

THE DINNER PARTY

A monumental, multi-media installation created by Judy Chicago and hundreds of volunteers between 1974 - 1979. A symbolic history of women in Western Civilization which has toured around the world to fifteen sites, six countries and a viewing audience of over one million people, in early 2007, icon of twentieth-century art will be permanently housed in the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY.

Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* elevates female achievement in Western history to a heroic scale traditionally reserved for men. *The Dinner Party* is a massive ceremonial banquet in art, laid on a triangular table measuring forty-eight feet on each side. Combining the glory of sacramental tradition with the intimate detail of a carefully orchestrated social gathering, the artist represents thirty-nine "guests of honor" by individually symbolic, larger-than-life-size china-painted porcelain plates rising from intricate textiles draped completely over the tabletop. Each plate features an image based on the butterfly, symbolic of a vaginal central core. The runners name the 39 women and bear images drawn from each one's story.

Each fabric runner is easily viewed from the front. Vivid imagery on the runner back is visible only across the span of a gleaming porcelain floor that undulates with the gilded names of 999 women who prefigured and supported the towering figures on the table. For viewers, the table installation is preceded by six Aubusson tapestry banners invoking the female principle as a meditation theme. The variety of details worked into the art would be overwhelming but for the powerful simplicity of the triangular form, holding a host of particulars in its equilateral embrace.

The multiplicity of lives alluded to in *The Dinner Party* would be impossible to take in except for one overarching fact communicated throughout the art: all these remarkable human beings were female. In the 21st century, the existence of women of achievement is not big news. In the United States, Annika Sorenstam has competed respectably in a men's professional golf tournament; Carly Fiorina heads the technology giant Hewlett-Packard; Dr. Condoleezza Rice is the President's Secretary of State, and Dr. Mathilde Krim is a major figure in AIDS research. But it was paradigm-shattering news that women had achieved in significant numbers when Judy Chicago began thinking about *The Dinner Party* in the late 1960s. There were no women's studies programs; no women in history courses; no seminaries teaching about the female principle in religion, and scarcely any women leading churches.

There were no exhibitions, books, or courses surveying women in art. Not one woman appeared in the standard art history college textbook by H.W. Jansen. There was no biography in English of Frida Kahlo; the music of Hildegarde of Bingen had not been heard for centuries. It was more than news -- it was a major challenge to academic and artistic tradition that the subject matter of women's

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achievements was adequate for a monumental work of art. Developing that subject matter, expressing it traditionally - i.e., on a heroic scale -- in media that were considered beneath the standard of fine art, working openly with scores of studio participants and acknowledging their role in the production of art - in all these ways Judy Chicago defied tradition, and challenged the usual boundaries of the contemporary art world.

Because of the range and magnitude of the challenge *The Dinner Party* embodied, its history was embattled over the quarter-century that elapsed from the time it left Chicago's studio in Santa Monica, CA to the time it was gifted to the permanent collection of The Brooklyn Museum by Dr. Elizabeth A. Sackler. In 1979 the work was premiered to enormous public enthusiasm by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, whose director, Henry Hopkins, had followed its progress and supported it with grant applications in the Museum's name for years. But the next planned stops on its exhibition tour were quickly scuttled.

In Seattle the Pacific Science Center booked the exhibition, claiming that because Chicago had achieved a history of textiles in the needlework, *The Dinner Party* fit the mission of the museum. But the Seattle Art Museum accused the Science Center of infringing on its territory, appealing to civic museum czar John Blaine to stop the show. Blaine ruled that *The Dinner Party* was unquestionably art, a bolder position than some critics would later take. The exhibition did not go to Seattle, WA. At another art museum the interested curator moved on, and the art was too unconventional for the museum to rise to the challenge of funding a show. The boundaries Chicago tested were proved not just real, but substantial.

But Chicago's uncommon range of abilities and her emphasis on education turned the tide. Knowing that women's achievements, especially in the arts, had disappeared from history, Chicago planned two volumes and a film documenting *The Dinner Party*, so that it would not be easily erased. She had already published an autobiography, *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist* (1975) in which she detailed her effort to construct a historical context for her life as a woman artist. Her effort came to fruition in *The Dinner Party* as volunteers scoured libraries for women in history, while others gave countless hours alongside Chicago in the studio where ceramics and textiles were made. Neither Chicago nor her colleagues imagined that her book would launch *The Dinner Party* when the art world could not, but that's what happened.

