



**Judy Chicago** is an artist, feminist, and writer whose career spans more than three decades. As an artist she has been highly influential, exploring a variety of media and addressing issues of gender, ethnicity, and power. Her best-known work, the massive installation *The Dinner Party*, has been exhibited across the world. In addition to her artistic achievements, she pioneered feminist art education, setting up study programs at Fresno State University, the California Institute of the Arts, and the Los Angeles Women's Building. She has published seven books, including two autobiographical texts, *Through the Flower* and *Beyond the Flower*.



§ CHAPTER THREE §

## Women and Art

### *Judy Chicago*

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From the time I was five, I began the practice of studying art, visiting the Art Institute of Chicago to take classes, and to wander through the galleries where my ambition was shaped. From very early on, I had set my sights upon becoming the kind of artist who would make a contribution to art history. However, the kind of art on display in the galleries through which I walked was sending a contradictory message.

On the one hand, I felt inspired by the wonderful paintings I saw in the museum and would spend hours studying the millions of colored dots that together form Seurat's *La Grande Jatte* (1884–86), learning a great deal from his use of color opposites. But when I looked at, for example, Degas's sensuous images of women, I could not relate to them or to many other male artists' depictions of the female, primarily because too many of those pictured seemed content to just lie around being gazed at, something I myself had no intention of doing.

One might say that this was when I began to experience "rupture," as it is sometimes described. I set myself against these images because they did not have anything to do with me. Even then, I knew that I did not wish to become the object of the male gaze.

Rather, I wanted to be the one who did both the gazing and the painting. Later, I came to understand that some of the confusion I felt as a female child was the consequence of an art system that privileges male artists, as evidenced by the centuries of discrimination against women artists; the omission of their achievements from the canon of art history; and the fact that even today, only 5 percent of the art found in American museums consists of work by women artists.

Then there were my experiences as a young woman artist struggling to be taken seriously. With considerable effort, I managed to wedge myself into an art system in which few women were visible, primarily by adopting what might best be described as “male drag,” i.e., banishing any indication of my gender from my art and assuming an aggressive stance that was false to my nature as a person.

However, I still found myself feeling opposed to and isolated from the type of art-making that has dominated much of what we have considered great art, a good deal of which seems to privilege form over content and technical innovation over human meaning, or at least meaning that affirms rather than denies my experience and feelings as a female person.

My problem was that I did not wish to be marginalized, nor did I want my experiences as a woman to be considered less central to the human dialogue than those of men. And it is crucial to understand that one of the ways in which the importance of male experience is conveyed is through the art objects that are exhibited and preserved in our museums. Whereas men experience presence in our art institutions, women experience primarily absence, except in images that do not necessarily reflect women’s own sense of themselves.

Consequently, since the early 1970s, I have been on a path whose goal has been to bring the female experience into the very mainstream of art history rather than its being—as it is too often—an “add-on,” at the end of the text as it were. When I began

down this path, I was quite alone and, it seemed, without any historical context—at least that's what people said to me.

And here I paraphrase a museum curator who, in an effort to explain some of the intense art-world hostility to which my work and even my very person have been subjected, said that there was no context for my art. As a result, he suggested, people in the art community did not know how to deal with my work, particularly because many of the issues it raised made them uncomfortable, which, according to him, was another reason they reacted negatively to it.

However, I had discovered from the research I had done in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s in relation to my best-known project, *The Dinner Party* (a monumental, multimedia tribute to women's history), that I did indeed have a context. This context extends back in time hundreds of years and consists not only of countless writings by women but also of a large body of art that, to my mind, evidences a different perspective from the art of men, along with a range of responses to the questions with which I was then concerned, questions concerning the nature of female identity. The trouble seemed to be that this context was not visible to most people.

This was the problem I set out to redress with *The Dinner Party*, one of my goals being to provide a tangible symbol of the many achievements and something of the historical context of women in Western civilization. Like most young women of my generation, I had grown up without any knowledge of this information, and, after I discovered it, I dedicated myself to breaking what seems a terrible historical cycle of erasure, a process which results in successive generations of women remaining ignorant of their marvelous heritage as women.

Not that I believed that this information would be valuable only to women, not at all. In fact, I was and am deeply convinced that men and women alike need exposure to a broader range of human experience than that which is transmitted through our

educational institutions, if only so that they might be better equipped to embrace the diversity of the world in which we now live. *The Dinner Party* was, in part, intended to call into question the way history has been written, demonstrating that an equally biased and exclusive historical picture could be assembled from any number of viewpoints—in this case, from the perspective of women. The piece might also be considered a corrective to the notion transmitted to me through my own education that women had made no significant contributions to history and—more pernicious in terms of my fierce ambitions as an artist—the idea that there had never been any really great women artists.

