

Judy Chicago: 'In the 1960s, I was the only visible woman artist'

By Nadja Sayej

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Judy Chicago in front of The Dinner Party. Photograph: Donald Woodman

As the Brooklyn Museum explores the process behind the 78-year-old's defining work, The Dinner Party, she talks about the tough road for women in art

When artist Judy Chicago was a student at the University of California in 1960, she had one question for her European history professor: "When are we going to learn about great women thinkers?" she asked. Her male professor promised Chicago he would talk about "women's contributions" in the last class. But he lied – there were no great women thinkers in his curriculum.

"It was the prevailing attitude in the 1960s that women had no history," said Chicago, 78, over the phone from her New Mexico home. "There were no women's studies, nothing."

It spurred the artist to not only found the feminist art program at the California State University in 1969, but to create one of the most iconic works of feminist art, The Dinner Party. The art installation is a long, triangular banquet table with plate settings for 39 figures of women's history. From the grandmother of American modern art, Georgia O'Keeffe, to women's rights activist Sojourner Truth, The Dinner Party has toured dozens of museums on three continents for an audience of 15 million people.

This month, Chicago opens an exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum called [Roots of The Dinner Party: History in the Making](#). It's the first ever exhibition to look into her creative process in making her most influential artwork. There will be over a hundred objects, from research documents to notebooks and drawings from 1971 to 1979, as well as the historic artwork itself.

For Chicago (who hails from the Windy City – it's her self-proclaimed artist name), it took the world long enough to tune into her forward-thinking vision. "The art world tried to pigeonhole me around The Dinner Party, but they have suddenly discovered my bigger career," says the artist. "I've been making art and showing all these years, it's just finally come more into the mainstream. It takes a *long* time."

This Brooklyn Museum exhibition shows how this deeply researched artwork originated and how it progressed, from its start in 1974 to its finish in 1979. "When I start, I have no idea how long it's going to take," she said. "I'm on a voyage of discovery."



Judy Chicago and others working on *The Dinner Party* at the Needlework Loft in 1978. Photograph: Courtesy of Through the Flower Archive

The exhibition will also be about setting the record straight, as the artwork was made in collaboration with several other people in her Santa Monica studio in the 1970s – some say she [exploited them](#).

"There's been a lot of misunderstanding about my collaborative process and how the studio was structured, which the show is going to help shed some light on," said Chicago.

While her assistants are often documented as volunteers, Chicago says her team of 400 participants – like embroidery artists, needleworkers, ceramicists, carpenters and office workers – didn't work together all at once.

"There was a core group of 20 or 25 people and some even got paid, so it's not even true they were all volunteers," said Chicago. "There were people who came in and out for short periods."

A close look at *The Dinner Party* reveals that each table setting for each woman has cutlery, a table runner with her embroidered name, a customised goblet and a colourful plate with (more often than not) a hand-painted, psychedelic-looking, sometimes three-dimensional vulva.

The banquet is divided into three wings; from prehistory to the Roman Empire, early Christian times and the modern day. So forget everything you know about history because who knew about Hypatia of Alexandria, a Greek mathematician and philosopher?

And who knew the first-ever female university student was Anna Maria van Schurman, a Dutch scholar

who spoke 14 languages? And that Boston spiritualist Anne Hutchinson helped develop religious freedom in the 17th century?
In the middle of the banquet, there is a Heritage Floor, which has 2,300 porcelain tiles with the names of 999 mythical and real women Chicago also wanted to honour; from [Catherine of Aragon to Colette](#).
When the artwork debuted at the San Francisco Museum of Modern [Art](#), it was an immediate sensation – people lined up for hours to see it – but it wasn't all critical acclaim. "Who knew the New York art critics were battering me and the piece with a sledgehammer?" she recalls. "In the 1960s, I was the only visible woman artist."



Judy Chicago designing the entry banners for The Dinner Party, 1978 Photograph: Courtesy of Through the Flower Archive

Male art critics like Hilton Kramer called the piece “failed art”, while female critic Maureen Mullarkey called it “preachy and untrue to the women it claims to represent”.

For a female critic to bash the piece was a surprise to Chicago. “Now that was really upsetting, that was more upsetting than the men,” she said.

Looking back at it now, Chicago is happy for the negative criticism and what it’s now added to the piece’s legacy. “Who knew there would come a time when The Dinner Party and the misogynist criticism that preceded it would be studied together in art history classes?” Chicago asks.

It was as if the art criticism was written in stone. “The way the New York Times used to work in the time of Hilton Kramer; was that if one person in one department issued a verdict, nobody was allowed to contradict it,” said Chicago. “For 20 years, everyone referred to The Dinner Party as what Kramer said: ‘vaginas on plates’. Nobody called it the history of women in western civilization, which of course, is what it is.”

Chicago starts off quiet when she speaks, but raises her voice when explaining, for the last damn time, what this legendary feminist artwork is about:

“It was to make the point that there is nothing that groups these women together who are from all different epochs, eras, countries, races, ethnicities, religions, class, except they had vaginas, which meant we didn’t know who they were!”

She pauses.

“Duh!”

It wasn’t until 2002, when the Brooklyn Museum acquired The Dinner Party, that things started to change. More than 20 years after the paper of record pooh-pooched Chicago’s art, the New York Times art critic Roberta Smith wrote that the artist’s piece was “[getting better all the time](#)” and “important”.

“And just like that everybody followed suit,” said Chicago. “Talk about the power of the New York Times; the paper had approved of my piece and suddenly everyone was like [squeals] ‘OMG, The Dinner Party, it’s so great!’”

“I was like, really?” she asks. “The New York Times gave me and The Dinner Party a halo in 2002, before that, I was shit.”

Even 50 years after her European history class at UCLA, the same problems still exist about women’s history.

“Upper-echelon universities in America still don’t teach the history of feminist art in their art history classes,” she said. “It reinforces one of the things I wanted to overcome, which was the erasure of women’s achievements – as one great woman thinker said: ‘Women grew up not knowing what women before them thought, taught, wrote or created, and as a result, they are constantly reinventing the wheel.’”

- Roots of The Dinner Party: History in the Making will show at the Brooklyn Museum until 4 March