inclusive future. She developed her personal politics in a generative time and place in community with other Mexican artists who were inspired by current events and manifested that in their artistic expressions.

The dialogue concerning her political involvement, however, is fraught with contradictory public perceptions and her demonstrated action. At the early age of 16, Kahlo was introduced to other creatives and quickly joined them in their involvement with the youth sector of the Mexican Communist Party (PCM) (Herrera 80). Her commitment to the PCM was evident: “Frida was attending workers’ rallies, taking part in clandestine meetings, making speeches” (Herrera 94). In 1928, Kahlo became acquainted with Diego Rivera and he quickly became interested in her, including her in a mural in the Ministry of Public Education in which she is dressed in a red button-up work shirt and hands out guns to people around her (Herrera 95). Embedded within this panel of the mural, a series named “Ballad of the Proletarian Revolution,” Kahlo is memorialized within a narrative of Rivera’s construction in which she is central to the proletariat struggle in Mexico. Rivera incorporates young Kahlo as an integral





Image 4 Diego Rivera (1886-1957). *Ballad of the Revolution* mural (1926). Ministry of Education in Mexico City.

supplier of material support to publicly romanticize their embodiment of egalitarian ideals. Kahlo had the benefit of youthful energy and zeal to maintain her energy when she first joined the PCM, but her political involvement did not falter as the years and conflicts unfolded.

Early into their marriage, Kahlo and Rivera encountered personal and external challenges that impacted their active involvement in the Mexican Communist Party. As the PCM became overtly dominated by Stalinists, tensions rose and a schism formed that caused many, including Kahlo and Rivera, to be ousted from the party as they aligned more with the ideals of Leon Trotsky (Herrera 103). Despite the lack of formal Party support, Kahlo was motivated by her liberal values to lead a massive effort to raise funds from the onset of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, which she viewed as “the liveliest and strongest hope to smash fascism in the world” (Herrera 203). She remained focused on this conflict for its duration, despite the fragility of her marriage and ongoing health issues that presented many difficulties to her life at this time.

In January of 1939, Kahlo arrived in France following an invitation from the principal theorist of surrealism André Breton and his wife, who had spent time with her in Mexico and assured her that she would have their support in launching an exhibition of her paintings and establishing rapport with the Parisian art community (Zakaria). During her three-month stay in France, she came to realize that she did not have a place amongst the surrealists of Europe and that the Spanish proletariat required further support (Herrera 252). She became aware first-hand of the refugees that the Spanish Civil War created and, with Rivera's support, she arranged for 400 people to be situated in Mexico (Herrera 246). It is admirable that Frida Kahlo maintained an unflinching resolve to accomplish the work that she felt passionately about, whether that pertained to her artistic or political endeavors. Her dedication to this cause was isolating given that few others in Mexico's political groups shared her concern for Spain and what further implications this could have on political regimes globally. In all, her approach to political advocacy primarily entailed private expressions of her political ideals. Whether she was writing to her wealthy friends and acquaintances to make individual appeals for funds or leveraging favors from the high-ranking politicians whom she had gained the favor of, Kahlo differed from her peers within the PCM who were publicly vocal about the theories and causes they were concerned about within the Party meetings and publications beyond them.

Kahlo's private, zealous advocacy for the advancement of egalitarian politics was further demonstrated through her involvement in arranging safe refuge in Mexico for Leon Trotsky and his wife Natalia Sedova. In 1937, Trotsky and Sedova had been displaced indefinitely for the eighth year as a result of Stalin's order for them to be exiled, which later escalated into an order to be assassinated (Rummel 112). Inspired by the compromised state of the esteemed Communist figures, Diego Rivera led the effort to petition the Mexican government, appealing directly to the

sympathetic liberal President Lázaro Cárdenas, to grant them political refuge in Mexico (Herrera 204). On January 9, 1937, Kahlo greeted the Trotsky and Sedova at the port in Veracruz, Mexico



*Image 5 Photograph of Leon Trotsky, Natalya Sedova, Frida Kahlo and Max Schachtman in Mexico in 1937.*

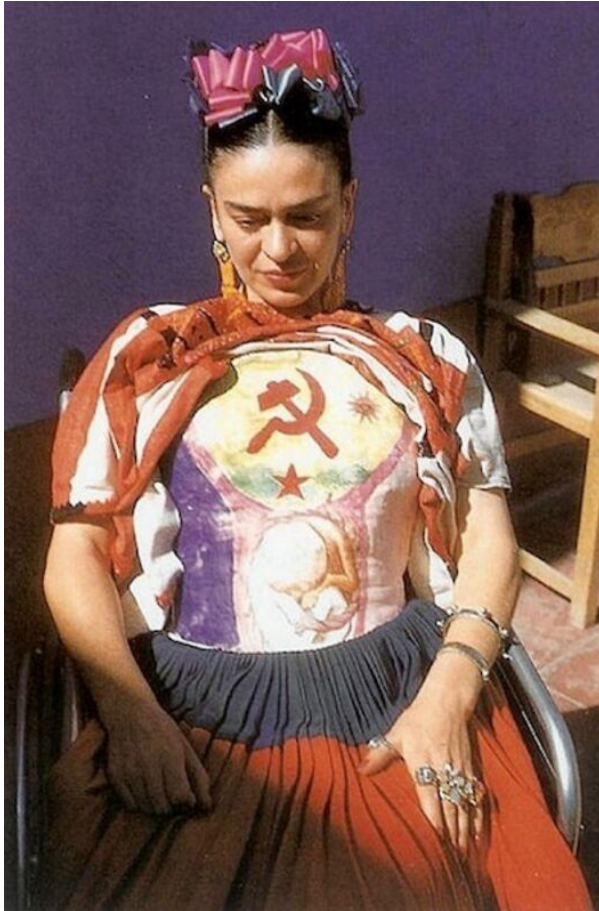
and together they made their way to La Casa Azul (The Blue House), Kahlo's childhood home that she shared with Rivera and opened to the fugitives (Herrera 205). These photographic moments of levity would soon end as personal and political issues developed within the group.

