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Dinner in the City: Reclaiming the Female Half of History: Christine de Pisan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* and Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*

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DINNER IN THE CITY

RECLAIMING THE FEMALE HALF OF HISTORY:
CHRISTINE DE PISAN'S THE BOOK OF THE CITY OF LADIES AND
JUDY CHICAGO'S THE DINNER PARTY

An essay submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Humanities

By

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ABSTRACT

Pippenger, Marsha Monroe. M.H., Department of Art and Art History, Master of Humanities Program, Wright State University, 2007. Dinner in the City Reclaiming the Female Half of History: Christine de Pisan’s The Book of the City of Ladies and Judy Chicago's The Dinner Party.

Although separated by more than 500 years, Christine de Pisan's The Book of the City of Ladies (1405) and Judy Chicago's The Dinner Party (1979) were created to validate and defend women and women's achievements and to move them from the periphery of the historical canon to the center, alongside accomplished men of history. Both are responses to misogynist beliefs and texts of their times. In this essay I present the historical basis of misogyny as well as events that led the two women to create their pieces. I illuminate the parallels between The Book of the City of Ladies and The Dinner Party, and illustrate how both attempt to achieve their goal of reclaiming women’s achievements to reinsert them into the historical record. I look at the paradoxes of confinement and freedom, separation and community, and individuality versus collaboration, themes that unite the book and the artwork. To conclude the essay, I consider the impact of The Book of the City of Ladies and The Dinner Party on women and the patriarchal canon, the success of their attempts, and what it means for the future. As part of my comparison of The Book of the City of Ladies and The Dinner Party, and prior to this essay, I created twenty-seven original collages on canvas that imagine the meeting of Christine de Pisan and Judy Chicago. The resulting exhibition titled "Dinner in the City: A Narrative Exhibition ", presented from January 21 to February 2, 2007, was
a twenty-first century reinterpretation of their work, telling their stories through my eyes.

Images of the collages, with descriptions, are included in the essay.
DEDICATIONS

Firstly, I dedicate this essay to Christine de Pisan and Judy Chicago. Without them there would be no paper.

Secondly, I dedicate this essay to all the women who came before me, who have benefited humankind and have achieved great things without proper recognition, and who have persevered nonetheless. I respect you.

Thirdly, I dedicate this essay to the teaching professionals at Wright State University who assisted me and suffered through the drafts and questions concerning my topic: Dr. Ava Chamberlain, Dr. Carol Nathanson, Dr. Heidi Breuer, and Thomas Macaulay, my thesis director. Thank you so very much.

Lastly, and most heartfelt, I dedicate this essay to my family: Alan, Laura, and Nathan. They know almost as much about Christine de Pisan and Judy Chicago as I do!
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What is Woman? - Man's undoing; an insatiable animal; perpetual trouble and non-stop combat; man's daily ruin; a storm in the home; an impediment to peace of mind; the wreck of weak-willed man; instrument of adultery; expensive war; the very worst creature and heaviest burden; fatal snake; human property.

Secundus, late twelfth century (qtd. in Blamires 100).

Male genius has nothing to fear from female taste. Let men conceive of great architectural projects, monumental sculpture, and the most elevated forms of painting, as well as those forms of the graphic arts which demand a lofty and ideal conception of art. In a word, let men busy themselves with all that has to do with great art. Let women occupy themselves with those types of art which they have always preferred, such as pastels, portraits, and miniatures.

Léon LaGrange, *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 1860 (qtd. in Chadwick 40).

Statements like these are evidence that for centuries our Western culture has assumed women's inferiority. As invalid as they are, such fallacies have slid insidiously into our cultural DNA, so much so that many women have found themselves believing such untruths. As far back as the ancient Greek philosophy of Aristotle in the fourth century BCE and the second-century CE medical writings of the Roman physician Galen, women have been considered as something less than men. Aristotle viewed woman as a
deformed male: "- females are weaker and colder in their nature; and we should look upon the female state as being as it were a deformity ..." (qtd. in Blamires 41). Galen agreed with Aristotle, noting that "within mankind the man is more perfect than the woman" and "it is no wonder that the female is less perfect than the male by as much as she is colder than he" (41). As I read these ancient scholars' "expert" pronouncements I am profoundly aware that these are opinions voiced by men. Where are the views of the other half of mankind, the females? Do such opinions exist?

Aristotle believed in the balance of opposites as moral values. In his view the heart was associated with heat and the brain with cold. Note that both Aristotle and Galen wrote that women are less than men because women are colder. Men were associated with heat and dryness, which were considered to be desirable traits; women were "left" with moistness and cold. So, in Aristotle's mind, as the warmer of the two sexes, man was superior, whereas a woman's coldness or lack of heat rendered her mentally and physically unstable. In Aristotle's system of balances (or hierarchy of misogyny) hot and cold translated into superior and inferior, ability and inability, and active versus passive (Cadden 23). Women were consistently inferior.

Galen, though he offered no accompanying proof, also states that the male's excess of heat is the reason for his perfection, because heat is the primary instrument of nature (Laqueur 28). Both scholars believed that the superiority of men was proved by the fact that man provided the seed to woman, who was seen as merely an incubator. Neither Aristotle nor Galen validated the female's role as the provider of a safe haven. They believed that men's superior heat nourished and defined the fetus, again giving no credence to women's role in nourishment. In addition, while female children were
necessary for reproduction, they also represented a failure in the reproductive process (24).

Sadly for women, other writers echoed the postulations of Aristotle and Galen. Pliny the Elder, in the first century CE, claimed that women's menstrual blood could cause wine to sour, mirrors to dull, metal to rust, and bees to die. I find it something of a paradox that in ascribing these calamities to females, Pliny, it seems unknowingly, also allots to women a certain amount of power. Plato, (fifth century BCE), noted that men who lived badly or were cowardly returned to earth as women in their second incarnation. In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas contributed to this cult of anti-female rhetoric by noting in *Summa Theologiae* that "woman is by nature of lower capacity and quality than man" (qtd. in Blamires 92).

These negative attitudes regarding women continued with the growth of Christianity, reinforced by the writings of St. Paul in the first century and St. Augustine in the fourth, as well as Aquinas (Broude and Garrard, *Questioning the Litany* 5, 17). Eve became the scapegoat as medieval theologians placed the blame for original sin squarely on her. Even the Virgin Mary could not rescue women from this stain as medieval clerics cited instance after instance of woman as a treacherous, disobedient, lascivious, wicked, dangerous, and wholly defective being (Brown-Grant, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, introduction).¹ Tertullian (c.160 - c.225), referred to women as "the gateway of the devil" (qtd. in Blamires 51); St. John Chrysostom (c.347 - 407) insisted that the Apostle Paul spoke of man’s superiority (59). Medieval writers embraced these beliefs and built on them in widely-known epics such as *The Lamentations of Matheolus, The Romance of*  

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the Rose, (both thirteenth century), and others that portrayed women as less intelligent, less capable, and sinful in so many ways.

This misconception that as a species man was hotter and drier, and thus more perfect than woman, persisted into the Renaissance era (Laqueur 112). Woman continued to be viewed as a defective male, an aberration. Male writers, such as the Italian author and poet Boccaccio, in his book Concerning Famous Women (1355-59), put forth the common Aristotelian belief that women were lacking in virtue, strength, bravery, and intellect. Boccaccio chose to write only about pagan women, stating that: "I have reached the women of our time, in which the number of illustrious ones is so small that I think it more suitable to come to an end rather than proceed farther with the women of today" (Boccaccio, qtd. in Blumenfeld 332; emphasis added). Even prior to Concerning Famous Women, Boccaccio wrote in The Corbaccio (c. 1355) about the imperfection of women, noting that man was made "in the image and semblance of God, a perfect creature..." and that even the lowest man in the world was worth more than a woman (qtd. in Blamires 172-173).

During the Renaissance, the concept of artist as genius referred specifically to men. In her book Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetic, Christine Battersby argues that the idea of genius is a category applied exclusively to men. Due to the circumstance of gender, women were denied the qualities of genius, talent, good judgment, knowledge, and physical prowess (Battersby, qtd. in Edwards 129-133). During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, women were denied access to the guilds and could not travel freely or hold public office. Their legal rights were limited. All of this reflected the common patriarchal belief of women's limited capacities.
The philosophers John Locke (1632-1704) and Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), while expressing belief in the equal authority of men and women, nonetheless viewed men as more capable than women due to historical factors (Laqueur 156).\(^2\) Schopenhauer, in his 1851 essay *On Women*, minces no words in labeling women physically and mentally inferior, deficient in reason, aesthetically wanting, and in every way lesser than men (Agonito 191). Even as late as the nineteenth century, Patrick Geddes, a well-known professor of biology, used his study of cells as proof that women were more passive, more conservative, sluggish and stable than men. Men, he believed, were more active, energetic, eager, passionate and variable (Laqueur 6). Those threatened by the Women's Suffrage movement in 1870s Britain claimed that women were incapable of assuming such civic responsibilities. In 1895, the Polish writer Victor Jozé stated that women had no business competing with men in public life (149).

I read the so-called "evidence" of women's inferiority, lesser intellect and capabilities that has accrued over centuries of male-dominated writing and I am incensed. My own personal experience tells me an entirely different story. Not only is this ancient and pervasive attitude of female degradation demoralizing, its prevalence ignores the many accomplishments of women who have contributed to the advancement of civilization over the centuries. I begin to understand that the construction of the historical canon, those deeds that embody the peaks of Western culture that deserve study, has taken place apart from women. I consider the numbers of women I have studied in history compared to the virtual multitudes of men and I read some more: histories, biographies, essays, articles and opinion pieces. I learn that in spite of progress gained during various women's movements up to and including the 1970s, women's opportunities have been

\(^2\) For more information on Hobbes and Locke see Agonito, *History of Ideas on Women* 95-113.
comparatively limited and their achievements largely eliminated from the historical
canon of Western culture. Those women whose accomplishments have been recorded are
few and far between, and they were often considered to be somehow different, more
masculine, more exceptional, isolated, and not part of a continuum of capable females.
Modeled after the examples of antiquity, the canon has become stuck in patriarchy and
misogyny. It has become a canon of inclusions (male) and exclusions (female), ignoring
those capable women who are worthy. This overemphasis on male accomplishments and
marginalization of female genius has prevented women from assuming their rightful
place in history. Silvia Bovenschen writes in *Heresies*:

> To be sure, it is very important that we reappropriate moments of female
> potential from past cultures which have been silenced in organized fashion
> by male history....The hidden story of women, which reveals itself to us
> as primarily one of suffering and subjugation...is the dark side of cultural
> history - or better: the dark side of its idealized version. (11)

Linda Nochlin, in her groundbreaking article *"Why Have There Been No Great Women
Artists?"* in the January, 1971 issue of *Artnews*, notes that "...domination of white male
subjectivity... must be corrected in order to achieve a more adequate and accurate view of
historical situations" (24). I realize that I have been slow to arrive at these insights, and
that I must do more to understand these historical wrongs done to women. In my reading,
I discovered two extraordinary females who are far ahead of me, and amazingly similar
in their aims. Worthy of inclusion themselves, both women were among those who
recognized the imperative of reclaiming women's rightful place in the canon. Christine
de Pisan (c. 1364-1430), France's first professional woman of letters, and Judy Chicago (1939-), contemporary visual artist, both confronted this situation head-on to right the wrong and bring women into the mainstream of history.

Christine de Pisan was an Italian-born writer who lived her life at the court of France in the fifteenth century. I discovered her for the first time in Whitney Chadwick's art historical survey *Women, Art, and Society.* Chadwick refers to Christine as the "first professional woman writer in Western history" (35). I was immediately puzzled and intrigued. If, as Chadwick says, Christine was the first professional female writer in Western history, why was her name unknown to me? I have always thought of myself as relatively well-read, and reasonably well-educated. If I had never learned of Christine de Pisan, how many other women were ignorant of her works, and by extension, the works of other accomplished women?

Continuing on in Chadwick, I learned of Christine's text, *The Book of the City of Ladies,* in which she tells the story of an allegorical city built by and for women who are intelligent, moral, and accomplished. I bought the book. Reading Christine's story of the City of Ladies reminded me of a contemporary art piece that seemed to have aims similar to those in *The Book of the City of Ladies.* I decided to investigate the artist, Judy Chicago, and her feminist installation, *The Dinner Party.*

Judy Chicago lives and works today in Belen, New Mexico and creates, writes, and speaks on women's issues around the country. More than five hundred years of male-

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3 The spelling of Christine's name varies according to the source. When referring to a specific source I have used that source's spelling, in this case "de Pizan." In my research I noted that most sources chose to use "de Pisan." Therefore, I have chosen to use the prevailing form of Christine de Pisan with an "s" when I reference her. An added historical note: Christine's father's family was from Pizzano, but some later French writers thought his place of origin to have been Pisa, hence, another reason for the different spellings.
dominated history come between these two remarkable women, yet their work pursues the same goal: achieving parity by placing women and their accomplishments into their long-absented and rightful place in the currently patriarchal historical canon. Change comes very slowly.

