

The Dinner Party Curriculum Project

Encounter 12: Making Connections

Grade Levels: Upper Elementary, Middle and High School



The Dinner Party
1974-1979



Birth Project
1980-1985



International Quilting Bee
1980-1987



Holocaust Project
1985-1993



Resolutions 1994-2000

In this Encounter, students investigate and compare aspects of other artworks to *The Dinner Party*. They consider Judy Chicago's early and later works, and artworks by other artists that connect to the *The Dinner Party* through various ideas and themes. Students consider artworks that make social statements and promote change, for example, or artworks that focus on such themes as women in history, gender issues, and identity. Students are led through a series of interpretation and comparison activities with artworks selected for their potential to shed light on *The Dinner Party*.

Art can inform other art. Deeper understanding of *The Dinner Party* emerges when students clearly understand what the artwork is and is not. Consideration of *The Dinner Party* in the context of other artworks with similar ideas and themes will help students deepen their understanding and appreciation of Chicago's work, while they develop a broader understanding of some potential purposes and the possible social impact of artworks over time. By making connections to current feminist voices in contemporary artworks, students should further appreciate the voice and message within *The Dinner Party*.

Investigation

The teacher will:

1. Explain to students that we often can better understand and appreciate an artwork when we consider it along with other artworks. We can look at other artworks from the same time period, or we can examine artworks made prior to and after the artwork in question. We might consider other artworks by the same artist so that we get a sense of how the current work fits into the artist's body of work. We might also consider artworks made by others that explore similar themes or ideas.

2. Help students consider *The Dinner Party* in the context of other 20th-century artworks by women. Remind students that *The Dinner Party* was created in the late 1970s. Invite students to view other artworks by women created during this time, and compare and contrast these other works with *The Dinner Party*. To find artworks for comparison, visit the National Museum of Women in the Arts and view the Museum's collection of work from the 20th century, at http://www.nmwa.org/collection/20th_centuryyearly.asp. Divided into Early, Middle and Contemporary 20th century, the website includes thumbnail images of work by women artists in the Museum's collection. The Artist Profile provides information about the artist. The Artist Portfolio includes images of the artworks by this artist in the collection.

Each time period includes a description of the social context and discusses women's artistic involvement of their time. A timeline of 20th-century events provides additional contextual information. Choose a particular artwork and ask questions such as the following:

- ▶ When was the artwork made? Was it made before or after *The Dinner Party*?
- ▶ What was going on at that time?
- ▶ What does this artwork seem to be about?
- ▶ To what extent and in what ways, if any, is it about the experience of women?
- ▶ To what extent and in what ways, if any, is it about women in history?
- ▶ How is it similar to and different from *The Dinner Party*?

3. Have students compare *The Dinner Party* with other works of art by Chicago at <http://www.judychicago.com/?p=gallery>. In particular, have them look at the pre-Feminist works (1972-1974) and the porcelain works (1972-1978) on the artist's website. Pay attention to color, composition, and titles of works in the first series. Attend to these things, but also to the medium and techniques in the second series. Have students read the introductions to each of these series. Ask, "What was Judy Chicago working on before *The Dinner Party*? What aspects of her earlier work are found in some way in *The Dinner Party*? How does consideration of these earlier artworks by the artist help us understand and appreciate *The Dinner Party*?"

4. Direct students' attention to Chicago's other art projects that came after her work on *The Dinner Party*, *Birth Project* (1985), *Holocaust Project: From Darkness into Light* (1993), and *Resolutions: A Stitch in Time* (2000). Suggest that students think about how these later artworks continue the content and form of her earlier works, including *The Dinner Party*, and how they represent a departure from these earlier works.

5. Have students investigate *The Dinner Party*'s relationship to the traditions of ecclesiastical embroidery and china painting, both employed in unique ways during the making of *The Dinner Party*. The Brooklyn Museum features close-up views of the needlework on several different table runners in the section entitled "Conservation" at http://www.brooklyn-museum.org/easca/dinner_party/conservation/index.php. Find examples of embroidery employed for traditional domestic or ecclesiastical purposes and compare these to embroidery and other needlework in *The Dinner Party*. Similarly, find examples of traditional china painting and compare and contrast plates from *The Dinner Party* to traditional plates. Create charts, Venn diagrams, or other visual devices to represent similarities and differences. Explain that both of these traditions have been long associated with craft. *The Dinner Party* confronts assumptions about differences between fine art and craft. Ask students how the artwork confronts ideas about art vs. craft.

6. Have students compare and contrast *The Dinner Party* to other artworks that explore similar themes. For example, suggest that students find other artists whose work celebrates the achievements of women. Shown here is *Women Mathematicians* by the artist Rhonda Wall. This artwork is part of a series that celebrates the accomplishments of women. Like many of her themes, this one required that she do extensive research. The artist learned about the mathematicians Hypatia of ancient Alexandria, whose profile portrait is shown with a polygon earring, and Ada Lovelace of 19th-century England, who is shown within Hypatia's dress. Rhonda Wall often combines photographs with drawing and painting. Ask, "How is this artwork similar to and different from *The Dinner Party*?"

7. Contemporary fiber artist Barbara Schulman creates goddesses or "vessels" like the one shown here, using felting and embroidery techniques. Again, ask students to consider how Schulman's work is similar to and different from *The Dinner Party*.



Rhonda Wall,
Women Mathematicians



Barbara Schulman,
Quiescent Muse

8. Look for works of art that might be instructive to compare to *The Dinner Party* through subject matter or themes (e.g., women in history, gender issues), metaphors (e.g., table, butterfly, triangle), or message (inequity, identity, contribution).

The students will:

1. Become increasingly knowledgeable about *The Dinner Party* and other artworks through the processes involved in comparing and contrasting artworks.
2. Share their ideas with others regarding similarities and differences.

Continuing Exploration:



Students can compare and contrast *The Dinner Party* with another table using a Venn diagram. For example, there are 13 place settings at each side of *The Dinner Party* triangular table as well as at *The Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci. The guests at each of these two tables are being honored. Chicago (1997) has said that she wanted to reinterpret *The Last Supper*, "that all-male event from the point of view of those who had traditionally been expected to prepare the food, then silently disappear from the picture" (p. 46).

Classroom Connections:

Art teacher Colleen Quigley created a sixth-grade lesson entitled *A Beautiful Stamp to a Beautiful Woman* that focuses on two enduring ideas:

- ▶ Voice needs to be given to unwritten history.
- ▶ Even a tiny artwork can give voice to unwritten history.

The lesson is designed to follow student investigations of *The Dinner Party*. Students create a postage-stamp image featuring a woman represented in *The Dinner Party*, using aspects of the woman's life in order to express her accomplishments and significance. Students consider how postage stamps have a place in our visual culture, paying homage to important people, places, and things. In this lesson students actually become activists by writing letters to the Postal Service and students' Congressional representatives stating the importance of this woman and how a stamp could tell her story to the world. Students become a voice for people who cannot speak for themselves.

Resources:

1. Chicago, J. (2007). *The Dinner Party: From Creation to Preservation*. New York: Merrell Publishers.
2. The Brooklyn Museum of Art, Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, features a resource-filled section on *The Dinner Party*. http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/home.php
3. For artworks by Judy Chicago, see her website, <http://www.judychicago.com/>, and *Through the Flower*, <http://www.throughtheflower.org/page.php?p=5&n=1>.
4. The National Museum of Women in the Arts, <http://www.nmwa.org/>, states in its mission that it "brings recognition to the achievements of women artists of all periods and nationalities by exhibiting, preserving, acquiring, and researching art by women and by teaching the public about their accomplishments."