

Colby College Museum of Art acquires a Faith Ringgold Story Quilt

On view this spring, the iconic painted textile exemplifies Faith Ringgold's commitment to telling stories of African American resilience

March 24, 2022, Waterville, ME—The Colby College Museum of Art has acquired a story quilt, *Coming to Jones Road #4: Under A Blood Red Sky* (2000), by renowned American artist, activist, teacher, and children's book author Faith Ringgold (b. 1930, New York). It joins another work by the artist in the Colby Museum's collection, the print *The Sunflower's Quilting Bee at Arles* (1997). *Coming to Jones Road #4: Under A Blood Red Sky* will go on view in April in the Colby Museum's Alford-Lunder Family Pavilion.

Ringgold's first New York retrospective in more than 40 years opened at the New Museum in February 2022. *Coming to Jones Road #4: Under A Blood Red Sky* was featured in the artist's first European retrospective, which opened in London at the Serpentine Galleries in 2019 before traveling to Glenstone in Potomac, Maryland, in 2021.

The iconic painted textile is well-known and widely reproduced. It is one of eight story quilts in the artist's important *Coming to Jones Road* series. The artist herself made multiple versions of *Under a Blood Red Sky*, including a gouache drawing and a print, but only one that she turned into what she defines as a story quilt. Ringgold invented a version of the medium that combines painted and sewn elements, and uses it to tell visual stories in series, as if they were pages of a storybook.

Coming to Jones Road #4: Under a Blood Red Sky features the artist's longstanding commitment to painting and draws from African American storytelling traditions, performance, and dressmaking, which Ringgold learned from her mother Willi Posey, a fashion designer and Ringgold's collaborator until her death in 1981. In its composition and form, the story quilt recalls Tibetan tankas, which are sacred paintings framed in richly brocaded fabrics.

Composed of acrylic on canvas with fabric borders, *Coming to Jones Road #4: Under a Blood Red Sky* (78 x 52 in.) tells a story of the resilience of enslaved people as they make their journey north toward freedom along the Underground Railroad, a network of secret routes and safe houses that extended into New England. Along the edges, Ringgold inscribes first-person narratives of the people on the journey: "By day we prayed for the black of night to come to cover us."

In her painting, Ringgold includes a luminous white moon to offer guidance to the figures, painted in black, as they make their way through a clearing of trees amid a deep red backdrop. Night stars ring the border.

Ringgold has said she was motivated to make the *Coming to Jones Road* series when she and her husband moved from Harlem to Englewood, N.J., in 1992. Few Black people lived there, and Ringgold encountered hostility and suspicion.

Jacqueline Terrassa, the Carolyn Muzzy director of the Colby College Museum of Art, called it a “rare opportunity to acquire a story quilt by one of the most important, influential, and courageous artists of our time.”

“It has art-historical and cultural significance, due to its subject and layered meanings, its visually rich form, and in the context of Ringgold’s broader contributions to the visual art and literary worlds. We are fortunate that when the opportunity arose to acquire it, we were able to act on it through our acquisition funds.”

The story quilt strengthens the museum’s holdings of works by influential women artists and Black artists, and enables the Colby Museum to more fully tell the story of an artist who helped define feminist art practices in the late 20th century. It will be useful for teaching art, art history, American history, American literature, performance studies, and environmental humanities. *Coming to Jones Road #4: Under a Blood Red Sky* will also help museum visitors learn about the Underground Railroad, the dangers encountered by enslaved people seeking personal freedom, and the strength and cultural affirmation that were also part of these stories.

Born in Harlem in 1930, Ringgold is a painter, mixed-media sculptor, performance artist, writer, teacher, and lecturer. She created her first political painting series in the 1960s and produced her first quilt, *Echoes of Harlem*, in 1980, in collaboration with her mother. Her first story quilt, the provocative *Who’s Afraid of Aunt Jemima?* (1983), is still held by the artist. She had her first retrospective at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1984. An accomplished writer, she has written many children’s books, including *Tar Beach*, based on her story quilt in the collection of the Guggenheim Museum. Ringgold has received 23 Honorary Doctorates and over 80 awards and honors. Her work is included in dozens of museum collections across the United States and is also visible through more than 16 public commissions.

The Colby College Museum of Art

Founded in 1959, the Colby College Museum of Art is a teaching museum, a destination for American art, and a place for education and engagement with local, national, and global communities. Part of Colby College, the museum is located in Waterville, Maine, and actively contributes to Colby’s curricular and co-curricular programs and to the region’s quality of life. It inspires connections between art and people through distinctive exhibitions, programs, and publications and through an outstanding collection that emphasizes American art and contemporary art within holdings that span cultures and time periods. The Colby Museum actively seeks to increase diversity, equity, inclusion, and access across all of its work and to advocate for the community value of art, artists, and museums in engaging with today’s most vital questions.

Image: Faith Ringgold (American, born 1930), *Coming to Jones Road #4: Under a Blood Red Sky*, 2000. Acrylic on canvas with fabric borders, 78 ½ x 52 ½ in. (199.3 x 133.3 cm). Museum purchase through the Jere Abbott Art Endowment and Jette Art Acquisition Fund. Photo by Luc Demers.