Though they are separated by time and circumstances, both Christine de Pisan's pre-feminist manifesto, *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405), and Judy Chicago's art installation, *The Dinner Party* (1979), were created to validate and defend women and women's accomplishments and to move them from the periphery of the historical canon to its center, alongside accomplished men of history. Christine's influence is evident in women's studies today, so much so that she is a part of Chicago's installation, while Chicago continues to advocate for women's inclusion in the canon. However, it is my view that as more than half of the world's people, women have lost momentum in this endeavor. We are foundering in our work to announce the worthiness of women's accomplishments and in the movement to reinsert women into the canon. We lack discipline.

While both *The Book of the City of Ladies* and *The Dinner Party* are creative pieces, they are also about the paradoxes of confinement and freedom, separation and community, and individuality versus collaboration. In this essay I will examine these contradictions as well as illuminate the parallels between *The Book of the City of Ladies* and *The Dinner Party*. I will illustrate how both attempt to achieve their goal of reclaiming women's achievements to reinsert them into the historical record. I propose not only to look at the work of these two artists but to consider the impact and the success
of their attempts. How successful has been this effort to call attention to women's accomplishments?

As part of my comparison of *The Book of the City of Ladies* and *The Dinner Party*, and prior to this essay, I presented an exhibition of original artwork titled "Dinner in the City: A Narrative Exhibition" (January 21 to February 2, 2007). Preparing such an exhibition required that I learn something about the two women and the work I was interpreting. Therefore my initial steps were to study their lives and the circumstances that led each of them to create their individual pieces. I read biographies, autobiographies, essays, and many other texts; I studied medieval illuminations, the traditional art of Christine's time, and the contemporary work of Judy Chicago. I made many preliminary drawings. Only then did I enter the studio. The result of these studies was an exhibition of twenty-seven paper collages imagining the meeting of Christine de Pisan and Judy Chicago, telling their stories through my eyes. It is my twenty-first century reinterpretation of their work. Before I turn to the actual art, I will provide some background.

Martin le Franc, in "Champion des Dames," 1442, writes the following in praise of Christine:

*For the benefit of foreigners, let us

Celebrate the valiant Christine.

So that, although death has taken

Her body, her name will endure always, (qtd. in Quilligan 11)

Christine de Pisan (c. 1364-1430) was born in Italy, but lived most of her life in France, where her father was the court physician and astrologer to King Charles V. It was
not common practice for women of her time to be educated, not even those of the upper classes like Christine. It was her father who encouraged her to read and write; her mother actually discouraged the practice. Married in 1380 at the age of fifteen, Christine was widowed at twenty-five, left to care for her three children, a niece, and her elderly widowed mother. Her protector, King Charles, was dead; her father had died several years earlier; two brothers had returned to Italy. Christine was alone and in rather desperate financial straits. Most women in her situation remarried or entered a nunnery (Bell, The Lost Tapestries of the City of Ladies 9).

Determined to support herself and her family, Christine began to write, actively courting patrons for her work among the aristocracy. Her writing found a receptive audience. Although she is best known for her allegorical works, which include The Book of the City of Ladies, Christine was a prolific and multifaceted writer, and her oeuvre includes love poems, devotional pieces, books on female conduct, military and political commentaries, and other medieval literary genres.

As her writing progressed from lyric poetry to more serious texts, she became concerned at the way women were devalued in the literature of the time. Christine became the first writer to address the tradition of misogyny in her society from a female perspective. Her defense of women developed over a number of years and through a range of different texts. Christine was not a radical feminist in the modern sense of the word; rather she built a moral and intellectual defense of women historically suited to her times. In developing and building her own intellectual authority (proved by the numbers of intellectuals who consulted her on many issues, including the Dukes of Burgundy, King Charles VI, and others) Christine was able to challenge the prevailing beliefs of her
era. Indeed, she became a key figure in the social, intellectual, and political milieu of early fifteenth-century France (Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defence of Women* 1).

Christine de Pisan wrote her allegory, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, in 1405, when very few women could read and write. It is not the first text in which she takes aim at such male writers as Ovid, Matheolus, and Cicero and their claims of women's inferiority. In 1399 she wrote *The God of Love's Letter*, a poem in which she accused men of maligning and mistreating women for no good reason. Between 1400 and 1403 in a series of letters to leading intellectuals of her time, Christine challenged a book begun by Guillaume de Lorris and completed by Jean de Meun entitled *The Romance of the Rose* (1240-1275). Rosalind Brown-Grant argues in her introduction to *The Book of the City of Ladies* that Christine condemned *The Romance of the Rose* as immoral and vicious; Blamires concurs that she viewed it as derogatory to women (286). I see this criticism as a bold move on Christine's part, for, according to Brown-Grant, Guillaume's and Jean's book was the ultimate misogynistic text (*Moral Defence* 7). Its male authors portray women as non-human, non-intellectual, irrational, and cunning. In challenging such a well-known literary work, Christine positions herself as an equal to the two male authors. In these earlier texts, Christine observes, quite rightly, that women had been unfairly represented over many centuries because they had not written books about themselves; everything about women was written by men! In fact, she states in *The God of Love's Letter*: "And if anyone says to me that books are full of such fickle women (a charge made by many, and one that I dislike), I answer that women did not write the books, nor did they put into them the things one reads there against women and their
behavior" (qtd. in Blumenfeld-Kosinski 22). Brown-Grant further comments that
Christine's objections to Jean de Meun's work sparked a series of literary debates on
women which extended into the Renaissance (*Moral Defence* 7-8).

Critics agree that *The Book of the City of Ladies* is modeled after several others by
male predecessors, although Christine reframed much of the prevailing historical material
in order to portray women in a more positive and realistic light than in the existing
misogynist tradition. The Italian scholar Petrarch (1304-1374) wrote a similar book of
moral biographies about illustrious men titled *On Famous Men* which Christine may have
known (132). Boccaccio (1313-1350), in *Concerning Famous Women* (1360-1374),
writes of the most famous (and infamous) pagan women from ancient times to the Middle
Ages.⁴

One of Christine's defenses is to point out the tendency for misogynist writers to
broadly generalize and condemn the whole female sex based on a few particular
examples (13). Indeed, she is careful to point out, in *The God of Love's Letter*, that some
women are deserving of disapproval, but that there are many more who should be
admired (Bell 23). She also capitalizes on the male idea of women as the "weaker sex" by
implying that they are under attack by a stronger foe. As Lady Reason informs Christine
in *The Book of the City of Ladies*, "Our wish is to prevent others from falling into the
same error as you and to ensure that, in future, all worthy ladies and valiant women are
protected from those who have attacked them" (11).

Christine demonstrates her understanding of existing social conditions while
encouraging her readers to improve their lot. She urges women to pursue personal virtue

⁴ For more information on Boccaccio and *Concerning Famous Women* consult Quilligan, *The Allegory of
Female Authority* 39; Bell, *The Lost Tapestries of the City of Ladies* 22; Chadwick, *Women, Art, and
Society* 14.
and points the way to equality by emphasizing women's moral and intellectual potential. Contemporary feminist Sheila Delany argues that Christine did not go far enough, that she should have encouraged a radical reformation of medieval social structures so that women would have gained access to all social roles. Delany refers to Christine as the "Phyllis Schlafly of the Middle Ages," declaring that Christine's major complaint against The Romance of the Rose was "dirty language" (qtd. in Blumenfeld-Kosinski 324). She points to the historical fact that women in Christine's era, relative to centuries before and after, had more opportunities (327). She also notes that Christine was not always consistent in her viewpoints. While these are valid points, Delany's ultimate thesis is short-sighted and unrealistic. Fifteenth-century society in no way resembles our world today. Christine was not in a position to instigate social revolution. Her problems with de Meun's text involved more than dirty language, they involved untruths and derogatory statements about women. While it is true that for a time women in the fifteenth century enjoyed some freedoms, these freedoms disappeared with the Renaissance emphasis on male genius. As for inconsistency, this is a case of a contemporary mind making value judgments on a medieval one. Neither I, nor Delany, can step into Christine's shoes, so the matter of consistency is irrelevant. I find Delany to be inconsistent herself, for in the same essay that she doubts Christine's legitimacy as a voice for women, she also talks about the need to "firmly anchor the figure in question in her own historical milieu," insisting that Christine be studied in relation to her social context (313-14). Christine's audience, while influential and educated, did not represent the larger community, which was still illiterate. In presenting herself and the women in the City of Ladies as positive
role models, not radical reformers, Christine adopts an approach reflective of the times in which she lived.

Christine used the great achievements of women of the past to counter misogynist stereotypes and inspire her contemporaries to contemplate and pursue great deeds. Thus, Christine's defense of women in *The Book of the City of Ladies* is a thoughtfully calculated response designed to emphasize and promote their true morality and worth and insert them into the historical canon. *The Book of the City of Ladies* became quite popular among Christine's own contemporaries, influencing other French writers such as Martin le Franc, and was read well into the sixteenth century (Brown-Grant, *Moral Defence* 128-29). It was translated into Flemish and English, and was even woven into a series of tapestries in 1513 for Margaret of Austria, daughter of the Emperor Maximilian I (Bell 43).

Christine opens *The Book of the City of Ladies* by relating her reactions to reading *The Lamentations of Matheolus*, written in the late thirteenth century: "I saw from the title that it was by Matheolus. With a smile, I made my choice. Although I had never read it, I knew that, unlike many other works, this one was said to be written in praise of women" (5). She soon sees that this is not the case, that while the book is intended as a satire, it refers to women as "monsters of nature" and less than human (Brown-Grant, *Moral Defence* 142). Although Christine understands that Matheolus' book is meant to be in jest, she also realizes that it is not an isolated piece of writing, but one of many more serious works that impugn women. In fact she notes:

... it made me wonder how it happened that so many different men - and learned men among them - have been and are so inclined to express both
in speaking and in their treatises and writings so many wicked insults about women and their behavior. Not only one or two and not even just this Matheolus... (qtd. in Quilligan 51)

Why is it, she wonders, that "all manner of philosophers, poets, and orators too numerous to mention... all seem to speak with one voice... that female nature is wholly given up to vice" (Christine de Pisan, The Book of the City of Ladies 6). Christine's first inclination is to believe these writers, thinking them to be more learned than she. In her shame and despair, Christine falls into a melancholy trance.

Startled from this "waking dream" Christine relates: "All of a sudden, I saw a beam of light, like the rays of the sun, shine down into my lap.... I looked up to see where the light had come from and all at once saw before me three ladies, crowned and of majestic appearance...(7). Here, in her introduction of the three "Virtues," Christine cleverly associates herself with the Virgin's Annunciation scene. The three women introduce themselves to the amazed Christine. They are Lady Reason, who holds a mirror up to mankind, Lady Rectitude, who upholds the rights of the poor and innocent - she carries a ruler to separate right from wrong - and Lady Justice, who resides in heaven, on earth, and in hell, meting out judgments. Of the three virtues, Lady Justice is closest to God, and all virtues come from her. Lady Justice carries a gold vessel inscribed with a fleur-de-lys, the lily of the Trinity.

Christine is scolded gently by Lady Reason, who asks her why she accepts so easily the authority of these philosophers, poets, and writers who write so derisively of women. She explains to Christine how the current anti-female beliefs can be refuted. Would God who creates all things in his image, and who created woman from the rib of
man make a creature as vile as these men describe? She argues that these male writers go against God for ignoring the contributions of women, and furthermore, that woman is most definitely the equal of man because she shares his human essence (22-23). These three Virtues are daughters of God, and they are here to help Christine.

The Virtues charge Christine with establishing a new written tradition by building a city of refuge for women. This allegorical city will be built by women, for women, and inhabited only by females of impeccable virtue, moral character, and accomplishment. The women who live within this allegorical city will be safe for all time from misogynist attack. With the help of Ladies Reason, Rectitude, and Justice, Christine will tell the stories of the illustrious women who have been discarded by man's view of history; these women will in turn "build" the city. Thus, The Book of the City of Ladies relates the city's construction by telling of the accomplishments of both historical and mythological women. According to Lady Reason: "Only ladies who are of good reputation and worthy of praise will be admitted into this city. To those lacking in virtue, its gates will remain forever closed" (11).

The construction of the allegorical city of ladies links Christine's text to St. Augustine's City of God (fifth century CE) as both extol the virtues of past historical figures who create an ideal community united by a pursuit of virtue and worthy endeavors (Brown-Grant, Moral Defence 134-35). Christine's city is organized around a hierarchy of female warriors, good wives, and saintly women. By building her case for women around the metaphor of a city, Christine effectively calls attention to women's contributions to civilization, showing women in the roles of city-builders and intellectuals, roles much overlooked in the patriarchal recording of history (135).
The Book of the City of Ladies became well-known in Christine's era, and she presented the finest copies of her manuscript to such notables as Queen Isabel of France; Jean of France, due de Berry; and John the Fearless, Duke of Burgundy (Bell 31). Twenty-five of the earliest copies still survive; some were written in Christine's own hand, and many are beautifully illuminated (31). The Book of the City of Ladies has gained popularity with contemporary feminists because it speaks to our modern concerns of recognizing and celebrating women's contributions throughout history.

