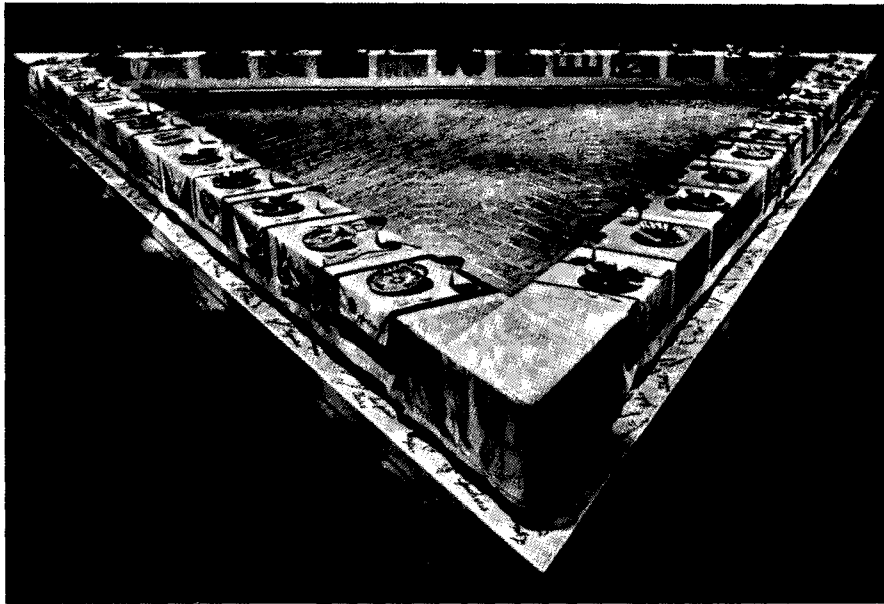


Symbols of Womankind: 'The Dinner Party'

An interview by Shelagh Wilkinson with Maryon Kantaroff
and Johanna Stuckey.

*Deux femmes parlent de leur réaction à The Dinner Party de Judy Chicago
et de l'importance symbolique de cette exposition.*



From The Dinner Party Needlework

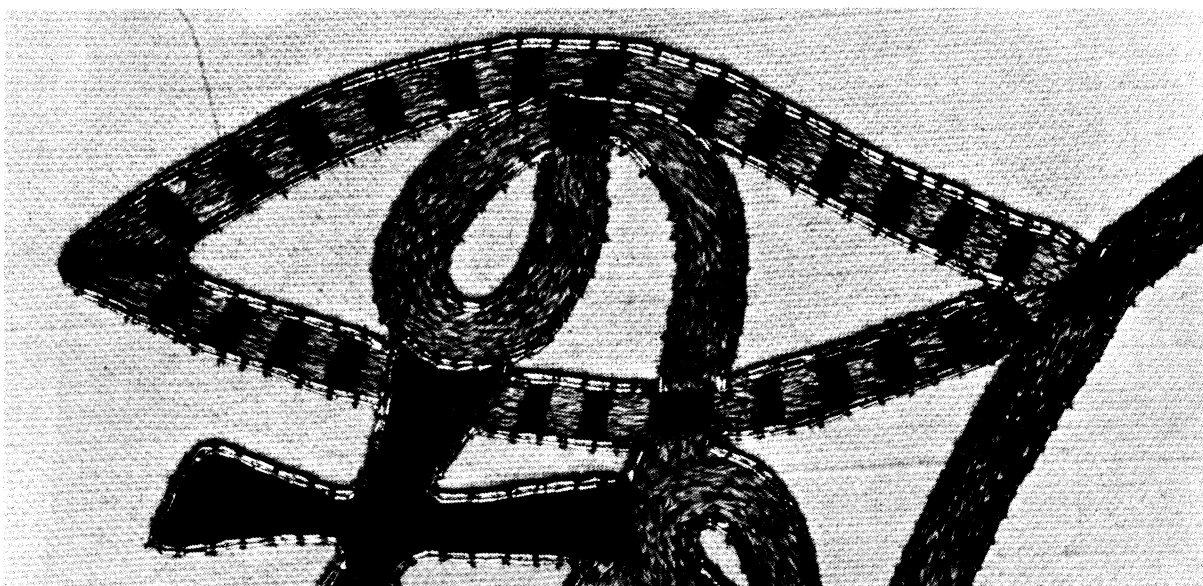
Installation of *The Dinner Party* at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

S.W. Recently you both went to New York to see the Judy Chicago show. Since you've come back, you have both been full of it. You have spoken so often about how symbolic it is for women. Can we talk about that? What was your major impression of *The Dinner Party*? And why is it so exciting and of such importance for women?

M.K. In terms of an art experience, for me this is the closest I've ever come to a religious experience when in an art gallery. It was like entering a church — a women's church. I was surrounded by these 'parables of woman'. This was woman's experience: a profoundly religious experience and, instead of its being orchestrated and enacted by men, it was for us. It was about us.

