

# The Dinner Party Curriculum Project

## Encounter 5: Gender Matters in Art History

**Grade Levels:** Upper-Elementary, Middle, High School



In this Encounter students place *The Dinner Party* in an art historical context. In order to build upon their understanding of gender and gender stereotypes, students form research groups and collect data about the representation of women in such places as art textbooks, children's books about artists and art, and museum and gallery exhibitions. The Encounter contains suggestions for helping students become familiar with the art historical context in which *The Dinner Party* was created. In addition, students investigate the activist work of The Guerilla Girls and become familiar with the group's approach to gathering and reporting data. Students are encouraged to engage in their own data-gathering and create ways of representing it.

It is important for students to understand the significance of the creation of *The Dinner Party* at the time it was made. It is also important that they understand how women have been represented in artworks over time. Through their various investigations into the inadequate ways women have been represented, students will gain a crucial understanding of the need for *The Dinner Party* both then and now. This realization also will allow them to see, by contrast, how seriously Judy Chicago and her collaborators viewed the achievements of women.

*In taking on (The Dinner Party), I took on the real nexus of the problem that has prevented women from overcoming their oppression: 1. The enormity of the task of changing attitudes on a large scale; 2. The problems of female role conditioning and how it prevents women from working at all, much less facing the challenge of changing their conditions; and 3. The absence of support in society.*

Judy Chicago, Journal Entry, March 6, 1977, Santa Monica, California

### Investigation

The teacher will:

1. Prepare for this encounter by reading Linda Nochlin's article, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" (ARTnews January 1971: 22-39, 67-71.) Key points of this article:

- ▶ Historically, it has not been socially acceptable for women to seriously pursue art.
- ▶ Women were not provided equal art educational opportunities.
- ▶ The art-historical tradition of romanticizing the artist-as-genius has systematically kept women from emerging as great artists.

2. Review with students what many people in society think women can and should do, and what many think men can and should do.



3. Remind students of the stereotypes represented in the boy toys and girl toys seen on display in major toy stores.

Discuss the following:

- ▶ How are toys displayed? How are they packaged?
- ▶ What do those who make, package, and display toys assume about girls and boys?
- ▶ What do these toys and their packages and display teach girls and boys?

4. Explain to students that for many years in the history of Western art, similar stereotypes were associated with making art. Men were the painters, printmakers, and sculptors. They were the celebrated artists. Women were not encouraged to study art. Did women make things? Yes. What do you suppose women made? Investigate to find out.

5. Have students investigate the question, “Why was *The Dinner Party* necessary?” As they consider this primary question, students might form research or investigation groups.

6. Engage students in some or all of the following:

- ▶ Invite an art historian to visit with your students to discuss the role of women in the history of art. This would extend your community of learners to include an expert. Remember that “experts” also can be “invited” in through their writings.
- ▶ Have students investigate what life was like for women in the years 1974-1979, when *The Dinner Party* was being made. What were women expected to do? How were women expected to act? What counted as “success” for a woman during this time?
- ▶ How are gender roles defined or promoted in artworks through time? Have students examine a range of artworks from Western art history. Suggest that they look for ways that gender roles are represented. Ask them to consider how the roles are promoted in the artworks.
- ▶ Examine books that present the history of art in the Western world. These art-history texts can have old or recent copyright dates. Suggest that students count the number of male and female artists who are mentioned or featured in the books for each century. Have students create a way to illustrate their answers to: Who’s in? Who’s out? Why? Alternatively, students might find an online listing of artists in the collections of local museums and ask the same questions.
- ▶ Use the same approach when considering art textbooks, children’s or young adult books about art and artists.
- ▶ Have students refer to online websites, newspapers, and other publications to examine local gallery and museum listings and those in cities such as New York. Once again, count the number of one-person exhibitions featuring women artists and create a way to illustrate their answers to: Who’s in? Who’s out? Why?
- ▶ Who are the Guerrilla Girls and what do they want? Suggest that students find out about the work of the Guerrilla Girls, an activist group that calls itself the “conscience of culture” and has a long history of using humor while working for equality. Have students visit the website to find out about this group <http://www.guerrillagirls.com>. Check out their publication, *The Guerrilla Girls’ Bedside Companion to the History of Western Art* for their ideas about how women have been represented in the art of the Western world.