As came to be expected within the marriage of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, infidelity catalyzed a set of insurmountable problems. Only about six months following their arrival, Kahlo and Trotsky began an affair that lasted roughly a month and seemingly did not garner much sentimentality from Kahlo, who referred to him by the condescending nicknames such as “the old man” and “Little Goatee” (Rummel 114). The tension grew while Kahlo was abroad in 1938 as the mutual respect and solidarity that Rivera and Trotsky enjoyed began to dissolve: Rivera left Trotsky's Fourth International Party which Trotsky deemed as a marker of “the moral death of Diego himself” (Herrera 246-249). The bitterness that settled in between the pairs came to an irrevocable end when Trotsky and Sedova left La Casa Azul in April of 1939, leaving behind the self-portrait Kahlo gifted him on his birthday in November of 1937 (Herrera 249; Rummel 114). Despite the sacrifices that Kahlo and Rivera made to accommodate the safety and comfort of their Russian friends, the lost camaraderie came as a result of friction between the independent,

opinionated individuals who existed beneath the veneer of their public personas. As such, it is deplorable yet unsurprising that the short-lived Trotsky-Kahlo affair largely overshadowed her political engagement. Rather, her political interests were overshadowed by the public perceptions that she was an impressionable woman who was enamored by yet another influential man.

The myth that Kahlo's political life was merely a series of whims that she followed, swayed by her romantic ties and emotional needs, was harshly perpetuated by the people closest to her. In the 2005 documentary film *The Life and Times of Frida Kahlo*, Kahlo's contemporaries share cynical regards: "To her, Communism had become confused with community and she believed that it would protect her from being alone" (Stechler 01:16:00). Another person snidely commented: "I don't think that Frida was a Communist. I think that Frida was a pantheist...She wants to sacralize everything she touches. She is in love with the world as a garden" (Stechler 01:19:00). As her health deteriorated and she continued to search for companionship outside of her reliably tense relationship with Rivera, Kahlo certainly relied upon the physical and emotional support of others. It is horrifying that her desire to have basic human needs met was interpreted by her peers as indicators of weakness rather than human vulnerability and frivolity rather than a sentimental, emotional connection to all living beings. The level of contempt she endured on behalf of Communist circles can be attributed to the glorification of male revolutionaries of the early 20th century, carrying massive guns within muscular arms, memorialized in publicly commissioned murals across Mexico. It is unsurprising, then, that the country that largely forgot figures such as Las Adelitas—proletariat women who took up arms in the Mexican Revolution and made major headway fighting alongside and leading troops in battles—would understate the political power of a woman who was disabled and established her political advocacy using the resources of her interpersonal connections (Cano 1357-1360). These

perceptions, rather than being true indicators of Kahlo's political alignment, reveal the normalized bigotry carried by her peers that obfuscated their ability to meaningfully understand one of the foundational ideas of Communism, synthesized in the slogan: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs" (Marx). Frida Kahlo, however, demonstrated a



*Image 6 Photograph of Frida Kahlo in a plaster cast which she painted with Communist symbols the hammer and sickle (c. 1951-1952).*

sincere understanding of this idea in her quote: "Revolution is the harmony of form and color and everything exists and moves under only one law: life. Nobody is separate from anybody else. Nobody fights for himself" (Stechler 01:22:00). She eventually applied and was readmitted into the Mexican Communist Party in 1948 which she remained a part of until her death in 1954, at the age of 47 (Rummel 174). To the discerning, however, it is evident that in her short life Kahlo was upheld by the idealism of her liberal values in words and in actions.

## **Educator**

Apart from her commitments to painting and political advocacy, Frida Kahlo dedicated herself to her work as a teacher. In 1928, she began working as a children's art teacher and she enthusiastically encouraged her students to believe in the value of their innate creativity and individual perspectives of the world around them, strictly emphasizing: "Don't copy anymore, paint your houses, your mothers, your brothers, the bus, things that happen" (Herrera 324). Within her lessons she also encouraged play and would join her students on the floor to play with marbles and tops (Herrera 324). In opposition to the strict structures inherent to institutional education, Kahlo determined that it was of paramount importance to meet the needs of the children within her care rather than impose demands for creative and intellectual production. Her eagerness to broaden her students' understanding of creativity and demonstrate learning to be an enjoyable experience both in formal and informal educational environments.

Although it was not until many years later in life that Kahlo returned to the classroom, her affinity for children and teaching art did not waver. In 1942, she joined about 20 other instructors at the Ministry of Public Education's School of Painting and Sculpture, working twelve hours a week (Herrera 328). Diverging from the existing European approach to art education, the school, affectionately known as "La Esmeralda" ("The Emerald"), instructed students to work from their individual ecosystems: "they sent them out into the streets and fields, to work from nature" and supported its mostly poor students by funding their tuition and supplies in full for the entirety of the five-year program (Herrera 329). These institutional standards created a culture in which students were understood and valued as individuals within the school, both as a physical site and as a network of instructors. The school's embracing and progressive

culture also created an opportunity for Frida Kahlo to demonstrate care in the genuine, eccentric way that felt true to her small but growing number of students.