Instructing Christine to use the "spade of her intelligence," and the "trowel of [her] pen," Ladies Reason, Justice, and Rectitude narrate to Christine carefully selected and juxtaposed stories designed to disprove negative clichés about women (The Book of the City of Ladies, 16, 35). By relating these sagas to Christine (who acts as both narrator and character, thus establishing her authority as historian and inhabitant of the city), the Virtues teach her to reject misogynist beliefs. Christine, in turn, teaches other women the same by relating and recording the stories as told to her by the Virtues. Christine the writer structures the story partly as a conversation with the Virtues, while Christine the character presents her questions and arguments for the inclusion of women into the canon of history.

The first two books within The Book of the City of Ladies introduce the reader to women past and present as they clear the land of misogynist "dirt," excising all anti-female writings before they lay the foundation and build the walls of the city. As readers, we are asked to view the accomplishments of women as a kind of social salvation, linked as they are with the building of civilization and the improvement of the human condition. This becomes more and more evident as Christine relates the achievements of moral and
learned females like the poet and philosopher Cornificia; the humanist and poet Proba, the Roman; Sappho, a poet and philosopher renowned for her intellect; the goddess Minerva, who invented numbers; Isis, the Egyptian goddess who taught people to garden and set up a system of law; Dido, who built and ruled the city of Carthage; and numerous others. By the end of Book One, Christine realizes "that the teachings of Aristotle, which have so greatly enriched human knowledge and are rightly held in such high esteem, put together with all those of every other philosopher who ever lived, are not worth anything like as much to humankind as the deeds performed by these ladies, thanks to their great ingenuity" (73).

In Book Two, Lady Rectitude provides Christine with the "stones" of the city: wise sibyls, prophetesses, queens, empresses, and good daughters, wives, and mothers. Christine thanks Ladies Reason and Rectitude, saying, "...I have discovered that women are more than capable of undertaking any task which requires physical strength or of learning any discipline which requires discernment and intelligence" (108). Rectitude notes later in Book Two that if she were to recount to Christine all the great gifts that have come from women it would take up far too many pages (138).

Book Three of The City of Ladies is the domain of Lady Justice, who introduces the most revered of those who will inhabit the City. These women are all saints and martyrs, and join the pagan and Christian warrior queens and military heroines of Book One and the wives, mothers, and daughters of Book Two. The reader sees that Christine's city is identified with all women of accomplishment, whether pagan or Christian, historical, legendary or mythical, past or present, living or dead. In addition, Christine's city has no distinction of class, all classes are welcome, and all are ladies (Quilligan 194-
This distinction is important for the women of the City. Each woman has proved by her deeds that she is intelligent and capable of great leadership. They are ladies by virtue of their impeccable moral character.

I finished reading The Book of the City of Ladies and its related material. I thought about the images Christine "drew" with her pen as she laid out the plan for the city, established the foundation, built the walls, and constructed the buildings. Pictures formed in my mind as I imagined and then sketched the collages I could create. I saw the Field of Letters that Christine cleared of anti-female statements; I visualized in my mind the City of Ladies. Then I started to think of Christine's connections to Judy Chicago, and how Chicago too created a kind of "city" with The Dinner Party. I was becoming excited at the idea of weaving together the stories of these two very accomplished women, so at this point I turned my attention to Judy Chicago.

Judy Chicago (1939-) writes in Embroidering Our Heritage: The Dinner Party Needlework:

From my studies of women's art and literature and my research into women's lives - undertaken as part of my search for my own tradition as a woman and an artist - I had concluded that the general lack of knowledge of our heritage as women was pivotal in our continued oppression. It caused us all to have an unconsciously diminished feeling of self-worth and a lack of pride in women. Because we were educated to think that women had never achieved anything of significance, it was easy to believe that we were incapable of ever accomplishing important work. The absence of female role models in my own development had sometimes
made me feel as if my intentions to be a major artist were insane. But a closer examination of history taught me that my ambitions were entirely consistent with those of many women of the past. Women had always made significant contributions to the development of human civilization, but these were consistently ignored, denied, or trivialized (8).

Judy Chicago was born Judy Cohen in Chicago in 1939. She was actively drawing by the age of three and taking classes at the Chicago Art Institute from the age of eight through high school. She received her undergraduate and graduate degrees from UCLA. Overwhelmed by the Minimalist aesthetic of the 1960s, she struggled to find her artistic vision (Chicago, Through the Flower 27-53). As a woman and as an artist, Chicago felt alone. She began to study women's art, literature, and autobiographical writings to see if women before her had faced similar issues. Like Christine, she saw that women were unfairly underrepresented in the artistic and historical canon. As she investigated women's issues, she began to realize that the prevailing male-centered paradigm focused on power over others. This was a striking difference from the emerging beliefs of the second wave of feminism (i.e., after 1960), which promoted one's own personal empowerment. Chicago was compelled to begin a spirited dialogue between historical tradition and her own artistic voice, challenging history's prevailing assumptions about female iconography, materials, and means of production.

In 1969, the artist changed her name to Judy Chicago as "an act of identifying [her] self as an independent woman" (Witzling 371). By the 1970s she was teaching in California universities, where she and the artist Miriam Schapiro developed the first programs in feminist art education. Their collaboration with their students on the
installation *Womanhouse* was a pivotal moment in Chicago's own artistic development. *Womanhouse* (1972) was the first openly feminist installation work to be seen in the United States (Chicago, *Beyond the Flower* 33). Each room in the house was transformed into a work of art addressing feminine subject matter that is often stereotyped, such as marriage, body image, and menstruation. The influence of *Womanhouse* can clearly be seen in Chicago's next major project, a series of airbrushed abstract portraits, titled *Great Ladies*, shown at the Grandview Gallery in Los Angeles in 1973. Chicago's aim with these portraits was to communicate the personal and historical importance of each "great lady" represented (*Through the Flower* 36). Like my own research for this essay, Chicago's interest in women's history and female images continued to develop. From the *Great Ladies* series she moved on to *Rejection Quintet*, a group of abstract colored pencil drawings where for the first time she was aware of a "peeling back" that revealed the elements of a vulval form (*Beyond the Flower* 38). This vaginal, or central core imagery, along with that of the butterfly, would become major symbols in Chicago's work.

The positive reception to *Great Ladies* inspired Chicago to conceive of a series of dinner plates titled *Twenty-five Women Who Were Eaten Alive*. These plates would address the seemingly deliberate obscuring of women's achievements and was a way for Chicago to teach women's history through art. She then considered one hundred abstract portraits of women, also on plates. At about the same time she visited a china-painter whose exquisitely hand-painted dinner service was permanently displayed where they belonged: *on her dining room table* (emphasis added). This struck Chicago with such force that she remembers in her memoir *Through the Flower* that this "was probably the moment when *The Dinner Party* was born..." (46).
Begun in 1975, *The Dinner Party* is a huge sculptural installation featuring thirty-nine illustrious women of history, represented as place settings around a triangular table, complete with dinner plates, napkins, goblets, and flatware on needleworked runners.

Chicago conceived of *The Dinner Party* as an homage to women, an attempt to right the wrongs of history and insert accomplished women into history's canon. As she states in Elizabeth Sackler's *Judy Chicago*, "having discovered my rich and previously unknown heritage as a woman, I set out to convey what I believed would be potentially empowering information to a broad and diverse audience through a monumental work of art that symbolized the history of women in Western civilization" (44).


Recently installed in its new permanent home at the Brooklyn Museum, *The Dinner Party* is a multifaceted experience. The major component is the triangular table, an early symbol of the feminine, and a reference to an equalized world (Chicago, *The
Dinner Party: A Symbol of Our Heritage 12). The shape appeals to me because the triangle is the most stable of the geometric forms; I see this as a metaphor for women's strength throughout history. The triangle also alludes to a non-linear view of history, which is, in my opinion, more accurate. In addition, the points of the triangle effectively "connect" the women throughout the centuries.

The Dinner Party table is forty-eight feet on a side and sits on a floor composed of sparkling white porcelain tiles inscribed in gold with the names of 999 additional significant women of history. On each side of the table are thirteen place settings. Each place setting honors an accomplished woman of history; each of these women in turn represents other worthy women who have made contributions to humankind. Each place setting contains an oversize, fourteen inch, porcelain dinner plate on a fabric runner specifically designed for the woman it represents, as well as flatware, a goblet, and a napkin. Thus, each woman "invited" to the table is a symbol of achievement deserving of inclusion in the historical canon, and the design of each place setting reflects this.

Chicago began her investigations of women and the historical canon by looking at medieval art, specifically the art of the Church and its use of visual symbols. Here she began to conceptualize images of accomplished women on plates. In her mind's eye, she saw the plates as a timeline of history, with each succeeding plate image rising higher than the one before, as an indication of women rising upward. Many of the plates incorporate Chicago's symbol of liberation, the butterfly, or her well-known central core imagery. I "see" the images on Chicago's plates rising upward much like the walls of the City of Ladies, both plates and walls serving as symbols of freedom and growing.

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5 Chicago uses the traditional idea of a timeline to organize the place settings. While this is true, I view the triangular shape as a move away from the linear standard, particularly because the triangle's points link all the centuries of women together.
strength. However, it is here that we also observe the first paradox, for both the City of Ladies and *The Dinner Party* act as communities of confinement, separated from misogyny. Although the plates rise up in triumph, they also contain each woman, and while the walls represent freedom and strength, they act too as modes of containment. It is a conundrum, for it is liberty with chains, democracy within parameters, and it will always be so, because advancement always comes with conditions.

Working out the overall concept of *The Dinner Party*, Chicago soon felt overwhelmed by the immensity of her project. She was doing the research, creating plates, painting, designing the table runners, and raising money by lecturing and selling art. Realizing that she needed help, she began to gather a core group of volunteers (18). This eased her burden tremendously as others took on administrative duties, research, publicity, documentation, and other tasks. Like the illustrious women building the City of Ladies, *The Dinner Party* became a community of shared labor and open exchange guided by Chicago's initial concept and ultimate vision. Here stands the necessary paradox of individual and community, for Chicago's vision, and Christine's human diligence (guided by the Virtues) are needed for the ultimate success of the community. In all the creation of *The Dinner Party* was a five-year struggle. It was a risky venture calling attention to the neglect of women's place in history. Artistically, Chicago was taking chances by using traditional women's craft media (china-painting and needlecrafts) instead of traditional fine art materials like oil paints, and by taking a didactic approach to her subject matter. It was also an emotional and financial drain, yet ultimately, it was tremendously empowering.
The Dinner Party premiered at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art on March 14, 1979. Five thousand people attended the opening. During the three months it was on view, one hundred thousand viewed the installation (Chicago, The Dinner Party 27). It was enthusiastically received by the general public; one older woman told Diane Ketchum from the Village Voice, "I felt I was in church. It was like visiting the cathedrals of France. She made these women into something holy" (Levin, Becoming Judy Chicago 311). When I first saw The Dinner Party on March 23, 2007, I too experienced that quality of reverence.

Critical response was mixed. Hilton Kramer of the New York Times called it "very bad art...failed art" (qtd. in Lucie-Smith 76). Robert Hughes of Time magazine agreed. Suzanne Muchnic of the Los Angeles Times called The Dinner Party "An Intellectual Famine", a "grotesque embarrassment on aesthetic grounds" and an educational disaster (Levin 309).6 Yet other critics were complimentary. The critic Blue Greenberg of the Durham Morning Herald told his readers that The Dinner Party was like a pebble in a pool: the ripples would go on and on, getting larger and larger, "repeating the message that there is a new way to look at history and that process has begun" (309). Artist and professor Robert Nelson stated that as a man he had relished the experience of seeing beautiful art created by women about women in a major museum (309).

Though the exhibition tour extended through 1988, and the public waited in long lines to see The Dinner Party, some museums, including the Rochester Memorial Art Gallery and the Seattle Art Museum, pulled out of their commitments, citing such reasons as "irreconcilable differences" (313). A number of major museums rejected the

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6 Edward Lucie-Smith provides further excerpts from Muchnic's reviews in Judy Chicago: An American Vision 76.
opportunity to host *The Dinner Party*. But grassroots organizations began to form, and through their fundraising efforts, *The Dinner Party* appeared in Houston, Boston, Cleveland, Chicago, and Atlanta. Some museums did agree to host, including the Museum of Contemporary Art in Montreal in 1982, the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, and in 1981-82, The Brooklyn Museum. By the end of its tour, *The Dinner Party* was seen by close to a million viewers in fourteen venues in six countries⁷ (Chicago, *Beyond the Flower* 103).

By this point in my research, I knew that the Brooklyn Museum now owned *The Dinner Party* and had plans to install it. What I didn't know was if it was yet on display. So, in the winter of 2005, I sent an e-mail to the Brooklyn Museum. I received a cordial reply from Courtney Gerber, a research assistant for the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art. Yes, they did have *The Dinner Party* at the museum. Yes, it was slated for permanent exhibit. However, at the current time it was in storage, not scheduled to be put on permanent display until March of 2007, more than a year future. This was disappointing. However, the next line in my e-mail cheered me immeasurably. If I would like to come to the museum, they would be happy to unpack the Christine de Pisan place setting and allow me to study it for my research! Courtney would meet me at the staff entrance.

I arrived at the Brooklyn Museum on March 17, 2006, St. Patrick’s Day. As promised, Courtney was waiting. We traveled up to the fifth floor storage areas. There were all the packed and labeled crates for *The Dinner Party*. The runners were in labeled boxes; the goblets were standing on shelves; and the large white floor tiles were stacked

⁷ The United States, Canada, England, Scotland, Germany, and Australia.
in rows one behind the other. However, the place setting for Christine de Pisan was missing!

