

The Dinner Party Curriculum Project

Classroom Connections: Considering Gender Influences

Grade Levels: Middle School (adaptable to other levels)



Danielle Dente

Art educator Danielle Dente created a unit of study for middle-school students entitled, *Considering Gender Influences*. In this lesson, “Gender Roles in the Artworld,” students learn how a person’s gender can influence opportunities in society, particularly in art-making. Students compare and contrast the lives and works of several female and male artists. They consider how the artists’ gender affected their choice of subject matter and the ways in which they created art. They consider art from the viewer’s perspective, 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 this neglect can be challenged.

Enduring Ideas:

1. Gender affects our choices and our roles in society.
2. Gender shapes the way we view, interpret, judge, and produce art and artifacts.



Lesson One: Gender Roles in Art World

Class: 8th Grade

Time Allotment: Three to four class periods.

Overview:

Lesson Summary:

Students are reminded of the restrictions upon the active involvement of women in societies throughout time and around the world, by considering the truth or falsity of statements about women in history, and by having a subsequent discussion about what they learned in the process. Students compare artworks created by female and male artists to determine what differences exist, if any. Through a series of activities and group discussions, students explore the role of gender in art. They review biased biographical information about important women in history and rewrite the biographies without bias. Finally, students return to *The Dinner Party* and reflect upon its importance at the time it was made, and to them, personally.

Artworks, Artists, and Artifacts:

1. Specific artists addressed in the lesson:
 - ▶ Caravaggio (*Judith Beheading Holofernes*, 1598)
 - ▶ Artemisia Gentileschi (*Judith Decapitating Holofernes*, 1618)
 - ▶ Mary Cassatt (*Mother and Child*, 1890)
 - ▶ John Henry Twachtman (*The End of Winter*, ca. 1893)
 - ▶ Elisabeth-Louise Vigee-Lebrun (*Hubert Robert, Artist*, 1788)
 - ▶ Elisabeth-Louise Vigee-Lebrun (*Self-Portrait*, 1790)
 - ▶ Judy Chicago (*The Dinner Party*, 1974-'79)
 - ▶ Mary Beth Edelson (*Some Living American Women Artists/Last Supper*, 1971)
 - ▶ Leonardo Da Vinci (*The Last Supper*, 1495)
2. Guerrilla Girls posters
3. The Guerilla Girls' *Beside Companion to the History of Western Art*, published by Penguin Books, 1998



Key Concepts Addressed in Lesson One:

1. Gender influences our opportunities in society.
2. Gender affects how we view and interpret art.
3. An artist's gender influences his/her artistic choices and opportunities.
4. Women and men have not had equal opportunities in the arts.
5. Women have faced more obstacles in the art world and society, while men have enjoyed more advantages.
6. Women's achievements have been neglected in history, but we can challenge this.

Essential Questions Addressed in Lesson One:

1. In what ways have artists been discriminated against because of gender?
2. How does gender affect how we view and interpret art?
3. How does an artist's gender influence what she or he creates?
4. Have women and men had equal opportunities in the arts? In society?
5. Are women's and men's art equally appreciated?
6. How does *The Dinner Party* inform our understandings of gender?
7. How do we change history to include more women?

PA Standards:

9.2.8 Historical and Cultural Contexts

- A. Explain the historical, cultural and social context of an individual work in the arts.
- C. Relate works in the art to varying styles and genre and to the periods in which they were created.
- D. Analyze a work of art from its historical and cultural perspective.
- E. Analyze how historical events and culture impact forms, techniques and purpose of works in the arts.
- I. Identify, explain and analyze philosophical beliefs as they relate to works in the arts.

9.3.8 Critical Response

- A. Know and use the critical process of the examination of works in the arts and humanities.
- B. Analyze and interpret specific characteristics of works in the arts within each art form.

9.4.8 Aesthetic Response

- A. Compare and contrast examples of group and individual philosophical meanings of works in the arts and humanities.