From the onset, her interest in an earnest connection with the school community was controversial as she humbly remarked to students and colleagues alike: “What’s this about teaching? I don’t know anything about teaching” and “How do you do this thing of giving classes?” (Herrera 329). Whether she asked these questions with the hope of receiving supportive responses or she took mischievous pleasure in the dismay she elicited, Kahlo’s lived experience as a self-taught artist prepared her for work as a children’s art teacher. Following her bus accident in 1926, she was forced to remain in bed for extensive periods of time and took the opportunity to explore painting even though her only exposure to artistic expression up until that point was the required art course taught at her high school and the muralists producing works around her school and city (Herrera 63). During this period of recovery, she made use of her father’s oil paints, a special easel her mother ordered, and subjects for her portraits, which came in the form of friends, family and herself (Herrera 63-64). As time went on and her condition did not make consistent improvements, she found herself recovering in solitude and making use of the mirror mounted above her bed so that she could devote her attention to producing self-portraits (Herrera figure 85). Even as she regained mobility to varying degrees over the course of her life, she remained loyal to her methodology of introspection and self-observation that strengthened her self-awareness and made it possible for her to paint evocative self-portraits. Early works such as the watercolor painting *Frida en Coyoacán Acuarela* (1927) points to this detailed understanding of her surroundings and herself. She includes intricate details of buildings around her neighborhood, placing them distorted angles with stark shadows, and a serene self portrait floating at the forefront to create a disorienting and intimate portrayal of her artistic skill

and vision at the time. These early years in her artistic practice continued to produce work that was a product of close looking (Instituto). Through her disciplined emotional and physical inspections, Kahlo developed a practice that concentrated on perfecting use of the materials and subject available to her which translated into her teaching ideology.

With her students at La Esmeralda, Kahlo established strong rapport with her students by encouraging them to approach creative expression through the lens of emphatic acceptance and celebration of themselves and others. One seemingly small but profound way in which she presented herself as a respectful mentor, rather than an authoritative and demanding instructor, was in the “familiar *tú a tú* basis of equality” that she instilled in her relationship with students (Herrera 330).



*Image 7 Frida Kahlo in her bedroom in La Casa Azul (c. 1951).*

In Spanish, the use of “*tú*” versus “*usted*” to refer to a person serves as a marker of

the level of respect that the person has a claim to or the degree of familiarity with that person. An instructor, supervisor, or elder would be spoken to using *usted* just as a new acquaintance would be, while a close friend or employee would be spoken to using *tú*. In adopting language that validated the equal status of her and her students, Kahlo created the opportunity for trusting bonds to develop with them. From the onset of her teaching career at La Esmeralda, she promoted a caring culture with students by sharing: “I am always learning...if the little



experience that I have had as a painter is helpful to you in any way, you will tell me so” (Herrera 330). This language simultaneously assured her impressionable students that they were all in a



Image 8 Frida Kahlo (1907-1954). *Frida Kahlo en Coyoacán* (1925-27). Watercolor on paper.

process of learning together and that her priority was providing insight and advice in accordance with their needs and interests. In treating her students as peers with valuable insight, Kahlo emphasized that success

can be found in viewing education as a life-long endeavor rather than an endeavor of mastery where success is marked by external recognition.

Her pedagogy crafted other empowering opportunities for students to feel excited about approaching art making as an opportunity to know and express themselves fully. Early into teaching lessons at La Esmeralda, she advocated for a distinct approach to critiques: “From time to time I will permit myself to make a few observations about your work, but also, I ask you, as the friends that we are, that when I show you my work, you will do the same” (Herrera 330). This approach emphasized the importance of receiving feedback from communities of creatives within the process of creating and rejected the hierarchical notion that commentary would be given unilaterally from teacher to student. Interviews with Los Fridos, four students (Fanny Rabel Guillermo Monroy, Arturo Garcia Bustos, and Arturo Estrada) who continued lessons with

Kahlo at her home when her health faltered and she was unable to travel to school, elaborate on this impactful experience. One student remembers painting a cactus in the garden when Kahlo came to stand next to him to watch him paint and then she commented: “your cactus is coming out beautifully, but not all of the tones on it are green. If you look carefully at the shadows they are lilac, purple, violet and gray and the thorns are silver” (Stechler 1:08:00). This earnest admiration and encouragement to practice careful observation to reveal the complexities of the world prepared her students to feel confident about their training as creatives.

Frida Kahlo’s investment in teaching Los Fridos generated lasting bonds and fruitful careers for her students later in their lives. Over the years, Los Fridos enjoyed full access to Kahlo’s attention and mentorship which developed opportunities for them to work on murals around Mexico and eventually jobs assisting artists and opportunities to exhibit their work (Herrera 335-341). Energized by their training by Kahlo, Los Fridos went on to form an organization called Young Revolutionary Artists made up of left-wing painters who worked to make art accessible to all people (Herrera 342). In the spring of 1953, Kahlo’s health was rapidly deteriorating and her friend Laura Alvarez Brava, who managed an art gallery in Mexico City, was inspired to honor her by exhibiting her work in a solo show in Mexico for the first and only time in her lifetime (Stechler 1:17:00). Due to the fragile state of her health, her doctor ordered that she avoid any strain whatsoever, so naturally she arrived in an ambulance and was carried inside the small gallery while bedridden to participate in the celebration of her life’s work alongside Los Fridos and other close friends (Stechler 1:19:00). Only a year after this bittersweet milestone, she died of an overdose of painkillers (Rummel 174). Within her limited but fruitful lifetime, Kahlo accomplished remarkable acclaim in her personal career while simultaneously advocating for her students to maintain a relationship with the arts. She created a learning

environment that focused on inspiration and mutual growth and encouraged her students to recognize the creative power they held in simply being themselves and sharing their perspectives. These lessons continued to have a profound impact on her students long after her death.