Walter, a museum employee, had moved the place setting to a room with better lighting, just for me. There it was, all set up as it would appear on the table itself. Courtney handed me a pair of gloves. Two museum conservators came in to take advantage of the opportunity to examine the runner for archival purposes.

The first things I noticed were the fine craftsmanship and minute detail of the needlework. As I examined the bargello\(^8\) stitch with its colorful threads, I immediately saw that I must incorporate that imagery into my artwork. The oversize, fourteen inch plate is meticulously carved in the butterfly form, one wing rising up in a defensive gesture, meant to symbolize Christine's attempt to defend women with her writings (Chicago, *The Dinner Party* 136). The polished white porcelain of the plate is a clay body specifically developed for *The Dinner Party* plates. Both plate and runner are done in shades of red and green, complementary colors to indicate the conflicts Christine encountered (Nishida,\(^9\) e-mail 9 July 2007).

Walter had taken care to "set the table" accurately and in good light so I could easily study and handle the pieces. This was an extremely nerve-wracking experience, and I have to admit I did not pick up the plate. I was too nervous. It was enough excitement to pick up the white lusterware goblet with the gold interior and to touch the matching flatware. All of the porcelain pieces are slightly larger than traditional dinnerware. The dinner plate sits on an angled support so that it is slightly tipped up for

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\(^8\) Bargello, also called Florentine, or flamestitch, is a traditional form of counted thread embroidery that dates from the Middle Ages (de la Bere).

\(^9\) I wish to thank Mayumi Nishida, personal assistant to Judy Chicago, for replying to my e-mails.
easier viewing. There are openings, like buttonholes, cut and stitched into the table runner. This allows all the pieces to be securely screwed down to the table.

Courtney noted that lighting would be an important factor in the permanent installation. The challenge would be to light the plates without damaging the fabric of the runners. I could already see some yellow discolorations in places where the fabric had faded.

I spent about two hours examining and photographing the pieces, asking questions, and trying to permanently internalize the whole experience. The staff at the Brooklyn Museum was welcoming and helpful. Courtney in particular was indispensable. A day later, I traveled to the rare manuscript department of the New York Public Library to look at medieval illuminations. I had to receive special permission to go into this area and once there, the staff retrieved the illustrations I was interested in and brought them to me. There, I was able to familiarize myself with fifteenth-century styles of manuscript illumination in preparation for the collages I would create as part of my study. Again, the
librarians were extremely accommodating. I returned to Dayton fully "fueled" and ready to introduce *The Dinner Party* to *The City of Ladies* for *Dinner in the City*.

However, I am getting ahead of the story. Prior to its arrival at the Brooklyn Museum, *The Dinner Party* seemed destined to suffer an unfortunate fate. In spite of the piece's success with the general public, and the profits it raised, *The Dinner Party* had failed to find a permanent home. Chicago reflected that she had misjudged the ability of the work to transcend the "bigotry of the art system" (Levin 319). It was put into storage, where it remained, save for an exhibition in Los Angeles in 1996 and its second appearance at the Brooklyn Museum in 2002. Chicago was $30,000 in debt and paying $1,000 a month to store the piece.

Several potential opportunities to find a permanent home failed until 2002, when art collector, activist, feminist and Chicago's friend, Elizabeth A. Sackler, purchased *The Dinner Party* and donated it to the Brooklyn Museum. Chicago's and Sackler's relationship dates back to 1988, when they first met. *The Dinner Party* was to become the "headliner" in the newly built Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum.10 "The point was to use the wealth of *The Dinner Party* for education, to take it as a starting point, to have it be available to the public," said Sackler. "What became an inspiration to me was imagining the magnificence of *The Dinner Party* in a space as magnificent as *The Dinner Party*" (Pogrebin, *The New York Times* E1). The permanently installed *Dinner Party* opened to the public on March 23, 2007.

Writer and art history professor Betty Brown remembers a colleague's experience at *The Dinner Party* during its initial tour: "As she neared the door [to *The Dinner Party*],

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10 The Sackler Center for Feminist Art is the first of its kind in the world, devoted to feminist art and issues. For more information see Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party* 2007.
one of the guards pulled her aside and said to her, "You don't want to go in there. It's nasty" (qtd. in Raven 3). Brown relates her own first experience of The Dinner Party:

> When we finally enter the exhibition space, it seems the very opposite of nasty to me. I walk into a dark, dramatically lit room. I see a large yet elegant triangular table set with glistening sculpted plates, each plate laid over a spectacular fabric runner. The table itself is elevated on a shiny tile floor, with hundreds of names scripted over its surface. This may sound corny, but the first impression I have is one of awe: it is so beautiful and so powerful. I circle the table again and again, reading the names of the women represented by the plates, whispering the names of the women written on the floor, hearing in my mind echoes of the names of the women - the many women- who had worked together on this project... I realize, as I walk around the Dinner Party, that I am being changed by this art. (qtd. in Raven 3-4)

Betty Brown's experience could have been mine when I entered the Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum on March 23, 2007 to see The Dinner Party in its entirety for the first time ever, in its new permanent home. I was shocked at my emotional reaction as tears ran down my cheeks. After a few minutes, thinking I had my feelings in check, I pushed speed dial on my cell phone to call my daughter, to tell her I was finally here. As she answered and I spoke, my voice trembled and a swell of emotion rushed through me again. I never dreamed that I would connect with the piece like this; I felt a kinship with the women represented at the table and honored at the struggles they had endured so that I could have this moment. At last I fully understood
why it is so important that women's contributions be recognized and honored. Again, Betty Brown echoes my own feelings:

Something wonderful happened during that encounter with that art, in that room, in that museum. I began to feel connected to all the women portrayed there. I began to feel part of the project, part of the community, part of the history. I began to feel proud of the women's history depicted there and proud to be heir to plate painters, table-setters, weavers, and embroiderers whose traditional art forms were honored there ... I began to feel proud to be a woman. I began to feel, like the "Dinner Party" itself, beautiful and powerful". (4)

Coming into the space housing The Dinner Party, I first passed through The Hall of Banners, a series of six Aubusson tapestries that speak of Chicago's hope for women: "And She Gathered All before Her.. .And She made for them A Sign to See.. .And lo They saw a Vision.. .From this day forth Like to like in All things.. .And then all that divided them merged.. .And then Everywhere was Eden Once again" (Chicago, The Dinner Party tapestries Brooklyn Museum). I see the spiral image, a symbol commonly found in matriarchal societies, swirling on tapestry one (Barnes 29). I notice the sign of an equalized world, the triangle, prominent in the second tapestry. Butterfly and central core imagery adorn the others.
From there I proceed to the Heritage Panels, large hand-colored photo murals which document the research for *The Dinner Party* and provide biographical information on the thirty-nine women "seated" at the table, as well as the 999 women written on the Heritage Floor. I turn a corner and enter a softly lit, triangular room, and there it is: *The Dinner Party*, the twentieth-century icon of women's achievements. This is the apex of my four years of research. I am here.

In this quiet room, Chicago pays homage to women's achievements by receiving women, not men, as the honored guests. The obvious artistic, religious, and historical reference is the Last Supper. In this version, however, as Chicago notes, the women are the partakers of the meal instead of the providers; they are the ones being served (*Beyond the Flower* 46). There is no Jesus, nor is there a Judas; each woman is equal in stature. Each place setting symbolizes a period of history, recognizing the unacknowledged contributions of legions of women while also alluding to their oppression through the metaphor of plates set upon and thus "contained" by the table (47). Chicago's use of the place settings is an intentional reminder of the endless meals women have prepared throughout history, and like those endless meals, reminds us too of their accomplishments that have similarly been "consumed" (46).

The names of 999 additional women written on ceramic tiles form a raised triangular floor that supports the table and the place settings. These women are assembled, according to the historian Gerda Lerner, in "affinity clusters" around the place settings. These "affinity clusters" were determined by the women's common experiences, achievements, and historic periods or places of origin (Chicago, *The Dinner Party: A Symbol of Our Heritage* 98). It's a way of grouping like with like and putting all of them within a context of support. (Brown, *Expanding Circles* 13).

Forty-five of the women named on the Heritage Floor are also honored by Christine in *The City of Ladies.*11 Chicago's criteria for the names on the Heritage Floor

11 The women who appear on the Heritage Floor as well as in the City of Ladies: Agrippina, Anastasia, Arachne, Artemisia, Blandina, Brunhilde, Camilla, Ceres, Circe, Clothilde, Deborah, Dido, Esther, Europa, Eve, Fredegunde, Helen of Troy, Hera/Juno, Hippolyta, Hortensia, Isis, Jezebel, Lampheto, Lucretia, Lucy, Manto, Marciana, Mary Magdalene, Medea, Minerva/Pallas Athena, Nicaula, Nicostrata/Carmenis, Octavia, Pamphile, Penthesilea, Portia, Queen of Sheba, Rebecca, Ruth, Sarah, Sceythia, Semiramis, Sulpicia, Virgin Mary, and Zenobia.
link *The Dinner Party* with *The City of Ladies*, for both women asked similar questions about the women they included. Did she make a significant contribution to society? Did she attempt to improve conditions for women? Did her life illuminate an aspect of women’s experience or provide a model for the future?12

As previously stated, the place settings are arranged in three sections of thirteen women each, each section forty-eight feet on a side and one side of an equilateral triangle. Side one of the table is comprised of women from prehistory to the end of Greco-Roman culture (Primordial Goddess, Fertile Goddess, Ishtar, Kali, Snake Goddess, Sophia, Amazon, Hatshepsut, Judith, Sappho, Aspasia, Boadaceia, Hypatia); side two stretches from the beginning of Christianity to the Reformation (Marcella, Saint Bridget, Theodora, Hrosvitha, Trotula, Eleanor of Aquitaine, Hildegarde of Bingen, Petronilla de Meath, Christine de Pisan, Isabella d'Este, Elizabeth R, Artemisia Gentileschi, Anna van Schurman); side three includes the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries (Anne Hutchinson, Sacajawea, Caroline Herschel, Mary WoUstonecraft, Sojourner Truth, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Blackwell, Emily Dickinson, Ethel Smyth, Margaret Sanger, Natalie Barney, Virginia Woolf, Georgia O'Keeffe). Judith, Sappho, and Amazon Woman, as well as Christine de Pisan, are honored guests at *The Dinner Party* and accomplished residents of *The City of Ladies*. Transformed into one of Chicago’s symbols, Christine appears as place setting number twenty-two.

Early in *The Book of the City of Ladies*, Christine comments, "My lady, [Reason] from what you've told me, I can see that woman is a very noble creature" (23). Pairing Christine de Pisan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* with Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*

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12 These questions guided the research team in their selection of the 999 women of the Heritage Floor. Culled from a list of nearly three thousand women, they represent a range of nationalities, experiences, and contributions (Chicago, *The Dinner Party* 98).
*Party* is my attempt to participate in the act of reconnecting women with their history. I was so intrigued by the connection I saw between Christine and Chicago that I felt I could use the common links between the two to lend my own voice to contemporary women, urging them to look back at the accomplishments of their predecessors so that they can use that knowledge and understanding to act in the present and build for the future. In the art exhibit that accompanied this essay, titled *"Dinner in the City, A Narrative Exhibition, "* I imagined the meeting of Christine de Pisan and Judy Chicago because what struck me so forcefully about their two works are their similarities.

Christine wrote *The Book of the City of Ladies* as a response to misogynist writings about women and to establish a written tradition for women of their accomplishments. Chicago’s goals were similar when she set out to correct the historical canon in a visual way. Indeed, the art historian Lucy Lippard has noted that since the beginning of the women’s art movement, Chicago has been adamant about the imperative of including women's deeds and women's work in the permanent record of history (Wylder 1). Christine and Chicago together illustrate in their work the breadth of female history.

Both *The Book of the City of Ladies* and *The Dinner Party* represent collaborative approaches. The author Christine is central to her story as she follows the directions of Ladies Reason, Justice, and Rectitude in writing about the illustrious women who work together to construct the city. Christine collaborates in two fashions. She engages in a dialogue with the three Virtues while at the same time relating the collaborative "building" of the city to her readers. She shows women working in community to clear the field, build the foundation, erect the walls and buildings, and inhabit the city.
Chicago was assisted by over two hundred other women (and several men) who had input into the direction, design, and fabrication of *The Dinner Party*. Approximately another two hundred participated in organizing and staffing *The Dinner Party* exhibitions. Christine built an allegorical city where "Only ladies who are of good reputation and worthy of praise will be admitted..." (*The Book of the City of Ladies* 11), and similarly, Chicago decided that women, in order to "attend" *The Dinner Party*, would be invited to the table by virtue of what they accomplished or represent. In writing *The Book of the City of Ladies* and in creating *The Dinner Party*, both women are challenging tradition, revising it to accurately reflect history, and providing a model for the future.

