

The Dinner Party Curriculum Project

Encounter 14: Dinner as Tradition

Grade Levels: Upper Elementary, Middle and High School



In this Encounter, students celebrate their new knowledge and understanding as their study of *The Dinner Party* comes to a close. The structure and focus of the Encounter can vary, but a collaborative creation of a celebratory meal remains as its core. Students and their teacher design and implement a “dinner party,” considering such things as the program, the guest list, decorations, menu, and room arrangements. They also consider ways to demonstrate what they have learned while exploring *The Dinner Party* by Judy Chicago.

During the making of *The Dinner Party*, on Thursday nights Chicago and her team of collaborators met for potluck dinners. These dinners were times for voices to be heard, struggles and problems to be addressed, and creative ideas to be shared. One goal for this Encounter is to remember and recognize the importance of these traditional meals. Another is to understand the connection between the artwork and the idea of a celebratory meal. In addition, the Encounter provides an opportunity to reinforce a sense of community shared by members of the class, and to provide closure for their study. Finally, the Encounter can be used as a final assessment activity in which students reflect upon what they have learned while exploring the artwork.

Investigation

The teacher will:

1. Remind students of the traditional ways in which people gather together for meals for the purpose of celebration. Families and friends often gather together for meals to celebrate birthdays, weddings, reunions and other special events, for example. Thanksgiving and other holidays often are celebrated with special meals. Scouting organizations, churches, and other community groups sponsor “potluck” dinners, to which individual members bring food to share with the larger group. Help students understand the importance of such traditional dinners for creating a sense of belonging to a community.

2. Refer to *Right Out of History: The Making of Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party* video recording and remind students that Chicago and the members of *The Dinner Party* studio held weekly potluck dinners on Thursday evenings. The artist (1996, p.8) describes these dinners:

► *Every Thursday night we held potluck dinner discussions. As we went around the table after supper, everyone was encouraged to speak openly about studio and other problems or—if we were having an intellectual dialogue or a guest speaker—to engage in the conversation...*

3. Show large poster or other images of *The Dinner Party*. Remind students that the artwork, *The Dinner Party*, is symbolic of traditional family and community dinners where guests come together around a common theme or to celebrate a special event. Help students to understand that the 39 women seated at the table, as well as the 999 women whose names are recorded on the *Heritage Floor*, are brought together for this “dinner” to celebrate their achievements in history.

4. Invite students to design and implement their own kind of dinner party to reflect upon, celebrate and showcase what they have learned in their study of Chicago’s *The Dinner Party*.

5. Have students consider such issues as the following:

- ▶ Who will be invited? (For example, just our class? Administrators? Parents? Other classes? Community members?)
- ▶ When and where will it be held?
- ▶ How will we share what we have learned in our study of *The Dinner Party*? (For example, what we have learned about the artist? About the artwork? About women in history? About the importance of research in creating art? About feminism? About gender? About purposes of art?) What symbols could we create or use to represent our new learning?
- ▶ How should the dinner table(s) be arranged? How might we decorate the space? In what ways might the decorations help convey our knowledge and understanding from our exploration of *The Dinner Party*?
- ▶ Will there be a program (a series of special presentations, for example)? If so, what should be the focus of the program? How should we end the celebration?
- ▶ What should the menu consist of? Should the menu be planned or should we have a potluck dinner in which people bring all kinds of different dishes?

6. Consider conducting a round-robin conversation during or after the dinner party in which students share new ideas, insights, and/or questions remaining as a result of their experiences with *The Dinner Party*. Focus attention on personal “aha!” moments, allowing students to reveal the personal significance of their experiences.

7. Consider suggesting that students role play during the dinner party. In this way, the dinner party becomes a kind of performance. Some possibilities of role play are as follows:

- ▶ Participants role play the women who were included at the table of *The Dinner Party*.
- ▶ Participants role play women newly invited to the table. These might be women from history or from contemporary times.
- ▶ Participants role play Judy Chicago and the members of her studio who created *The Dinner Party* and reflect on what the making of *The Dinner Party* has meant to them personally as well as to society.



The students will:

1. Consider the tradition of having a meal with family members or a larger community to celebrate important ideas and events.

2. Make the connections between such traditional meals and Chicago’s artwork, *The Dinner Party*, as well as with the tradition of Thursday night potluck dinners held for members of the studio during the creation of *The Dinner Party*.

3. Plan and implement a dinner party to share and showcase their new knowledge and understanding as a result of their exploration of *The Dinner Party*.

4. Reflect upon and share what they have learned through their study of *The Dinner Party*.



Continuing Exploration:

Works of art about dinner gatherings could be explored during this learning encounter. For example, Faith Ringgold's *Dinner at Aunt Connie's House* could be analyzed and compared.

Classroom Connections:

Upper Elementary (adaptable to Middle and High School): Art teacher Martha Weber created a sixth-grade lesson that includes a dinner party celebration focusing on gratitude for women in history. Students create banners that commemorate important women and their achievements. These banners are exhibited at the dinner party. Students create art as a means of visually expressing their appreciation for the achievements of others.

Materials:

1. Chicago, J. (1996). *The Dinner Party: A Commemorative Volume Celebrating A Major Monument of Twentieth-Century Art*. New York: Penguin Books.

Resources available from Through the Flower

1. Phoenix Learning Group. (1999). *Right Out of History: The Making of Judy Chicago's Dinner Party*. St. Louis, MO: Phoenix Films & Video.
2. Posters and postcards of overview of and individual place settings within *The Dinner Party*.