During my years of research for *The Dinner Party*, I stumbled upon dozens of images by women artists that made me feel affirmed in a way that the work of their male counterparts never did. These included, for example, the self-portraits I discovered in basements or dark corners of European museums, which, as a happy result of recent feminist scholarship, have begun to emerge from obscurity to take their place in the art historical canon.

As for the widely accepted argument that many of the famous, even iconical, paintings by men constitute great art, I call into question some of the criteria by which greatness has been measured. After all, how “great” is yet another image of a nude woman displayed upon a couch, not matter how well it might be painted?

One reason I wanted to confront the issue of what constitutes great art is that I am concerned for the ways in which young women develop their sense of self. Still, despite my maturity, when I visit museums filled with work by men, I feel my sense of self challenged to the point that I experience a sense of dissolution—as if I do not exist.

Even when the paintings do not evidence overt hostility toward women or the sense of entitlement with which most male artists approach the female body, I believe that they inevitably produce the same kind of confusion for many young women that I experienced when I was young. And I cannot help but wonder how

many of these young women will have the wherewithal to develop and sustain the oppositional gaze (learning to look against the pre-conceptions of the dominant culture in order to resist its perspective and its expectations).

Almost three decades ago, I was motivated to make visible my own opposition to an art system which, I had come to realize, disempowers women, in large part through the erasure of our aesthetic heritage. Once I began to encounter the rich history of women's art, it changed my life, partly because much of the work I discovered was—to me—important, sometimes even great art. But, more significantly, the knowledge I acquired about the bravery of the women who had made the work gave me strength to continue in the face of innumerable obstacles.

In addition, women's images and the achievements represented by these images helped me to see myself as part of history rather than in opposition to it, even though it was a history which was largely invisible. Thus, one might say that I have lived in opposition to the prevailing system, but in harmony with an alternative system, one which has nurtured my sense of self.

I carried this newfound context within my mind for more than fifteen years, and during that time I was engaged in an image-making whose focus was both an alternative female identity and also the assertion of an oppositional set of values. These values were oppositional in the sense that they challenged many prevailing ideas as to what art was to be about (female rather than male experience); how it was to be made (in an empowering, cooperative method rather than a competitive, individualistic mode); and what materials were to be employed in creating it (any that seemed appropriate, irrespective of what socially constructed gender associations particular media might be perceived to have).

By the mid-1980s, I felt that I had realized many of my aesthetic goals, in particular those which involved the creation of images about my discoveries about women's history and my exploration into what it means to be a woman. My primary intention in terms

of this body of art was for it to reach others, especially young women, so that they might be strengthened by it to the point that they might not be persuaded by the plethora of images of women that can so threaten a woman's sense of herself that she ends up retreating from her own perspective.

In the decades since I found my own path as an artist—one whose aim has been to contribute to ending the cycle of erasure of women's achievements, attested to by *The Dinner Party*—women's studies courses have abounded; feminist theory has evolved into a formidable body of intellectual challenges to traditional thought; and women artists all over the world have internalized the freedom that female artists of my generation fought so hard to acquire. As a result, an enormous body of art by women of the past has emerged from the shadows of history through the scholarship of countless feminist art historians. And new and exciting art by women is being created everywhere.

Nevertheless, I receive innumerable letters from female students and, when I lecture at universities in various parts of the world, often hear stories that repeat the same complaint. Too many educational and art institutions continue to present women's work in a token way, and hence, young women are still being deprived of knowledge about what women before them thought, taught, and created. Rather than inheriting a world made different by the infusion of oppositional ideas, new generations of women are experiencing the same identity problems that motivated my own search for a female history and for images which affirmed rather than negated my existence. In terms of young women artists, it is my perception that too many of them continue to feel isolated and contextless with the same sense of belonging nowhere that I had. My goals have always included bringing women's art into the mainstream. As long as women's art is treated as an "exotic other," it will continue to be marginalized.

Another of my goals has always been to demonstrate that women's art could be as interesting to men as men's art has been to

women throughout history. In contrast to some feminists, I firmly believe that women's art can and should be understood by men, and that the body of art by women about the female experience can help to expand men's understanding of women and to broaden their views of what constitutes the human experience.

However, too few men have been willing to acknowledge or accept that they have much to learn from women and from women's art. One explanation for this resistance might be that many men find it difficult to be open to a different way of seeing, particularly one which demands the recognition that the universality of perspective too often claimed for male art (especially white male art) is, in reality, a view of the world shaped and limited by men's experience, which has generally been based upon the privilege of being male in a male-dominated world.

My deepest desire is to make a contribution to a more equitable world and to do so through what is dearest to me, which is—and always has been—visual art.