

# The Dinner Party Curriculum Project

## Encounter 9: On the Wings of a Butterfly

**Grade Levels:** Upper-Elementary, Middle, High School



In this Encounter, students continue to explore contextual information important to *The Dinner Party*—the symbolism of the butterfly and the historical significance of the women whose names appear on the *Heritage Floor*. Students first review symbols they have encountered in their previous investigation of *The Dinner Party*. They then learn about the butterfly from scientific and cultural-historical perspectives, and speculate as to why Judy Chicago used butterfly symbolism in the artwork. They return to *The Dinner Party* place settings, noting uses of the butterfly imagery as well as the names of women on the *Heritage Floor* adjacent the place settings. From the names on the *Heritage Floor*, students select one or more women and investigate her history and contributions.

Judy Chicago used the butterfly symbol to teach women's history and to "...symbolize liberation and yearning to be free" (Chicago, 1979, p. 52). The butterfly metaphor becomes more salient as students dig deeper into the many components of *The Dinner Party* and gain an enriched understanding of the artwork. As they learn more about the women whose names are inscribed on the *Heritage Floor* and recall the criteria used to determine which women would have a place there, students are reminded of the continuing importance of supporting the interests and needs of women now and throughout time. In addition to continuing to enrich their understanding of *The Dinner Party*, this Encounter provides students with an opportunity to think of themselves in a larger context and how they, too, can contribute to society.

### Investigation

*The teacher will:*

1. Prepare materials. Make copies of the *Butterfly Information* sheets (see below) to distribute to students. Prepare a space for keeping a list (e.g., the blackboard or a large poster board) with the heading: "What We Know about Butterflies". The list should be divided into two columns: Scientific and Cultural-Historical.
2. Engage students in a discussion about symbolism. Remind students that in earlier Encounters with the place settings of *The Dinner Party*, they saw how the artist had incorporated symbols for the "guests" at the table
  - ▶ For example, show students the Carolyn Herschel placesetting and assist them in identifying the central eye that peers out at the universe, the comets symbolizing those she discovered, and the telescope symbolizing her profession.
3. Have students share what they already know about butterflies. List their contributions on the prepared worksheet space. After students list what they already know about butterflies, distribute the scientific and cultural-historical information sheets about butterflies and ask students to refer to them as they add to the list of what they know. Ask the students: Given what we now know about butterflies, why do you suppose Judy Chicago chose to use the butterfly as a symbol in *The Dinner Party*?

4. Distribute the handout with statements by the artist about her use of butterflies and discuss the connection between their speculations and her stated intentions.

5. Refer students to the 39 place settings from *The Dinner Party* and ask them to identify the butterfly imagery on the plates. Ask the students to discuss similarities and differences among the plates.

6. Have students now focus on the *Heritage Floor*. Provide students with information about the *Heritage Floor* or visit the Brooklyn Museum Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art website:

▶ [http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner\\_party/heritage\\_floor/index.php](http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/heritage_floor/index.php) ◀



7. Explain that the *Heritage Floor* is made of porcelain tiles inscribed with the names of 999 women who provided the larger context of female history through which to understand the accomplishments of women represented at the table. It took a team of 20 researchers two years to compile the information for the *Heritage Floor*. There were three criteria for inclusion on the *Heritage Floor*:

- ▶ Did the woman make a worthwhile contribution to society?
- ▶ Had the woman attempted to improve conditions for women?
- ▶ Did the woman's life or work illuminate a significant aspect of women's history or provide a model for a more egalitarian society?
- ▶ Inform students that in *The Dinner Party* (1996) catalogue, Judy Chicago explained the groupings of the names of women:

*The names on the floor were grouped together based upon some commonality of experience, contribution, historic period, and/or geography, then placed in relation to particular place settings in order to emphasize the fact that the achievements of the women represented on the table need to be seen in this larger context (p. 10).*

8. Direct and introduce students to the *Heritage Panels*. Explain that the *Heritage Panels*, also found in the adjacent room as one exits the gallery housing *The Dinner Party*, are in the form of a time line including all the women of *The Dinner Party*. Show students the reproductions of the *Heritage Panels* available online at Through the Flower's website: <http://www.throughtheflower.org>.

9. Guide students to learn more about individual women whose names appear on the *Heritage Floor* and, direct students to the Brooklyn Museum of Art, Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art Heritage Floor Data Base: [http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner\\_party/heritage\\_floor/search.php](http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/heritage_floor/search.php).

