

The Dinner Party Curriculum Project

Encounter 10: The Artist's Voice

Grade Levels: Upper Elementary, Middle and High School



In this Encounter, students view a video recording and hear from the artist, Judy Chicago, as she introduces *The Dinner Party*, explains how she began to work on the project, how others eventually came to join her, and how their work continued toward the completion of the artwork. Chicago provides a tour of *The Dinner Party*, one “wing” of the triangular table at a time, while revealing her intentions and making connections among materials, techniques, and symbolism in the plates, runners and the *Heritage Floor*. Prior to viewing the video, students list questions that they have about the artwork and how it was made. They are encouraged to listen for information about how the women at the table are represented by symbols and about how the artist uses metaphor throughout the artwork.

The artist's voice and perspective enhance the students' appreciation and understanding of the artwork. Close-up views of needlework are accompanied by the artist's rationale for using various techniques for runners, and for what she calls the “millennium triangles” found at the three junctures of the table. Although students have been introduced to the notion of metaphor, their understanding is enhanced when they hear the artist refer to the various metaphors in the artwork. Ultimately, students learn that the artist often can offer important contextual information, contributing greatly to what they know and value about an artwork.

Investigation

The teacher will:

► Prepare for this encounter by reviewing the DVD and determining the parts that ought to be featured when it is presented to students.

1. The DVD is 41 minutes in length.
2. The introduction is approximately five minutes and should probably be seen by all students.
3. On the DVD, Chicago highlights 23 place settings and the millennium triangles by explaining media, imagery, process, metaphor, and form.
4. Place settings addressed from the first wing: Primordial Goddess, Hatshepsut, Aspasia, Boadicea, and Hypatia
5. The second wing: Theodora, Hrosvitha, Trotula, Eleanor of Aquitaine, Hildegard of Bingen, Christine de Pisan, Elizabeth R, and Anna van Schurman.
6. The third wing: Anne Hutchinson, Mary Wollstonecraft, Sojourner Truth, Susan B. Anthony, Emily Dickinson, Ethel Smyth, Margaret Sanger, Natalie Barney, Virginia Woolf, and Georgia O'Keeffe.
7. One millennium triangle is explained in depth, while the other two are shown and referred to.

► Make sure that students are prepared to watch the video. Possibilities follow:

1. Explain that the video features the artist talking about the various parts of *The Dinner Party*. Invite students to list questions that they would like for her to address.

2. Prepare a list of questions for students to consider while viewing the DVD. For example:

- What is china painting and how did the artist learn how to do it?
- How do you know that the artist and her helpers engaged in a lot of trial and error?
- How do the names on the *Heritage Floor* relate to the women “seated” at the table?
- What metaphors does the artist refer to when describing the artwork?
- What is “white work?”
- Why are some plates higher off the table than others?
- Why did the artist make the backs of the runners difficult to see?

3. Prepare a list of questions for students to consider when the artist describes a plate and runner associated with specific women. For example:

- How does the artist describe the plate?
- How does the artist describe the runner?
- What symbols does the artist refer to?
- What needlework is important in this particular place setting?
- What does the artist indicate is important to remember about the woman’s contributions or achievements?



4. For those students who have engaged in research about a specific woman, possibly while engaged in Encounter 8, *Investigating Meaning*, ask students to create a list of questions that they would like to hear addressed by the artist. Ask, “What would you like to know from the artist about the place setting design for the woman you researched?” Students can view appropriate sections of the DVD to hear from the artist about the selected place setting.

5. Hold a discussion after viewing the DVD. Review the questions and provide students with the opportunity to discuss what they learned.

6. Ask the following questions: “What surprised you and what did you find of particular interest? What did you learn from the artist that you didn’t know already?” Teachers may wish to require students to answer questions in writing first before sharing their responses. Even the most

reticent students will have plenty to say after they have written about it.

7. In order to emphasize that artists like Judy Chicago read and engage in research so that they can make aesthetic, practical, and informed decisions about the content, materials, and processes that give form to their ideas, ask students what the artist needed to know in order to create *The Dinner Party* with all of its components. Ask them to speculate as to how the artist learned what she needed to know in order to create the artwork.

The students will:

Prepare to watch the DVD, “*The Dinner Party: A Tour of the Exhibition*,” by raising or becoming familiar with questions that the video tour may address.

1. View video tour of *The Dinner Party*.

2. Reflect upon the video tour and discuss the ways in which Judy Chicago addressed the questions generated prior to the viewing.

Classroom Connections:

Art teacher, Andrea Horn, who teaches at Muhlenberg Elementary School in Allentown, PA, created a fifth-grade lesson entitled, "The Dinner Party: A Feast of Women's Contribution's." This is the second lesson in a unit of study entitled *Mothers of Mother Earth*. In this lesson, the teacher and students view the DVD, *The Dinner Party: A Tour of the Exhibition*, explore a poem by Judy Chicago, and investigate the entry banners, which also represent the voice of the artist. Through an investigation of the artist's voice, students deepen their understanding of *The Dinner Party* and the contributions of women who have improved the world.



Resources available at Through the Flower Shop:

The Dinner Party: A Tour of the Exhibition DVD

