



An Introduction to the Jasper Project's The Supper Table

Like seeds, ideas are planted on the wind. They ride the currents of questions, concerns, and eventual solutions before, if conditions are agreeable, they ultimately deliver themselves stronger, confident, full of potential and purpose, ready to be planted and grow. This was the way of the Supper Table.

The idea for the Supper Table came to me more than a decade ago when, after teaching courses in women's and gender studies while at the same time eking out a career in freelance writing, I shifted the focus of my writing from women's and children's health to arts and culture. As both a later participant in and a student of the second wave of the US women's movement, Judy Chicago's iconic 1979 feminist art project, *The Dinner Party*, had come to me in an avalanche of answers to the interrogative call-to-arms for late twentieth century historians of marginalized peoples -- *What were the women doing?* It was both enthralling and disheartening to learn for the first time the names of some of the women who sat at Chicago's epic table. Not just Virginia Woolf, Susan B. Anthony, and Georgia O'Keeffe, who most of us know, but Christine de Pizan, Hildegard of Bingen, Boudica, and 33 more women with inspiring stories every woman and girl should have in their intellectual arsenals.

As a native South Carolinian, my consciousness of my foremothers was raised in the 1980s when, thanks to the scholarship of groundbreaking historians like Catherine Clinton, Jaqueline Jones, and Anne Firor Scott, it became obvious to me that the women clinging to the branches of my own family tree, and those of most people I knew, were not the Southern belles that Hollywood, popular literature, and the *Daughters of the Confederacy* would have us believe. The women who built South Carolina, as well as the women who made it better, were women with dirt under their fingernails. They were scrappy, determined, often indignant, and knew few privileges, much less romantic fairytale notions of beaux, parties, or magnolias in the moonlight. The women who built South Carolina, and especially the women who made it better, came to their missions from places of need, anger, and sometimes desperation. They were visionaries, problem solvers, fixers. They were

women who couldn't sleep at night because of what they knew had to be done. And they deserved their place at a metaphorical table of their own.

The idea of using Chicago's model of setting places at a symbolic table to celebrate some of the most admirable of South Carolina's women presented itself almost fully formed from the confluence of my personal experiences with art and women's history and the desire to tell the often untold stories of women who would be heroes if their stories were better known. The seed for the Supper Table found a place to grow in the Jasper Project, a collaborative arts engineering non-profit organization that had grown from the multi-arts publication, *Jasper Magazine*, founded in 2011.

But forty years had passed since the Dinner Party was unveiled. While, as women, we still contend with far too many of the same issues Chicago and her contemporaries did, the evidence of revolution is all around us in the way we communicate, share knowledge, see art, see each other, and enjoy the products of women artists. While the Dinner Party was, for the most part, a solo-artist endeavor created to rattle the chains a patriarchal arts culture held over women artists, South Carolina women artists today enjoy a supportive community and a sisterhood that makes them strong and visible. Granted, there is little to be shared among South Carolina artists when it comes to structural and financial support of the arts, and in a state as traditional as South Carolina, women still bear the added brunt of institutions that impede their full embrace of a career in the arts. Still, despite these obstacles, the culture of women artists in South Carolina is thriving. Given the current climate, the application of Chicago's model to a project celebrating South Carolina women's history perfectly presented itself – women should honor the women.

And so it was that, after much deliberation and a consultation with Dr. Marjorie Spruill, professor emeritus at the University of South Carolina and renowned women's history scholar, a baker's dozen of women were selected from a staggering roster of agitators and homemakers, church ladies and iconoclasts, all of whom had stories deserving to be told. (The Supper Table's baker's dozen is brought to us courtesy of the Grimke sisters, Sarah and Angelina, Charlestonian abolitionists whose devotion to social justice was as strong as their commitment to one another, and so the sisters share a place at the table. I don't think they would have it any other way.)

One of the strengths of the Jasper Project is our ability to bring artists from different disciplines together to use their unique tools and talents to process and preserve specific moments in South Carolina's cultural history. The Supper Table provided a perfect opportunity for women artists, much like the women boundary-pushers they were honoring, to celebrate the gifts our honored women gave us.

To that end, twelve of South Carolina's most exceptional women in each of the fields of visual, literary, film, and theatrical arts were invited to participate, each providing her own perspective of the honored women's contributions. Some of the artists reached across disciplinary lines to consult or work together on their subjects. Others worked independently. All gave us heartfelt, sometimes paradigm-shifting tributes to women from history who, after living with them via hours of research and the soul-thrashing labor of creating art, became dear to the artists. All of them gave pieces of themselves to the Supper Table, and it is as much a memorial to these more than 50 women artists as it is to the honored women seated metaphorically at the table.

Women have always found a way to create art, whether they called it art or not.

In the absence of tools and supplies women have captured canvasses wherever they could find them. From prehistoric cave-painters (it is estimated that as many as seventy-five percent of whom were women) to Helena of Egypt, Herrad of Landsberg, and the quilters of Gee's Bend, women have a knack for finding avenues for expression of their creativity even in the harshest of circumstances. Cultural anthropologists tell us that, even in Neolithic times, women were the principal artists creating not just utilitarian art objects such as textiles, baskets, and pottery, but also jewelry and other bodily adornments.