Christine saw the need for community; Chicago understands the same need; and I found community when I visited *The Dinner Party* in Brooklyn. I traveled to Brooklyn alone and came home part of an entirely new community composed of women who are determined to awaken humankind to the breadth of women's accomplishments, who are passionate about women's right to be recognized for their contributions to the world. In community women find strength and power and safety; they are empowered to voice their own visions. For Chicago, this perception came directly out of the Women's Movement of the seventies, which enacted change not through individual exploits but through the actions of women working together. Women initiated change by creating communities in which to work and to exhibit their art. Chicago structured a community with the creation of *The Dinner Party*. Christine created a community in building the City of Ladies. She points to the importance of community in *The City of Ladies* by including the story of the Roman goddess Ceres, who, as the teacher of agriculture, showed her people how to live in community (68). Ceres rescued her people from a future of aimless
wandering by teaching them how to build proper cities and towns and how to sow and harvest seed. She even invented the plow. Significantly, Ceres is also a woman of note on The Dinner Party floor.

The artist Harmony Hammond states in Arlene Raven's book Crossing Over: Feminism and Art of Social Concern that the revolutionary changes wrought by the Women's Movement of the 1970s were caused not by individuals, but by groups of women working together (xi). The difference between male and female versions of community is this: women's community becomes collaborative; men tend to impose their model or vision on the community13 (xiii). If women are to continue to build equality, they must maintain their vision of a truly collaborative community. According to Hammond, "Connecting was the function and meaning of women's traditional art, and it is still consciously a function of feminist art today" (qtd. in Raven 54). Chicago realized this aspect of community when she opened her studio to the women who worked with her on The Dinner Party. She saw profound changes occur in the confidence and attitudes of the women who collaborated on the project. For many it was the first time their ideas had been validated and their creativity had been affirmed. Perhaps Dorothy Kittredge Goodwill, a needleworker from Cleveland who worked on the Hildegarde of Bingen runner, says it best:

I am immensely proud to be a part of The Dinner Party and deeply grateful for the opportunity to work with Judy Chicago to bring her vision to fruition.

13 For more on community, see Chicago, Through the Flower, 65-69; 97-99; hormones: Harmony Hammond, cited in Raven, Crossing Over: Feminism and Art of Social Concern.
The Dinner Party helped me realize a sense of honor about my qualities as a woman. It demanded nothing less than excellence from me and my skills as a needleworker. It required my total commitment as an artisan. It challenged me intellectually and creatively. And, it gives to me and my daughters a history of our role models...it gives us back our heritage.

(Cleveland, The Dinner Party catalogue 1)

I experienced collaborative community from 1993 to 2001 when I was one of six female artist/owners of Conversation Pieces, a gallery of fine art and fine craft located in Tipp City, Ohio. For nearly eight years the six of us worked together. We developed the business plan, sought out other artists' work to sell along with our own, handled marketing and publicity, sponsored successful juried exhibitions, and saw to the myriad other tasks that come with running a small business. We made decisions by discussing issues and building consensus; each partner's individual responsibilities capitalized on her strengths. It was truly a collaborative effort. Personal life issues, not egos or discord, were the reason for our difficult decision to close the gallery in 2001.

There is unity, as well as personal empowerment, in collaboration. The collaboration moves us beyond the object created; it extends to the reader of The City of Ladies and to the viewer of The Dinner Party. Reading the book, or experiencing the art initiates a conversation between the creator and the reader/viewer, and through this, establishes the potential for further connections. In being made aware of the struggles and achievements of other women, the individual woman can understand that she does not stand alone, that no matter what, she is part of a community. Some might argue that Christine created her work in solitude, but did she really? She was assisted by the
Virtues. Little matter that they were not flesh and blood; they were her collaborators nonetheless. One could argue too that this is the paradox of individual versus collaboration or community. However, I see this as a both/and situation where it is possible to have individual achievement and community/collaborative accomplishment.

As each viewer communicates his or her experience to another, (indeed, each time Christine wrote to one of her patrons), another connection is established. From this vantage point, we are able to see that along with Christine de Pisan and Judy Chicago, we are creating yet another connection - in essence - we are building across time. When I bring these two women together in my own images and present them to the world, I am establishing another link, and by doing this, moving us all into the future. As Lady Reason tells Christine:

My dear daughter and beloved friend, I've now prepared a trench for you which is good and wide, and have emptied it of earth which I have carried away in great loads on my shoulders. It's now time for you to place inside the trench some heavy, solid stones which will form the foundations of the walls for the City of Ladies. So take the trowel of your pen and get ready to set to with vigour on the building work. (Christine de Pisan, The Book of the City of Ladies 34-35).

Both Christine and Chicago begin their creations with the foundation. The City of Ladies is built on the foundation of great women like Queen Semiramis, who with her husband conquered Assyria, the city of Babylon, and many other territories. After his death she continued to rule and added Ethiopia, India, and most of the East to her kingdom. Because of her courage and great deeds, Semiramis was chosen to lay the first
foundation stone for The City of Ladies (35-37). Other females such as the lawmaker
Nicula, empress of Ethiopia, and great warrior queens like the Amazon women also
helped to lay the foundation stones of the city (30, 37-39). In keeping with the foundation
metaphor, The Dinner Party sits on its own white tile foundation inscribed with the
names of 999 accomplished women of history (including Semiramis). The women in the
city and the women at the table have "risen up" from a base, or precedent, constructed
from other women's great deeds. Note too, that parallels can be made between the earthly
materials both writer and author use: stones compose the city's foundation while the
plates and tiles are made of clay.

Just as Christine honors the "womanly arts" in The Book of the City of Ladies,
Chicago deliberately chooses traditional women's media for The Dinner Party:
needlework and painted china plates. Both abandoned male guidelines for creativity to
embrace female ones, validating them in the process. With the assistance of Lady Reason,
Christine writes of the first teacher of weaving, Arachne, who invented the arts of dyeing
wool and weaving fine tapestries, as well as the art of growing flax and making it into
cloth. Arachne even developed the means to make nets and traps for catching fish and
fowl (73-74). Chicago includes Arachne on the Heritage Floor. Boccaccio had argued
that man was far better off before such civilized arts as weaving and cooking, calling
them the arts of fallen civilizations (74, Quilligan 101). Christine, in her homage to
Arachne's contributions, effectively discredits Boccaccio, cleverly noting that Christ
himself made use of Arachne's discoveries in his use of fish, linen, and dyed cloth. To
strengthen her argument, she also notes Jesus' use of the communion bread, not possible
without the accomplishment of Ceres (74).
During the course of creating *The Dinner Party*, Chicago became more and more intrigued by the rich tradition of needlework. She determined to include as many different techniques and styles as she could, all corresponding as closely as possible with the historical eras of each woman at the table. It was another way to focus attention on women's unrecognized heritage (Chicago, *The Dinner Party Needlework* 15). In addition, she chose to include symbols and images on each runner to create a narrative about each woman and her struggles. For instance, Christine's runner is executed in a bargello stitch, a traditional form of counted thread embroidery much like needlepoint. Bargello, also called Florentine or flamestitch, has its origins in the Middle Ages (de la Bere). The jagged design on the runner points threateningly inward towards Christine's plate as an indication of Christine's own sense of the danger posed by misogynist texts of her day (Chicago, *The Dinner Party Needlework* 158). The exquisitely embroidered initial "C" for Christine is modeled on a medieval manuscript. The original illumination (1413) shows Christine presenting a copy of *The Book of the City of Ladies* to Isabel of Bavaria, the Queen of France (158). The needlework was executed by L.A. Olson, an educator who also worked on Millenium Runner #1, Hildegarde of Bingen, Anna van Schurman, Margaret Sanger, Isabella d'Este, Sojourner Truth, and Susan B. Anthony (282).
Chicago recalls Christine's writing in her notes regarding women's needlework arts and ancient goddesses. Many of the most ancient goddess images were thought of as "Eternal Weavers" because they "spun life" or "wove destiny" (24). Both women write of the Egyptian goddess queen Isis, whom Chicago credits with the invention of spinning and includes on the Heritage Floor and Christine additionally lauds for her knowledge of horticulture (The Book of the City of Ladies 69). Various myths give credit to female deities for teaching women many of the needle arts; Chicago writes of Odysseus, or Ulysses, encountering both Calypso and Circe at their looms (30). Helen of Troy and Andromache were known not only for their wise counsel but also for their weaving skills (30). Circe and Helen are both included in The Book of the City of Ladies and on the Heritage Floor.

14 While Christine makes no mention of Circe as a weaver, she does relate an encounter with Odysseus/Ulysses (The Book of the City of Ladies 63).
Lady Reason emphasizes to Christine the importance of language because it was given to women for voice (27-28). In fact, she emphasizes that Christ's resurrection might have gone unnoticed had not Mary Magdalene told the apostles (27). Reason relates the story of the nymph and prophetess Nicostrata, also called Carmentis, who established the first rule of law on the future site of the city of Rome and invented the Latin alphabet (64-66). The Roman goddess Minerva, or Greek Pallas Athena, invented the Greek alphabet, numbers, and the method of forging armour (66-68). Reason speaks of the learned poets and philosophers Cornificia, Proba, and Sappho. Indeed, all three women were so accomplished that even Boccaccio sang their praises, saying of Sappho, "...spurred on by her fine mind and burning desire, [she] devoted herself to her studies and rose above the common, ignorant herd, making her home on the heights of Mount Parnassus; in other words, at the summit of knowledge itself (58-61). Chicago also honors Sappho's contributions by giving her a place at the table.

Christine gives further emphasis to language by acting as the scribe for the stories told her by the Virtues. This is important. Instead of relying on oral tradition, which can be lost or corrupted, Christine, by recording the contributions of women, establishes not only their credibility, but their permanence, giving women's achievements a much better chance of being inserted into the historical canon. The written telling of the accomplishments of such women as Nicostrata/Carmentis and Minerva/Pallas Athena actually extends their authority into the present time as evidenced by their inclusion on \textit{The Dinner Party} Heritage Floor.

As individuals, Christine de Pisan and Judy Chicago share similar professional traits. Christine was intimately involved with the production of her work. Not only did
she write and edit, she copied out her own texts, chose which would be assembled together, and gave detailed instructions to the artists who painted the illuminations. Some of her written instructions still exist. Like Christine, Chicago is also a writer with ten books to her credit, including two autobiographies, and several chronicles of *The Dinner Party*. Her literary work, much of which focuses on her personal struggles as a woman and an artist, as well as those of other women, adds to the ongoing presence, and thus to the authority of women in the historical canon. In addition to their primary roles as writer and artist/writer, both women acted as historians, critics, and aestheticians as well.

The importance of the written and visual records of Christine de Pisan and Judy Chicago cannot be overemphasized. Their efforts to bring women and women's accomplishments into the mainstream underscore the understanding that women have had no substantive written tradition to look to and that through the centuries women have suffered from a sense of having very little value. While these may appear to be overstatements, they are not. When women's achievements are not recognized and recorded, they are not respected. In fact, Chicago calls attention to this very issue in reference to Christine de Pisan. When interviewed for the Florida State University website, she noted that it was necessary to read *The Book of the City of Ladies*, not just read *about* it, because then it lost its power. This dearth of a recorded history has become, over time, a kind of psychological crippling, because in not being valued one is not validated. One is, in a sense, invisible.

It seemed to Christine that for centuries women had accepted and internalized these beliefs. Christine reveals that she herself has absorbed this falsehood in the early parts of *The City of Ladies*. Note her text:
Even so, given that I could scarcely find a moral work by any author which didn't devote some chapter or paragraph to attacking the female sex, I had to accept their unfavorable opinion of women since it was unlikely that so many learned men, who seemed to be endowed with such great intelligence and insight into all things, could possibly have lied on so many different occasions. It was on the basis of this one simple argument that I was forced to conclude that, although my understanding was too crude and ill-informed to recognize the great flaws in myself and other women, these men had to be in the right. Thus I preferred to give more weight to what others said than to trust my own judgment and experience.

(6; emphasis added)

In this passage Christine acknowledges what she and other women have been conditioned to accept. She undervalues herself and overvalues the opinions of the male writers of her time. This may be a show of humility on Christine's part, but it also strikes me as a sly contradiction, a wry poke at men's superior attitudes. This passage effectively sets the scene for the appearance of the Virtues, leading to Christine's own transformation.

Judy Chicago also talks about the conditioning of women not to question this anti-female propaganda, or, if not to question, to feel as if they must live with it, and for many, even to believe it. In a rather painful personal anecdote, she writes in *Through the Flower* about being offered financial help by a patron interested in her sculpture. Feeling that she had no real options if she were to complete the art, she accepted his assistance, in spite of his reason for helping her. He felt that women needed help from men because they "were inferior, and he liked to help women" (42). If I take my own experience as
evidence, I, like Christine, have been too willing to accept, unquestioningly, the
dismissive and denigrating pronouncements by men in regards to the female sex. Why
have we accepted this conditioning, and why have we not protested sooner, when, like
Christine, our own experience tells us differently?

*Dinner in the City: A Narrative Exhibition*

The creation of a work of art is part concept, part design, part craftsmanship and
execution, and part intuition. As an artist, I begin with the idea, followed by preliminary
sketches, drawings, and color scheme, but the end result is often very different from the
initial inspiration. With a narrative series, I have to maintain some thread of the story, but
at some point I need to allow the materials and my intuition to lead me, and that requires
time and solitude. Judy Chicago writes in *Through the Flower*. "I had to have
uninterrupted studio time in order to concentrate on the bringing together of my chosen
subject matter of women's history, my newly developed skills at china-painting, and now
this potentially rich form language" (39). Like Chicago, I too needed uninterrupted studio
time in order to complete the visual presentation of my research on Christine de Pisan's
*The Book of the City of Ladies* and Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*. I had been making
sketches, notes, and preliminary collages for some time; I was now ready to embark on
the full series of mixed media paper collages.

