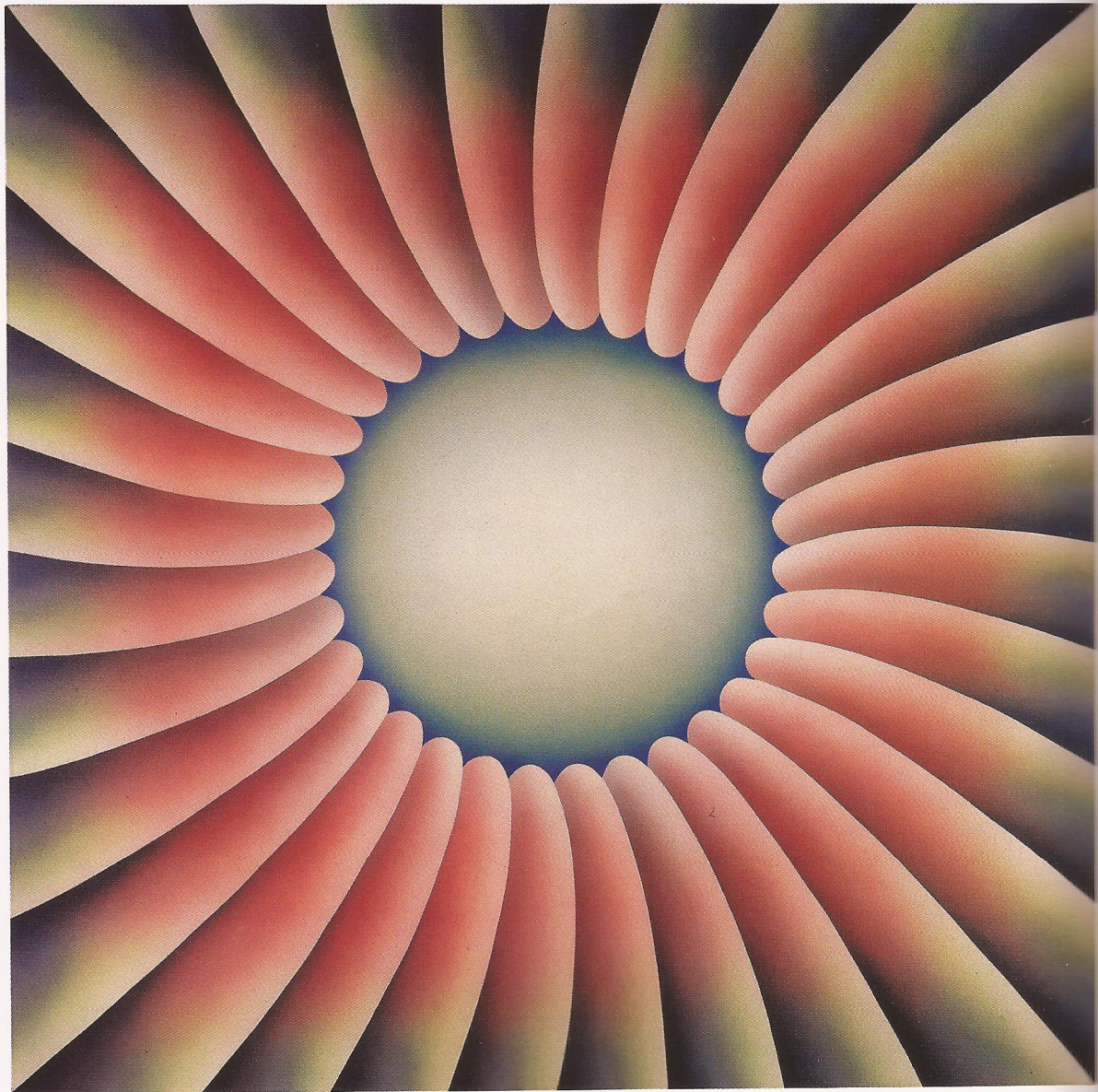


LEARNING TO APPRECIATE

# Judy Chicago

by Gail Levin

*Through the  
Flower*, 1973  
Sprayed acrylic  
on canvas  
60 × 60 in.  
The Collection  
of Elizabeth A.  
Sackler





I wish I had been, like the critic Lucy Lippard, an early supporter of Judy Chicago's. But it took me years and plenty of life experience to recognize her contributions as crucial. Today I would not dream of introducing college students to art history without discussing her work. This commitment has become easier since most textbooks now include her monumental project *The Dinner Party*. The experience that altered my opinion shows much, too, about the art-world obstacles women have had to face.

