

The Dinner Party Curriculum Project

Encounter 13: Passing On and Disrupting Traditions



Grade Levels: Upper-Elementary, Middle, High School

The Dinner Party highlights the creative work that women have long made a part of their daily lives but that has not been recognized as *art* within the Western art historical tradition. Handwork—embroidery, tatting, including the process of lace draping, and china painting—plays significant roles in the artwork. As a part of her research, Judy Chicago sought the expertise of women who were keeping these traditions alive. The table runners, banners, and table corners consist of finely executed embroidery and other handwork, and the table-runner styles often correspond to the time period in which the woman lived.

In this Encounter students will consider the way in which *The Dinner Party* honors the textile and ceramics traditions. Students are introduced to textile traditions and are asked to consider some examples of handwork over time. Students make general comments, ask questions about changes, and offer possible historical explanations. Finally, they engage in research to address their queries.

An artist's choice of media and methods will always have important implications for the way an artwork looks, but such choices also carry with them significant symbolic implications. By consciously selecting processes associated with the long-ignored artistic practices of women, artists symbolically elevate their status; they, too, are invited to or honored at the table. It is important for students to recognize the symbolic meaning of the inclusion of the textile and ceramics traditions within the artwork. As they speculate as to why these practices have been seen as “lesser” arts, they increase their understanding of the need for *The Dinner Party* at the time it was created.



Investigation

The teacher will:

1. Create packets of materials for use in this Encounter. Students will work in groups so it will be important to have a resource packet for each group.
2. Collect actual examples of handwork, attempting to find examples for each of the decades of the 20th and 21st centuries. Students and their families might be enlisted to help build the collection. Flea markets and second-hand stores are good sources for tea towels, crocheted lace doilies, aprons, baby clothes and accessories, crewel pillow tops and the like. Such venues are also excellent sources for vintage paper products related to handwork—catalogues, patterns, and sets of directions, for example. Photographs or photocopies of handwork could serve as an alternative to actual handwork.
3. Distribute handwork examples and a worksheet, *Handwork in Time*, to each group. The worksheet directs the students to use their observational skills and what they know from family or personal experiences to organize the examples of handwork in chronological order.

4. Remind students to pay attention to their conversations as they attempt to put the handwork in order. What comments did they make about the items? What did they observe? The worksheet asks the students to record at least three general comments about handwork. The prompt states, “Over time, handwork_____.” Students are to complete the statement three times.

5. Suggest that students imagine that a handwork expert will visit their class to talk about handwork traditions. What questions would they like to ask the expert? In the space provided on the worksheet, students write at least three questions. This would be an excellent opportunity to invite a member of the community to share knowledge about handwork and handwork traditions. Encourage students to ask the expert the questions they prepared.

6. Ask student groups to share their three general comments and three questions for an expert. As the groups share, comment upon the similarities and differences among student observations and what they want to know.

7. Suggest that students take their questions further. They could choose one question and offer their “best-guess” answer. Explain to students that they can use primary and secondary sources to collect information. Students can share their findings in class, as part of a school display, in multi-media presentations or in other such ways.

8. Suggest that students learn more about the handwork traditions in *The Dinner Party*. Are some of the examples from their investigation similar to or the same as the handwork represented in the artwork? Have students speculate about these traditions. How have they changed over time? What might account for the kinds of changes in handwork traditions over time?

9. Have students determine how Judy Chicago incorporated handwork traditions in *The Dinner Party*. In what way is the handwork traditional? How has the artist broken with tradition?



10. Have students learn more about china painting. An option is to show the section of the *Right out of History: The Making of Judy Chicago's "Dinner Party"* video showing how Judy visited a china-painting convention and enlisted the help of china painters for her project. How does *The Dinner Party* incorporate china painting? How did the artist borrow from the tradition for the artwork? What did she include? How is the china painting in *The Dinner Party* similar to and different from the china painting students have learned about? What is traditional? How did the artist break with tradition?

11. Ask students what they now know about china painting that they didn't know before. Explain to students that china painting has not typically been considered an art form and has been seen, instead, as merely a “craft.” What do they think about the distinction between art and craft? What makes something art? What makes something craft? Who should decide?

12. Discuss with students the artist's decision to use processes associated with craft and women's daily/domestic creative work in *The Dinner Party*. Was this a good choice? Why? What are the implications of the choice? How important is this decision to the overall meaning and significance of the artwork? Why?

The students will:

1. Examine the visual qualities and sociohistorical context of some textile and ceramics traditions.
2. Work in groups to chronologically sort actual pieces or photographs of handwork.
3. Consider which pieces were created during different time periods, and write three general statements.
4. Write three questions they would like to ask a handwork expert if they had an opportunity to do so.
5. Select one of their questions, offer their “best-guess” answer, and actually engage in research to seek answers to their queries.
6. Speculate as to the meaning and significance of the choice to include these processes in *The Dinner Party*.

Culmination Exploration

1. Encourage students to interview family or community members who do handwork of some kind. Help students create a list of what they would like to know. Suggest that they include questions about how the individual learned the process.
2. Invite students to visit the Brooklyn Museum website featuring *The Dinner Party*; go to specific place settings and zoom in to see details of the handwork.
3. Students can investigate contemporary artists who are using craft traditions or related artwork such as Joyce Scott, Lisa Lou, Ted Hallman, Nick Cave, and others.

Classroom Connections:

High School:

Art educator Dolores Eaton created a lesson for high-school students in which students first interview a family member who has engaged in handwork of some kind to learn about the role this form of art making has played in their lives. After investigating one wing of *The Dinner Party* and the women honored there, they explore handwork techniques and processes and, in collaboration with other students, complete an artwork incorporating handwork processes and techniques.

Upper Elementary:

Art educator Erica Harner created a lesson for upper-elementary/middle-school students in which they investigate the symbolism of selected table runners from *The Dinner Party*.

Middle School:

Art teacher Kris Tuerk of Kutztown Area Middle School in Kutztown, PA, designed an activity in which students were inspired by artwork made by women in their families. Each student brought to the table a memory, a specific artifact or artwork that defined a woman in their family as an artist. A group “show and tell” took place during which each student’s voice was heard.

Materials:

Handwork in Time Worksheet

Resources:

1. Brooklyn Museum of Art website for *The Dinner Party*, http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/dinner_party/
2. Kellman, J. (1996). *Women’s handwork: Stories of similarity and diversity*. *Art Education*, 49(2), 33-39.
3. Photo reproductions of various table runners. See J. (2007). *The Dinner Party: From Creation to Preservation*. New York: Merrell.
4. Resources available at Through the Flower Shop <http://www.throughtheflower.org/store/>:
 - ▶ CD of digital images of *The Dinner Party* has a section on needlework
 - ▶ Postcards showing details from some of Judy's needlework.
 - ▶ *The Birth Project* book is filled with great examples of handwork.
 - ▶ *Resolutions* note cards (show a sampler.)
 - ▶ *Holocaust Project* note cards (show a needlework detail from Double Jeopardy).
 - ▶ *Sewing Circle* notecard.
 - ▶ Photo reproductions of various table runners. See J. (2007). *The Dinner Party: From Creation to Preservation*. New York: Merrell.

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Handwork in Time

First: Write 3 general statements about the handwork, completing the following sentence stem:

Over time, handwork...

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Second: Imagine that a handwork expert will be visiting your class. Write 3 questions you would like to ask the expert:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Third: Invite a representative from another group to view your arrangement and ask you *tough* questions about how you organized your collection. Make changes that the group believes ought to be made.

Fourth: Share your findings with the whole class, including your general statements and questions.