Collage is an art form that was once regarded as one of the "low arts", its origins
rooted in piece quilts, scrapbooks, and other traditionally feminine handicrafts. Elevated
to the status of a fine art in the early part of the twentieth century, it still uses humble
materials as well as the media of fine art: paper, discarded mail, scraps of fabric, string,

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old newspapers, stamps, and any number of other found objects. Collage is a process of "building" and layering, of adding and taking away. The art historian Lucy Lippard sees collage as a particularly female medium because it knits the fragments of our lives together, and potentially leaves nothing out, a sort of community itself, inclusive. I don't fully agree with her analysis because I believe that in collage, as in all the arts, selection and discernment are important. I carefully designed the images I presented in "Dinner in the City," choosing the colors and compositions that best suited my goals. I would agree that the "piecing" nature of collage relates it to needlework, yet collage also fits the traditionally male domain of painting. It is simply painting with paper as the medium rather than paint, thus paper as fabric/female, paper as paint/male, combining the two into a cohesive whole.

Creation of the twenty-seven collages that comprise "Dinner in the City: A Narrative Exhibition" took place over the course of two and a half years. Ideas and drawings were considered and discarded; other artists' work was examined; research was conducted. I looked at many examples of medieval illuminations, and I considered the symbols I wanted to include, as well as appropriate color schemes and iconography. I knew it was important that the entire exhibition maintain continuity, because, after all, it is a narrative. I am imagining the meeting of Christine and Judy Chicago and weaving a tale, telling the story as I see it.

I viewed the arrangement of the collages in the Wright State University Gallery as a circular exhibition. The narrative began on both sides of the entry door and flowed around the room, culminating at the center wall (Appendix Two). I divided the artwork into three sections. On either side of the entrance hung nine (nine by twelve inch)
canvases pieced together in a grid, as one would piece a quilt. One set of nine gives an overview of *The Book of the City of Ladies*; the other portrays images from *The Dinner Party*. These collages set the stage for the story.

I purposely chose a multiple of three for the grid images because the number three resonates with meaning. The three Virtues, Ladies Reason, Rectitude, and Justice, have obvious associations with the Trinity. The three-sided dinner party table is associated with the stable geometric of the triangle, the ancient triangular symbol of the feminine. *The Dinner Party* was partly inspired by the Last Supper, and here too there is a relationship to the grid and its multiples of three. In Leonardo do Vinci's fresco of *The Last Supper* at Santa Maria della Grazie in Milan, Jesus' apostles are grouped in threes, and there is a tri-partite window directly behind Jesus, framing him, again referring to the Trinity. Each singular canvas in the grid tells a part of the "Dinner in the City" story.

Note that a checkerboard motif appears in all of the collages that comprise "Dinner in the City". This "diaper" pattern, as it is known, was chosen for its historical allusions, as many medieval illuminated manuscripts use such small, repeating patterns as background decoration. The use of the checkerboard helps to unify all the collages of "Dinner in the City".

Following are descriptions of the twenty-seven images that comprise "Dinner in the City: A Narrative Exhibition". The first grid of nine collages tells the story of Christine and *The Book of the City of Ladies*:
Title: "Je Christine" (I, Christine)

The first collage is a portrait of Christine as I imagine her in the early parts of *The Book of the City of Ladies*. In referring to herself as "Je Christine" Christine places herself within the story as well as in the role of narrator. Rather than using the third person or no identification at all, as was more common in her time, Christine uses the gendered form of "je", or "I". Her use of the first person adds to her authority in telling the story (Quilligan 12). In the background appears a profile of Christine reading, accompanied by the pages of a book. The names of Matheolus, Aristotle, and Jean de Meun appear on the book pages as well as two titles: *On the Secrets of Women*, a Latin book about the defects of women, and Jean de Meun's *The Romance of the Rose*. Early on I decided that I did not want Christine to have distinct facial features, because she is, in many ways, all women, and I wanted female viewers to see something of themselves in Christine. I felt rich, royal colors were appropriate for this image.

"Je, Christine". (Christine de Pisan, *Song in Honor of Joan of Arc* 1429, qtd. in Quilligan 11). These two words, meaning, "I, Christine" open Christine's poem about Joan of Arc and have their background in *The Book of the City of Ladies*, where she repeatedly uses the personal pronoun with her name. This technique establishes Christine as the authority of the text of *The Book of the City of Ladies*, as well as letting the reader know that the author, (and the authority), is female (12).
The title of this collage refers to Christine's despair as she contemplates "all manner of philosophers, poets and orators too numerous to mention, who all seem to speak with one voice and are unanimous in their view that female nature is wholly given up to vice" (Christine de Pisan, *The Book of the City of Ladies* 6). She later notes that these writers would equate woman to a "vessel in which all sin and evil of the world has been collected and preserved" (6). I was fascinated by this metaphor of women as vice-filled vessels, especially in relationship to ancient theories of woman merely serving as a vessel for the seed of the man in reproduction. I combined this "vessel of vice" with the archetype of ancient "Venus" and Minoan snake goddess figures. My sexual goddess looks at the world from one eye in the goblet cup. Perhaps her goblet brimming with female vice is in danger of spilling out onto the world. An embryo is in her hand; another woman looks out from the background; and a despairing face (man? woman?) trapped within a cathedral-like window peers out from between her breasts.

**Title: The Waking Dream**

Reading and contemplating the despicable qualities of her gender as written by men, Christine cries out in despair to God. Slumped in her chair, she falls into a trance-like sleep, a "waking dream", surrounded by clouds of despair and confusion. She will soon be awakened by a beam of light.
Christine awakes from her trance-like state to find before her three ladies, crowned and majestic in appearance. Their faces shine with bright light. For the first time we meet the Virtues: Ladies Reason, Rectitude, and Justice. Here they appear as indistinct figures of yellow, moving down a path that breaks through clouds and earth. They are shrouded and mysterious, as if from a celestial realm; as indeed they are, for they are the daughters of God.

The first Virtue addresses Christine. She is Lady Reason. Lady Reason carries a mirror to take the measure of mankind. She explains to Christine that whoever looks in the mirror will see him or herself as he or she really is. In this collage, I have placed the mirror to Lady Reason's right so that she can carry instead a basket full of misogynist dirt. Behind her are the rocks to be cleared from the Field of Letters.

Reason explains to Christine that they are sent from God to instruct her in the building of a city for ladies. "Only ladies who are of good reputation and worthy of praise will be admitted into this city. To those lacking in virtue, its gates will remain forever closed" (11).
Title: "My name is Rectitude...this splendid rule...is the yardstick of truth..."

The second lady speaks to Christine: "My name is Rectitude and I dwell in heaven more than on earth (13). She holds a rule, a rod of peace. It is the yardstick of truth and separates right from wrong and good from evil. Because it is a measuring tool this rule will help Christine build the city. In this image Lady Rectitude actually holds two rules, one like a scepter. Note the jewels and the checkerboard motif.

Title: "I am Justice...this vessel is like a measuring cup..."

Lady Justice explains that she dwells in heaven, on earth, and in hell; she is the most beloved of God's daughters. As the keeper of order, her duty is to judge. She and God are essentially one and the same; she is the feminine half of God. The cup she holds is pure gold. It measures out to each person exactly what he or she deserves. Justice is the most important of the three Virtues for everything culminates in her. Justice will help Christine put the finishing touches on the city. Deep colors and jeweled elements indicate the high rank of this Virtue.
Title: "You are to construct...a walled city"

At last Christine knows what role she is to play in the construction of this place of refuge, this safe haven for women of good moral character and great accomplishment. The city will begin with the foundation and the walls.

The inspiration for this and the other foundation collage is derived from an ink drawing I found in a magazine. Although the artist is unknown, the arrangement of the simple shapes appealed to me. Bold color and texture as well as the checkerboard add interest.

Title: "Only ladies...of good reputation...worthy of praise...will be admitted"

This image depicts another foundation wall in jewel tones of pink, gold, and blue. It was important to create the illusion of stacked stones, yet still maintain the imagined landscape of The City of Ladies. Some real stones are used in this collage.

The second grid of collages considers subjects from The Dinner Party. I chose to interpret some of the women in a figural sense while visualizing others in terms of the plates, runners, and goblets that represent them on Chicago's table. Like the images from The Book of the City of Ladies they progress in chronological order from Pre-History to Rome, Christianity to the Reformation, and the American Revolution to the Women's Revolution. This follows the same timeline Chicago chose for The Dinner Party.
Title: In the beginning...the Goddess

This goddess image is based on ancient artifacts such as the Venus of Willendorf and other female figures from ancient history. While the specific use of these figures is not known, it is thought that they might be fertility icons or images of the Creator Mother. They all share some common elements: large hips and breasts and an emphasis on the reproductive areas. Women were crucial for the survival of early societies, so female images were revered.

The Dinner Party table honors Primordial Goddess, a representative of the first goddess images and seen as a fundamental cosmic force. She is followed by the Fertile Goddess who emphasizes the continuity of the race and the importance of women in creation. Snake Goddess, recalling Minoan female statues, is also at The Dinner Party table; there is an element of her here in the uplifted arms.

I combined the goddess images into one form, referencing all three of The Dinner Party goddesses with my choice of colors: yellows, browns, and golds, the same hues chosen by Chicago for her Dinner Party goddesses. My goddess appears with her arms uplifted in celebration of the life force and the nurturing qualities of the feminine. Some of Chicago's own central core imagery seems to have "sneaked" in.

Title: Sophia... Wisdom

Sophia, the Greek word for wisdom, is a soft abstract portrait. She is a goddess archetype, a female deity personified in the Wisdom books of the Old Testament. It is said that each time the word wisdom appears in the Bible it is referring to the goddess Sophia (Pippenger 1). Some say the woman embraced by God in Michelangelo's Creation of Adam is Wisdom/Sophia, the female counterpart of God. As cultures shifted from matriarchies to patriarchies Sophia was deemphasized to the point where now she is virtually unknown.

I chose to emulate the colors of the Sophia plate and runner in The Dinner Party, using leaves to refer to the floral imagery of the plate. Sophia's image is less distinct than many of the other women as befits her virtual erasure from the culture.
Title: *Judith at the Table...*

The biblical Jewess Judith is represented by her place setting at *The Dinner Party* table. Judith rescued her people from the hands of the Assyrian general Holofernes by offering herself to him. She managed to drug him to sleep, whereupon she cut off his head and returned with it to her people, placing his head on the gatepost.

The triangles in the background symbolize stability and strength; the plate and runner designs are my interpretations of *The Dinner Party* plate and runner.

Note that all the plate/runner collages share the same composition as a unifying element within the grid.

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Title: *Empress Theodora... Advocate for Women...*  

Theodora was a Byzantine Empress married to the Emperor Justinian. She was a controversial ruler and opinion about her is mixed. However, she was a great advocate for women, enacting laws to protect women from abuse, to receive fair treatment in divorce, and to allow women to inherit property. Together she and Justinian were responsible for the building of the great Byzantine church Hagia Sofia (The Church of the Holy Wisdom) in Constantinople (present-day Istanbul).

Byzantine art, specifically the mosaic of *Empress Theodora and Her Attendants*, ca. 547 CE, at San Vitale in Ravenna, is the inspiration for the Theodora image (Janson 255). Figures in Byzantine art are iconic, shown as "types" rather than as individuals. The colors are jewel tones with gold and gold leaf as major elements. Theodora "reigns" here in the rich attire of an Empress, complete with crown and jewels. The checkerboard motif appears in a mosaic format.
Twelfth century Hildegard of Bingen was a Renaissance person before the Renaissance, a political and religious figure, scholar, mystic, skilled musician and composer, scientist, medical practitioner, and artist. A prolific writer of medical and scientific texts, poems, letters, liturgical songs, and even a morality play, Hildegard described her many visions in her journals and texts. She even supervised the production of medieval illuminations. Hildegard founded two women's communities and spent most of her life in convents, eventually serving as the abbess.

The Hildegard plate is designed to resemble stained glass. The window shape on the goblet and the gold background emulate the stained glass and gold used on the Hildegard runner on The Dinner Party table.

Judith with the head of Holofernes was inspired by the painting of the same title by the seventeenth-century Italian Baroque artist Artemisia Gentileschi. I chose the same pose as Gentileschi's Judith, showing her fleeing with her booty while also looking back in apprehension as well as in triumph. The orange-red skirt echoes her fleeing form and denotes strength and power. The blue streaks in her hair reminded me of Medusa, adding to the sense of movement in the collage.

Gentileschi was a rare woman in her time, a successful and sought-after painter specializing in large-scale historical and religious subjects even though such subject matter was considered inappropriate for women painters. She was a follower of the painter Caravaggio, who was known for his use of dramatic lights and darks, called chiaroscuro. The rich darks and bright colors of the collage are reminiscent of the technique.