Before I graduated from a woman's college in 1969, Chicago had created a body of colorful abstract art, winning praise from formalist Clement Greenberg, the predominant New York critic, but no notice from my professors, all male, who said nothing I can recall of women artists.

While in graduate school in the fall of 1970, the course on abstract expressionism included no women, nor did the new book on the topic by art critic Irving Sandler feature any women, nor did the text we used to introduce undergraduates to art history, authored by H.W. Janson.

Meanwhile, that same fall of 1970, in California, Judy Chicago managed to launch a separate course of study at Fresno State College exclusively for women. In order to explore the connection of visual work and women's history, she took 15 women students off

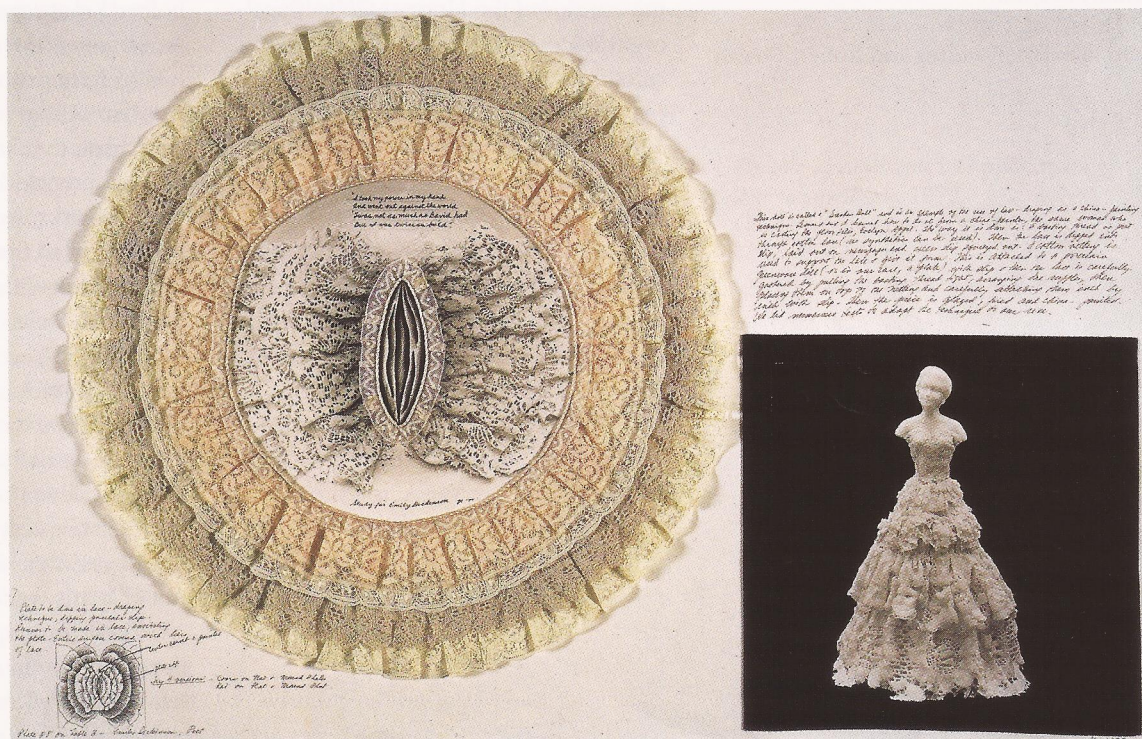
campus into what she described, with homage to Virginia Woolf, as "a space of our own." Word of Chicago's *démarche*, which she called the Feminist Art Program, reached as far as La Jolla where Miriam Schapiro was teaching, but not to me on the East Coast.