Interdisciplinary Connections:
History, Writing/English

Lesson Objectives:

► Students will:

1. Learn that women artists have not have the same opportunities as male artists.
2. Consider a work of art from male and female viewpoints.
3. Compare and contrast artworks of the same subject by women and men.
4. Analyze a work of art after understanding the social context in which it was created.
5. Consider how an artist's gender may influence his/her artistic choices.
6. Gain more knowledge about women's history by studying *The Dinner Party*.
7. Discuss generally women's contributions to art and society.
8. Rewrite specific women's history with a feminist gender lens.



Assessment:

Formative assessment:

1. Class participation in discussions and assigned activities.
2. Completion of various related worksheets. All worksheets will be checked for completion and thoughtfulness of answers, such as specific reasons for choices taken from details seen in the artwork.
3. Students should be actively engaged through speaking, listening intently, or

writing responses. The content of each worksheet applies to the objectives.

Summative assessment:

1. Students should be actively engaged either through speaking or listening intently.
2. Each group will have completed a re-written biography that will be checked for the following criteria:
 - The student has removed any unnecessary information not about the woman.
 - The student has spoken only of the woman's achievements in a positive light.
 - The student has avoided gender stereotyping.
 - The student has provided an explanation for the gender difference between the artist and her male contemporaries, instead of reducing her status as a woman.
3. Objective #6 will further be met after students complete *The Dinner Party Reflective Response Sheet*, in which they will reflect on their study of *The Dinner Party* and its role in gender issues. Each question should be given thoughtful consideration.

Sequence of Action:

Motivation:

1. *The Guerilla Girls' Challenge!* Introduce students to the Guerilla Girls through a poster created by the group entitled *The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist*, or a similar poster by the group. Explain to the students that through humor and anonymity this group of women acts as the "conscience of the art world." The students will then be given a worksheet created by the teacher, containing statements from *The Guerilla Girls' Bedside Companion to the History of Western Art* about women's history in society and art. This worksheet has been created as a true or false questionnaire in which all statements are true. Students should complete the quiz individually. Afterwards the class will discuss the results. Consider: What did you know about women's history? What parts are the most surprising or shocking to you? What would you like to learn more about? See Worksheet: "*The Guerilla Girls' Challenge!*"

Development:

1. The teacher will pass out two images of *Judith Beheading Holofernes*—one by Caravaggio and the other by Artemisia Gentileschi. Students will work in groups to see if they can figure out which of the two was created by a woman. Students will record their responses and give specific reasons for their decisions. They will then discuss their responses with the class. This will give the teacher the opportunity to explain the social constraints that Gentileschi faced as a woman artist active after the Renaissance. Through this activity students will begin to consider how the artist's gender may have influenced the way she painted the subject. See worksheet, "Who Did It?"



2. Next, students will look at the Impressionist artworks by Mary Cassatt and Henry Twachtman. Again, students will compare and contrast each piece, and determine which was painted by a man, and which by a woman. The teacher can discuss Cassatt's role as a woman artist during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

3. Questions to ask after each male-female identification activity:

- ▶ Did your reasoning have to do with gender stereotypes?
- ▶ Was the decision based on your own gender influences or the artist's?
- ▶ Whose point of view did you have when looking at the images—a man's, a woman's, the artist's?

4. Ask students to think of as many women artists as possible, excluding the two you just discussed. Talk about their responses. Next show the two artworks by Elisabeth-Louise Vigee-Lebrun. Which depiction looks more like a "real" artist? Why do you say that? What about the other? Discuss the life and work of Vigee-Lebrun. Discuss the advantages men had at this time in 18th century France and the obstacles Vigee-Lebrun had to overcome. After knowing more about the social context in which she worked, why do you think she painted herself that way? Consider how an artist's gender affects artistic choices.

5. Show images of *The Last Supper*, one by Mary Beth Edelson and the other by Leonardo DaVinci. Ask students to compare and contrast these works utilizing a Venn diagram. What do you think Edelson was trying to say in this artwork? Do you think her gender played a role in her reasons for choosing this subject matter? How do you interpret each artwork as a male? Female?