10. Have students, working alone or in groups, select a specific place setting and identify the names of women on the *Heritage Floor* that appear in association with the woman honored in the place setting. Have students review the criteria for women represented on the floor. Learn about one or more women whose names appear there. Encourage students to look for connections between the woman who is honored at the table and the women on the floor grouped near her.

11. Students can investigate not only the commonalities of the women represented in a particular time period but also group women by their commonalities across time. (e.g., scientists, writers, activists, etc.). Using the **SEARCH** link on the Brooklyn Museum Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art Heritage Floor Database, students can learn about individual women as well as use tags to identify groups of women by their commonalities.

▶ [http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner\\_party/heritage\\_floor/search.php](http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/heritage_floor/search.php) ◀

12. Invite students to create a way of displaying their new knowledge of women represented on the *Heritage Floor* and *Heritage Panels*. For example, students might wish to adapt the butterfly symbol and create other symbols to design a poster or banner in honor of the woman researched.



The students will:

1. Review symbols and recall the use of symbolism in *The Dinner Party*.
2. Create a list of information about butterflies from their own experiences and from the information provided on handouts.
3. Speculate as to why Judy Chicago chose to use the butterfly as an important symbol in *The Dinner Party*.
4. Compare and contrast the ways in which the butterfly symbol appears in the plates of *The Dinner Party*.
5. Become familiar with the women represented on the *Heritage Floor* and *Heritage Panels* and the criteria used to determine which women would be included. Speculate as to the commonalities among women on the floor and the women represented by the place settings at the table. Select one or more women on the *Heritage Floor* to research.
6. Work with other students and their teacher to determine a way to symbolize what they have learned about the women named on the *Heritage Floor* and listed on the *Heritage Panels*.

### Continuing Exploration:

1. As a strategy for introducing metaphor and dividing into groups, teachers can distribute butterfly images, stickers, or nametags asking students to find their matching group members. This approach to grouping can introduce and reinforce the butterfly metaphor in any encounter with *The Dinner Party*.

- ▶ To emphasize the spirit of contribution as evidenced by the women chosen to “sit” at table of *The Dinner Party* or to be represented on the *Heritage Floor*, encourage students to make contributions in support of women. Discuss the criteria used to determine which women would sit at the table and which would be represented on the *Heritage Floor*. Ask students, “What does it mean to give to society?” What are contemporary examples of giving to society?
- ▶ As a collaborative studio project constructed over the course of a school year, students might create a visual reminder of their contributions to the social fabric which they inhabit and participate in every day. Students will make handmade paper “scales” (see Scientific information about butterflies under Resources) on which they will record actions or write intentions based on the stem sentences suggested below. The stem sentences suggest conscious awareness of actions in the past, present, and future. Together over time students will build the wings of a butterfly with the goal of filled wings for public display. Students will complete the following stem sentence(s):

- ▶ In support of women I have \_\_\_\_\_.
- ▶ In support of women I am \_\_\_\_\_.
- ▶ In support of women I will \_\_\_\_\_.

### Materials:

1. *The Butterfly: Scientific and Cultural-Historical Perspectives* handout
2. *The Butterfly: Judy Chicago’s Perspective*

### Resources:

1. Brooklyn Museum Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, *The Dinner Party*  
[http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner\\_party/home.php/](http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/home.php/)
2. Resources available at Through the Flower Shop <http://www.throughtheflower.org/store/>:
  - ▶ *Heritage Panels* set

### References:

1. Chicago, J. (1996). *Beyond the Flower*. NY: Viking Penguin, p. 48.
2. Chicago, J. (1996). *The Dinner Party*. NY: Penguin Books, pp. 11-12.
3. Meadows, K. (1996). *Earth Medicine*. Brisbane, Queensland AU: Element Books Limited.
4. Miller, M. & Nelson, C. (1993). *Painted Ladies: Butterflies of North America*. Boulder, CO: Johnson Books.

# The Dinner Party Curriculum Project

## The Butterfly: Scientific Perspective



Order: *Lepidoptera*, meaning “scaly wings.” Butterflies and moths are the only insects covered with scales that are actually flattened hairs that overlap.

Butterflies evolved into existence 40 million years ago. Today there are 20,000 butterfly species worldwide with 700 species found in America, north of Mexico.

