



Educator packet for the special exhibition

The Fertile Goddess

on view at the Brooklyn Museum, December 19, 2008–May 31, 2009



1



2



3



4



5



6

The Fertile Goddess



The Fertile Goddess at *The Dinner Party* by Judy Chicago

During the Feminist Movement of the 1970s, feminist artists and scholars, including Judy Chicago, began to understand ancient representations of the female form as symbols of women's power and prestige in history. In her monumental installation *The Dinner Party* (1979), Chicago presents a ceremonial banquet for carefully chosen guests, including the Fertile Goddess. Arranged on a triangular table measuring forty-eight feet on each side are a total of thirty-nine place settings. The "guests of honor" are designated by means of intricately embroidered runners, each executed in a historically specific manner; upon these are placed, for each setting, a gold chalice and utensils, and a china-painted porcelain plate rendered in a style appropriate to the individual woman being honored. The Fertile Goddess's place setting includes female figurines that Judy Chicago modeled after ancient ones. Her figurines draw inspiration from the earliest known female forms of the Paleolithic Period, such as the famous *Venus of Willendorf*, from about 25,000 B.C.E.

Above: Judy Chicago (American, b. 1939). *The Dinner Party* (Fertile Goddess place setting), 1974–79. Mixed media: ceramic, porcelain, textile. Brooklyn Museum, Gift of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Foundation, 2002.10. © Judy Chicago. Photograph by Jook Leung Photography

Description of Six Figurines

Crafted from clay or carved from stone, these six small female figurines have breasts, bellies, buttocks, and thighs that are emphasized or portrayed schematically. Carved or painted lines and patterns suggest tattoos or body paint, scarification, clothing or jewelry. Most of these figurines must be supported to stand in upright positions, and they are small enough to be carried.

Background Information

Found throughout the ancient world, nude female figurines like these vary in form and style, yet most share the common characteristics noted above. These figurines are often referred to as idols or goddesses, although there is a debate over the use of these terms since little is known about the objects' function and meaning. Most of what archaeologists know about female figurines is based on "archaeological context." Modern excavations carefully record exactly where any object is found along with associated objects and features, even microscopic plant and animal remains. Such records were not always kept for excavations in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, and not all figurines were excavated by archaeologists.

Excavated figurines have been found in tombs or graves, houses, settlements, garbage heaps, and what seem to be shrines or temples. Sometimes the same type of figurine has been found in more than one context, suggesting it was used both by the living and for the dead, perhaps for more than one purpose. Some of the functions suggested for these figurines are goddess, ritual object, votive offering, vehicle for working magic or fulfilling wishes, talisman for protection, teaching or initiation device, or embodiment of a cultural ideal of the female form.

Questions for Viewing

Look Closely

Investigate each of the six objects, one at a time.

Does the object appear to represent a human or an animal? What specific features do you see? What added features would help you to be certain?

What material does it appear to be made from? Does it look old or new? What do you see to support your ideas?

Compare and Contrast

Look at two objects side by side.

What similarities can you find in form, style, and surface texture? What differences do you notice?

Interpret

Observe the objects to determine what inferences can be made from them.

Who might have made them? Who might have owned them? What might be their purpose? What can't you tell by looking? What more would you like to know?

Incorporate Background Information

Read the Background Information in this packet.

Does this information reinforce or change your ideas about what you see?

Read "The Fertile Goddess at *The Dinner Party* by Judy Chicago" section in this packet.

Can you identify which of the six objects was made in 1977? Use the captions to identify Chicago's figurine. What elements does she borrow from ancient figurines? Are there any differences?

Investigate Big Ideas

Why do you think these figures are depicted nude? Why do you think the body parts have been exaggerated?

How does the theme of fertility relate to these objects? Is fertility connected to or separate from the theme of motherhood?

Classroom Activities

Collaborative Sculptors

Some scholars suggest that female figurines from the Halaf period were created very quickly, probably by a group of people. Once the figurines were made, the clay was set out in the sun to dry. Divide your class into groups of three or more. Place a generous but equal amount of air-dry clay in the center of the group. Create as many small figurines as possible in a fifteen-minute period, using pinch methods. Add an additional challenge by requiring that all finished figurines look different from one another. Discuss why these ancient figurines might have been made this way. Consider what to do with the finished figurines.

Goddesses and Gods

Using Judy Chicago's Fertile Goddess as inspiration, explore ways to create goddess figurines from clay. Consider making figurines of male gods or animals, since these have also been found in many excavations. Female figurines are often found in greater quantities than male figurines and have received more attention and generated more interest than either male or animal figurines.

Mythic Action Figures

Today hand-held figurines are popular in the form of action figures and dolls. Create your own mythic action figure using Play-Doh or Model Magic. Consider different ways to exaggerate or simplify the figure in order to represent its special ability or power. Then draw a comic strip or write a story about your character. How will viewers/readers recognize your character's special power? Make sure to include as many details as possible.