J.S. We both found ourselves in tears; so we went and had tea. We talked and then we came back to enjoy until the Gallery closed. For me what was important was not the vulva designs on the plates, although they are interesting. What had the greatest impact on me was the incredible table runners all done in traditional crafts, that is, in quilting, embroidery, appliqué, lace, and so on. And all of this kind of work has always been called *crafts*. But this show makes the statement, loud and clear, that this is not craft — it is art — women's art! And it's art of the highest integrity, art of the most superb quality!

M.K. There is a symbolic integration in this work — it is a creative integration — that is not achieved in most masculine art. There are male and female symbols throughout the work but remember it is a dinner party — prepared by women and all of us are guests.



From *The Dinner Party Needlework*

Hatshepsut's capital letter combines the eye of justice with the life-giving symbol of the Pharaoh.

J.S. It is a women's commentary on Plato's *Symposium* and, of course, the Last Supper, and, indeed, on women's domestic role. But it is more. It is a re-creation of women's history and our contribution to civilization. So the integration of symbols is obvious. In one runner, for instance — that of Sappho — the classical Doric temple columns combine with female symbols on the frieze to celebrate not a god, but a goddess.

S.W. *You have both spoken to me about the symbolic nurturing that is evident in this show — how does this happen?*

M.K. Well, you get the dinner party, then the place settings, each intricately designed to portray our goddesses and heroines, and each of these is offered as an expression of love and caring. It's as if you 'feed' on the art of the women of the past, you produce your own artistic 'feast', you set the table, and then you invite the world. It's a statement of female love executed with great sensitivity in its use of material and symbol. And even with all this woman-craft, the phallic symbol is never omitted. The knives and forks are all male symbols and the triangular shape of the table is, of course, a thrusting male symbol as well as the triangle of the vulva.

S.W. *If you could choose the setting at the dinner party that appealed to you most, which one would you pick — and why?*

M.K. The symbols representing the Empress Theodora moved me the most. The design is so expansive; the colours are aesthetically pleasing to me and they are also Byzantine. I don't know too much about the history of women — at least not in the academic way that Johanna does — but as an artist the work speaks to me in a different way. In this design there is such integration of amazing subtlety — there is such an integration of each specific artistic part which makes the symbolic whole. For instance, the illuminated initial plus the mosaic on the plate plus the colour scheme and the design — this is all summed up in her period which is Byzantine. This is the beauty of *The Dinner Party*. Each of us is drawn to our own particular goddess or heroine.

J.S. That's right, Maryon; you would be drawn to the expansive and the Byzantine, to an art form that is totally non-conforming, whereas I am drawn to the woman who had to contend with Calvin and John Knox, him and his 'monstrous regimen(t) of women.' Because of this I am particularly drawn to Anne Hutchinson. This plate shows how tight and constricting was her life in the Puritan colony. You'll notice on her plate how the grey-brown tendrils try to crawl right off the plate in an attempt to grow, to love, but that growth, that love, is cut off. We get the impression of dead roots trying to get life and sustenance but the culture denies them. Anne Hutchinson represents for me all the dreadful waste of women not only during her period but during all the patriarchy; Anne's religious teachings — that everyone partook of the Holy Spirit — went counter to those of the Church. Tried for heresy and excommunicated, this brave woman and her family were hounded into exile and eventually massacred by hostile Indians.

M.K. It is also very important that we remember that Judy Chicago stands on the shoulders of Georgia O'Keeffe and she acknowledges her debt. In fact this is a tremendous use of our own women artists, our predecessors, in a very honest and creative way.

There is one thing I would like to mention about the symbolism of this work because there is one table setting that stands out as not 'really fitting in.' This is the setting for Ethel Smyth of 'Shoulder to Shoulder' fame. Her symbol is a black-and-white piano to symbolize the music that she wrote — strident marches. In actual life she wore men's clothes and a tie and this is all woven into her tapestry. And somehow this place setting is not integrated. This one stands out like a sore thumb as not belonging because it has no subtlety of colour. And I ask why? Is it because she is dressed as a man? I don't know. But it just doesn't work for me.

J.S. Yes, perhaps that is right, because the Sojourner Truth plate is not quite as integrated as the others, but it works. We get the double face, the agony of her pain and the joy of her life; her cry, 'And ain't I a woman?' called out to me from her place setting.

S.W. *You mention that you had to travel out to Brooklyn to see this art exhibition because no downtown gallery would have it. Why didn't a Manhattan gallery run such an important exhibit?*

J.S. Probably for much the same reason that the new musical *Onward Victoria* closed after the run of a few nights. We went to see that show on the opening night. It is about Victoria Woodhall, who ran for President of the U.S.A. in 1874 on a feminist 'free love' ticket. We watched it and we were spellbound. Everything about it was good; it was thoroughly feminist; but a man behind us kept yelling 'Take it off.' He was bored; he yawned loudly and pretended to sleep. But the audience loved it. They gave it a standing ovation at the end. The press panned it the next day and said the audience was bored. It immediately closed. That is symptomatic of what could have happened to *The Dinner Party* — it too had been pretty universally panned — by male critics! So maybe that's why it didn't get into a Manhattan gallery. But we trekked out to Brooklyn to see it anyway and we found it one of the most exhilarating art exhibits we have ever seen. ☺