6. Introduce students to *The Dinner Party* by Judy Chicago. Provide a brief explanation about its meaning and purpose. Place students in groups. Each group will be given images from a woman's place setting at the table. Students will also be given a biography of that woman (written by a third party, *not by Chicago*). Together students will rewrite the biography with a feminist lens by removing any unnecessary information and speaking only of the woman's achievements in a positive light. They should avoid gender stereotyping and provide an explanation for the gender difference between her and her male contemporaries, instead of reducing her status as a woman. After learning more about the woman, students will compare her life with the imagery created by Chicago. Students will try to decode the symbolism to find meaning and metaphors that represent the woman. They will report their new biography and the corresponding imagery from *The Dinner Party* to the class.

Culmination:

1. After this last activity students should reflect individually about the purpose of *The Dinner Party*. They will answer the following:

- ▶ Had you ever heard of the woman your group researched? If so, explain when you learned of her and what you know of her. If no, explain how not knowing makes you feel.
- ▶ Was there a woman mentioned, by you or another group, who you would like to know more about?
- ▶ *The Dinner Party* recognizes 1038 women of achievement. What do you think of that? What more would you like to know about them? How many important women in history would you have guessed there were?

- ▶ How does *The Dinner Party* inform our understanding of gender?
- ▶ Why do you think Judy Chicago felt it was important to create this artwork?
- ▶ Do you think her own gender influenced her choices?
- ▶ How do you feel about the artwork from your own perspective as a male or female?

2. Finally, students will complete *The Dinner Party Reflection Sheet*. This will give students the opportunity to think about a personal experience through a gender lens and reflect back to the teacher about what, if anything, has “clicked” for them at this point.



Preparation:

▶ Teacher Research and Preparation:

1. Find artworks by *male* and *female* artists from the same time period with the same subject matter. Find artworks that provide a good context to discuss gender’s role in artistic choices.

2. Find or create biased-biographies of woman to be re-written by groups, one per group. (See Rewriting History Worksheet sample)

3. Prepare images from *The Dinner Party*.

▶ Instructional Resources:

1. Make copies of *The Dinner Party Reflection Sheet*.

2. Prepare images from *The Dinner Party* (six to eight women),

3. Gather images listed under **Artworks, Artists, Artifacts**.

4. Locate or purchase Guerilla Girls posters

▶ Student Supplies:

1. Pencil.

2. All worksheets.

3. Copies of all images—one per group.

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The Guerilla Girls' Challenge!

By Danielle Dente

The following statements were adapted from *The Guerilla Girls' Bedside Companion to the History of Western Art*. Read each statement carefully. Based upon what you know about women's history and art, decide whether the statement is true or false. Circle True or False:

1. In ancient Greece and Rome, women could not vote or engage in transactions worth more than a grain of barley.

True False

2. In Rome, women of the citizen class gained a few rights. They were allowed to go out in public and attend dinner parties, pageants, plays and other social events. Some women learned to read and write.

True False

3. In Ancient Greece and Rome, women of all classes participated in designing, weaving, and stitching domestic and ceremonial cloth. Their work was highly valued, treasured, and even used as currency.

True False

4. According to Pliny the Elder (First century), the odor of a woman's burned hair drives away serpents and the ash of burned hair cures warts, sore eyes, and diaper rash, and when mixed with honey, cures ulcers and wounds.

True False

5. In 12th century England, men were embroiderers too, and naturally they got paid more: women earned only 83 % of what men earned per day. Believe it or not, this was better than it is today in the U.S.: women average about 77 cents for every dollar earned by men.

True False

6. In the Middle Ages, women were usually engaged to be married at age 12, and were married by 15. If an engaged girl married another man, she could be killed.

True False

7. In the Middle Ages, education was thought to interfere with a woman's ability to be a good wife and mother. Almost no women were taught to read and write.