The next year Chicago agreed to join forces with Schapiro and both moved to the California Institute for the Arts, the new school founded by the Walt Disney Co. in Valencia. For

*Emily Dickinson* study for plate from *The Dinner Party*, 1977

Ink, photo, and collage on rag paper 22½ × 34½ in.

Collection of the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C.

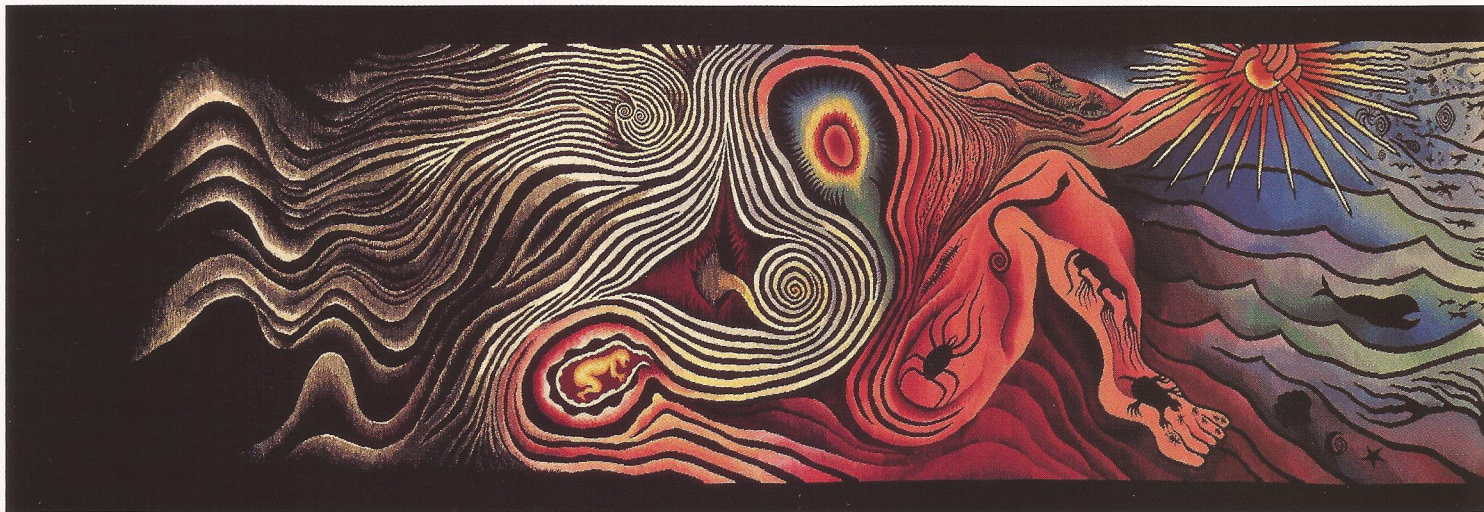


this version of the Feminist Art Program, they gathered a collective of women students and went on to create *Womanhouse*, an ambitious and notorious project that would mark a turning point in art history. They occupied a Los Angeles dwelling slated for demolition and filled it with installations and performances that challenged gender stereotypes and raised consciousness of ways in which women's creativity was marginalized and

repressed. Although the spectacle provoked wide media attention, no word of it reached me, preoccupied with studying for doctoral examinations. During this time, Chicago also worked on *Through the Flower*, a compelling autobiographical chronicle published in 1975 and named after a painting of hers that refers metaphorically to female anatomy.

Fast forward to 1976, when, with my new Ph.D., I went to the Whitney





*The Creation* from the *Birth Project*, 1984  
Modified Aubsson Tapestry (weaving by  
Audrey Cowan)  
42 × 163 in.  
On loan from Audrey and Robert Cowan

Museum of American Art as the founding curator of the Hopper Collection, organizing exhibitions and writing a catalogue raisonné of Edward Hopper's work. Visiting San Francisco in 1979, I chanced upon *The Dinner Party* during its debut in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Chicago had worked for over five years on this bold celebration of women's history (48 feet on each side of a triangular table with 13 place settings per side representing women in myth and history). I remember being impressed with its ambition and uncomfortable with its overt sexual imagery. At the time I failed to see that Chicago used a "vulval metaphor," as she called it, to demonstrate that "the oppression experienced by the women at the table was a result of their gender."