## **Part II: Faith Ringgold**

### **Childhood and Artistic Foundation**

Born in Harlem in 1930, Faith Ringgold was exposed to a New York changed by the Harlem Renaissance, also known as the *New Negro Movement*, of the 1920s. This movement of cultural and creative expression was born out of the political and societal changes set off at the end of the 19th century and the start of the 20th. After the formal end of slavery, and the Reconstruction period ended in 1877, Southern legislatures passed Jim Crow Laws as a means of continuing racial segregation, among other forms of racialized oppression, that African Americans were subjected to even after the 1865 passage of the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (Urofsky, Library of Congress). The sociopolitical landscape in the rural South was fraught with segregation, violent attacks in the form of lynching, suppression of voting rights, lack of equitable pay, among other injustices that encouraged African Americans to migrate North. Living in an industrialized region provided the structure of a fixed wage and work schedule which made it possible to have time away from work. This burgeoning creative energy and racial pride was intensified after the first World War, which saw the participation of Black troops in the fight “to keep the world safe for democracy” abroad, motivated to seek participation in society as full citizens in part due to the disparity in the supposed “freedom” they were fighting for elsewhere and the distinct lack of freedom they experienced at home (Library of Congress). This distressing period was some of the impetus for feelings of racial pride and progression in the Black community that emerged leading up to this important milestone, in part making possible the invigorating impact of the Harlem Renaissance and its aftermath. The desire to make room within the fabric of American society and politics, rather than be cut off, was

intense and powerful. This is the New York that Faith Ringgold was raised in by a mother who supported her daughter with a career as a seamstress.

In interviews over the span of her career, Faith Ringgold often reminisces on her experiences as a child in Harlem. She recounts: “When I was a child I had asthma and I was home a lot, not going to school. I might be home for a week recovering from an asthma attack but I had all my schoolwork. My mother would get my books and find out what my lessons were so I could keep up with my reading. My mother often would give me a little scrap of cloth and I would make something” (Craft in America). Ringgold was regularly embedded in a nurturing environment that afforded her time and materials to carry out her creative ideations. In the 1991 documentary *Faith Ringgold: The Last Story Quilt*, she recounts that her mother would bring her school books along with “paper and crayons to draw and I would get bits of cloth and needle and thread and I would make little things” (Irving). This offers a rare depiction of an artist developing comfort with their materials and personal taste that diverges from the typical grandiose terms that are reserved for exceptional artists. Ringgold’s early experiences working with whatever materials were immediately available to her and use of creative expression to process difficult situations speak to the necessity of resourcefulness and self-expression amidst times of struggle. Ringgold speaks to the roots of quilting in the United States in a 2019 interview: “It was an art form that slaves used to keep themselves warm and to also import their art because they couldn’t bring the art forms that they practiced in Africa. This was a way of them being able to continue their art in a way that was acceptable to the slavers because it was keeping them warm” (Mahdawi). This tradition of finding opportunities to create beauty and necessary tools to survive within bleak conditions informs the continuation of this quilting as an art making practice and symbol of resistance. Portraying her artistic practice burgeoning from

regular engagement with scraps of material over the course of her childhood creates a narrative that facilitates recognition of her ancestral ties to the African Americans history of quilting.

This all comes full circle in Ringgold’s story quilt *Matisse’s Chapel* (1991), from The French Collection Part I series. This work is both a recreation of Matisse’s work in The Rosary Chapel in Vence, France and an imagined family portrait of Ringgold’s dead relatives. Gathered in the chapel, they are all dressed stoically in black suits—the only exception is a woman dressed in a white wedding dress. In the text along the borders, Ringgold documents the events of a dream set in this space: “As I arrived at the Chapel Grandma Betsy was telling a story.



*Image 9 Photograph of Faith Ringgold with her mother, Willie Posey Jones (c. 1930s).*

‘There was a story my Mama Susie told

us young-uns ‘bout slavery. I never will forget. She ain’ never talk much ‘bout slavery, so when this white man ask her how she feel ‘bout being descendant from salves? She come back at him.

‘How you feel descendant from SLAVERS?’” (*Matisse’s Chapel*). The subsequent text describes

a harrowing story that Ringgold’s Grandma Betsy shares about slavery and how it haunts

Americans from one generation to the next.

The reference to Henri Matisse is a powerful decision that Ringgold executes masterfully. Her careful recreation of a work within the Western canon is incorporated in recognition of the



Image 10 Faith Ringgold (b. 1930). *The French Collection #6 Matisse's Chapel* (1991). Acrylic on canvas with pieced fabric border.

systems of oppression that have historically supported colonialism that she juxtaposes with a family portrait and quasi-oral history on slavery. Matisse's chapel symbolizes the institutional embodiment of Western colonial practices and Ringgold flattens in and pushes it to the background within

her work. The chapel serves as a solemn backdrop for a sobering gathering that comes to life with the color, texture, and language Ringgold chooses. Within this context, what prevails in this piece most poignantly is the value of criticizing these parts of history and their shared impact across time and space. This tactile depiction of oral history taking place also emphasizes how Ringgold's expertise with quilt making was only possible because of the tradition of quilt making among enslaved Black women on plantations. Manifesting the past in the present, juxtaposing the great European artists with the quotidian artistry present in textile art that Black women participated in, and creating a personally meaningful work where her ancestors can

gather as she remembers them make this an exemplary piece in demonstrating Faith Ringgold's artistic style and values.



