

Story Quilts: The Bitter Nest, Change, and The French Collection (1987 – 1997)

In Ringgold's most expansive episodic effort to date, *The French Collection* tells the fictional story of Willia Marie Simone, a young Black woman living in twentieth-century Paris told through detailed letters home to her Aunt Melissa. Ringgold inserts Willia into the modernist avant-garde as a vibrant, vocal participant. The tale that unfolds over the course of a dozen quilts is a direct challenge to the exclusion of Black women's voices from art history, a project that led Ringgold on several trips to Paris, Giverny, and Aries. Says young Willia in *Cafe des Artistes* (1994): "The important thing for the colored woman to remember is we must speak, or our ideas and ourselves will remain unheard and unknown. The cafe is my academie, my gallery, my home. The artists and writers are my teachers, and my friends. But Africa is my art, my classical form and inspiration."

Change 2 and *Change 3* explore the artist's relationship to her body and continued interest in performance. The latter is a group self-portrait of the artist at different points throughout her life. The quilt hints at the existential nature of identity, asking "Can you imagine a party where everyone invited is a manifestation of yourself?"