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Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*

An Influential and Historical Masterpiece

THE FEMINIST ART MOVEMENT COMPRISED A COLLECTIVE effort by feminist artists who wanted to reconstruct the predominantly male history of art and promote women artists' visibility in more institutions. Artists in this movement wanted to make an impact in the world with their art, whether that be correcting predisposed misconceptions or altering stereotypes about women. Because of the efforts of feminist artists, opportunities were made for women that had not been present beforehand and allowed others to see life through the perspective of women. Feminist artists such as Mary Beth Edelson, Miriam Schapiro, and Lynda Benglis helped pave the way for change to begin. One specific influential feminist artist was Judy Chicago, who created controversial yet powerful artworks such as *Womanhouse* and *The Dinner Party*. With three tables each set at forty-eight feet and seating thirty-nine female guests atop a floor comprised of nearly one thousand influential names, *The Dinner Party*, alongside other feminist art, had a great impact on society and has allowed feminism to be promoted on different platforms. Chicago's art helped to highlight the struggle of creating the piece, the bond that occurs between art and people, and the criticism that inevitably arises from such a substantial and influential work.

The struggles of *The Dinner Party* occurred all throughout the creation of this masterpiece and brought awareness to feminism. Prior to this extensive project, Judy Chicago fostered a strong connection with women's history which, in turn, helped to define her own feminism. Once she defined her own feminism, Chicago was inspired to share her views with others. Chicago was employed at Fresno State College before the start of *The Dinner Party* and desired to create an all female-artist environment for her students where she could focus on femininity. Although her classes were ultimately transformative, Chicago's students struggled

with the course load and demands. Chicago and her students later on moved to CalArts from Fresno State College and completed a different project entitled *Womanhouse*, where she used those same techniques in *The Dinner Party*.

The intricacy of this piece illustrated the great struggle of creating such a monumental project. As her group of leaders and volunteers formed, Chicago's vision of a great production slowly came to fruition. The help of Leonard Skuro as a ceramicist, Susan Hill as head of needle-



Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 1974–79. Ceramic, porcelain, textile 576 x 576 in. (1463 x 1463 cm) Brooklyn Museum, Gift of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Foundation, 2002.10 @Judy Chicago/Artist Rights Society (ARS) New York; Photo @Donald Woodman/ARS NY

work, and Diane Gelon as head of administration and fundraising were a great benefit to Judy Chicago and *The Dinner Party*. These three individuals aided Chicago in her own struggles, whether it was logistics or execution of a certain artistic maneuver. Chicago intended for her studio of volunteers to function in group processes which would aid in the practice of female equality and empowerment. Although beneficial, groups posed a significant problem to the overall process of *The Dinner Party* at times. The group dynamics within the studio were titled “empowerment within hierarchy” where individuals performed specific tasks to the likings

of Chicago (Gerhard 109). Women were able to feel important in their duties, but had to comply with the conclusive desires of Chicago. During the creative process, another struggle included trying to piece together the lost history of women. Chicago's research team of about twenty women spent nearly two years compiling information about the contributions of women and whether or not they improved the living conditions of others. Several other struggles arose through the *The Dinner Party* as well, such as the dissatisfaction of viewers that felt unrepresented, volunteers that did not feel credited for their effort, and the overall time expended.

Despite the struggles of the volunteer artists, *The Dinner Party* ultimately created a bond with people and, in turn, promoted Judy Chicago's feminist ideas. This bond with Chicago's art appeared negative or positive, depending on the viewer. Chicago's ultimate goal was to "[enable] viewers . . . to see the world through the prism of 1970s US feminism" (Gerhard 614). *The Dinner Party* helped to convey the complications of feminism in that era. In addition to helping regular viewers visualize the struggles endured during the 1970s, it helped the artists themselves to visualize them as well. This four-year long project had a great influence on those who helped Chicago's vision come true. Workers came from across the country to volunteer; most were white and female except for one African-American and one Native American (Gerhard 604). When everything operated harmoniously in the studio, Jane F. Gerhard explained that Chicago felt connected to the feminists she was commemorating ("Judy Chicago and the Practice of 1970s Feminism" 610). Chicago's volunteers sacrificed time, jobs, and even schooling to help with *The Dinner Party*. By spending many hours with their specific tasks, the volunteers began to grow closer to the "feminist" that they were assigned to. The needleworkers for the table runners started to identify with specific women and even view them as role models (Gerhard 123).

Not only did artists bond with historical feminists but with their fellow volunteers. Those who worked on *The Dinner Party* grew close to each other and constructed a unique bond. Women could convene, have a role in a certain field, and be a part of something greater than just themselves. Judy Chicago instilled her values of feminism into those who accepted them. Work was the essence of the studio, and Chicago made that very clear. Some women during that era did not feel as though they had a place in society, but volunteering for *The Dinner Party* reminded them of their importance in life and the impact they could make on the perspectives of others. This female environment that Chicago formed brought women closer together and closer to their histories.

Although some felt closer to other women and women's history through Chicago's piece, countless individuals argued otherwise. Once *The Dinner Party* was displayed at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in March of 1979, there was an outbreak of criticism which came from several types of people. Artists complained that Chicago's piece was not art but was a "craft" instead (Gerhard 615). Artists made these comments because of Chicago's use of various textiles and modes. Rather than sticking to one type of art medium, Chicago incorporated needlework, china painting, ceramics, and other mediums to convey her message of feminine history. Other criticisms about *The Dinner Party* came from feminists who argued that this piece was "essentialist and Eurocentric" (Gerhard 615). For each seated guest in the party, Chicago created china plates that resembled the vagina of each specific woman in order to symbolize her feminine identity. Feminists felt as though these plates were pornographic and contributed to the objectification that women experience throughout life. Despite harsh criticism, the importance of Chicago's work was not demeaned in any way; people recognized the significance of *The Dinner Party*. *The Dinner Party* had been rejected by the art world and disregarded, but that does not mean it did not make a difference. Gerhard explains how after 1982, no US museum agreed to show this piece, with the exception of a 1996 exhibit in Los Angeles because of its "overt imagery" (615). It was not until 2003 that the Brooklyn Museum of Art became the permanent home of *The Dinner Party*.

Judy Chicago made a significant impact on the feminist art movement, even though critics might believe otherwise. She promoted feminism and brought awareness to those who needed it. Chicago utilized multiple techniques for her art in order to salvage the past and recognize the historic accomplishments of women in Western Civilization (Gerhard 126). The multilayered meanings of each facet of *The Dinner Party*, coupled with the piece's symbolism, showcased activism that exists within artists. The project had its struggles, criticisms, and trials, but that never stopped Chicago's process of creating *The Dinner Party*; she still articulated the message she intended on sharing. *The Dinner Party*, although somewhat overlooked in its time, created a powerful statement to feminist art and art history in general. In 2019, reporter Brigit Katz announced that a new exhibition in New Mexico in 2020 would celebrate *The Dinner Party* and its impact ("Judy Chicago Retrospective to Look Beyond *The Dinner Party*"). With this exhibition, people in this day and age have the opportunity to not only grasp the value of Chicago's masterpiece but challenge and rethink their perspectives.

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