True False

8. During the Renaissance, women were excluded from painter's guilds or academies.

True False

9. During the Renaissance, one of the few ways a woman could work as an artist was to be born into a family of artists who needed assistance in the family workshop.

True False

10. In the city of Bologna, during the Italian Renaissance, women were admitted to the University, and there was even a school for women artists.

True False

11. If you were a rich or middle class woman during the 17th and 18th centuries, and one of your sisters got married first, your parents would probably blow their fortunes on her dowry, leaving you nothing, and you'd never marry.

True False

12. In the 17th and 18th centuries, one out of 10 women died in childbirth, and four times as many women were accused of being witches than men.

True False

13. If you were a 19th-century girl, you could not be the legal guardian of your own children or hold a job without your husband's permission.

True False

14. Women in the United States could not vote until 1920.

True False

15. Today, more women's art has been exhibited, reviewed, and collected than ever before. But, women artists still get collected less and shown less. The price of their work is almost never as high as that of white males.

True False

16. Women artists of color have had the hardest time getting their artwork shown in galleries or museums.

True False

Who are the Guerilla Girls?

The Guerilla Girls are a group of women artists and arts professionals who fight discrimination. They call themselves "the conscience of the art world." They have produced over 80 posters, printed projects, and actions/performances/lectures that expose sexism and racism in the art world and culture at large. They wear gorilla masks and costumes to keep the focus on the issues rather than their individual personalities, and they use humor to prove that feminists can be funny. They could be anyone; they are everywhere!

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

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The Who Did It? Mystery Files

By Danielle Dente

Names of Group Members: _____

Date: _____ Section: _____

THE CASE OF THE ITALIAN MASTER

Subject: *Judith Beheading Holofernes*

Media: Oil Paint

Location: Italy

Time Period: 1598-1618, The Italian Renaissance-Baroque Style

Your Job: Compare the two artworks. After carefully considering each work, decide WHO DID IT? One was painted by a man, and one by a woman. Be sure to give specific examples from the art to justify your answer.

Judith Decapitating Holofernes

Reason:

Judith Decapitating Holofernes

Reason:

THE CASE OF THE IMPRESSIONIST

Subject: *Mother and Child*

Media: Oil Paint

Location: France and America

Time Period: 1890's, Impressionism

Your Job: Compare the two artworks. After carefully considering each work, decide WHO DID IT? One was painted by a man, and one by a woman. Be sure to give specific examples from the art to justify your answer.

The End of Winter

Reason:

Mother and Child

Reason:

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Re-writing History Worksheet

By Danielle Dente

The Biography of Caroline Herschel (1750 – 1848)

Caroline Herschel was born in 1750 into a working class family in Hanover, Germany. Her father, Isaac, tended gardens to support his family, yet he was also a clever musician. In time, his mastery of music led him to secure a position as a bandsman in the Prussian army. He encouraged all of his six children to train in mathematics, French, and music. But Caroline's mother wanted something else—Caroline was destined to be her house servant, a virtual Cinderella. Isaac took pity on her bleak life and, without his wife's knowledge, encouraged her to improve herself. Typhus struck Caroline at age 10. This stunted Caroline's growth; she never grew past four foot three. Because of this malformation, her father advised her that she would never marry and would live her life as an old maid. He believed that she was not handsome enough for a man to ever have interest in her. This prediction became true, yet Caroline led a long life with many friends and admirers. She scarcely fit the image of a crone.

When Caroline was twenty-two, her brother, William, took her away from her home in Hanover to Bath, England. He felt sympathy for his sister, and he needed a housekeeper. He also gave her voice lessons, and she became the most prominent soprano in Bath. By this time, William was an accomplished musician and a chorus director with a yearly salary of 400 pounds. He had a hobby that he supported with all his spare time—astronomy. William Herschel had an obsession with seeing deeper and deeper into space by creating very powerful telescopes. After Caroline arrived, his notoriety flourished in England as a great telescope maker. He quit his job as conductor after receiving a pension from King George III. Devoting his time to astronomy, he produced and sold huge quantities of fine telescopes. At this time, Caroline did not share her brother's passion for the science. William trained her in mathematics, yet she was still a housemaid, not yet his apprentice.