## Political Advocacy

Faith Ringgold established her decades-long career as a multidisciplinary artist within the tumultuous political and social landscape of the 1960s and 1970s. Within an evolving landscape defined by an aesthetic shift towards minimalism, political organizing against U.S. military intervention abroad, and pushback against sexism and racism in the art world, Ringgold established a presence as a Black woman artist who advocated for Black women. Story quilts such as *Matisse's Chapel* (1991) were completed with the support of her mother, are particularly interesting as they offered her a format to answer the question: “When there is a group for blacks and...a group for women, where do I go?” (Farrington). The organizing work Ringgold carried out with her daughter, Michele Wallace, amidst the height of racist and sexist biases of the 70s and 80s led to demonstrated her commitment to public advocacy that practiced community advocacy.

The women artists of the 1970s feminist movement were motivated by different political ideologies, lived experiences, and demands which ultimately created schisms. In the 2011 documentary film *!Women, Art, Revolution*, director and artist Lynn Hershman Leeson presents interview footage of prominent scholars and activists talking about the charged political atmosphere and individual experiences women had in their efforts to make a place for themselves in the art world (Hershman Leeson). The interpersonal biases that Black women faced in Second Wave feminism of the late 20th century made it even harder to work against the institutional prejudice that was so normalized. In a 2006 interview, artist Howardena Pindell spoke about this culture: “It was sort of a built-in attitude within the institutions that it was acceptable, normal, and preferable to have all white male shows. So, coming up against that, both as a Black person and as a woman, was very daunting because it had to do with basic

attitudes” (Hershman Leeson). Not only was it a challenge to work for inclusion in galleries, it was made all the more difficult because the feminist movement was largely led by white women seeking the same level of inclusion as their white male counterparts. Black women and other women of color were fighting their battles alone. This was exemplified by Faith Ringgold’s organizing work in New York in 1970.

In protest of Nixon’s invasion of Cambodia, American artists decided to protest by stepping out of the Venice Biennale and hosting a “Biennale in Exile” in New York City that exclusively included white male artists (Hershman Leeson). In a 1991 interview, Faith Ringgold remembers the outrage she and her peers felt and how the group WSABAL, Women Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation, carried out a demonstration against the exhibition when they failed to integrate it (Hershman Leeson). With a coy laugh, Ringgold shares that the group was actually just made up of herself and her daughter Michele Wallace, “Those were the days when two people could raise a lot of hell and made everybody think we were thirty-five thousand people” (Hershman Leeson). This example offers striking insight into how Black women had to bear the burden of fighting against normalized injustice. While the women of the art world were outraged and critical of the execution of this exhibition, only Faith Ringgold and her then-teenage daughter Michele took direct, decisive action against yet another display of the systemic oppression by white, cisgender men because, as Black women in the art world, they stood to lose the most. While reminiscing on this unsupportive and difficult time, it is remarkable to hear the optimism and joy in Ringgold’s voice.

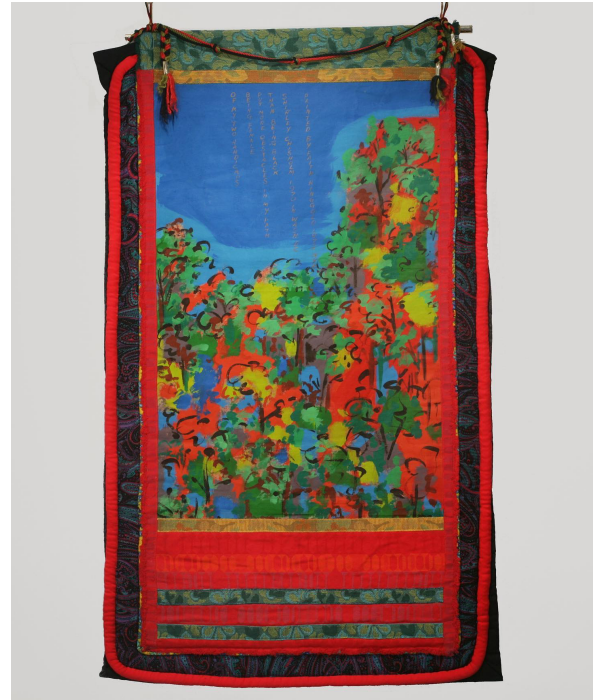
As one of Ringgold's contemporaries, Judy Chicago, enjoys recognition and acclaim at a level most artists, let alone women artists, ever accomplish in their lifetimes. From May 26 to



September 26, 2022, both Chicago and Ringgold were featured in an exhibition titled “Women’s Work” at the Lyndhurst Mansion in New York state (Graeber). The curatorial choice to arrange the installation as a domestic scene—a table set intricately with colorful wall colorful decor inviting guests to closely examine Ringgold's cloth painting titled “Of My Two Handicaps” (1972/1993) and two prototype plates from Chicago’s “The Dinner Party” (1974-1979) in conversation with each other.

*Image 11 On wall: Faith Ringgold (b. 1930) “Feminist Series: Of My Two Handicaps” (1972/1993). Acrylic on canvas, framed in cloth. On table: Judy Chicago (b. 1939). Prototype plates from “The Dinner Party”: “Virginia Woolf” and “Elizabeth Blackwell” (1974-79). Ceramic and porcelain.*

The work “Of My Two Handicaps” incorporates a quote by Shirley Chisholm, the first African American congresswoman: “Of my two handicaps, being female put more obstacles in my path than being Black” (Graeber). A close look at the painting reveals that within a scene of a lush tree line in vibrant primary colors, the Chisholm quote is written out vertically in metallic text. Along the borders, intricately patterned bold cloth hides the subtlety of the written text. In this presentation of the quote, there is a further push for the viewer to look closely to fully grasp the positionality of Black women as they grapple with racism and sexism at once. While Blackness and womanhood co-exist in her everyday lived experience, Chisholm, and by extension, Ringgold, discuss their reality that gender, above race, has marginalized them.