My judgment was no doubt influenced by the chief *New York Times* art critic Hilton Kramer. He had warmly praised my recent exhibitions of modernist abstractions and now he roundly condemned *The Dinner Party*. I also hearkened to the chorus of critics who insisted that Chicago exploited the many women who had volunteered to assist her in executing her designs. Her name made the news, I figured, while theirs appeared only in the credit panels and accompanying books. I did not then know how many artists rely on assistants to execute work without giv-

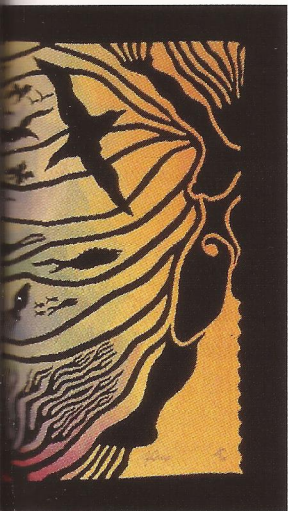
ing them any credit; and it was years before I met several of Chicago's assistants, some of whom still work with her and are proud of the fact.

Meanwhile, when the Whitney was preparing to install and publish a catalogue on works newly selected from its permanent collection, I compiled and brought to a curatorial meeting a stack of notebooks filled with photographs of all the works by women the museum owned. But only the usual handful of women made the cut. I had already discovered that the Whitney discarded another woman's art in its entirety, never even announcing that the 1968 bequest by Josephine Nivison Hopper, Edward's widow, included not only his works but hers.

When I attempted to restore Jo Hopper to history in my 1995 biography of her husband, Kramer and a few others protested. Their vehemence coupled with the Whitney's disregard for women made me realize that certain struggles never end. So I decided to take a new look at the recent history of women's art and activism. What struck me as pivotal was the Feminist Art Program. I wanted to understand how and why Chicago made this move.

I had plenty of catching up to do and began to take another look at Chicago's career, not having paid attention to her work since *The Dinner Party*. During the 1980s, she had com-





pleted two major undertakings, the *Birth Project* and *Powerplay*, both of which continued her focus on gender. In taking up the subject matter of the *Birth Project*, Chicago tried to express the female "point of view" and fill a gap in Western art. She went outside of the art establishment's hierarchy by designing works meant to be produced by volunteer craftswomen working independently and exhibited outside of museums and commercial galleries.

In *Powerplay* (1986), Chicago returned to the more conventional venue of a New York gallery, showing works which explored, at the suggestion of her new husband, photographer Donald Woodman, "men as women might wish them to be." Experimenting with a wide range of media, this project dealt with moving beyond stereotypes in the portrayal of men. In these images, which examined traditional concepts of masculinity, Chicago addressed male violence. Although *Powerplay* was not collaborative in the sense of her previous projects, Chicago did include a suite of tapestries woven by her longtime friend Audrey Cowan, with whom she has worked since *The Dinner Party*.

The *Holocaust Project*, on which Chicago collaborated with Woodman, premiered in 1993, after eight years of preparation, as a mixed-media traveling exhibition with audiotape narra-

tion. The couple explored their own Jewishness and diverse aspects of the tragedy in the project, including commentary on the fate of the Gypsies and homosexuals. The influence of the *Holocaust Project* on other artists is evident, in my opinion, in the Broadway play, *Last Night at Ballyhoo* (1997) by Alfred Uhry, whose last scene visually recalls Chicago's *Rainbow Shabbat*. This final piece in her project is executed in stained glass and depicts the Friday night Jewish Sabbath meal as emblematic of sharing and unity.