Judith's story of rescuing her people, the Jews, from the Assyrian general Holofernes is told by both Christine in The Book of the City of Ladies and Chicago in The Dinner Party.
Sojourner Truth was born into slavery. She was an ardent Abolitionist and Women's Rights advocate, speaking around the country on these issues. Chicago's Sojourner Truth plate represents three faces emanating from a single body form. One weeps for the slaves, one shows the rage that African-Americans could not reveal for fear of punishment, and one is inspired by African tribal masks.

I did not want to emphasize anger, so I chose to concentrate on the weeping face with her tear falling over the goblet, and the tribal designs. The tribal patterns call attention to the sorrowful face, a suitable reminder of the suffering and indignities that slaves endured. I believe it is also a respectful and dignified portrayal of the Sojourner Truth story. The color scheme reflects that chosen by Chicago for the Sojourner Truth place setting which combines strip-woven African-inspired patterns and sections of a pieced quilt intended as a tribute to the contribution of African-American women to the quilt tradition (Chicago, The Dinner Party 195).
Title: *Virginia Woolf... A Room of One's Own...*

The writer Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) lived during the Women's Suffrage Movement in England in the early part of the twentieth century. She felt strongly about gender equality and was known to leave a party if she heard a comment denigrating women (250).

The title of this collage comes from a story where she writes of the need for woman to have a "room of one's own" in which to work and create. I pictured her sitting in front of a window looking out into the world, as if she is in the world but not of it. This room is a refuge in which to think and dream, yet at the same time it is a space of confinement. Thoughts, hopes, and dreams can go in and out the window, but is the woman shown here equally free? It's up to each viewer to decide. There is also a sense of Christine's Annunciation experience in *The Book of the City of Ladies* when she is struck by the bright light of the three Virtues.

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Title: *Georgia O'Keeffe...Series I, no.8... After Georgia...*

The painter Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986) is today one of our most famous female artists. She was an unusually strong and singular personality, choosing to follow her own instincts in painting through the harmony of color, line, shape, and rhythm.

I deviated from Chicago's design for the Georgia O'Keeffe plate, which is muted in color and based on one of her paintings titled *Black Iris,* and chose instead two inspirations. The first was a photograph of O'Keeffe as a young woman, taken by her future husband Alfred Stieglitz, the photographer, in 1918. In both photo and collage her strong features, long neck, and upward, hopeful gaze are emphasized. I combined her portrait with one of her paintings, *Series I, no. 5,* an oil painted in 1919. The composition and colors reflect this painting. Her face emerges from the sweeping shapes formed by the colors.
The final group of collages continues my interpretation of the combined Christine de Pisan and Judy Chicago sagas. The first two pieces are meant to mirror one another as iconic images. Each icon collage is intended to hang next to its corresponding grid of collages, so Christine's image follows her grid of nine, and Chicago's portrait is placed next to the nine small Chicago collages. Both icon collages measure thirty by forty-eight inches.

Title: *Christine de Pisan ...icon...*

As befits an educated woman, and as Christine presents herself in the introduction to *The Book of the City of Ladies*, she is shown here by a window, reading, in a foreshadowing of the events to come. Her head covering alludes to those seen on medieval women in illuminated manuscripts. Christine wears a blue gown to associate her with the Virgin Mary. This is in keeping with traditional illuminations of Christine from the Middle Ages.
Christine de Pisan...icon...is actually the first piece I created for the series. After I had completed several others, I knew I would either have to change it dramatically or make a new collage because it did not measure up artistically. The weekend before I was to hang "Dinner in the City: A Narrative Exhibition ", my daughter and I tore off the background. The following week I redid the entire piece, finishing the collage on Friday night. I hung the exhibition on Saturday morning.

Title: Judy Chicago...icon

The goal with the Judy Chicago icon was to present her as a strong woman representative of all women. Therefore I gave her a solid, slightly shortened body and a very frontal, direct stance. This also reminds the viewer of the frontal postures of traditional Byzantine icons. The background colors and swirls interpret the Christine de Pisan plate and runner designs on The Dinner Party table. In her hand, which reaches out to all women, she holds the pieces of a butterfly, Chicago's metaphor for liberty, for women rising up and transforming. I initially tried a full-form butterfly but it seemed too cute, so I elected to use the pattern of a butterfly on her hand. This fit much better and still conveys the meaning.
Chicago is also well-known for her use of vaginal imagery in an attempt to legitimize female forms in art. She is noted for her use of the term “through the flower” which comes from one of her early paintings. By going “through the flower” women can move beyond the traditional confines of their gender (Chicago, Through the Flower 206). Therefore the main focus of the Judy Chicago icon is the rainbow of colors in her central core. It is a complex arrangement of many small pieces of paper and radiates with color and the idea of limitless possibility.

The final seven pieces are slightly larger than the icon images, thirty-six by forty-eight inches. Christine de Pisan and Judy Chicago begin to infiltrate each other’s collages as their stories come together.
Title: "All of a sudden, I saw a beam of light..."

Christine's awakening from her trance by the beam of light is that of an annunciation. This recalls the posture of the Virgin Mary, who is often shown with a book open to Isaiah's prophecy of the virgin birth. Quilligan writes that in appropriating this Biblical imagery Christine puts herself in place to receive her messages from God's daughters, Ladies Reason, Rectitude, and Justice (54). In fact she actually quotes Mary in the text: "Behold your handmaiden, ready to do your bidding" (Christine de Pisan, The Book of the City of Ladies 16). Manuscripts of Christine's text usually show her dressed in Virgin blue. Quilligan notes that Christine seems to have organized her own workshop for illuminating her writing (39). She supervised the production of elaborate presentation copies for such patrons as the Dukes of Berry and Burgundy and Queen Isabella of Bavaria.
I present Christine at her writing desk with Matheolus’ open book in front of her. She reaches towards the incoming light as the shadow of Judy Chicago looks on.

**Title: The City of Ladies., the Field of Letters...**

A gilt-like checkerboard frames the City of Ladies, where women of great deeds, impeccable virtue, and courage reside in safety from misogynist attack. Christine is told by the three Virtues that they are there to instruct her in the building of a walled city, sturdy and impregnable, the gates of this city to be open only to praiseworthy and reputable women. It is to be a city that is un paralleled in its splendor, built to last for eternity.

First, however, the Field of Letters must be cleared. This is the building site for the City of Ladies and it is covered with debris. The debris is a metaphor for the writings of anti-feminists; clearing the ground of this misogynist dirt undermines the authority of misogyny, in essence, "sweeping” it away. In its place will be the stones of the city, each stone representative of a celebrated woman of learned or military achievement.

I have taken some artistic license in my presentation of the City of Ladies and the Field of Letters, making the field somewhat literal. The walls of the city are said to be round;
therefore I placed the city on a round, brightly colored hill, safe above misogynist thought.

Title: *The Meeting...*

This collage shows the meeting of Christine de Pisan and Judy Chicago across the centuries. The two touch hands in a metaphorical gesture that unites all women who have overcome misogynist obstacles to achieve great deeds. Christine wears the traditional virgin blue gown; Chicago is vibrantly multicolored to represent strong women everywhere. The City of Ladies appears in the background. The checkerboard motif continues.
Title: *No longer a Vessel of Vice...*

The goddess figure called Vessel of Vice dances in celebration, for with the building of the City of Ladies and the creation of *The Dinner Party*, women's value to history is proven and she can take her place within the city, at the table, and in the canon of history. Bright gold reflects the delight of the happy goddess; the design of the cup interior is based on the Christine de Pisan table runner. Rich royal blues and purples form the background. The Vessel goddess stands before the dinner party triangular table partially set with runners and plates. Shadows of notable women look on from the background.
Title: Dinner in the City...

Christine de Pisan proudly takes her place at the table of history. Judy Chicago stands behind her in shadow. Christine holds her goblet, gold and bejeweled in my interpretation, and her plate, on which only the faintest design appears. This is not only for compositional reasons, but also to indicate that history is not finished for women and women are not finished contributing to history. Christine de Pisan's table runner, based on a bargello or flamestitch technique on the Chicago runner, appears in the foreground. Through the arched doorways is the City of Ladies.

We have now come to the last two collages in "Dinner in the City: A Narrative Exhibition". They are the centerpieces, or culminating images in which woman realizes her power and moves into the future with the support of all those who have come before her.
Title: Beauty in Power

Christine looks on from afar as modern woman expresses her power at *The Dinner Party* table. My main goal in this collage was to capture the gesture of wholehearted strength and celebration of women's power in the world. This called for rich, bold colors and a strong female figure with arms uplifted. The checkerboard motif continues to tie the past to the present.
Title: Looking forward...

The past, present, and future of women and their achievements come together. The border design echoes the bargello, or flamestitch pattern of the Christine de Pisan runner on *The Dinner Party* table. My bargello pattern is composed of many small cut and torn pieces of paper. Christine, as the past, stands in the background. Judy Chicago, in the middle ground, represents the struggles of contemporary woman. Woman future is the large figure in the foreground. All look forward together, united across the centuries by their struggles and their accomplishments. All are ready to take their place in the canon of history. Like the richly colored, busy canvas, their contributions are many.
I began to study the relationship between Christine de Pisan and Judy Chicago more than four years ago, reading and taking notes and forming pictures in my mind. It has been a journey of jumps and starts, periods of intense investigation followed by months of lying fallow while other parts of my life clamored for attention. First, I discovered Christine de Pisan in Whitney Chadwick's book *Women, Art, and Society* (4) and my curiosity was aroused. I read *The Book of the City of Ladies*. I started to think about Judy Chicago's piece *The Dinner Party* and how both women were trying to accomplish the same thing. Then followed my contact with the Brooklyn Museum and that first exciting trip to "meet" Chicago's Christine de Pisan place setting. Exactly one year later, I returned.

March 23, 2007 was an emotional day in my life. After all this time spent with my two "ladies", I was about to meet both of them. I had joined the Brooklyn Museum so that I could attend the members' opening. It was 11:45 a.m. and the permanent installation of Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* would open to members at noon. I decided to check out the gift shop in anticipation of what mementoes I would purchase from this trip. I was standing near the check-out when the woman next to me said: "You look familiar."

"I don't think we have met," I said. "Where are you from?"

When she said, "Cleveland", I laughed and said we must look like Midwesterners, because I was from Dayton. This is how I met Barbara Megery, one of the Cleveland organizers of the Ohio-Chicago Art Project, Inc., who brought *The Dinner Party* exhibition to Cleveland in 1981. It was the beginning of a heart-filled experience. Barbara took me in hand and introduced me to the group she was traveling with, many of
whom had also been part of that grass-roots effort of poetry readings and performances that brought *The Dinner Party* to the banks of Lake Erie.

On Thursday, March 23, 2007, at the Brooklyn Museum just outside the gift shop, Judy Chicago signed my new, updated *Dinner Party* book, "For Marsha, In Honor of Christine de Pisan, Best Regards, Judy Chicago." I gave her the prospectus of this essay, along with a page of thumbnail images of my artwork. While I was not able to have a substantial conversation with Chicago, she showed interest in my research on parallels between *The Dinner Party* and *The Book of the City of Ladies*.

I spent four days at the Brooklyn Museum with *The Dinner Party*. Not only did I meet Judy Chicago and Elizabeth Sackler, I met Susannah Rodee, Executive Director of Chicago's feminist art organization, Through the Flower. I met Diane Gelon, who was an early and critical collaborator with Chicago on *The Dinner Party*. I met Audrey Cowan, who worked on the runners for Eleanor of Aquitaine and Fertile Goddess. I met Mary Ross Taylor, the animated bookstore owner who was responsible for *The Dinner Party* exhibition in Houston in 1980. She was very interested in my research, and we talked for some time about that, her experiences in bringing *The Dinner Party* to Houston, and the progress of women today.

I keep in touch with the remarkable women from the Ohio-Chicago Site Project group, as well as several others. We have, in essence, formed a new coalition of women determined to see our contributions honored by history. We exchange images of our artwork and notes of encouragement to one another. Those who were active in the seventies women's movement have told me stories of their efforts to insert women into our historical record. I am inspired by them to action of my own. Recently I e-mailed the
group asking for comments about their experience of *The Dinner Party*. Ann Mackin wrote that she was so proud to be able to share the "multifaceted history that surrounds *The Dinner Party*" (e-mail, 9 July 2007). Roz Kochman, a former attorney turned sculptor, is also a docent at the Brooklyn Museum. Intrigued by my essay topic and exhibition, she has read *The Book of the City of Ladies*, and writes that she now talks about it to her tour groups. She adds that she is amazed at how *The Dinner Party* has caused her to focus on the lack of women artists in museums and to realize that half of the human race has been neglected in this regard for so long. She finishes her message with, "we are catching up, however..." (e-mail, 9 July 2007).

Chicago has reissued an updated *Dinner Party* book for the opening of the Sackler Center for Feminist Art. In it she writes that she has been criticized for her exclusion of certain women from *The Dinner Party* table. She notes that *The Dinner Party* is a symbolic history of women in Western civilization, not an exhaustive one, and that past historical records favor the history of the upper classes. Thus, it could be argued that the impact of *The Dinner Party* has been limited to middle-class women, and perhaps that was true at one time. But judging by the four days I spent at the opening of the Sackler Center for Feminist Art I would say that is no longer the case. Hundreds of viewers were on hand to see this piece, and those viewers were men and women, young, old, moms, dads, students, professional artists, people of all ages, races, economic classes, and education. It was a truly moving experience to observe.

