

The Dinner Party Curriculum Project

Encounter 8: Investigating Meaning

Grade Levels: Upper-Elementary, Middle, High School



The first part of this Encounter allows students to carefully consider one place setting. They engage in an activity to practice describing and interpreting an artwork that is not part of *The Dinner Party* before investigating the meaning of a single place setting. Students are guided through the process of looking carefully at the one place setting and constructing interpretive statements about its meaning. In the second part of the Encounter, the students apply what they have learned to the investigation of meaning of another place setting at the table. This Encounter provides opportunities to practice critical thinking and language arts skills.

It is crucial that students investigate individual place settings to see how the artist infused her artwork with what she and her collaborators learned from their research about each of the women. Students will note the way important attributes of the featured woman are presented symbolically in the various components of the place setting. Students will become experts about a woman at the table. By researching information about their assigned woman, students can better understand the symbolism and ideas in her place setting. Finally, their investigation leads to having Judy Chicago's goals come to

fruition—students are learning the history that had once been erased. As increasing numbers of students engage in this kind of investigation, women will increasingly have their rightful place in history. As a group they are elevating knowledge about women.

Investigation

The teacher will:

1. Review the overall installation of *The Dinner Party*. Make sure that students recall the triangular table with the names of 39 women of achievement in history, the place settings honoring each of women at the table, and the *Heritage Floor* with the names of 999 women. Explain that you and they will practice interpreting another artwork and then apply the same process to one of the place settings from *The Dinner Party*.
2. If students are not accustomed to interpreting artworks, engage in the Guided Practice that follows: Did the woman make a worthwhile contribution to society?
 - ▶ Practice investigating meaning by showing the students reproductions of a single image of any artwork that is fairly easy to describe and interpret.
 - ▶ Distribute copies of the artwork or, alternatively, project or display the image so that all students can see it clearly.

- ▶ Distribute Word Cards so that each student has at least three different descriptive and expressive words from which to choose in discussing the artwork in question.
- ▶ Have students look at their Descriptive Word Cards. Ask, “What do you see? Does anybody have a descriptive word that you believe fits this artwork?” Encourage several responses and have students explain how the word “fits” the artwork.
- ▶ Have students look at their Expressive Word Cards. Ask, “What moods or feelings connect with this artwork? Does anybody have an expressive word that you believe connects with this artwork?” Again, encourage several responses and have students offer explanations for the words they have chosen.
- ▶ Finally, ask, “What ideas or themes are communicated?” and “What is this artwork *about*?” Encourage students to offer interpretations that reference concepts such as friendship, isolation, happiness, etc. Encourage different interpretations and talk about how each “fits” the artwork.
- ▶ Review the process that they used to investigate meaning.

3. Have students investigate **one place setting**. Explain that they will use this same process to investigate the symbolism and meaning of one of the 39 place settings from *The Dinner Party*. The materials for their investigation should include the following:

- ▶ Images of place-setting components, including plate and runner, honoring one of the 39 women at the table.
- ▶ Word Cards to assist them in describing what they see and telling about the moods and feelings expressed.
- ▶ Context Cards. individual index cards with statements that reveal information about the woman and her time.

4. Ask students to deal out the Word Cards until there are no more in the stack. (Some group members may end up with more than one card.) Distribute the handout with a list of information about the woman honored.

5. Have the students silently read the information found on the handout. Remind them that they should try to find a time during the discussion to share the information on the handout.

6. Direct students to spread the images on the table so that all members of the group can see them. While looking and talking among themselves, they are to discuss the following questions:

- ▶ What do you see?
- ▶ What moods or feelings are expressed?
- ▶ What ideas or themes are communicated?

7. Suggest that students begin the discussion with the Word Cards. Explain that as they consider each question, they should try to find words that they believe fit with a place setting component. (Remind students that they need to refer to details *in* the artwork.)

8. Remind students that whenever appropriate, group members may “fund” the conversation with contextual information found on the context cards.

9. Finally, ask students to use ideas discussed in their group to complete the following statement:

- ▶ The place setting honoring _____ conveys (or communicates, says, expresses, evokes, reminds us, lets us see, etc.)

10. Have each group present the place-setting components and read their interpretation statement to the class.

11. While soliciting group statements, encourage the class to note how the group interpretations are similar and different. Since an important goal is to have students understand how an artwork can convey ideas, moods and feelings, make sure that the ideas presented are reiterated and even celebrated during the class discussion.

12. Be prepared to feature images and statements in a bulletin board display for the classroom or elsewhere in the school.

13. Have students investigate **other place settings**. Once students have interpreted a single place setting, have them consider others at *The Dinner Party* table.