*Image 12 Faith Ringgold (b. 1930). Of My Two Handicaps (1972/1993). Acrylic on canvas, framed in cloth.*

An example of how layered biases infiltrated the art world can be seen in Judy Chicago’s life and artistic practice. Born as Judith Cohen, she explained that she was inspired by the Black Panthers to change her name, stating: “I didn’t feel like I had a name” and decided to make a “symbolic statement about the fact that I was taking control of my own destiny” (Hershman Leeson). It is important to validate the crisis of identity Chicago had as a result of the patriarchal tradition of passing on a surname from father to child and husband to wife. The decision to change her name and allot meaning to this choice is not harmful in it of itself. However, she is speaking from a privileged, entitled position when she discusses this choice as part of the political conversation and movement perpetuated by and for African Americans during this time

period. Such a positioning situates Chicago's experience with naming as springing from the same well as African Americans' historically, when in fact it is drastically different.

The politically charged practice of changing surnames was born out of, among others, the Nation of Islam, a movement and organization started in the 1930s that sourced ideas from the Islamic religion and Black nationalist thought (Melton). This group encouraged its members to change their surnames to confront the dehumanizing legacy of naming practices in which enslaved people were categorized as the property of slave owners, denoted by the surname they carried. In choosing to change their last names, Black Americans who take part in this practice choose to reclaim agency over their own lives in as many ways as they can. Judy Chicago's decision to co-opt this practice is problematic as it overlooks how her whiteness is in direct odds with the historic roots that necessitated the practice. The identities Chicago holds allow her the privilege of being considered a revolutionary when she appropriates the revolutionary work of others. In the wake of the disappointment and anger this realization generates, there is also a strengthened appreciation for artists such as Faith Ringgold who create works that are culturally competent, politically motivated, and committed to producing an empowering presentation of marginalized communities and their plights.

In her notorious work "The Dinner Party," Chicago presents predominantly influential white, Western women represented by place settings that include symbols such as triangles, flowers, and foods that denote reproductive organs tied to cisgender women. Set on a triangular table that also presents motifs akin to Indigenous designs, Chicago's work ties biological sex and femininity as intrinsically connected which ostracizes non-white women and non-cisgender women. Within the context of Chicago's positionality and the Second Wave feminist movement, this work is in line with the work of tokenized inclusivity towards the goal of equal intervention

in interpersonal dynamics, politics, and the workforce (Burkett). In stark contrast to this work is Faith Ringgold's 1993 book *Dinner at Aunt Connie's House*. The story details the excitement of



Image 13 Judy Chicago (b. 1939). *The Dinner Party* (1974-79). Ceramic, porcelain and textile.

two little girls as they participate in an annual family gathering and dinner party at their beloved Aunt Connie's house which also serves as a gallery celebrating the accomplishments of Black women in history (Ringgold).

This work is

impactful in that the

curated selection of women offers the little girls, an impressionable audience, an opportunity to appreciate and admire elders who helped create change that will in turn influence their access to opportunities. In this book, Black women are celebrated for their trailblazing work in a wide array of fields and times and places in an effort to inspire new generations that progress comes when we advocate for ourselves and our communities. Faith Ringgold's inclusive and deeply personal investment is clear in *Dinner at Aunt Connie's House* and is further representative of her commitment to continue to document and appreciate the work of Black women with the knowledge that dominant artistic and historic accounts will not do this work.

The 1991 film *Faith Ringgold: The Last Story Quilt*, director David Irving offers an intimate look into Ringgold's life, vibrant spirit, and tireless dedication to political advocacy in protests and in art. She discussed her state of mind in the early 1960s as she approached galleries: "I took paintings, and I took slides and I took photographs...And there weren't hardly any galleries that were showing the work of black women. And women in general and Blacks in general. So therefore, there was no precedent for saying "go here, go there." So, I just went everywhere" (Irving). Through health difficulties, discouraging comments from others, and racial and gender discrimination, Ringgold was resilient and optimistic in a way that not only carved a path for her but established a path for others to follow.

In her book *Creating Their Own Image*, Lisa Farrington discusses Ringgold's 1977 visit to Nigeria for the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) and its impact on her aesthetic. Yearning for a connection to her roots in African cultures and art making, in opposition to her Eurocentric training in college which asked her to use Greek busts as inspiration (Irving), Ringgold was struck by "African sculpture, masks, costumes, and textiles" and became interested in using nontraditional materials such as "feathers, beads, sequins, and brocaded fabrics" (Farrington). This wider range of materials offered her more ways to develop a new aesthetic that celebrated her cultural identity as an African American woman and family history given that her mother, Willi Posey Jones, worked in fashion design (Irving). However, this path also presented a risk given that these materials are considered intrinsically tied to crafts, which lives outside of the Western canon (Farrington).

Ringgold's exploration of textiles, beading, feathers, and other such materials as a part of art making became more commonplace leading up to the 1980s. As the Pattern and Decoration movement unfolded between 1972 and 1978, more women artists became interested in

incorporating elements of traditionally “folk” or “decorative” practices into their work and effectively established a counternarrative to the status quo that celebrated minimalism as carried out by white male artists (Farrington). This movement circumvented the artistic ideals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and embraced “forms traditionally coded as feminine, domestic, ornamental, or craft-based and thought to be categorically inferior to fine art” (Katz and Lowery). The exploration of traditionally feminine forms of labor was an important part of the feminist art movement that directly rejected the minimalist work of white men that dominated galleries, museums, and other art spaces. The research that Ringgold carried out was uniquely revolutionary, however, given that her methods worked at the intersection of a diasporic Black identity, womanhood, community, and heritage within the context of the United States in a way that had not been meaningfully explored up to that point. Ringgold’s art continued to explore forms of storytelling that are uniquely tied to Black women’s experiences through the period of slavery and subsequent racial biases as seen in her quilt projects.