The *Holocaust Project* bothers some critics who complain that the theme defies representation, which, to them, belittles the tragedy. Others object to its broadly inclusive view or prefer more abstractly symbolic memorials to its figurative narratives with their populist agenda. Yet the use of accessible forms to promote ideas characterizes all of Chicago's work and continues to reach audiences. For example, catching up with the *Holocaust Project* at Lehigh

*Eleanor of Aquitaine* test plate from  
*The Dinner Party*, 1979  
China paint on porcelain  
14 in. diameter  
On loan from Audrey and Robert Cowan





University in 2000, I was struck when an African-American male student told Chicago in public: "This is the first time that I can relate to the Jews."

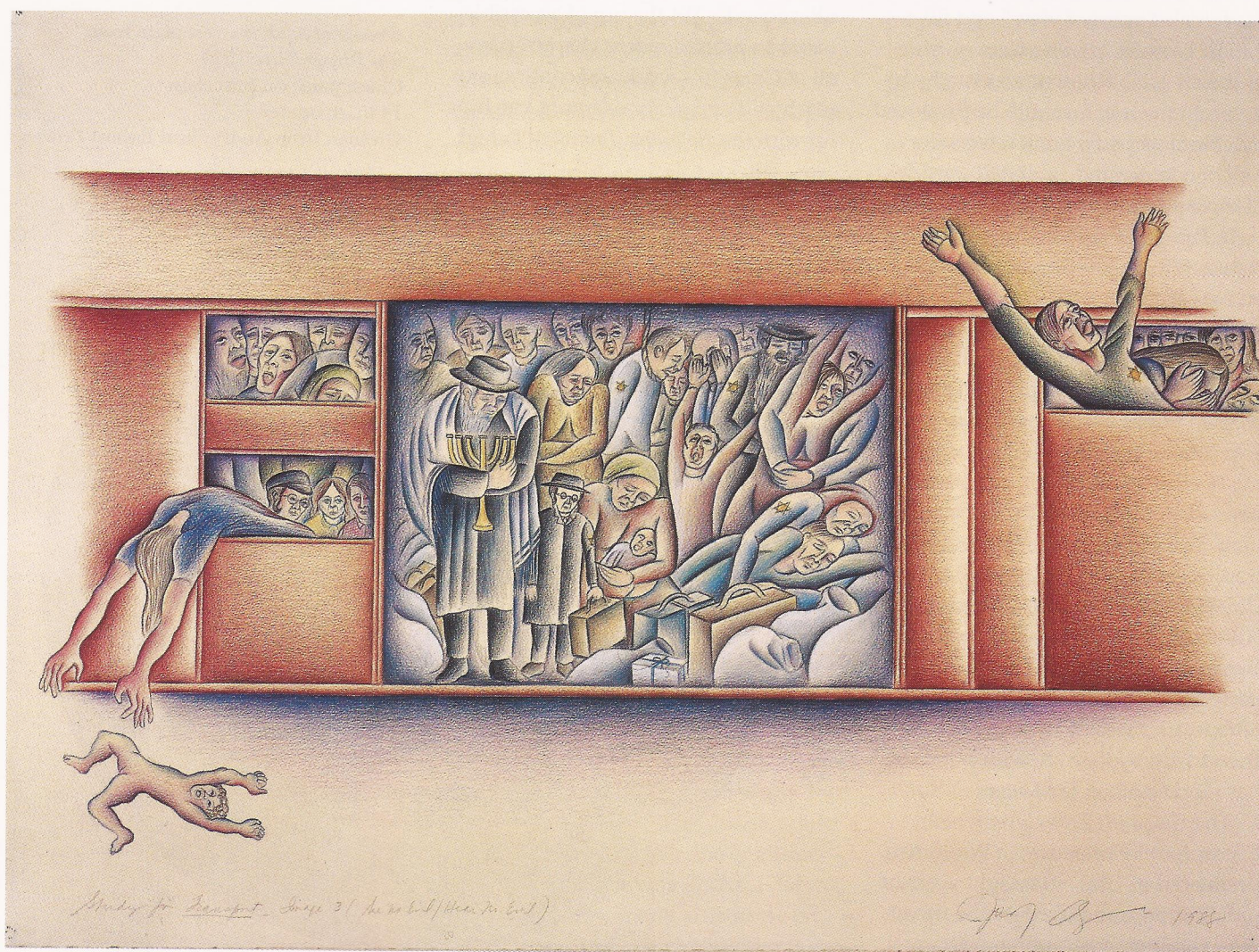
His response sums up for me the power of Chicago's art. Since early in her career, her work has raised awareness of significant issues. Her willingness to flout fashion in order to get beyond the art world and reach a larger audience has annoyed conservative critics. Yet her revolutionary activism, artistic ambition, and original mix of technical and formal invention have energized her supporters, especially the many who have worked on her projects.

