



The Dinner Party Still Rocks

Judy Chicago's iconic installation—featuring textile and ceramic place settings for thirty-nine women of history—is once again on view in Brooklyn, thanks to benefactor Elizabeth A. Sackler. *by Carol K. Russell*

Seeing The Dinner Party changed my life in a way I didn't know art could do. It's about community not just ego, history not just the present, power not just victimization, and it also melts the barrier between arts and crafts. To know the story, from the vision of Judy Chicago through its creation by her with the contributions of many participants, is to have faith in the human imagination—including our own.

—Gloria Steinem

Thirty years after it sparked an international feminist art movement, Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* reignited New York City's arts community at the March opening of its new, permanent home in Brooklyn. Marking Women's History Month, the Brooklyn Museum led a significant cultural and civic advance as a chorus of prominent voices joined those of *The Dinner Party*. Present-day Medici Dr. Elizabeth A. Sackler has shared her own influence and personal resources in order that the feminist message integral to this enduring touchstone stands firmly in a major arts institution.

Housing Chicago's installation is the Elizabeth A. Sackler

ABOVE: The new gallery for The Dinner Party (© Judy Chicago, 1974–1979; ceramic, porcelain, textile; 3' x 48' x 42'). Collection of the Brooklyn Museum (gift of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center Foundation). Photo courtesy of Polshek Partnership Architects.

Center for Feminist Art, which provides flexible gallery and study spaces. Notes museum director Dr. Arnold Lehman, "The Brooklyn Museum is extremely fortunate to have this unique center, which will expand the discussion that feminist art has generated over several decades." Sackler, a museum trustee, envisioned Chicago's work as a starting point for education and dialogue yet admits having been inspired by "... imagining the magnificence of *The Dinner Party* in a space as magnificent as *The Dinner Party*."

To address this mission, architect Susan T. Rodriguez made her own mark on women's history by disrupting the white boxes in the rambling nineteenth-century museum with a cheeky triangular gallery. Three dense glass walls at once anchor and echo all perspectives of Chicago's dynamic wedge, which shimmers beneath a constellation of tiny lights reflecting ad infinitum.

Steered by the diagonal references, one's eyes return ever inward toward the radiating table. Here, one appreciates as never before each "guest's" brilliantly conceived place setting as well as her individual struggle.

In 1974–1979, Chicago designed and orchestrated the making of *The Dinner Party*, an expression of feminist values through thirty-nine women's lives. Building layers of metaphors with traditional women's crafts, Chicago illuminates the exhaustively researched stories of these women with textiles and handpainted china plates. A procession of ceramic symbols inclines upward from cloth runners elegantly hand wrought in embroidery, quilting, weaving, or whatever fiber technique best honors each woman. (Chicago worked with a network of fiber artisans to create the runners.) Each of the thirty-nine "Girls," as Chicago affectionately calls her guests, leads a further strand of women's history that flows from her runner to a succession of names painted in gold across the white porcelain floor. In this way, 999 additional women, representing a wealth of contributions to Western civilization, are at last given due context.

Never asserting craftsmanship for its own sake, Chicago intended womanly materials and methods to challenge conventional notions about art and artists while demonstrating tangible commitments to a common cause. The work, eventually seen by a million people at fifteen sites around the world, was met with controversy throughout its tour.

For the Brooklyn opening in March, an international audience assembled to celebrate feminist art in *The Dinner Party's* new digs. Three related exhibitions were on view: *Global Feminisms: An International Survey in a Range of Media* by 87 Women Artists Representing 49 Countries (through July 1); *Pharaohs, Queens, and Goddesses: Feminism's Impact on Egyptology* (through September 16); and *An Art of Our Own: Women Ceramicists from the Permanent Collection*. As well, two books were launched: *Becoming Judy Chicago: A Biography of the Artist* by Gail Levin (published by Harmony, 496 pages, \$29.95) and *The Dinner Party: From Creation to Preservation* by Judy Chicago (published by Merrell, 308 pages, \$49.95).

In 1999, *Newsweek* included *The Dinner Party* with works by Messrs. Michelangelo, Duchamp, Chagall, and Rivera in its list of "ten works of art that have rocked the ages." Chicago says, "Though my views have certainly become more humble as I've matured, I continue to believe that we still need an art that can lead us to a future where some of the differences between us can be overcome and the world thereby made at least a little more whole." Those of us old enough to remember *The Dinner Party's* 1980 Brooklyn opening might add, "Rock on, Girl!" ●

The Brooklyn Museum, at 200 Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn, New York, is online at www.brooklynmuseum.org. Judy Chicago's website is www.throughtheflower.org. Both books mentioned are available on these two websites or from major booksellers.



TOP: Judy Chicago in front of the place setting for the Biblical figure Judith. Photo © Donald Woodman. MIDDLE: Place setting for Georgia O'Keeffe. BOTTOM: Elizabeth A. Sackler holds up Susan B. Anthony's runner during the installation. Photos courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum.



ON THE WEB: fiberarts.com

Visit our website for excerpts from Judy Chicago's talk at the opening. She answered questions about art-making as a career and acknowledgment of *The Dinner Party* fiber artisans.