Chicago comments on page eighty of her autobiography, *Through the Flower*, "I felt that it was important for [the] women to learn about the work of women of the past, identify with their lives, and use their achievements to extend their own." She is
absolutely correct in believing this. *The Book of the City of Ladies* and *The Dinner Party* are not just anecdotal pieces about women's exploits; they offer a new paradigm for women to follow in order to be respected and included in the record of history. One can ask if the goal is to insert women into the existing canon, or to provide a model for a totally new, or at the very least, reconstructed historical canon. One thing that can be assured is that a remade historical canon that includes the accomplishments of both men and women would transform that canon from elitist to accessible, from a closed to an open community. Both Christine and Chicago point to the importance of allowing women to use their own experiences as subject matter. By canonizing women's experience as valid history, valid literature, valid art, we reveal the fully formed nature of the entire human condition for the first time. No longer is it a half-formed history of masculine identity.

One major impediment to the recognition and continuity of women's history is its discontinuity. This is not as contradictory as it seems. As can be noted from our two examples of *The Book of the City of Ladies* and *The Dinner Party*, much of women's history not only was eliminated from the canon, it was actually nearly forgotten, save for a few who kept the stories. Because of this, women continued to repeat the same experiences, thinking they were forging new ground when they were actually treading the same geography of experience, because the older creations had been destroyed. Thus, some accomplishments were unknowingly built on those that had come before but disappeared. It is important to keep these histories alive, to keep reading the book, to keep viewing the art, and to keep women's accomplishments before the public eye. It is
vital that we advance and be noticed, not just march in place. Women's accomplishments, like men's, must be validated by the culture at large.

When interviewed by Betty Ann Brown in the late 1990s, Chicago noted her belief that women have a different relationship to history than men, that women need to work together and unite behind one set of goals because women are not at the point where they can individuate as men do (Brown, *Expanding Circles* 22). She notes that women have books, women have art. What they don't have is the power to push through change because they have been, in Chicago's opinion, unwilling to do the work together. We may have been told that "no man is an island", but the truth is that most of us have internalized the belief that it is the individual, not the community, who can change the world.

Chicago points to *The Dinner Party* as an illustration of this. Others had been unwilling to work to find a permanent home for *The Dinner Party*, because after all, that was Judy Chicago's creation, that was Judy Chicago's problem. Chicago's point is this: because *The Dinner Party* is such a well-known feminist icon, preserving it forces open a crack in the wall of patriarchal history. Once the wall has a crack in it, other women too can follow through that crack. As more and more do, the crack widens until the wall comes down (22). Because Chicago, Sackler, and the Brooklyn Museum worked together, not only does *The Dinner Party* have a home, now that wall is crumbling, and more and more women are destined to find their way through that ever-widening crack.

I believe that women's influence has been felt throughout the centuries even when it was not officially recorded or verbally recognized, that somehow it exists within the genetic code. While I can offer no proof of this belief, I think that every action or thought
finds its way into the world, whether or not we are aware. Part of the significance of *The Dinner Party* is its public exposure of women's history to a large audience, but another vital part of its importance is the controversy it has stirred. *The Dinner Party* has made its way into the general culture, by virtue of the fact that people talk about it, they think about it, they come to see it, and in doing so, spread the waves of women's accomplishments out a little further into the world. The value of the efforts of such notable women as Christine de Pisan and Judy Chicago is that they recorded women's efforts and called attention to them. They would not let women be ignored and pushed into the shadows of history.

What was Christine de Pisan's influence in her own time? She certainly cannot be considered a contemporary feminist, nor should she be. Christine's aim was to call attention to women's achievements and to emphasize their intelligence. She wanted women to be recognized for their true worth, to be treated decently, and to treasure learning. She never advocated changing the social structure so that women played an equal role. For Christine there were no thoughts of equal pay for equal work, no Equal Rights Amendment for the fifteenth century. That did not fit her belief system or her time period in history.

However, Christine's writings and the opinions contained in them were extremely influential in her lifetime, as indicated by the amount of correspondence between her and other notable thinkers of her day, both men and women. She was consulted on a variety of subjects and conducted letter writing campaigns for and against various issues. Her influence continued on into the next century in Europe, and continues today as more and more contemporary women discover her writings as I did, as did my friend Roz.
Kochman, and her tour groups at the Brooklyn Museum. Christine proposed a new world order in *The Book of the City of Ladies*; Chicago updated and put it into form with *The Dinner Party*, and there is no reason we cannot create that new world order today.

Judy Chicago continues to write and create art. She has expressed how *The Dinner Party* project affected the lives of those who collaborated with her: "The changes that took place in some of my co-workers, particularly those who worked in the studio [on the needlework] for an extended period of time, were astounding" (Chicago, *Embroidering Our Heritage* 21). For the first time in many of these women's lives, their abilities were valued and the importance of their work was validated. The women who worked on the project with Chicago say it best themselves. According to Dorothy K. Goodwill, who worked on Hildegarde of Bingen and Snake Goddess, "This project, and the decision to come, was a strong, almost spiritual experience for everyone. There was weeping in telling of the real need to create artistically - to make art - to let out something very deep and strong within them" (qtd. in *The Dinner Party* 220). Stephanie G. Martin, (Millennium Runner # 3, Sophia, Aspasia, Mary Wollstonecraft), noted that it came as a revelation to her that she could make demands on both herself and her family so she could make art and not feel guilty about doing so (220). Many spoke of having always wanted to do something larger than life, something that would live beyond them, of being united in community with a common goal, and being pushed to accomplish more than they had ever thought possible. Working in the studio together demanded honesty and responsibility (221). Pamela Checkie, (various projects) may be speaking for the group when she says, "I would see my hand shake when I picked up the needle. I had had previous full-time jobs as an accountant, but this was different. Not only was I completing
a piece of work, but I was also working with other women for a cause I believed in " (221; emphasis added).

I met a number of these women at the opening of The Dinner Party permanent installation. Never have I experienced such a sense of empowerment as I did in spending time with them and listening to their experiences working on The Dinner Party. They have carried that strength forward into the rest of their lives. They tell their stories. They are living examples of women's contributions to history and they are putting it into the record. Just as they continue to empower others like me, each woman who experiences The Dinner Party is also encouraged, and empowered by The Dinner Party, to take her place at the table.

Chicago wrote in her journal on Thursday, December 11, 1975, "My dream is that I will make a piece so far beyond judgment that it will enter the cultural pool and never be erased from history, as women's work has been erased before" (The Dinner Party 29). Because of Chicago's continuing efforts on behalf of women artists and women's history, The Dinner Party and other work by women artists today is included in most of the major art history surveys. More attention is being paid to women of the past and their accomplishments. Chicago is currently working to launch a K-12 curriculum based on The Dinner Party, to teach about women's contributions and the future potential of women in the world (Through the Flower, Summer 2007 1). Critic Richard Lacayo notes that for many schoolchildren this will be a first encounter with more than a

15 According to the April 2, 2007 Time magazine article by Richard Lacayo titled "What Women Have Done to Art", until 1986, H.W. Janson's History of Art did not include a single woman among the 2300 artists in the text. When revised in 1986, nineteen were added. Today, of course, more women artists are represented, though still considerably fewer than men.

16 Through the Flower, the non-profit feminist art organization founded by Judy Chicago, is currently working with Kutztown University in Pennsylvania to develop this K-12 curriculum.
spattering of accomplished women, and, "who can argue with that?" (Time 67). With its inclusion in the art history books, its permanent location at the Brooklyn Museum, a curriculum designed around it, and the numbers of viewers I witnessed at its opening, I can truthfully say that The Dinner Party today has become a part of the historical canon.

When one reads The Book of the City of Ladies and learns of the great deeds of the women about whom Christine wrote, and combines that with the stories of the women at The Dinner Party, how can one build a reasonable argument against women's inclusion in the canon? It is imperative for women today to keep these accomplishments before the public eye so that we are reminded every day of the things that women have done throughout the centuries to build community, advance civilization, and improve the quality of life for all people. The words and images of women of past centuries and today must be read, heard, and seen to encourage future generations to follow their own visions.

Christine pays homage to two hundred women in her fifteenth-century treatise. Chicago, over five hundred years later, canonizes 1,038. Both writer and artist include in their works women of historical or mythological significance, chosen for their actual accomplishments or spiritual or legendary powers. Chicago's women come to the table so that we can see the full range and beauty of their heritage and influence, and hear what they have to say. When contemporary female viewers visit the table, and see their history celebrated, they recognize their own capabilities. Chicago's approach, of course, is a modern day reflection of Christine's story.

Christine defied the traditions of her time by actively promoting her writing in order to support her family, rather than finding a new husband or entering a convent. She defended the morals and virtues of women and promoted their great deeds in a culture
where men viewed women as defective males. Chicago too was ignored and isolated by the established male-dominated art world. However, in spite of controversy and negative opinion, both women persevered and followed their own visions, providing an example for other women to follow. They filled multiple roles in the creation of their projects, serving as architects, aesthetiticians, writers, historians, and critics, and they faced opposition from others in doing so. They publicized and defended the social constructs and behaviors that centuries of male-dominated culture had identified and denigrated as female: caring, nurturing, accommodating others. By highlighting these traditional female attributes they recast them as the positive traits that they are.

Both The Book of the City of Ladies and The Dinner Party serve as feminist monuments, metaphors of refuge and community, relying on the language they use and the visual images they employ to effectively make their points. They are about transformation, about making women's significant deeds a part of our permanent history. Both were literally and figuratively "building" a canon. But the question must be asked: Do they actually succeed in reclaiming the female half of history for insertion into the canon?

Because both The Book of the City of Ladies and The Dinner Party are by women, about women, and for women, women can identify themselves in the works; they can see themselves taking their place in the city, or at the table, of history. But I think we are not where we want to be; we have not yet succeeded, but we are succeeding. However, this is the time when not just one individual, but a community of individuals must come together, collaborating to create a world where women, more than one-half of the humans who exist and have existed on this planet, are full and contributing partners with men.
*The Dinner Party* and *The Book of the City of Ladies* are precious stones dropped into the center of a pool of water. They create ripples, and the ripples undulate, and go ever farther and farther out. Women must continue to drop stones into ever larger ponds until we are releasing boulders into oceans. The ripples will grow and grow and grow....
APPENDIX ONE

Press Release, January, 2007:

DINNER IN THE CITY

A Narrative Exhibition

This is the story of two remarkable women.

Selected women throughout the centuries have made it their life’s work to bring women’s accomplishments into the mainstream of Western history and culture. **Christine de Pisan** (ca. 1364-1430), France’s first professional woman of letters, and **Judy Chicago** (1939-present), contemporary visual artist, both confronted this situation head-on.

Christine did this by writing *The Book of the City of Ladies*, in which she refutes the misogynist writings of her time. Judy Chicago addressed the same issue with *The Dinner Party*, an art installation in which she honors accomplished women of history.

In *The Book of the City of Ladies*, Christine tells how in a waking dream she is visited by three graces, Ladies Reason, Rectitude, and Justice. They charge Christine with establishing a new written tradition of women. To do this, Christine constructs an allegorical city built by both mythological and historical women of accomplishment, to be inhabited solely by them and other women of note. The debris cleared from the building site represents "misogynist dirt" or the writings of the anti-feminists.

Five hundred years later Judy Chicago struggled with the same issue of women still underrepresented in the artistic and historical canon. She created *The Dinner Party*, an installation in which thirty-nine illustrious women of history are transformed into symbols, represented by table place settings of china, silverware, napkins, and goblets, all placed on individual table runners. The women are the honored guests.

Christine de Pisan is place setting number twenty-two, a guest at Chicago’s *Dinner Party*.

There is synergy between Christine de Pisan and Judy Chicago; they share the same strength of spirit. In this exhibition I attempt to bring them together by telling and blending portions of both their stories. It is my 21st century re-interpretation of the two tales.
APPENDIX TWO

Wright State University Art Galleries
Dayton, Ohio

Running feet: 110
square feet: 807

Experimental Gallery

Gallery Layout of "Dinner in the City: A Narrative Exhibition"

1. 170" - Didactics, Christine de Pisan grid of nine 9 x 12" collages
2. 177" - Christine de Pisan icon
3. 19'4" - The Annunciation, The City of Ladies, No Longer a Vessel of Vice
4. 28'3" - The Meeting, Dinner in the City, Beauty in Power
5. 28'6" - Looking Forward, Judy Chicago icon, Judy Chicago grid of nine 9x12' collages (to the left of entry door, followed by icon)


Works Consulted


<http://www.bayrose.org/needlework/bargello.html>


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Fleming, John V. *The Roman de la Rose: A Study in Allegory and Iconography.*  

Gerber, Courtney. Research Assistant, Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art.  


Kochman, Roz. E-mail. 9 July 2007.

--- Personal interviews. 25 March 2007.


Mackin, Ann. E-mail. 9 July 2007.


--- *Song in Honor of Joan of Arc. 1429.*


<inquirer.gn.apc.org/womenxt.html>.


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Schulz, Diane Rae. "*The First Feminist?*" *Awakened Woman.*


<http://www.throughtheflower.org/>.


