

The Dinner Party Curriculum Project

Encounter 7: The Making of The Dinner Party

Grade Levels: Upper-Elementary, Middle, High School



The Dinner Party core studio team

In this Encounter, students consider the processes engaged in by Judy Chicago and her collaborators as they created *The Dinner Party*. Students watch the video documentary, *Right Out of History: The Making of Judy Chicago's Dinner Party*, or read excerpts from a variety of sources. They learn how the artist developed and refined her ideas, how she eventually brought others into the process, and how she and her collaborators investigated ways of working with materials to achieve Chicago's desired effects.

As students become aware of the processes involved in creating *The Dinner Party*, they develop a deeper understanding of the scope of the project, an enhanced appreciation of its complexity and multiple meanings, and an awareness of the knowledge and skill required to create its various components. Students learn how research and investigation are integral to the artistic process. They also learn about the benefits and drawbacks of collaboration in such a process.

Investigation

The teacher will:

1. Prepare by previewing the video, *Right Out of History: The Making of Judy Chicago's Dinner Party*, or by reading about the process of creating *The Dinner Party* in one or both books written by the artist that are devoted to the topic: *The Dinner Party*, published in 1996, and *The Dinner Party: From Creation to Preservation*, published in 2007.
2. Make individual copies of the excerpts from *The Dinner Party* books (1996, 2007) provided below in which Judy Chicago describes the processes and people involved in the making of the artwork. Each student in the class will receive one of these quotes. During a discussion about the making of *The Dinner Party*, students will be invited to share the contents with the other members of the class
3. Provide students with a series of questions about the making of *The Dinner Party*. These may be recorded on poster board, allowing room for answers, and posted in the classroom. Review the questions with students and encourage them to add their own questions about the creation of the artwork,
 - ▶ How did the original idea for creating *The Dinner Party* come about? For example, did Judy Chicago have a sudden flash of inspiration or develop her idea over time? How do you know?
 - ▶ In what ways did Judy Chicago and her collaborators work with or elaborate on the basic idea for *The Dinner Party*? For example, an artist might make sketches, create models, and/or engage in research.

- ▶ What kinds of decisions did the artist and her collaborators make about materials and techniques? How did they experiment with materials and techniques? What was important to think about as they investigated the best way to proceed with materials and techniques?
- ▶ In what ways was the making of *The Dinner Party* a collaborative effort? How did the artist enlist the assistance of others? What kinds of work did the helpers engage in?
- ▶ How did the artist and her collaborators decide when a part of the artwork was finally completed? What did they consider or think about in order to decide something was finished?
- ▶ How important was experimentation in the process of creating *The Dinner Party*? How do you know?
- ▶ How did the artist and her collaborators involve experts in different areas? How did the artist and her collaborators engage in self-education?
- ▶ In what ways did the artist and her collaborators demonstrate self-motivation, discipline, and a strong work ethic?

4. Show the video, *Right Out of History: The Making of Judy Chicago's Dinner Party*. Remind students of the posted questions and suggest that they try to answer them as they view the documentary. Explain that they will have the opportunity to discuss and post answers after viewing the video.

5. After watching the video, hold a discussion in which students have the opportunity to offer responses to the posted questions.

6. Distribute individual copies of the excerpts from *The Dinner Party* books (1996, 2007) provided below in which Judy Chicago describes the processes and people involved in the making of the artwork. Invite students to share the contents with the other members of the class, as appropriate, during the discussion about the artistic process.

7. If the video is unavailable, students or the teacher can investigate answers to the posted questions by referring to books and other materials about the making of *The Dinner Party*. Alternatively, the teacher may wish to tell the story. Students may join the story-telling by referring to the quotes distributed in class.

8. Show students “*The Dinner Party Acknowledgement Panels*” on the Brooklyn Museum’s Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art website, http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/acknowledgement_panels/, where they will be able to see photographs of the 129 members of the creative and administrative team, along with each participant’s name, occupation, residence, specific role and length of involvement in the project. They will also see a list of 295 individuals and organizations that made contributions to the project.

9. Hold a conversation with students about the process of collaboration. What do they think are some benefits of working with a group to make an artwork? What are some drawbacks or disadvantages?

10. Provide an opportunity for students to list questions that they still have about the making of *The Dinner Party*. Discuss ways that they might find answers alone or working with other students. Encourage students to continue their investigation and invite them to share their findings with the class.



The students will:

1. Review a list of questions to consider about the making of *The Dinner Party* and contribute their own questions to this list.
2. Watch the video, *Right Out of History: The Making of Judy Chicago's Dinner Party*, or read excerpts from books and other materials, to learn about the processes engaged in by Judy Chicago and her collaborators as they created *The Dinner Party*.
3. Participate in a discussion about the making of *The Dinner Party*, addressing the questions provided and referring to quotes by the artist

4. Generate additional questions about the making of *The Dinner Party*. Look at additional sources such as Judy Chicago’s other books and the many articles written about *The Dinner Party* over the years in order to help answer the questions. Work alone or in groups to investigate and eventually share what they find.



Continuing Exploration:

1. Highlight or look at any monumental piece of art. Have students consider the following: What different kinds of work were required to complete this artwork? Could one person have done it all? Have students speculate about the collaborative effort involved in various famous artworks.

Classroom Connections:

1. Upper Elementary (adaptable to Middle or High School): Art teacher Andrea Horn from Muhlenberg Elementary in Allentown, PA created a fifth-grade lesson, *Mothers of Mother Earth*. Students parallel

the process of making *The Dinner Party* by balancing the challenges that arise when working in teams while allowing for individual strengths. Students consider the responsibilities of the leader and the responsibilities of the team. Additionally, Horn asks the question, "Why is research important in creating a work like *The Dinner Party*?" Students then are involved with their own research and need to make decisions, as did the researchers of *The Dinner Party*.