Butterflies generally fly in the daytime. They bask in the sun to warm their flight muscles. The morning sun aids in their birth and the average lifespan of an adult butterfly is around two weeks. Some colder-climate species may take up to two years to reach adulthood.

When courting, butterflies touch or flutter in unique ways. Males spend their lives searching for females and mating can last from 10 minutes to hours, sometimes occurring in tandem flight. Butterflies are able to distinguish the sex and/or species of other

butterflies and find nectar in special flowers by seeing “hidden” ultraviolet colors. They smell with antennae that are knobbed at the ends. Females taste plants with their feet to determine if it is the right place to lay eggs.

Metamorphosis is the process of changing from eggs to caterpillars (larvae) to chrysalises (pupae) to winged adults. Caterpillars survive by eating host plants while butterflies seek nectar plants. Host plants include citrus, broadleaf trees, cherries, poplars, birches, and willows. Nectar plants include lilac, honeysuckle, goldenrod, clover, azalea, jewelweed, milkweed, petunia, fruit tree blossoms and thistle.

When storms approach, butterflies seek shelter under blades of grass, leaves, woody surfaces and rocks. Hibernation boxes lined with tree bark and mounted in the shade can help protect adult butterflies in the winter.

## The Butterfly: Cultural-Historical Perspective



In the Native American spiritual practice of Earth Medicine, the butterfly was possibly chosen as the totem for elemental Air not just for its constant activity of being in *motion*, traveling from one place to another, but also because of its “great *transforming* powers” (Meadows, 1996, p. 81). According to the teachings of the Medicine Wheel, those born between January 20 to February 18, May 21 to June 20, and September 22 to October 22 belong to the Butterfly Clan. They are described as “always active—physically, mentally, or emotionally—with fresh ideas and unexpected ways of doing things. They are manipulative and like to transform things.”

“Butterfly Clan people have an affinity with air, so they will be invigorated and stimulated by being out in big open spaces and away from any kind of confinement whenever possible” (p. 81).

Butterfly lore links the butterfly to the human soul. The Aztecs believed that deceased family members would visit them in the form of butterflies to assure that all is well.

Egyptians believed that butterflies reflected the immortality of the soul and awaited them in the afterlife.

The Irish and other cultural groups view butterflies as the souls of the dead waiting for passage through purgatory.

Many cultural groups associate butterflies with souls. When Chinese newlyweds are given a jade butterfly as a gift, it symbolizes the coming together of their two souls.

People in medieval times considered the butterfly a symbol for the arrival of spring.

Butterflies in ancient Mexico were associated with the earth and its many gifts.

Several Asian cultures view butterflies as symbols of happiness and joy.

The Japanese consider the butterfly a symbol of womanhood.

By representing the women at the table and sharing their stories, Chicago freed women from imposed silence and invisibility.

# The Dinner Party Curriculum Project

## The Butterfly: Judy Chicago's Perspective



An ancient symbol for liberation, Judy Chicago selected the butterfly as a visual base for many of the transmuting forms on *The Dinner Party* plates. As a metaphor, a butterfly represents an active form, chosen by the artist to challenge the notion of female passivity. As butterflies, the women attempt to lift themselves up from their socially confined roles.

Butterfly is "a metaphor for an assertive female identity"

(Chicago, 1996, p. 6)

Judy Chicago on May 13, 1973: *I want the butterfly forms to allow me to express a variety of emotional stances and to be free, liberated forms. They are slowly taking shape in my head, and it looks like they'll occupy me for some time to come—perhaps the next five years.*

(Chicago, 1996, p. 21)

Judy Chicago on June 2, 1974: *I want to make butterfly images that are hard, strong, soft, passive, opaque, transparent—all different stages—and I want them all to have vaginas so they'll be female butterflies and at the same time be shells, flowers, flesh, forest—all kinds of things simultaneously.*

(Chicago, 1979, p. 22)

*I developed an iconography using the butterfly to symbolize liberation and the yearning to be free. The butterfly form undergoes various stages of metamorphosis as the piece unfolds. Sometimes she is pinned down; sometimes she is trying to move from a larva to an adult state; sometimes she is nearly unrecognizable as a butterfly; and sometimes she is almost transformed into an unconstrained being.*

(Chicago, 1979, p. 52)

*The butterfly forms undergo a metamorphosis as the painted and sculpted abstract portraits become increasingly dimensional, a metaphor for women's intensifying struggle for freedom.*

(Chicago, 1996, p. 5)