In her piece “That’s Not Your Story: Faith Ringgold Publishing on Cloth,” Jessica Hemmings discusses Ringgold’s inspiration for quilt-making, her production process, and critical reception. While visiting the Rijksmuseum in 1972, she came across fifteenth-century cloth paintings from Nepal and Tibet called thangkas (Hemmings). Noting that these large-scale works were unframed, Ringgold identified a clear benefit to working more heavily with textiles: ease of transport and more complete incorporation of traditionally feminine work that pushed back against established views of what is considered art (Hemmings). In addition to the diverse fabric and symbols Ringgold was interested in, she also saw this as an appealing medium to incorporate text and publish her stories more freely. When working on her memoir, Ringgold recalled the reasons her publisher provided as explanation for finding her story inauthentic: “Because most of



the writers, black women writers, who had written their stories at that time were writing stories of all the horrors their lives had brought them. Well I am sorry. My life had not been a horror” (Hemmings). To Ringgold, the challenges that came with devoting her artistry to story quilts were well worth the reward of expressing herself fully artistically and politically. Faith Ringgold’s work with her mother and daughter to advocate for their place in the art world and for sociopolitical opportunities and celebration of traditional feminine, folk art is evidence of her unwavering dedication to uplifting her community.

## **Educator**

The question of what makes an artist great has typically been focused on the criteria of exceptionalism and originality. An artist can only hope to become a household name by producing one-of-a-kind masterpieces that infiltrate major galleries and museums, protected by pristine glass cases. In *The Andy Warhol Diaries*, the 2022 biopic of Andy Warhol streaming on Netflix, for example, the development of his ideas for pop art pieces were dutifully carried out by a team of assistants he met in New York queer social circles. Warhol did not pay his assistants wages, instead allowing them to stay in his studio space in exchange for their labor. He is not alone in being permitted, and even encouraged, to carry out a career as an artist in this way. White male artists rely on their muses for inspiration and assistants for technical execution of their ideas while claiming all of the accolades. The ambitions in Faith Ringgold's career are twofold: to establish her name in the prominent galleries and museums of New York and ensure that other artists of color can enjoy the same recognition. Her unique balance of personal aspiration and public advocacy for inclusivity and diversity in the arts exemplify a model of artistic success that emphasizes the need for creative expression at a fundamental, community-wide level.

From the beginning of her career, Faith Ringgold has been an educator. Despite nurturing and acknowledging her talent for creative expression from a young age, her family could not imagine a world in which she could enjoy a successful career as an artist. This was not because they did not appreciate and value her creativity. They simply saw teaching as a direct path to a sustainable, fulfilling way for her to provide herself a content life. Ringgold explained: "To be a teacher is a professional job that is popular among African Americans in the south because they had segregated schools, so in my family that was something that people did. My great-

grandfather being the first, Professor B.B. Posey” (Craft in America). Support in her family was closely entwined with encouragement to navigate the reality that there was no established path to follow for women of color in the arts. In acknowledgment of the history and value of this teaching tradition among Black Americans, and how it manifested in her own family over generations, Faith Ringgold was motivated to experiment with crafting a teaching career.

Within her college community, Ringgold began to develop a strong sense of how she could leverage a career as a teacher to achieve her two professional goals. She spoke about these early years in her working life: “When I went to The City College of New York in 1948, they asked me: ‘What are you planning to be?’ Well if you put it like that, I want to be an artist and I was told we don’t offer that degree to women, but one woman there said, ‘Wait a minute, you can major in art and minor in education and be an art teacher’” (Craft in America). There was an established prejudice that pushed women with creative sensibilities to careers in teaching. At this time, white men dominated the art world almost exclusively with some exceptions in the form of white women. This created a toxic cycle in which women of color were pushed into paths that underestimated their capacity and perpetuated the derogatory view of teaching as a simple endeavor, especially teaching children, as compared to the work of making a career in the subject they teach. It was easier to imagine that someone like Faith Ringgold would teach the next great American artist rather than see her own talent as deserving of attention in galleries and museums.

These expectations did not discourage Ringgold in her effort to carve out a path that could lead to opportunities and recognition in the arts for herself and others like her. After completing her undergraduate degree, she began teaching at an elementary school and encountered students who motivated her in distinct ways. When recounting her work with young students, she shares the delight of seeing a student’s eyes light up when they realize they are capable of translating

the images and stories in their imaginations into an art project (Irving). She also makes important mention that even if she felt her students lacked interest in developing a strong visual aesthetic in their work, she never saw this as a lack of ability and so she continued to motivate them all the same (Irving). In Ringgold's classroom, the priority was to develop a joyous approach to learning and making for the predominantly children of color that she taught rather than instill a limiting criterion of the correct and incorrect ways to be creative. Echoes of this ideology are seen in June Jordan's essay "The Creative Spirit and Children's Literature": "Children are the ways that the world begins again and again. If you fasten upon that concept of their promise, you will have trouble finding anything more awesome, and also anything more extraordinarily exhilarating than the opportunity or/and obligation to nurture a child into his or her own freedom" (Jordan). As an author of children's books in the 1970s, "a time where both Black nationalist and library driven publishing models made children's books by Black mothers marketable," Jordan saw children's literature as a pivotal part of an intergenerational effort to correct the harmful misinformation about their own histories, attack capitalist and white supremacist values, and perpetuate the idea that "the birth of Black children is cause for celebration" (Gumbs, Martens & Williams 24). This loving appreciation of and advocacy for children generally, and especially within the Black community, helps illustrate the radical implications of education when approached from the position of confronting history and transforming American society to adopt a more culturally conscious framework. Through Augusta Savage, a sculptor and educator, we have another example of a teaching artist who understood her full potential to create opportunities to make art accessible. She moved to New York from Florida in 1921 and steadily earned acclaim and commissions for her realistic sculpting work (Jones). Savage earned a scholarship that took her to Paris in 1929 and upon