*“Thus the question of women’s equality--in art as in any other realm--devolves not upon the relative benevolence or ill-will of individual men, nor the self-confidence or abjectness of individual women, but rather on the very nature of our institutional structures themselves and the view of reality which they impose on the human beings who are part of them..”*

“Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” by Linda Nochlin

- ▶ Invite students to visit the website and study posters created in the early years and over time that especially target the artworld. Borrow the Guerrilla Girls' idea of using systematic methods for recording data discovered from research investigations such as those mentioned above. Ask students how they might present their findings in a public way. Students should think of themselves as activists as they create an artwork with a graph or chart and a humorous invitation to study the facts.

The students will:

1. Engage in investigative activities aimed toward developing an understanding of the social/historical context in which *The Dinner Party* was made.
2. Use humor to create an artwork that presents the statistics gathered through their research. Consider the Guerilla Girls as an example of using research, legwork, math and statistics, along with humor, to get an important message across.

### Continuing Exploration:

1. The book, *Anonymous Was a Woman: A Celebration in Words and Images of Traditional American Art—and the Women Who Made It*, contains images of traditional handcrafted work and text by women. Share this with students to emphasize the kind of creative work that has historically been acceptable for women to engage in.
2. Link up with a Social Studies or History teacher to design activities for students to investigate traditional work by women and/or learn about women artists—historical and contemporary.

### Classroom Connections:

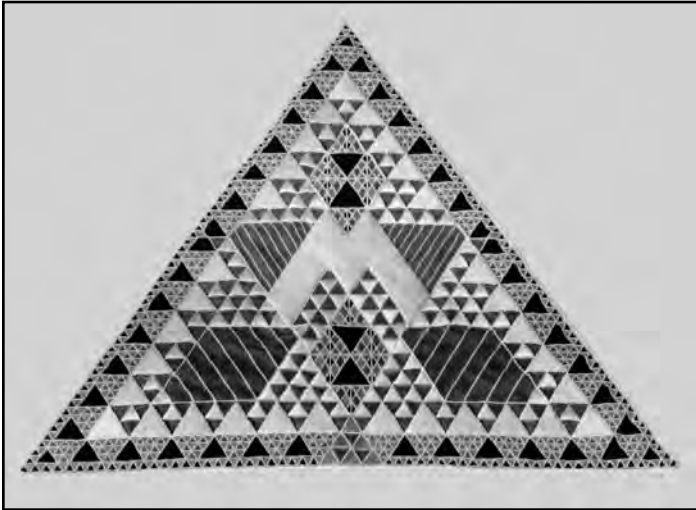
1. Middle School (adaptable to other levels): Art educator Danielle Dente of Dallas Middle School in Dallas, PA, created the lesson, *Gender Roles in the Art World*. Through this lesson, students learn how a person's gender can influence opportunities in society, particularly in one's art-making. Students compare and contrast the lives and work of several female and male artists. They consider how the artists' gender affected their choice of subject matter and the way in which they created art. Students also consider art from the viewer's point of view, as a male or female, to illustrate that gender also affects how we view and interpret art. Students spend time looking more closely at Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*, as this piece alone reflects the key concepts of the lesson. The lesson addresses the idea that women's artistic achievements have been neglected in history, but we can challenge this. See *lesson*.
2. High School (adaptable to other levels): Art teacher Addy McKerns of Twin Valley High School in Elverson, PA, developed an activity within a unit based on gender identity for her high school students. While studying gender stereotypes, she asked students to consider what they might actually learn to do if gender stereotypes did not play a role in their life. Students filled out a worksheet in which they reflected on an activity or skill they would undertake if they didn't let such cultural biases hold them back. After collecting and reviewing her students' responses, with the help of other teachers and departments in her school, McKerns created experiences in which all of her students were given the opportunity to take on these "other-gender" tasks. The students discussed their reactions to this assignment and how it affected their ideas about gender stereotyping. This is a wonderful action-based approach to help students understand why the message of *The Dinner Party* is still relevant today. See *worksheet*.



### Materials:

1. An assortment of art and art-history texts written for adults and/or children.
2. Web addresses for local museums, galleries, art centers, etc. for listings of exhibition schedules.
3. Books, websites, and other resources for use in investigating lifestyles and gender roles for women during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.

### Resources:



1. Bank, M. and Rose, P. (1995). *Anonymous Was a Woman: A Celebration in Words and Images of Traditional American Art—and the Women Who Made It*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin.

2. Nochlin, L. (1971). "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *ARTnews*, 22(39), 67-71.

3. Gaze, D. (1997). *Dictionary of Women Artists*. Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn.

*Note: this is a wonderful reference book that a local library may have.*

4. The Guerrilla Girls website: <http://www.guerrilla-girls.com>

5. Guerrilla Girls (1998). *The Bedside Companion to the History of Western Art*. New York: Penguin Books.