Materials:

1. Judy Chicago statements—excerpts from her writing in *The Dinner Party* (1996) and *The Dinner Party: From Creation to Preservation* (2007).

Resources:

1. Chicago, J. (1980). *Embroidering Our Heritage*. Garden City: Anchor Press.
2. Chicago, J. (1993). *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist*. NY: Penguin Group.
3. Chicago, J. (1993). *Holocaust Project: From Darkness Into Light*. NY: Penguin Group.
4. Chicago, J. (1996). *Beyond the Flower*. NY: Penguin Books.
5. Chicago, J. (1996). *The Dinner Party*. NY: Penguin Books.
6. Levin, G. (2007). *Becoming Judy Chicago*. NY: Random House.
7. Lippard, L. (2003). *Judy Chicago*. NY: Watson-Guptill Publications.
8. Luce-Smith, E. (1999). *Judy Chicago: An American Vision*. NY: Watson-Guptill Publications.
9. Brooklyn Museum of Art website for *The Dinner Party*: http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/dinner_party/
10. Brooklyn Museum, Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art: *The Dinner Party: Acknowledgement Panels* http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/acknowledgement_panels/.

Many resources are available from *Through the Flower*:

1. <http://www.throughtheflower.org/store/>

The Dinner Party Curriculum Project

Judy Chicago: On Making The Dinner Party



The following are excerpts from *The Dinner Party*, published in 1996, and *The Dinner Party: From Creation to Preservation*, published in 2007, describing the processes and people involved in the making of the artwork.

I began working by myself, struggling to formulate what was to become an overwhelming task and one that I could never have completed alone: I intended to create a work of art that could symbolize the immense amount of material about women's history that I was discovering (later amplified by a team of researchers) (Chicago, 1996, p.4).

The Dinner Party developed out of my earlier efforts to create abstract portraits of historical women with sprayed acrylic on canvas. At some point, I decided that these images needed to be done using a more painterly technique. In 1971, I made a trip up the Northwest coast of America, where I stumbled upon an antique shop in Oregon. There, in a locked cabinet, sitting on a velvet-covered base, was a beautiful hand-painted porcelain plate. Soon afterward I enrolled in a class in china-painting but quickly realized it would not provide me with an understanding of the basic principles. This required two years of private study. . . . By the spring of 1974, I decided that these plates should be presented on a large banquet table (Chicago, 2007, p. 11).

During the period I was learning china-painting, I continued with my research into women's history. I also worked steadily in my studio, trying to develop an iconography that meshed my abstract aesthetic language, specific historical information about women of interest to me, and the image of a butterfly, which I intended as a symbol of liberation (2007, p. 12).

In 1975 I began working on the first series of plates. Sometime later I decided to make some of the images dimensional and, as I then had rather limited ceramic skills, sought help in the person of Leonard Skuro, a graduate student in ceramics at UCLA, who became my assistant. His job, which proved to be quite formidable, was to design a system for making plates that could be relieved, then painted in a complex process that required multiple firings (1996, p. 5).

I had determined that the table should rest upon a porcelain floor covered with the names of other women who "had made a mark on history" and was trying to assemble a large file of information about women for this Heritage Floor. During these years I kept running into a young feminist activist and art history student named Diane Gelon (whom I have always called Gelon). One day I asked her what she was doing with herself. When she replied "Not much," I inquired whether she might be interested in helping me with some of the research for the names on the floor, which was becoming increasingly time-consuming. She agreed and eventually became the administrator of what would slowly become an increasingly complex project (1996, p. 7).

Shortly after Gelon began working with me, I received a letter from a woman named Susan Hill, who had read and been inspired by my first book, *Through the Flower*. She also wished to assist me, though she had no idea that she would become the needlework supervisor of an enormous project, coordinating dozens of stitchers working in the studio loft in which I had originally worked in solitude. It was she who introduced me to ecclesiastical embroidery, which opened up another new visual language for me. Even though I could barely sew, I was soon to discover that I had unexpected ability to design for the needle and textile arts (1996, p. 7-8).

Susan, Gelon, and Leonard became my basic studio team, which rapidly amplified over the next few months, in particular by a young industrial designer named Ken Gilliam, who devised all of the ingenious systems that were to provide the structural and mechanical underpinnings for The Dinner Party installation. As my concept for The Dinner Party developed, many dozens of people came forward to help with what seemed like ever-expanding work, some for only a few days, others for several years. Slowly, teams evolved, not only in ceramics but also in research, graphics, photography, and fabrication (1996, p. 7-8).

Many studio members were eager for opportunities for leadership (opportunities that are still too often unavailable for women), and each team soon had a supervisor. These were chosen on the basis of skill, along with the willingness to make a significant time commitment and also assume leadership. The studio gradually became a structure of self-sufficient groups, working under my guidance while also building teamwork through shared responsibility and honest dialogue (1996, p. 7-8).

Almost everyone, including myself, worked as a volunteer, except for a few members of the primary team. We tried to raise enough money to pay those individuals small salaries so that they could be free to work full-time on the project... (1996, p. 7-8).

Early on Gelon and I instituted the group process techniques that I had used in my earlier feminist programs, which involved applying what came to be called consciousness-raising principles to our weekly group meetings. 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, something some women, at least at first, were hesitant about doing (1996, p. 7-8).