Chicago has thrown off constraints once imposed on the art world by

white men. She has defied decorum and broken taboos. Early examples of this break with tradition are *Red Flag* (1971), a photolithograph depicting a bloody tampon being removed, and the installation *Menstruation Bathroom* in *Womanhouse*. Her breakthroughs in subject matter have had a liberating effect on artists who are hailed today for setting trends.

When *The Dinner Party* confronted New Yorkers in 1980 with its vulval plates, even Hilton Kramer admitted their ingenuity, which he sought to deprecate, however, as "the kind of ingenuity we associate with kitsch." The term "kitsch" featured in a 1939 polemic by Clement Greenberg, "Avant-garde and Kitsch," went so far

Study for *Transport* from the *Holocaust Project*, 1988  
Prismacolor on paper  
25 1/16 x 33 1/16 in.  
Courtesy of Flanders Contemporary Art





as to assert "a general agreement among the cultivated of mankind over the ages of what is good art and what is bad," claiming that kitsch "has erased this distinction." Neither Greenberg nor Kramer could have predicted that what they disparaged as "kitsch" would appeal to younger generations for whom Chicago's work is a signpost.

When Chicago in 1972 began to study techniques of painting china that she would later incorporate into *The Dinner Party*, she entered an area by then largely reduced to the status of a domestic hobby for women. She transformed this dainty medium, combining it with monumental scale and her vulval metaphors, managing to capture attention and protest society's repression of women. Her ironies have affected many younger artists, among them Jeff Koons. His slick fabricated porcelain images that evoke sex and desire echo Chicago's painted and sculpted porcelain plates. But if Chicago paved the way, subsequent critical discussion highlights how easily a man's expression of sexuality is accepted, while a woman's is perceived as threatening and transgressive.

Chicago's anti-elitist departures from dominant styles, her mix of craft techniques and exuberant color, and, above all, her willingness to deal with contested content, from gender discrimination to the Holocaust to ethics (as in her recent project *Resolutions: A Stitch in Time*) have helped to



expand the boundaries of accepted artistic expression, liberating not only women, but artists working outside the dominant Western aesthetic around the globe. But even Chicago's far-reaching influence is not as important to me as her ability to communicate ideas about and to women. As one of my undergraduates wrote in a final essay: "*The Dinner Party* will stick with me throughout my life because every time I do something great with my life I will be able to think that one of these women helped me to get where I am today." W

***Holocaust Project Logo*, 1993**

Stained glass

47 $\frac{3}{8}$  × 54 $\frac{5}{8}$  in.

Courtesy of Flanders Contemporary Art

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*Judy Chicago* will be on view at NMWA from October 11, 2002–January 5, 2003. The exhibition is presented through the generous sponsorship of The Elizabeth A. Sackler Foundation. The foundation seeks to raise awareness of the contributions of women in all areas of art and culture with specific focus on feminist art. According to Elizabeth A. Sackler, "This exhibition is a glimpse of the breadth and range of Judy Chicago's oeuvre, her groundbreaking contributions to the world of art and to women. She has fought the status quo with the same single-minded tenacity, resilience, and gumption with which she has conducted her life and forged her life's work."

Coinciding with NMWA's exhibition, Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* will be on view at the Brooklyn Museum of Art from September 20, 2002–February 9, 2003. This gift to the Brooklyn Museum of Art from The Elizabeth A. Sackler Foundation will be permanently installed in 2004.

Look for more on *Judy Chicago* in the holiday issue of *Women in the Arts*.



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