

The Dinner Party Curriculum Project

Encounter 11: Constructing Interpretations

Grade Levels: Elementary, Middle, and High School



In this Encounter, students continue to deepen their understanding and appreciation of *The Dinner Party* as they stand back and focus their attention upon the entire installation. Students have previously considered symbolism and meaning in individual place settings. As they attend to the artwork as a whole they will review what they have learned about the work thus far and use prompts to construct thesis statements in response to the question, “What is *The Dinner Party* about?” Students’ responses to this question will vary, depending on their grade level and how much attention they have paid to the artwork and its contexts.

Prior to this Encounter, students have considered all the parts of *The Dinner Party* closely but separately. This Encounter allows them the opportunity to stand back and

interpret the work as a whole. The activities here prompt students to review the various components of the artwork and then attend to its complexity.

Investigation

The teacher will:

1. Provide reproductions or project images of *The Dinner Party*.
2. Review with students the overall installation of *The Dinner Party*, highlighting components such as the triangular table, place settings and runners, the *Heritage Floor* and *Panels*. Assist students in recalling the “table” metaphor and butterfly symbolism.
3. Elicit contextual information from students. What was the world like when Judy Chicago began creating *The Dinner Party*? How did the artist and her collaborators work to create the artwork? What were some of the “jobs” performed by the artist and her collaborators? What did Judy Chicago say was important about the artwork? What did she say were her intentions?
4. Ask questions that will engage students in discussions about works of art so as to lead to interpretations. List four categories (underlined below) on board or overhead.
 - ▶ **Associations**—What does this work make you think of? What does it remind you of?
 - ▶ **What’s there?**—What do you actually see?
 - ▶ **Expressive qualities**—What *moods or feelings* are expressed? What moods or feelings do you associate with the work?
 - ▶ **Ideas/Themes**—What ideas or themes are expressed in the work?

5. As students contribute, ask them to support their ideas and supply evidence from the artwork or its context. “Why do you say this?” What information do you have that supports your view?”

6. Rank responses under each category. Are some more important? More obvious?

7. Have students work in groups to address the question, “What is this work about?” They should make connections among the various ideas listed in the columns and the artwork itself. Ask them to develop a thesis sentence using the following stem:

▶ *The Dinner Party* is about (insert optional word card) _____, in that or because _____.

▶ Note that one way to assist students in constructing interpretations is to provide word cards with ideas, themes or concepts that relate to the artwork. For *The Dinner Party*, for example, words might include: history, women, power, society, research, liberty, freedom, tradition, privilege, strength, gender, erasure, celebration, bearing witness, experience, etc.

▶ Students select word cards from a pile in the middle of their table and try to complete a thesis sentence using the word (see above).

8. Have each group share its thesis sentence with the rest of the class. Discuss the similarities and differences among the statements. Stress the need to connect their interpretations with what they know about the artwork and its context (the artist’s stated intentions, the way it was made, the time when it was made, etc.).

9. Discuss the benefits of having different perspectives or ways to think about the artwork. Ask, “How have these different ideas about the meaning of *The Dinner Party* contributed to our understanding and appreciation of the artwork?”

10. Introduce the notion of “layers of meaning,” suggesting that *The Dinner Party* is a very complex artwork, with many components. The artwork can be said to have many different messages. For example, ask, “What does it say about women?” “What does it say about society?” “What does it say about research?” “What does it say about history?” “What does it say about power?”

The students will:

1. Draw upon what they know about and observe in *The Dinner Party*, considered as a single installation artwork, to construct interpretations of the work.

2. Through a process of observation and discussion, determine what ideas seem more important than others when considering the meaning of *The Dinner Party*.



Continuing Exploration:

1. Work with classroom or Language Arts teacher to have students develop their thesis sentences into carefully crafted paragraphs or essays.

2. Have students work in teams to create a plan to showcase *The Dinner Party* at the Brooklyn Museum Elizabeth Sackler Center for Feminist Art as a tourist destination. Students should imagine that they work for the Brooklyn Office of Tourism. Suggest that they consider the following questions:

▶ What might they say to get people to consider making the trip?

- ▶ What might they say about the artwork?
 - ▶ What might they say about the experience of viewing it, remembering that the banners and *Heritage Panels* are also part of the visit?
 - ▶ What might they say about its message and meaning?
 - ▶ What might they say about what people “take away” with them when they visit?
3. Engage students in a discussion about the merits of the artwork being permanently housed in a museum. Introduce the discussion:
- ▶ *The Dinner Party* now has a permanent home in the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum. This large space was designed especially to house the artwork. Do you think the artwork should have a permanent place in a museum? What are the benefits of having it displayed in a museum? What are the benefits of having it displayed elsewhere? Where would you like to see it displayed? Why?
4. Have students consider how they might tell others (parents, friends, other grade levels) about *The Dinner Party*. What might they say?
5. Present the important ideas about and themes of *The Dinner Party* through role-playing.
- ▶ Students might assume the role of exhibition guides. Take turns explaining the symbolism and significance of different place settings.
 - ▶ Students might become a plate or place setting and tell about the artwork from this perspective.
 - ▶ Students might assume the role of a feminist and talk about the artwork from a feminist perspective.
 - ▶ Students might assume the role of one of the women represented at the table.
6. Create a movie or “slide” presentation (such as in Powerpoint) with any of the above roles.

