

# ARTSLANT

## WAYS OF SEEING JUDY CHICAGO'S "THE DINNER PARTY"

By Sally Deskins

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"The Dinner Party studio," 1978. Judy Chicago addresses a gathering of volunteers in the Dinner Party studio. Courtesy of National Museum of Women in the Arts. Photo: Amy Meadow

"My lifelong goal has been to overcome the erasure that has eclipsed the contributions of so many women," said Judy Chicago on the occasion of two new exhibitions examining the production of her best-known work, *The Dinner Party*. These exhibitions, currently at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C., and the Brooklyn Museum, uniquely present the seminal artwork in a now unfamiliar way, recalling the authentic grit of the feminist process, and the inclusive approach of its complete original installation design.

Some feminists have argued enough ink has been spilled on Judy Chicago. But her banquet-sized table and the surrounding installations which originally encompassed *The Dinner Party*—produced from 1974 and 1979 with more than 400 volunteers—endure as the subject of exhibitions and scholarship. This season's exhibitions each revisit the origins and development of *The Dinner Party*, best known, a bit incompletely, for its 39 place settings symbolizing the contributions of women throughout Western history.



Judy Chicago Designing the Entry Banners for *The Dinner Party*, 1978. Courtesy of Through the Flower Archive

### Time for (Re)Presentation

*The Dinner Party* is often described as a monumental icon to women and feminist art, and sometimes, erroneously, to Chicago herself. Monuments, of course, are contested territory, the terrain on which fiery discussions about representation, history, and memory take place: who is celebrated, and who is left out? Some feminist critiques of monuments balk at the very notion of canonizing individuals, of making “heroes.” Every one of us has an impact on our world, argue these theorists, and crediting individuals promotes the myth of the patriarchal archetype genius. *The Dinner Party*, conceived as an exercise in counteracting erasure and rethinking history as written, is often critiqued as doing the very opposite. It is in this light, timed with the new exhibitions looking back to the conception and original execution of the work, that a contextual discussion around the (lingering, but often hushed) controversies surrounding Chicago and *The Dinner Party* seems particularly warranted.

In 2007, *The Dinner Party* became a permanent installation at The Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art (EASCFA) inside the Brooklyn Museum. Chicago’s other work has also been acquired by major institutions in recent years. To some, this institutional recognition throws Chicago’s feminism into question, as their goal is to stay outside such hallowed spaces; to others, Chicago has now “made it” and is thus unworthy of more discussion (despite the fact that it took decades to achieve a permanent home for *The Dinner Party*). Thus, the complete work remains largely overlooked by feminist and art historical documentation, and highly misunderstood and under-recognized by academia—despite its popularity with museumgoers. Chicago’s oeuvre and legacy are worthy of further discussion, not only for the sake of the artist and *The Dinner Party*, but in service of fully researching and contextualizing other work by women.