Months before *The Dinner Party* opened in San Francisco, CA, Judy Chicago addressed a sales conference of publishing representatives, describing the epic project that she documented in *The Dinner Party: A Symbol of Our Heritage* (1979). In the audience was a young woman from Houston, Evelyn Hubbard, who had worked for U.S. Representative Barbara Jordan before becoming the first African American sales rep in the huge Doubleday firm. Impressed by Chicago's presentation, Hubbard told feminist bookseller MaryRoss Taylor, "We need to get this show to Houston as a follow-up to the International Women's Year Conference." Taylor called *The Dinner Party* studio in Santa Monica and formed a committee of local art professionals to help a handful of feminist activists in the quest for a venue. Calvin Cannon, then Dean of Humanities at University of Houston - Clear Lake, said "Yes," and the show opened there in 1980 to enthusiastic reviews from local art critics and the public. "Where did we go wrong?" wailed feminist activist Helen Cassidy, "We thought we were starting a revolution, but they love it!" John Blaine, who vetoed the exhibition in Seattle, by then headed the Cultural Arts Council of Houston and expressed satisfaction at the support the art exhibition received through Arts Council grants.

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Boston women artists visited the exhibition and quickly adopted the Houston, TX model, inspiring the formation of new community groups in Cleveland, OH and Chicago, IL. Museums came slowly on board, in Atlanta, GA, Brooklyn, NY - later to be the permanent home - and across Canada. In Europe the exhibit was presented by arts organizations as well as feminist groups. Critical response varied greatly, from praise to loud objections published by Hilton Kramer and Robert Hughes during the exhibition at The Brooklyn Museum. They felt *The Dinner Party* was not art. But if it wasn't art, what was it? A highly trained artist conceived it, designed it, worked to create it, and directed its realization. Hundreds of thousands of visitors were moved by it. It stirred strong passions, evoked arguments among highly trained professionals, inspired parodies and imitations, even gave rise to a wave of elementary-school projects where children honored the woman of their choice by decorating a paper plate.

As *The Dinner Party* traveled, the culture it was part of slowly shifted. Women's studies joined existing specialties on college campuses. Women's rights were slowly won in the workplace, the courtroom and the schoolyard. Some churches yielded to women's demands for leadership roles. Geraldine Ferraro ran for Vice President of the United States on the Democratic ticket. And in the art world, trends that had first emerged in California feminist art began to sweep the country among young artists both male and female. Performance art, which originated in feminist incubators, became well known. Materials ranging from fabric toys to paper clips became part of contemporary artmaking. Personal subject matter, tabooed by formalists like Hilton Kramer, made a comeback. Installation art became a standard, and historical troves were mined to yield narrative art and post-modern commentary on history. The world, even the art world, began to catch up to the point from which Judy Chicago had begun *The Dinner Party*.

While the project of permanently housing *The Dinner Party* was stalled perpetually by the high cost of creating an ongoing institutional framework for it, the growing audience for the work found it hard to believe that housing the art was not just a matter of saying "Yes." For Chicago, the situation was deeply frustrating. Over and over, exhibitors profited from showing the piece. On campuses, fields of study sprang up that lent context to the factual detail embodied in the art. To students, *The Dinner Party* was part of art history. But it was crated in storage with no institutional sponsor in sight.

Chicago offered the art as a gift to the University of the District of Columbia, where a bond issue had passed to renovate a library as a cultural center. Republican Congressmen responded with fury, threatening to cut the District's budget and end the National Endowment for the Arts, which had supported the artmaking. Despite the loosening of gender restraints on women, the loudest defenders of cultural tradition were "old white men"; their supporters were numerous, however, and not all old, white, or male, as conservative Christians began to dominate the political arena. And as gender studies, women's studies, African American studies and other new specialties competed for students, funding, and intellectual privilege, it became less clear where *The Dinner Party* fit in academia.

By 2000 it seemed that the only realistic option was to preserve *The Dinner Party* and hope that a future generation of prosperous women would choose to house it. Then its future was secured by a woman who saw *The Dinner Party* as a museum-worthy work of art, and who could endow an institution with the resources to house it: Dr. Elizabeth A. Sackler. Younger than Chicago, Sackler's experience of art from many cultures was almost unique. Her father, Arthur M. Sackler, acquired countless artifacts from world cultures, donating them to museums along with buildings to house them. Sackler, who earned her Ph.D. in social history, had worked with museums on exhibitions and fund-

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ed the repatriation of Native American artifacts. She also collected works by Judy Chicago and got to know her. Over time Sackler came to a decision: she would offer to purchase the work as a gift to The Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY, of which she is a Trustee.

Although the Museum had been threatened with the termination of city support by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, who was offended by a painting shown there, the Trustees gave Sackler a standing ovation for her role in preserving the controversial *Dinner Party*. Plans for renovation of part of the Museum are now underway, as part of Sackler's gift. After a temporary exhibition in Fall 2002, *The Dinner Party* awaits its permanent installation there, planned to open in 2006. Through the Flower Corporation will ultimately receive an endowment from the charitable remainder trust created to transfer the art to the care of a major museum.

Making connections through art.

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A nonprofit feminist art organization founded by Judy Chicago.