returning to the United States she founded “the Savage Studio of Arts and Crafts in Harlem where she trained many other artists of the Harlem Renaissance” (Jones). Historically, Black women artists face the unique challenge of being denied opportunities in the still white male dominated spaces in the art world on the basis of their race and gender. Both Augusta Savage and Faith Ringgold were tenacious in their efforts as artists and educators to create opportunities for themselves and generations to come. They recognized the identities that marginalized them in American society as the sites for meaningful connection with their community.

Throughout the span of her career, Faith Ringgold has earned well-deserved acclaim for the powerful themes and captivating detail work depicted in her paintings, story quilts, and children’s books. In 1991, she published her first children’s book *Tar Beach*, based on a story quilt *Woman on a Bridge #1 of 5: Tar Beach* that was completed in 1988, depicting the story of a little girl named Cassie Louise Lightfoot and her life in and understanding of New York City (Buck). She centers the perspective of an eight-year-old girl who is keenly aware of the economic difficulties her family faces yet motivated to do anything she wants to do with her life: “I can fly. That means I am free to go wherever I want for the rest of my life” (Ringgold). This short yet poignant story offers a heartening representation of girlhood, Blackness, city life, and economic difficulty that directly challenges the social expectations of children who have lives like Cassie Louise. It is important to note that the book exactly follows the text that is included in the original story quilt and the illustrations featured prominently in the book are isolated segments of the larger piece that were enlarged to closely follow the narrative as it unfolds. As such, Ringgold indicates that her art and books are meant for all audiences and therefore trusts children’s ability to engage with complex stories and discern the larger implications of the

narrative. Over the course of thirty years, Ringgold has published more than twenty books for children that similarly celebrate and inspire her community by simply telling their stories.

It is impossible to know how many people Ringgold has impacted by means of her works. The moving 2017 short film “The Ancestors Came” by Cecile Emeke depicts Ringgold reading an excerpt of *Tar Beach* and talking about her childhood spliced with documentary-style videos of a city and surrealist clips of three children playing and wandering through a lush forest. In the last moments of the film, Ringgold looms by some sparse trees, seemingly beckoning to the children deeper within the forest: “Hide little children so that you can be free to be. Free to be” (Emeke 00:05:10). This moving assurance to the vulnerable children in her community that she is looking over them to ensure their well-being and freedom to be anything they want to be encapsulates the impetus behind her work as an author of children’s books. Faith Ringgold was pushed into the difficult work of leading movements to demand large-scale change and can now assure the next generation of Black children that there are spaces where their lived experiences and individual perspectives are safe to explore and express.

## Conclusion

The famous works of Faith Ringgold and Frida Kahlo boast the unique quality of inspiring awe and a sense of connection to the artists and the narratives they embody. Although both Kahlo and Ringgold found difficulty connecting to their cultural, artistic, and political communities at the beginning of their careers, they continuously demonstrated their genius ability to depict their timely perspectives of womanhood, culture and heritage, politics, among other massive themes. However, an undue consequence of time and notoriety is the endeavor to make these two figures accessible to audiences in the art world that are still mostly white.

I have never had the opportunity to appreciate the work of Frida Kahlo without mention of her husband Diego Rivera. In order to avoid her queerness and disability, western audiences fall on the framework of the nuclear family and her childlessness to understand her multifaceted life. In the presentations of Faith Ringgold, curators prominently place her work alongside that of women like Judy Chicago without consideration that they are not in community with each other, then or now. As a Black woman, Faith Ringgold's effort to make a name for herself in the 1970s was distinct from the plight of her white colleagues. Outside of the institutions they navigated, both Kahlo and Ringgold understood their power in their community as bearers of personal power to advocate for each other for generations to come.

Growing up in California within a transmuted version of Mexican culture, inculcated with the support of an immigrant mother and U.S.-born Mexican father, I was similarly made aware of the effort required to be conscious of and excited about my heritage. My mother forbade me from speaking English with her to ensure I did not lose the ability to speak her native tongue, often sharing her knowledge of Mexican history, and my father chaperoned me to dance lessons where I fell in love with danza folclórica (traditional Mexican dances). These

opportunities offered me points of connection to people who recognize me without knowing my name. The saying “la sangre llama” is uttered widely as an assurance across communities of the Latinx diaspora. In its simplicity, the meaning is profound: Latinxs have an ingrained love for one another that, when we find each other in places far from our motherland, makes a home anywhere. I vividly remember seeing Frida Kahlo’s work in an exhibition in Los Angeles when I was 11-years-old and saw her work as the medium through which she made the personal familiar. Coming to know and appreciate the work of Faith Ringgold through academic and museum contexts, I can recognize her as someone who similarly reaches out to the Black diaspora with extended arms. In the effort to preserve our culture and artistic practices, Kahlo and Ringgold set the example of how to put action behind the love we have for the people we see ourselves in community with.

Spaces of learning are uniquely powerful in pushing educators to connect with their own understandings of knowledge production while also inspiring them to support the diverse needs and experiences of children. It is no surprise, then, that the works of Kahlo and Ringgold are often found in the educational programming of non-profit organizations, museums, popular media, and schools that hold the colossal responsibility of celebrating children as individuals and as a creation of their ancestors.



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