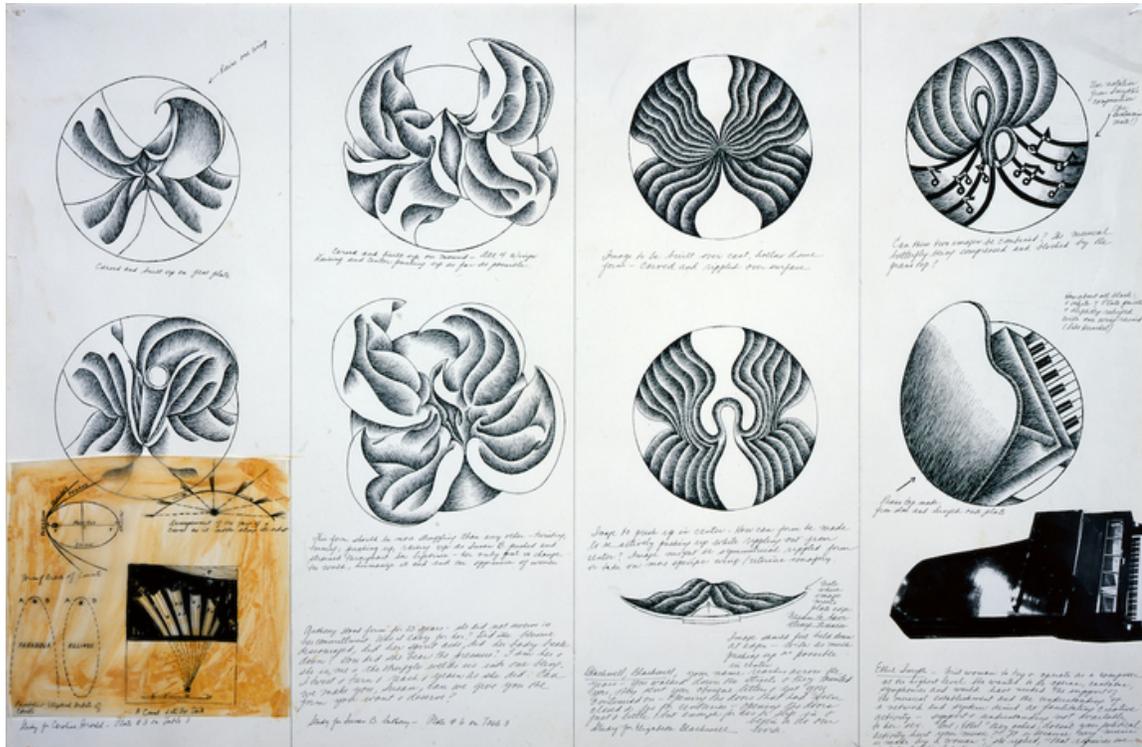
The Dinner Party Needlework Loft, 1977. Courtesy of Through the Flower Archive

### Lingering Discontent from a Controversial Tour

Chicago may now be seen as museum-approved, though she works outside it. *The Dinner Party*, too, was created by institutional outsiders, and designed to challenge the traditional, white-walled, “solitary genius” (typically white male) framing of art history.

When *The Dinner Party* first went on tour from 1979–1988, controversies around the artwork were well known in mass media and academia. Some major institutions would not even temporarily display the contentious piece—even [The House of Representatives discussed the “provocative” nature](#), debating its artistic integrity versus its purported pornography in its liberal (yet abstract) representation of vulvas.

While conservative critics had problems with its so-called sexual nature, feminists argue the repeated use of the vulva throughout the 39 table settings, essentializes women by reducing them to their biology alone. For second wave feminists like Chicago, the use of feminine iconography celebrated and broadened the discussion of women. At the time, artists were using imagery like the vulva to critique *society’s* reduction of women to their biology—not the other way around. The essentialist argument today, though not without merit, is truly an argument expressed in hindsight. Despite venue cancellations and widespread [criticisms](#), *The Dinner Party* was immensely popular during its international grassroots tour, causing lines lasting hours, breaking attendance and fundraising records. (To note, *The Dinner Party*, though fragmented from its entire original exhibition installation, is the most popular piece at the Brooklyn Museum.)



Judy Chicago (American, born 1939). Study for C. Herschel, S. Anthony, E. Blackwell, and E. Smyth plates from *The Dinner Party*, 1978, Ink and collage on paper, 23 x 35 in. Courtesy of the artist. © 2017 Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. (Photo © Donald Woodman)

### What (and Who) We're Not Seeing Today

The entirety of the original installation of *The Dinner Party* included displaying Heritage Banners (in a hallway leading up to the table), the artwork table and Heritage Floor tiles, Heritage Panels (a collage contextualizing the 1,038 women featured in the place settings and Heritage Floor), Documentary Panels (showing volunteers working on the piece), Acknowledgement panels (listing volunteers who worked on it), Donor Panels, and, after the first exhibition, portions of [The International Honor Quilt](#).<sup>[1]</sup> Often, installations would be complemented by a group exhibition of china painters to give context and credit to those who worked on the place settings. The exhibitions were also complemented by local events, exhibits, courses, and other projects which added to the regional context of each tour stop. Some venues could not house all of these elements (or did not want to due to the educational/non fine art aspects). Tellingly, when regarded in documentation today, these elements seem to not exist, ironically leaving behind crucial parts of an installation that was meant to honor those left out of history. That early attention focused on the table likely impacted its permanent installation at the Brooklyn Museum as just the table and Heritage Banners. Art historians today largely recognize it as these elements alone.



Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 1974–79, Ceramic, porcelain, textile, 576 x 576 in. Brooklyn Museum, Gift of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Foundation, 2002.10. © 2017 Judy Chicago / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo © Donald Woodman

The International Honor Quilt counters another criticism of *The Dinner Party*: that it excludes many women by focusing on Western societies and mainly white women of royal status.<sup>[2]</sup> This remains a pertinent critique of *The Dinner Party*, though it disregards Chicago and her team's research process and intent. Starting from ground zero they considered some 3,000 women in detail, without computers. They were bound to the limited resources about women's history available in the 1970s. Chicago maintains the project is a *symbol* of the history of women in Western civilizations, not a history in entirety. Still, Chicago heard the critique and responded with The International Honor Quilt. Artists and non-artists alike were invited to contribute a triangle quilt patch honoring the women that made an impact on them. The initiative amounted to hundreds of quilts and added another layer to the expansive artwork.



*The Dinner Party* Workers Painting Names on the Heritage Floor Tiles, 1978. Courtesy of Through the Flower Archive

*The Dinner Party*, thus, is bigger than Chicago—although she was the leader and designer. The *understanding* of this tremendous work over time morphed, in some feminist circles, into a perceived aggrandizing monument to the artist. When it is mentioned in textbooks, the collaborative process is occasionally mentioned, but the focus is on the table, craft, its historical intent, criticism for whom it excludes, and Chicago's name itself. The inclusive elements of the original exhibition are scarcely recognized.

Today, the permanent installation at The Brooklyn Museum includes just the Heritage Banners and the table artwork; aside from her tiny signature, unlit on the floor, and the museum's wall text, it does not glorify Chicago. Nevertheless, the simplified display overlooks the various people and contextual aspects that originally showcased the monumental work in a multilayered light. This is perhaps due to a slow shift from the original comprehensive environment—the collaborative studio—to an institutionalized, canonized display, something that, again, ironically *The Dinner Party* was fighting against.



Judy Chicago and Others Working in *The Dinner Party* Needlework Loft, 1978. Courtesy of Through the Flower Archive

### Inside *The Dinner Party* Studio

Readings of artworks can change with context and curatorial decisions—this is not necessarily unique to this installation—but *The Dinner Party* perhaps epitomizes this impact. However, viewers now have a truly unique opportunity to see the story behind the collaborative making of the artwork, the situational context behind its design, and the historical information about the women featured.

To celebrate the Judy Chicago Visual Archive at the [National Museum of Women in the Arts](#)' Betty Boyd Dettre Library and Research Center, NMWA presents *Inside "The Dinner Party" Studio*, an exhibition about the work's creation using archival documentation and film. Curated by Library Director Sarah Osborne Bender, the exhibition is up to the task of interpreting the multi-layered, materials-based project. *Inside "The Dinner Party" Studio* focuses on the studio space and community led by Chicago, bringing together selected preparatory objects, illustrated letters and drawings, Documentary Panels, contact sheets and photographs, ephemera, and Johanna Demetrakas' film, *Right Out of History* (1980), which documented the making of the artwork. Of note is a sketchbook which includes Chicago's plans for *The Dinner Party* and peripheral projects like *The Dinner Party: A Symbol of Our History* (1979), a book chronicling the history of the women featured in the piece and the story of the installation's creation. This exhibition catalogue, available throughout the original tour, was updated in 2007 with *The Dinner Party: Restoring Women to History*, which included a history of the tour itself. Also telling are Chicago's original plans for the permanent housing for the installation. Contrary to critiques about the work's museum recognition, permanent housing was one of the original goals—to ensure these women's histories are not lost again.



