



Maya's Quilt of Life

1988

Acrylic on canvas and painted, dyed, and pieced fabrics

73 inches by 73 inches

(185.42 centimeters by 185.42 centimeters)

[Left Side]

This painted story quilt is a tribute to the universal wisdom and strength of Maya Angelou, the phenomenal woman, writer, poet, thinker, and human being. It was commissioned for Ms. Angelou's birthday, April 4, 1989, by Oprah Winfrey who says of Ms. Angelou; "She is our mother, sister, friend, and teacher."

The text of the quilt is excerpted from:

Just Give Me A Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Diiie, 1971

Gather Together in My Name, 1974

The Heart of a Woman, 1981

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, 1970

By Maya Angelou reprinted by permission of Random House Inc.
New York City.

Just Give Me A Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Diiie

Phenomenal Woman

Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.

I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size. But when I
start to tell them, They think I'm telling lies.

I say,
It's the reach of my arms,
The span of my hips,
The stride of my step,
The curl of my lips,
I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me.

I walk into a room
Just as cool as you please,
And to a man,
The fellows stand or
Fall down on their knees.
Then they swarm around me,
A hive of honey bees.

I say,
It's the fire in my eyes.
And the flash of my teeth.
The swing in my waist.
And the joy in my feet.
I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me.

Men themselves have wondered
What they see in me
They try so much
But they can't touch
My inner mystery.
When I try to show them

They say they still can't see
I say,
It's the fire in my eyes,
And the flash of my teeth,
The swing in my waist.
And the joy in my feet.
I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me.

Men themselves have wondered
What they see in me
They try so much
But they can't touch
My inner mystery
When I try to show them
They say they still can't see
I say,
It's the arch of my back,
The Sun of my smile.
The ride of my breasts,
The grace of my style.
I'm a woman,
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me.

Now you understand
Just why my heads not bowed.
I don't shout or jump about
Or have to talk real loud.
When you see me passing
It ought to make you proud.
I say,

It's in the click of my heels,
The bend of my hair,
The palm of my hand,
The need for my care.
'Cause I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal Woman,
That's me.

Willie

Willie was a man without fame
Hardly anybody knew his name.
Crippled and limping, always lame.
He said, "I keep on movin'
Movin' just the same."

Solitude was the climate in his head
Emptiness was the partner in his bed,
Pain echoed in the steps of his tread,
He said, "I keep on followin'
Where the Leaders led,"

I may cry and I will die.

But my spirit is the soul of every
Spring.

Watch for me and you will see that I'm present in the songs
that children sing.

People called him "Uncle", "Boy," and "Hey."

Said, "you can't live through this another day."

Then they waited to hear what he would say.,

He said, "I'm living

In the games that children play."

“You may enter my sleep people my dreams,
Threaten my early morning’s ease,
But I keep comin’ followin’ laughin’ cryin’,
Sure as a summer breeze.

“Wait for me, watch for me.
My spirit is the surge of open seas.
Look for me, ask for me,
I’m in the rustle in the autumn leaves.

[Right side]

“When the sun rises
I am the time.
When the children sing
I am the Rhyme.”

When I Think About Myself
When I think about myself
I almost laugh myself to death,
My life has been one great big joke,
A dance that’s walked
A song that’s spoke,
I laugh so hard I almost choke
When I think about myself.

Seventy years in these folks’ world
The child I works for calls me girl
I say “Yes ma’am” for working’s sake
Too proud to bend, too poor to break.
I laugh until my stomachache,
When I think about myself.

My folks can make me split my side,
I laughed so hard I nearly died,
The tales they tell, sound just like lying.
They grow the fruit, but eat the rind,

I laugh until I start to crying
When I think about myself.

Songs For The Old Ones

My fathers sit on benches
Their flesh count every plank
The slats leave dents of darkness
Deep in their withered flanks.

They nod like broken candles
All waxed and burnt profound
They say “It’s understanding
That makes the world go ‘round.”

There in those pleated faces
I see the auction block
The chains and slaver’s coffles
The whip and Lash and stock.

My fathers speak in voices
They shred my fact and sound
They say “It’s our submission
That makes the world go round.”

They used the finest cunning
Their naked wits and wiles
The Lowly Uncle Tomming
And Aunt Jemima’s smiles

They’ve laughed to shield their crying
Then shuffled through their dreams
And stepped ‘n fetched a country
To write the blues with screams

I understand their meaning
It could and did derive
From living on the edge of death
They kept my race alive.

Gather Together in My Name.

“Baby, Mother Dear’s Going to tell you something about life...”

“People will take advantage of you if you let them. Especially Negro women. Everybody, his brother and his dog, thinks he can walk a road in a colored woman’s behind. But you remember this, now. Your mother raised you. You’re full-grown. Let them catch it like they find it. If you haven’t been trained at home to their liking tell them to get to stepping...” “Stepping. But not on you.”

“You hear me?”

“Yes, Mother. I hear you.”

The Heart of A Woman

“Sit down baby. I’m going to tell you something you must never forget.”

“Never, never let a person know you’re frightened. And a group of them... absolutely never. Fear brings out the worst thing in everybody. Now, in that Lobby you were as scared as a rabbit. I knew it... If I hadn’t been there, they might have turned into a mob, but something about me told them, if they mess with either of us they’d better start looking for some new asses.

‘Cause I’d blow away what their mammas give them.”

She laughed like a young girl.

“Look in my purse.” I opened her purse.

“The Desert Hotel better be ready for integration, ‘Cause if it’s not, I’m ready for the Desert Hotel.”

...”Take care of yourself. Take care of your son, remember...

Black folks can’t change because white folks won’t change. Ask, for what you want and be prepared to pay for what you get.”

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

...”During the picking season my grandmother would get out of bed at four o’clock (she never used an alarm clock) and creak down to her knees and chant in a sleep-filled voice, “Our Father, thank you for letting me see this New Day. Thank you that you didn’t allow the bed I lay on... to be my cooling board, nor my blanket my winding sheet. Guide my feet this day along the straight and narrow, and help me to put a bridle on my tongue. Bless this house and everybody in it. Thank you, in the name of your son, Jesus Christ, Amen.”

“The truth is a stubborn fact”...

Maya Angelou