14. Choose the additional place settings that students will investigate and assign names of *The Dinner Party* “guests” to students working alone, in pairs, or small groups.
15. Have students work alone, in pairs, or small groups.
16. Explain to students that they are to engage in research about the woman whose name they have been assigned, with the goal of creating a list of information like that used in first part of this Encounter.
17. Suggest that students consider the woman’s plate and runner while they make choices about the information that they include in their list. They should consider what would be most helpful to others when interpreting the place setting.
18. Provide an opportunity and ample time for students to view and discuss symbolism and meaning in additional place settings of *The Dinner Party*.



The students will:

1. If necessary, practice observing and interpreting an artwork *not* associated with *The Dinner Party*. Use Descriptive and Expressive Word Cards.
2. Observe and interpret a selected place setting. Use Word Cards and a handout with contextual information about the woman honored. Carefully consider the components, making connections between the contextual information and what is presented in the artwork.
3. Write a thesis statement that addresses how the place setting components function to communicate ideas about the woman represented.
4. Work alone, in pairs or small groups to research contextual information about the woman honored in another place setting that has been assigned to them.
5. Consider the components, symbolism and meaning of this new place setting, carefully making connections between the contextual information and what is presented in the artwork.
6. Make choices as to which information would be most helpful to others as they attempt to interpret the symbols and ideas of additional place settings. Create a list of contextual information to assist others in interpreting the assigned place setting.

Continuing Exploration:

1. Display reproductions of the place settings along with student writing about them. Display lists of contextual information generated by student research.
2. Link up with a Language Arts or English teacher to assist students in completing interpretive essays about the place settings they investigate in this Encounter. The sentences generated in the activity can be refined as thesis sentences to be supported by the remaining parts of the essay.
3. Link up with a Social Studies or History teacher to focus on the women honored at the table. Suggest that they allow students to locate the individual woman on a timeline and find out more about what was going on at the time she lived.

Classroom Connections:

1. Art teachers Stephanie Spencer and Dayna McNichol from Pallasades School District in PA, created a very special environment for their students to experience *The Dinner Party*. They recreated *The Dinner Party* by arranging tables in a triangle. Reproductions of 18 place settings were placed along the three sides of the table. They emphasized the idea of “table” as a gathering place. Recalling their own experience of *The Dinner Party* as it is installed at the Brooklyn Museum, they darkened the room and added twinkle lights to recreate the hushed and reflective environment. In setting the stage for their

students to experience the work in this changed environment, these teachers emphasized the importance of the installation of the artwork and created an atmosphere of respect that continued throughout their students' investigation of the artwork. In addition, as the students entered this altered space, they became a "part" of the work.

2. Middle School art teacher Hannah Koch created three lessons based upon a careful look at the place setting for Susan B. Anthony. Her lessons can be found elsewhere on this site.

Materials:

Packets of materials can be made by teachers and/or students and should contain:

1. Images of plates and runners of selected women at the table.
2. Word Cards (Descriptive and Expressive words).
3. Context Cards. Individual index cards containing statements that reveal information about the woman and her time.
4. *Investigating Meaning* worksheet (students complete these forms with one or two sentences).



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Descriptive Word Cards 1

ornate

plain

complex

simple

bright

dull

different

similar

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Descriptive Word Cards 2

rhythmic

static

open

closed

flat

deep

rough

smooth

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Descriptive Word Cards 3

hard edges

soft edges

high contrast

low contrast

light

dark

thick

thin

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Descriptive Word Cards 4

straight

curved

irregular

regular

organic

geometric

warm color

cool color

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Expressive Word Cards 1

safe

sinister

bold

shy

eager

hesitant

energetic

lazy

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Expressive Word Cards 2

mysterious

obvious

heroic

timid

caring

distant

cheerful

sad

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Expressive Word Cards 3

calm

nervous

proud

humble

friendly

aloof

powerful

weak

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Expressive Word Cards 4

dreamy

somber

funny

serious

intense

shallow

tense

relaxed

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Investigating Meaning

Your group has been given a packet of materials containing:

1. Images from the place setting of a woman at *The Dinner Party* table.
2. Context Cards containing statements that reveal contextual information about the woman and her time.
3. Word Cards (Descriptive and Expressive).

Instructions:

1. Distribute Context Cards. (Some group members may end up with more than one card.)
2. Silently read contextual information that is found on the *Information Sheet*.
3. Spread images on the table.
4. Use Word Cards to prompt discussion within your group. Ask these questions:

- ▶ What do you see?
- ▶ What moods or feelings are expressed?
- ▶ What ideas or themes are communicated?

(Remember that you need to refer to details in the work, as well as contextual information had within the group, as you discuss the artwork.)

5. Whenever appropriate, group members may wish to offer or “fund” the conversation with contextual information from the handout.

6. Complete the statement:

The place setting honoring _____ conveys (communicates, says, expresses, evokes, etc.) _____