Judy Chicago, Study for Emily Dickinson from *The Dinner Party*, 1977, Ink, photo, and collage on paper, 23 1/8 x 35 in. National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C., Purchase, Members' Acquisition Fund, 2001.3. © 2017 Judy Chicago / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Lee Stalsworth

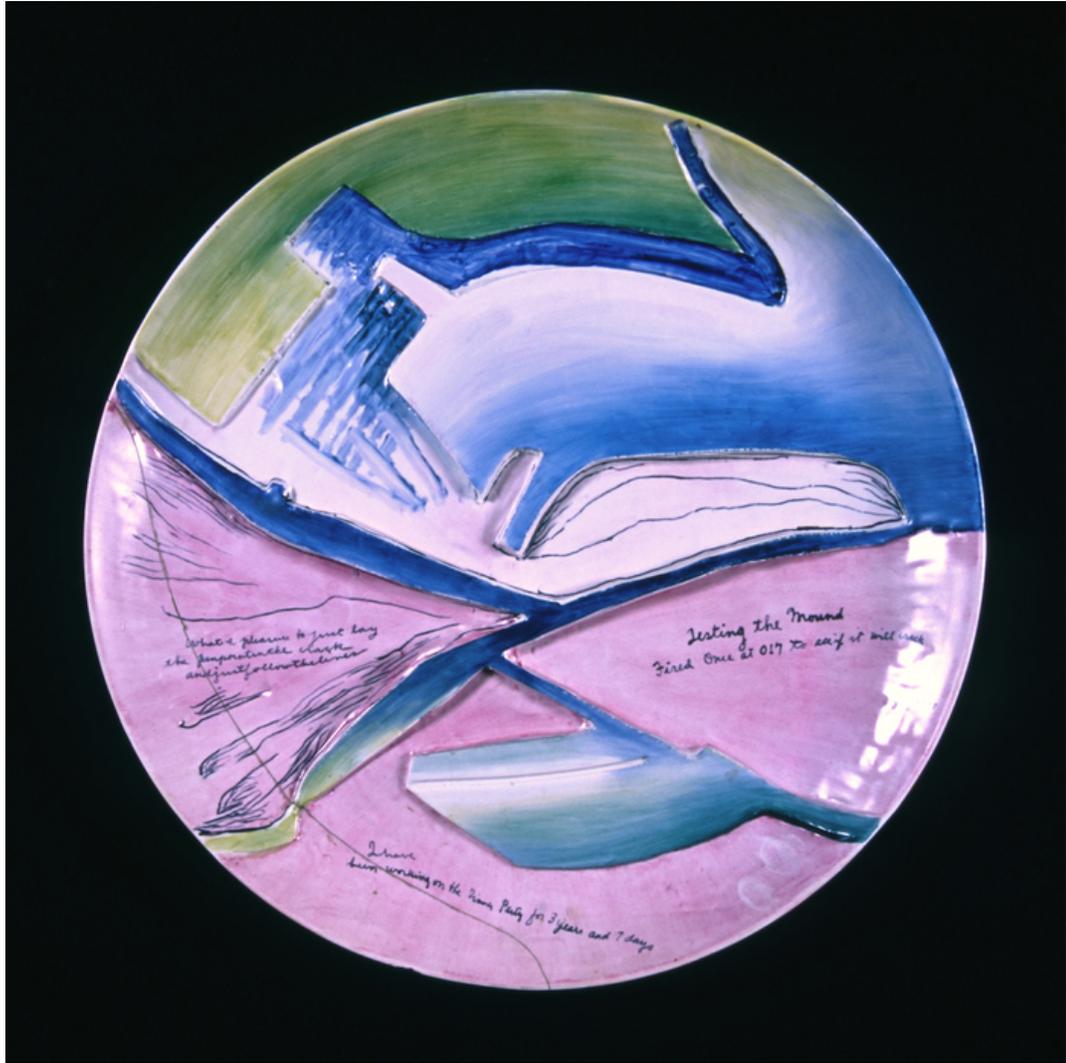
### "The Messiness of How It Really Got Done"

On October 20, the Brooklyn Museum opens [The Roots of "The Dinner Party": History in the Making](#), the final exhibition in the acclaimed *A Year of Yes: Reimagining Feminism at the Brooklyn Museum*. The Museum calls it "the first museum exhibition to examine the formal, material, and conceptual development" of *The Dinner Party*. Including never-before-exhibited objects, the show focuses on the installation's development, its model of collaborative art-making, and how it remains "a testament to the power of revising Western history to include women."

The exhibition includes test plates, research documents, notebooks, and preparatory drawings from 1971 through 1979, with sections on Chicago's vision and material studies, research documents from Chicago's workshop, and ephemera from the worldwide tour. The exhibit adds depth and context to the visitor's experience of *The Dinner Party* while "unpacking some of the misperceptions surrounding this controversial artwork and its critical reception."

