



The Dinner Party: Judy Chicago and the Power of Popular Feminism, 1970-2007 (Since 1970: Histories of Contemporary America)

Jane F. Gerhard

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Judy Chicago's monumental art installation *The Dinner Party* was an immediate sensation when it debuted in 1979, and today it is considered the most popular work of art to emerge from the second-wave feminist movement. Jane F. Gerhard examines the piece's popularity to understand how ideas about feminism migrated from activist and intellectual circles into the American mainstream in the last three decades of the twentieth century.

More than most social movements, feminism was transmitted and understood through culture—art installations, *Ms. Magazine*, *All in the Family*, and thousands of other cultural artifacts. But the phenomenon of cultural feminism came under extraordinary criticism in the late 1970s and 1980s Gerhard analyzes these divisions over whether cultural feminism was sufficiently activist in light of the shifting line separating liberalism from radicalism in post-1970s America. She concludes with a chapter on the 1990s, when *The Dinner Party* emerged as a target in political struggles over public funding for the arts, even as academic feminists denounced the piece for its alleged essentialism.

The path that *The Dinner Party* traveled—from inception (1973) to completion (1979) to tour (1979-1989) to the permanent collection of the Brooklyn Museum (2007)—sheds light on the history of American feminism since 1970 and on the ways popular feminism in particular can illuminate important trends and transformations in the broader culture.

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