(Self) Representation

These figurines were made before other ways of capturing an image, such as photography or film, were invented. One scholar has speculated that figurines like the *Venus of Willendorf* could have been made by a woman looking down at her own body. Other scholars think they represent what was considered the ideal physical female beauty at the time. Use clay to sculpt your own image, or partner with a classmate to create images of each other. Embellish your sculpture with identifiable features, such as the carved lines and patterns on the ancient figurines, to show hairstyle or accessories such as glasses or clothing. Sculpt or add a favorite object, like a musical instrument or a book that is meaningful to you and tells something about your personality.

E-mail a photograph of your artwork to teen.programs@brooklynmuseum.org, and we will post it to the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art Facebook page. Visit the page at www.facebook.com/pages/Brooklyn-NY/Elizabeth-A-Sackler-Center-for-Feminist-Art/8843565890.

Resources

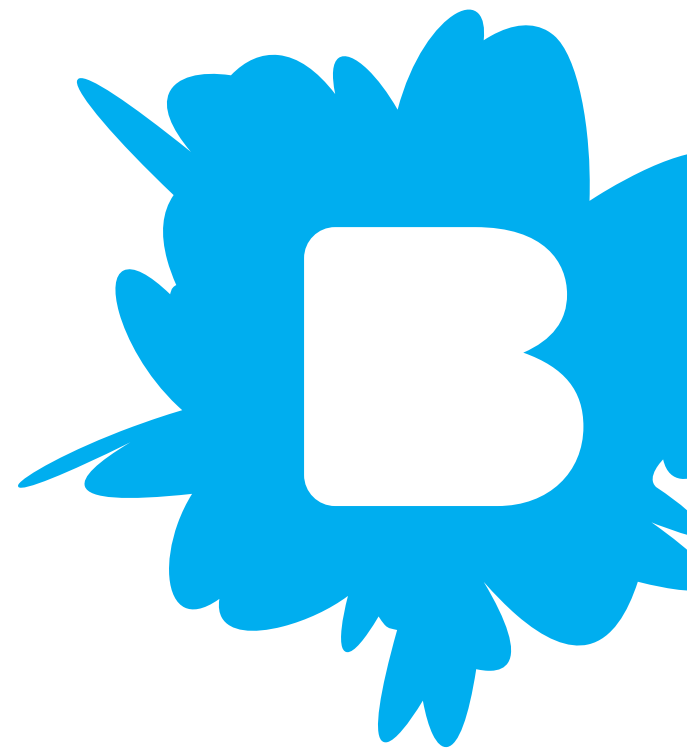
www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/fertile_goddess
Description of *The Fertile Goddess* special exhibition

www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/place_settings/fertile_goddess.php
Images, secondary sources, and Web site links for the Fertile Goddess place setting

www.brooklynmuseum.org/collections/egyptian_classical_middle_eastern/07.447.505.php
Image, description, and audio file for the “Bird Lady” *Female Figurine* from the Brooklyn Museum collection

On front, clockwise from top left:

1. *Female Figurine*. Provenance not known; type known from Northern Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) and Syria. Late Halaf Period, late fifth millennium B.C.E. Clay, pigment, $4\frac{1}{8} \times 1\frac{1}{8} \times 1\frac{1}{8}$ in. (10.4 x 4.7 x 4.2 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Hagop Kevorkian Fund and, Designated Purchase Fund, 1990.14
2. Judy Chicago (American b. 1939). *Ceramic Goddess #3*, 1977. Glazed ceramic, $10 \times 8\frac{1}{2} \times 3$ in. (25.4 x 21.6 x 7.6 cm). Courtesy of ACA Galleries, NYC, and the artist
3. *Female Figure*. Provenance not known; type known from from Nubia (modern Sudan). Predynastic Period, Naqada II–Naqada III, circa 3500–3100 B.C.E. Terracotta, pigment, $5\frac{1}{2} \times 1\frac{7}{8} \times 1\frac{1}{8}$ in. (14 x 3.7 x 4 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Bequest of Mrs. Carl L. Selden in honor of Bernard. V. Bothmer, 1996.146.1
4. *Figurine*. Provenance not known; “Kusura” type known from Anatolia (modern Turkey). Early Bronze Age, third millennium B.C.E. Marble, $6\frac{3}{8} \times 4\frac{3}{8} \times \frac{1}{4}$ in. (17.4 x 10.6 x 0.6 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Bequest of Mrs. Carl L. Selden, 1996.146.5
5. *Female Figurine*. Provenance not known; type known from Cyprus. Late Bronze Age, Late Cypriot II, circa 1450–1200 B.C.E. Terracotta, pigment, $3\frac{3}{8} \times 2\frac{3}{8} \times 2\frac{1}{8}$ in. (9.1 x 5.5 x 5.3 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Mrs. Fred Betts, 22.12.
6. *Female Figurine*. Provenance not known; type known from northern Iran. First millennium B.C.E. Red-brown burnished terracotta, $9 \times 3\frac{1}{2} \times 2\frac{3}{8}$ in. (22.9 x 8.9 x 6 cm). Anonymous loan, L77.8



Brooklyn Museum

200 Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn, NY 11238-6052
www.brooklynmuseum.org