

AP[®] ART HISTORY

2010 SCORING GUIDELINES

Question 5

Left: Faith Ringgold, *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?* 1983

Right: Blank

5. The work shown is the story quilt *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?* (1983) by Faith Ringgold.

Analyze how the artist's choices of imagery and medium address the social issues of race and gender. (10 minutes)

Background:

This question asks students to analyze how the artist addresses race and gender. It requires students to think about the context of the work and the artist's choice of materials. Students are presented with a complex combination of text and image presented in a nontraditional medium that has often been viewed simply as a craft practiced by women. The objective is for students to recognize the choice of the medium of quilt as it relates to women and/or feminism. In addition, Ringgold's use of the "Aunt Jemima" stereotype gives students an opportunity to discuss the treatment of race. This is a complex question, and scorers must view students' responses holistically.

Quilting is a traditional craft that has long been associated with women. A quilt is a bedcover made of two sheets of cloth encasing a layer of padding for warmth. Quilt making may have been practiced as early as ancient Egypt but didn't become widespread in the United States until the mid-nineteenth century, when the industrial production of fabric relieved women of the tasks of spinning and weaving. The proliferation of sewing machines in the 1850s aided the production of quilts. There is folklore about certain quilts being hung outside safe houses as a signal to runaway slaves, but there is no historic evidence to support this idea. Nevertheless, quilting is an important tradition within the African American culture.

Faith Ringgold (b. 1930) grew up in Harlem and attended the City College of New York. She graduated with a B.S. in art in 1955 and taught in the New York City public schools and later at the University of California, San Diego. Early in her career, Ringgold faced the challenge of entering an art market that was dominated by white male artists and gallery owners. She became an active protestor against the dominant politics of the art world, demonstrating for equal representation for women and minorities. During the 1960s and early 1970s, she produced highly charged paintings focusing on race. The civil rights movement, the women's movement and the black power movement informed her work. Later she became interested in African culture and art and traveled to West Africa in 1976 to study textiles, masks and sculpture. In the early 1980s she began to collaborate with her mother, fashion designer Willi Posey. Their first collaboration combining painting and fabric was based on *thangkas*, portable devotional paintings from Tibet. In 1980 they produced a quilt for an exhibition called *The Artist and the Quilt*.

The death of her mother in 1981 inspired Ringgold to begin a series of quilts that quickly evolved into story quilts, her signature medium. These works combined the two traditions of quilting and the folk tale. *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?* was the first of many story quilts. The story begins with a description of the parents of Aunt Jemima. When they disapprove of Jemima's fiancé, she elopes with him to Florida, and the couple goes to work as domestic servants. Ringgold wrote the story of Jemima Blakey in vernacular dialect and sewed it into the quilt:

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Jemima could do anything she set her mind to. When Ma Tillie and Pa Blakey, Jemima's Ma and Pa, forbid her to marry Big Rufus Cook on account a they wanted her to marry a preacher, Jemima up and marry Big Rufus anyway, and they run off to Tampa, Florida to work for Ole Man and Ole Lady Prophet cookin, cleanin and takin care a they chirun, somethin Jemima never had to do livin in her Ma and Pa's comfortable home in New Orleans.¹

When her employers die in a fire, Jemima is named in the will and uses her inheritance to open a successful catering business in Harlem. She has two children who grow into adults and marry. Jemima's daughter chooses an evil man to wed. At the end of the story, Jemima inherits her parents' house in New Orleans and moves there to open another restaurant. Her life is cut short, along with that of her husband Big Rufus, in a fatal car accident, and their bodies are brought back to Harlem for a traditional "African funeral." Jemima's daughter and her evil husband inherit the new restaurant along with the family home in New Orleans. The story concludes with the words, "Now, who's afraid of Aunt Jemima?"

In the story, Ringgold turns Aunt Jemima, the well-known "mammy" stereotype, into a successful African American businesswoman. The other characters in the story, whether black or white, have varying degrees of good and bad qualities. Ringgold wanted her characters, the family and friends of Aunt Jemima, to be real human beings instead of oversimplified stereotypes. The Aunt Jemima quilt, a tribute to Ringgold's mother, addresses autobiographical themes as well as larger issues confronting African Americans and the struggles of women. In essence, the artist aimed to reclaim and redefine the Aunt Jemima stereotype.

