

The Dinner Party, Part II: For Famous Artists: Combining Research and Studio Experience in the Art Appreciation Classroom

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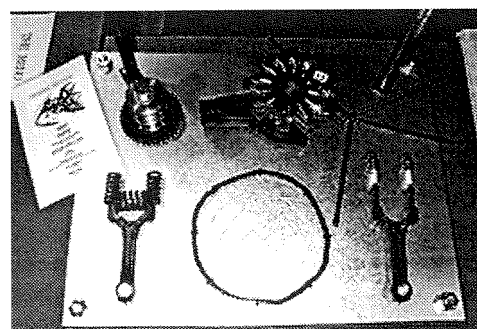
STUDENTS GAIN GREATEST APPRECIATION for visual arts when they explore all the disciplines: art history, criticism, aesthetics, and production, but the challenge of providing positive and meaningful “studio” experience for appreciation students is formidable. Time and space constraints pressure instructors to emphasize “product” at the expense of “process.” A new look at Judy Chicago’s “The Dinner Party” suggested a solution: a student “Dinner Party” to honor artists whose lives have been researched and interpreted in individual place settings.

The original “Dinner Party,” a mixed media installation produced to honor famous women in history, combined years of scholarship and the work of hundreds of artisans to produce a monumental 1979 exhibit that introduced viewers to the accomplishments of female heroes. A dinner table, triangular in shape with sides 48 feet long, supported 39 individual place settings created to honor each guest and to reflect events, influences, and accomplishments in their lives. Under the table, a ceramic “Heritage Floor” recorded the names of 999 additional notable women. Following Ms. Chicago’s famous example, Art Appreciation students host “The Dinner Party, Part II: For Famous Artists” at Southern Polytechnic State University each quarter.

Working in teams, students collaborate by e-mail as they research individual artists using traditional print media, on-line resources, and interactive multimedia titles from the Electronic Gallery of the SPSU Library. Teams then design unique place settings and table runners representative of the artistic style of each guest. The college community joins Art Appreciation students in honoring famous artists by viewing “The Dinner Party, Part II,” a special week-long educational exhibit in the Student Center. Finally, a special “Web site” team recreates the exhibit digitally on the Web for future instruction and enjoyment.

Preparation for “The Dinner Party, Part II” begins with an introductory slide lecture on Chicago’s original installation. Ms. Chicago’s new volume, *The Dinner Party* (1996) by Viking Press, provides an excellent resource for study. The class examines several place settings as reflections of the lives and accomplishments of the guests they honor. The three faces decorating the plate of 19th century abolitionist Sojourner Truth re-

veal the sorrow of slavery, the anger at injustice, and the legacy of African culture. The richly embroidered sun on Hatshepsut’s table runner of Hatshepsut celebrates her reign of ancient Egypt’s 18th dynasty. While acting as interpreter and guide for the Lewis and Clark Expedition, Sacajawea carried her child in a beaded cradleboard similar to the one above her plate; her beaded monogram represents the Indian translation of her name, “Bird woman.” With each example students



discuss similar ways of interpreting the lives and styles of artists.

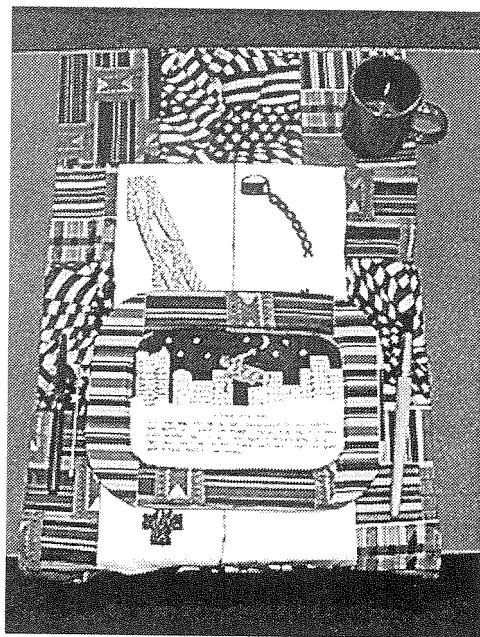
After introduction to the original installation, the class begins planning "The Dinner Party, Part II." From a carefully selected list representing major styles, students, in teams of two, select an artist to research. Each team will be responsible for a complete place setting and a research paper. The place setting includes food and beverage containers, utensils, a place mat or table runner no more than 18 inches wide, a place card with the artist's dates, a menu, and a guest list of 10 influential people the artist might have invited to the party. Research papers include a brief biography, a time line, summary of important events and influences, a list of references, and a visually attractive cover.

Three weeks before the actual exhibit, teams turn in rough drafts of the written research paper and begin planning and constructing the place settings. Few restrictions apply; commercially available plates and utensils are "off limits" unless radically altered; students are encouraged to consider tools of the trade as utensils and reminded that each individual element must reflect the style, technique, and place in history of the artist.

Finally "exhibit week" arrives, and students arrange chronologically the artists' place settings, research papers, menus, place cards, and guest lists around a giant rectangular table in the Student Center. Posters around campus announce the exhibit, inviting the college community to help celebrate the lives of famous artists. For the entire week, art appreciation classes meet in the exhibit hall, and teams take turns introducing their artist to the class, using individual elements of the place setting to interpret the artist's style and events in his life. At the end of the week students have met many different artists, seen a giant timeline of place settings interpreting their styles, heard their

biographies, and examined the influences on their lives.

Each team's place setting and research paper are evaluated on thoroughness, craftsmanship, originality, effort, and teamwork. Evaluating the project itself reveals several positive outcomes. Preparation for the exhibit provides exposure to art history, criticism, aesthetics, and production. Students experience collaborative learning while researching a variety of media to study the context within which the artist lived and worked. Participants metaphorically interpret the artist's style while manipulating and arranging materials to produce place settings. Finally, students learn about other artists from each other, while seeing interpretations of many artists' styles and experiencing the excitement of participating in an art exhibit. Less formal but equally gratifying evidence of the project's success are the animated "after dinner" conversations and excited requests for future invitations to "The Dinner Party, Part II: For Famous Artists"!



Betty Oliver Seabolt is a Regents' Connecting Teachers and Technology Faculty Development Workshop award recipient.