This reflexive focus implies a unique acknowledgement of limitations of and by the Brooklyn Museum, and recognizing that, without additional context, perhaps misconceptions have been easily perpetuated.

"People might be accustomed to seeing the image of [*The Dinner Party* table], and part of her project has been aggrandized," EASCFA Curator Carmen Hermo, who curated the exhibition, told me recently. "Now, people can see some of the messiness of how it really got done."



Judy Chicago, Testing the Mound for The Dinner Party, 1977, Porcelain and China paint, diameter: 14 in. Courtesy of the artist. © 2017 Judy Chicago / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo © Donald Woodman

Of note are displays representing the artists' complex experimentation with mediums, containing, for example, broken plates; the evolution of the plates' vulva / butterfly designs and the ensuing controversy; and the intense, detailed process the studio underwent to select the women to feature, including original cards listing information on over 3,000 women considered. The exhibition lends perspective into the authentic struggle to bring this idea to fruition; the complexity of feminist issues *The Dinner Party* brings to the fore; and also how it is interpreted and displayed by the EASFA today.

Chicago and her original exhibition liaison, Diane Gelon, were both available for questions regarding items or details for the exhibitions. They worked with NMWA to try to identify the original volunteers presented in the Documentary Panels. This grounded readiness points to the continuing presence and interest of Chicago and her team in relation to this work. *The Dinner Party* remains a distinctive monument to women who remain at the margins of history pages, major institutions, and art gallery walls.



Judy Chicago, *Sojourner Truth #2 Test Plate from The Dinner Party*, circa 1978. Porcelain and China paint, diameter: 14 in. Brooklyn Museum, gift of Judy Chicago, 82.165. © 2017 Judy Chicago / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. © 2017 Judy Chicago / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Sarah DeSantis, Brooklyn Museum

After *The Roots of "The Dinner Party"* comes down, the surfeit of context will also come down. A printed handout and an interactive tablet will give historical context about the women featured; the Heritage Banners will remain as the "hallway of respite" before entering *The Dinner Party* gallery; the table will remain as a provocative centerpiece of the EASFA, contextualizing the feminist exhibitions around it in the Sackler Center, and curatorially encouraging critical thought for feminism and art past and present. Probably it will remain the most popular permanent artwork at the Brooklyn Museum, and aptly so, as women and minority artists remain under- and misrepresented; *The Dinner Party* reminds us of this, remaining a beautiful testament to overlooked populations.

Other exhibitions are building on Chicago's artistic impact, such as *Judy Chicago's Pussies* at the [Jessica Silverman Gallery](#) in San Francisco, on view through October 28, 2017, and *Womenhouse* at La Monnaie de Paris from October 20, 2017–January 28, 2018, which will continue on to the NMWA in the Spring 2018. As Chicago's work gains broader and more contextual repute (let's face it, many people outside art circles can hardly name a woman artist), so will that of other women—and, if anything, its critics and detractors will hopefully inspire others to take what Chicago started and build on its sentiments, grow it, make it better and even more just. There will always remain room for critique and praise: *The Dinner Party* can be both imperfect *and* feminist, an unfinished exercise in representing an incomplete history of women. But let it be accepted for its complexity, for its problems and its achievements—a simplified narrative, no matter who's doing the oversimplification, just isn't feminist.



Judy Chicago, Cartoon for Entryway Banner #2—And She Made for Them a Sign to See from The Dinner Party, 1978, Acrylic on paper, 38 x 60 in. Courtesy the artist and Salon 94, New York. © 2017 Judy Chicago / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

[Inside the Dinner Party Studio](#) runs from September 17, 2017–January 5, 2018 at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C.

[Roots of "The Dinner Party": History in the Making](#), run from October 20, 2017–March 4, 2018 at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum in New York.

[1] Sally Deskins, "Revealing Judy Chicago's 'The Dinner Party': An Analysis of the Curatorial Context," thesis, West Virginia University, 2016, 197 p.; 10110160.

[2] For example in Hilary Robinson, "Reframing Women," *Circa*, 72 (1995): 18–23.