The Aunt Jemima character originated in minstrel shows in the 1800s and was then used, as it continues to be used, in the advertising of baking products. By 1900, more than two hundred thousand Jemima dolls and one hundred-fifty thousand Jemima cookie jars had been sold. Aunt Jemima was also maligned as an overweight and servile version of the "mammy" archetype, a female Uncle Tom. Ringgold took issue with this derogatory depiction of Aunt Jemima and sought to recharacterize her in a positive light. In addition, the artist identified Jemima with her own struggle with obesity, which eventually became a theme for another story quilt. Ringgold envisioned Jemima as a sort of "super mom" and considered her a salient issue for black feminists. She wrote in her autobiography,

Just think of her strength. No one ever raped Aunt Jemima. They hate her because she is not vulnerable. Isn't she the one who takes care of the children — her own and everyone else's — and yet is able to make something of her life? Isn't she the ultimate female survivor, the one mainly responsible for keeping us together — as necessary to the family as to the race? Don't you think she's the sacrificial lamb who loves those who often don't love her?²

Writer Nagueyalti Warren elucidates another perspective of Aunt Jemima:

African American resentment regarding Aunt Jemima stemmed not from a rejection of the maternal or domestic image she presented, but from unabashed attempts to create, with this single image, a monolithic African American woman and market her to the world.³

1. Faith Ringgold, *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?* (1983).

2. Ringgold, F. (1995). *We Flew Over the Bridge, The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold*. Little, Brown & Co.

3. Retrieved July 20, 2010, from <http://www.answers.com/topic/aunt-jemima>

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Question 5 (continued)

In addition to the text, Ringgold stitched embroidered portraits on canvas into the quilt. Other sections have the triangular patterns common in the traditional quilts of early America. This tradition was associated with women, as they were the main producers of this utilitarian art. This links the work to the feminist movement. While Ringgold considers herself a feminist, it is notable that she received mixed messages from the African American community when she became involved in the feminist movement in 1970. “Being black and feminist,” she said, “was equivalent to being a traitor to the cause of black people.”⁴ Ultimately, these complex identity issues became woven into the patchwork of Ringgold’s oeuvre.

Students have four tasks:

- (1) They must analyze how the imagery addresses the social issue of race.
- (2) They must analyze how the imagery addresses the social issue of gender.
- (3) They must analyze how the choice of medium addresses the social issue of race.
- (4) They must analyze how the choice of medium addresses the social issue of gender.

Better responses will address contextual issues such as the civil rights movement, stereotyping, race relations, feminism, appropriation and the black arts movement (in particular, artists such as Jeff Donaldson, Betye Saar and Joe Overstreet, who dealt with this Aunt Jemima totem). These responses will identify the quilt as a traditional medium within the domestic sphere relating to women.

Weaker responses will describe the work without connecting it to its social context. These responses will not probe the significance of the quilting medium or the use of a racial caricature.

Reminder: This is a complex question that must be interpreted holistically. Valid points could be intertwined.

Points to remember:

- Although the work is fully identified, it is not in all textbooks, so some students might not have seen it in class. Students should still be able to critically analyze the work and its context.
- Students must analyze the artist’s choice of **both** imagery and medium.
- Students must analyze how the artist addresses **both** race and gender. Points might include:
 - Stereotypes
 - African American identity
 - Dialect
 - Servitude
 - Advertising
 - Power
 - Feminism
 - The domestic sphere
 - Appropriation
- This question addresses social context and provides students a chance to demonstrate critical thinking related to cultural references and the dialogue they bring forth. The title of the work itself should be an impetus for discussion.
- This is a 10-minute question.

4. Ringgold, F. (1995). *We Flew Over the Bridge, The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold*. Little, Brown & Co.

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Question 5 (continued)

Scoring Criteria

Score Scale 0–4

- 4** Analyzes with specificity how both the imagery **and** the medium address issues of race **and** gender.
- 3** Analyzes with less specificity how both the imagery **and** the medium address issues of race **and** gender. May be unbalanced or contain minor errors.
- 2** Describes rather than analyzes how both the imagery **and** the medium address issues of race **and** gender.
OR
Analyzes how the imagery **or** medium address issues of race **and** gender.
- 1** Describes rather than analyzes the imagery **or** the medium in addressing race and/or gender.
- 0** Makes an attempt, but the response is without merit because it fails to analyze the work or makes only incorrect statements.
- This is a nonresponse, such as a blank paper, crossed-out words or personal notes.