In time she began to help him in his business. She spent long hours grinding and polishing the mirrors they used to collect light from distant objects. At the age of 32, she became an apprentice to her brother. She knew the mechanics of the craft and had developed the self confidence lost to her from her period of servitude to her parents. She was becoming of greater use to her brother. Frequently, when he would leave on business, she would take over in his place. Visitors began to recognize her authority. King George III gave her a pension of fifty pounds. This was the first time that a woman was recognized for a scientific position.

Her first accomplishments were the detection of nebulae. William gave her a small telescope with which to look for comets. Trivial though it may sound, in this era, comet-hunting was the main focus of many astronomers. Caroline's first experience in mathematics was her catalogue of nebulae. She calculated the positions of her brother's and her own discoveries and amassed them into a publication. One interesting fact is that Caroline never learned her multiplication tables. She studied them so late in life that she never got a grasp of them. She carried a table on a sheet of paper in her pocket when she worked.

William gained more prestige for his discovery of the planet Uranus. He used his huge twenty-foot telescope for this achievement. Because of his reputation, he became an emissary of the King. William traveled to Germany to give a huge

telescope to the University of Gottingen. The King commissioned the gift to the school; he was an extensive patron of William's work. During William's visit to Germany, Caroline had her first big breakthrough—she discovered a comet. This was eventful news for Caroline as well as the scientific community. Her brother was elated when he learned of her progress.

William married and spent less time at the observatory, yet Caroline, although grieving for her lost friend and partner, carried on her work as a prominent astronomer. Before William's death, she found seven more comets. When her brother died, she finished her career as an observational astronomer. She returned to Hanover and lived with her younger brother, Dietrich. Before her death, she catalogued every discovery that she and William had made. She sent this to the scientific community in England, and they proclaimed her an honorary member of the Royal Astronomical Society and the Royal Irish Academy. Germany honored her as well. The King of Prussia gave her the Gold Medal of Science for her life's accomplishments.

The Prussian aristocracy received her well until her death. To be seen with her in public was an honor. She had many friends, among them William's son, John and his wife. John was also a prominent English scientist, so he and his aunt had much to discuss. Caroline lived to be 98. The church of her childhood, near her parents, is where she now rests. The entire scientific community mourned the passing of such a strong and prominent scholarly woman.

Melissa Nysewander (2006). Caroline Herschel. Retrieved March 27, 2009
<http://www.agnesscott.edu/Lriddle/women/herschel.htm>

In Other Words:



What were Caroline Herschel's contributions? Did the author present relevant information about her? Work together to rewrite Caroline Herschel's biography with a gender lens. Use a separate piece of paper. You will have the opportunity to report to the class what you have learned.

Remember: Remove any unnecessary information that is not about the woman. Speak only of the woman's achievements and avoid gender stereotyping. Provide an explanation for the gender difference between her and her male contemporaries instead of reducing her status as a woman.

Hint: You may want to begin by crossing out any irrelevant information.

Once you have finished rewriting the biography, think about the imagery created by Judy Chicago for her. Consider any symbolism that would reflect Caroline Herschel's life. *Hint:* Look closely at the table-runner designs. Record your findings in the space below:

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The Dinner Party Reflection Sheet

By Danielle Dente

Student Name: _____ Section: _____

Reflecting on Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*:

1. Had you ever heard of the woman your group researched? If so, explain when and how you heard of her. If no, explain how not knowing makes you feel. Were there any women mentioned, by you or another group, who you would like to know more about?

2. *The Dinner Party* recognizes 1038 women of achievement. What do you think of that? Would you like to know more about them? Did you know there were so many important women?

3. How does *The Dinner Party* inform our understandings of gender? Why do you think Judy Chicago felt it was important to create this artwork? Do you think her own gender influenced her choices?

4. How do you feel about the artwork from your own perspective as a male or female?