5. The work shown is the story quilt *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?* (1983) by Faith Ringgold. 5 A

Analyze how the artist's choices of imagery and medium address the social issues of race and gender. (10 minutes)

Throughout this work, African Americans and women are portrayed having professional occupations similar to white males. Faith Ringgold, an African American woman, is thus trying to ~~elevate~~ emphasize equality and is speaking out against discrimination by race ^{and} gender. Specifically, Ringgold gives the example of Aunt Jemima. Relating to the African American woman, Ringgold attacks the stereotype that the syrup company portrays her as. ^{→ 2nd Paragraph} The medium itself is important because and keeps in line with feminine ideas. Traditionally, women have made quilts and quilts are often connected with feminine art. Many feminists, ~~are~~ such as Ringgold, argued that women had been doing what Picasso and Cubism ~~does~~ ^{long} before either did with Cubism a long time before Picasso then.

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5. The work shown is the story quilt *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?* (1983) by Faith Ringgold. 5B

Analyze how the artist's choices of imagery and medium address the social issues of race and gender.
(10 minutes)

The artist's choice of imagery of ~~the~~ different types of people on the quilt with happy faces. ~~Maybe~~ Saying that they are all one of the same since everyone at the time generalized black women to ~~be~~ all being like Aunt Jemima a happy face, round Manny. ~~The~~

Ringgold did this work on a quilt to ~~be~~ ~~to~~ address social issues with gender as well as race ~~so~~ because quilting is a traditionally female task and art form.

She is making a statement that all African Americans can't be generalized ~~to~~ to be Aunt Jemima ~~and that~~. In a feminist way of being proud of her race as well as gender.

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5. The work shown is the story quilt *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?* (1983) by Faith Ringgold. 5C

Analyze how the artist's choices of imagery and medium address the social issues of race and gender.
(10 minutes)

The artist, Faith Ringgold, uses a common tradition of making quilts in the African-American community and translated it into her own life experiences. It gives multiple views of how different races and genders are seen in her eyes, Most of which are black women. This ~~part~~ work displays cultural diversity and capabilities of every individual, From the little girl in the dress to the ~~doctor~~ African American male doctor.

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2010 SCORING COMMENTARY

Question 5

Overview

This question asked students to analyze how the artist addresses race and gender. It was intended to make students think about the context of the work and the artist's choice of materials. Students were presented with a complex combination of text and image presented in a nontraditional medium that has often been viewed as a craft practiced by women. The objective was for students to recognize the choice of the medium of quilt as related to women or feminism, or both. In addition, Ringgold's use of the "Aunt Jemima" stereotype gave students an opportunity to discuss the treatment of race.

Sample: 5A

Score: 4

This essay analyzes the work of art as an act of feminist and social protest "speaking out against discrimination" in both society and the art world. With respect to imagery, the student understands how Ringgold transforms a demeaning symbol of race ("attacks the stereotype") and gender and empowers African American women to professional levels of equality with white men. With respect to medium, the student describes the choice of quilting as essential because it takes an art form associated with women to challenge prevailing notions of high art and those who create it. The closing reference to Picasso bolsters the argument because Ringgold specifically explored that artist's work in a well-known series (*The French Collection Part 1*, number 7). This essay earned a score of 4.

Sample: 5B

Score: 3

This essay begins with — but does not complete — an analysis of Ringgold's work within the context of feminism and racial stereotypes. With respect to imagery, the student describes how there are "different types of people" generalized into smiling, "Manny" [*sic*] types, but the complexity of the figures is not explored. With respect to medium, the student explains how quilting was chosen by the artist because that medium is traditionally seen as both a "task and art form" created by women. The discussion is less full than that of higher-scoring essays, so this essay earned a score of 3.

Sample: 5C

Score: 2

This essay describes rather than analyzes the choices made by Ringgold. With respect to imagery, the student notes the racial and class diversity of the figures. The essay implies but does not specify how "capabilities [*sic*] of every individual," such as the doctor, challenge assumptions about race and class. With respect to medium, the student places the work within the quilting tradition of the African American community. The student does mention that the work relates to the artist's "own life experiences" but does not say how that is the case. The essay earned a score of 2.