In one of my favorite books, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Alice Walker writes about the flowers her mother always planted to bring beauty to their humble country homes. And from Walker's stories I developed an intense desire to identify the places the women from my own family claimed to express their unique needs to rearrange the world into something more beautiful than the way it was when they found it. The way they planted their gardens with chrysanthemums interspersed between bean plants to keep bugs at bay. The way they arranged their pantries with all the colors of the earth on the shelves in jars of peaches, pickles, and tomatoes, kept precious until they would ultimately nourish a family. The way favorite articles of clothing appeared repurposed as coils in braided rugs and chair cushions. Women, especially poor women, have always known the importance of bringing beauty into not-always-beautiful situations.

Later in this collection, SC poet laureate Marjory Wentworth writes, for example, about the Black Pulitzer Prize nominated playwright, novelist, and actor, Alice Childress, who used the combination of her skilled way-with-words and the unique perspective of a Southern woman living in Harlem to reveal the intense adversities of life in a white world. In her young adult novel, *A Hero Ain't Nothin But a Sandwich*," Childress writes, "One day I almost said it . . . after goin over the words in my mind, 'Benjie, the greatest thing in the world is to love someone and they love you too.' But when I opened my mouth, I said, 'Benjie, brush the crumbs off your jacket.'" While Childress wrote primarily about race relations and the gross unfairness she witnessed daily, she still found beauty in her stories of love and relationships.

Similarly, women have always known the importance of restoring dignity to otherwise undignified environments. This was likely the impetus for the groundbreaking work at which so many of the honored guests at the Supper Table labored.

In Qiana Whitted's essay on Septima Poinsette Clark, for example, we learn not only about Clark's dedication to literacy for her Black sisters and brothers, but that the educator and civil rights activist took great pains to teach her students the expressive flow of cursive writing, not only because it was beautiful but because being able to provide a signature was a requirement for registering to vote. Art can be utilitarian, and it is always purposeful.

In her melodic essay on health care activist Dr. Matilda Arabella Evans, Candace Wiley writes that, among the many institutional advances Evans deserves credit for, her founding of a school for nurses in Columbia, SC allowed Evans' "tribe" of young health care professionals to live "their parents' most untamable dreams. Through nursing, these women would find a path away from farm

and domestic work and toward financial independence. Through nursing, they'd have a hand in saving Black Columbia." Is there a greater dignity than bettering oneself and one's community at the same time?

As much as we have traditionally been encouraged to dichotomize women into convenient categories of good women (those who know their place) versus bad women (those who don't), the women at the Supper Table, like the women who honor them with their art, defy classification. While some women worked through the church, others fought their way through the academy, making paths by walking them and leaving trail-markers for others to follow.

Women like Julia Peterkin and Alice Childress wielded their pens in their personal crusades to respectively preserve the nuance of Gullah culture and illuminate the intricacies of the places in the middle where black and white cultures overlap.

For entertainer Eartha Kitt, who was born in the small town of North, near St. Matthews, SC, her favorite audiences were the members of society she identified with most, the disenfranchised, the people foolish and courageous enough to look at the world and see how it could be better, and eventually the LGBTQ community. "We're all rejected people, we know what it is to be refused, we know what it is to be oppressed, depressed, and then, accused, and I am very much cognizant of that feeling," she famously said. "Nothing in the world is more painful than rejection. I am a rejected, oppressed person, and so I understand them, as best as I can, even though I am a heterosexual."

Women like Sarah Leverette, who—only left us in 2018 having witnessed more than a single century that placed women in every position from flapper to happy homemaker to *bra-burner* (no bras were burned at the 1968 Miss America protest in Atlantic City, by the way) to pussyhat-sporting president protester—challenged every institution that tried to control her. Essayist Carla Damron writes of Leverette, "Sarah chose an unlikely path for herself. Born in 1919—the year Congress voted to allow women the right to vote—she never considered the traditional roles of women." Damron continues, "Not only did Sarah finish college like all the Leverette children, she was one of three women to pass through the door at the USC School of Law in 1940. These female students were not a welcome sight; nationwide, only about three percent of law school admissions were women. The law school dean made it clear to everyone that women were not wanted there. 'Are you still here?' he'd asked when seeing Sarah in the hallway. Yes, she was. And she remained there. Not only was she the only woman in her class to finish, she surpassed most of her male counterparts to graduate magna cum laude." Visual artist Olga Yuhno brings Leverette's message home in her place-setting which depicts a tiny porcelain fist (ironically, Sarah was just shy of five feet tall) bursting through the sea of glass she shattered throughout her lifetime.

In defying categorization, actively or not, the women honored at the Supper Table embraced the complicated lives they lived. Modjeska Monteith Simkins, who never planned to marry but fell victim to Cupid's arrow when it was directed at her and future husband Andrew Simkins, was forced to leave her position as a sixth grade teacher of algebra at Booker T. Washington School in 1929 when she married, as married women were not allowed to teach. Candace Wiley writes, "It probably only took two days of marriage for Andrew to notice that the day-drenched shirts he tossed in the

dirty clothes basket were still there and that there was never a new set of clothes pressed and waiting for him in the mornings. He might've glanced at Modjeska, who would have caught the look and said, 'Whoever was taking care of your laundry last week, let them keep on.' She would boast for decades, 'I've never ironed not even one of his dress shirts!'"

Meeghan Kane writes of Julia Peterkin, "Reading Julia's work, her stories, novels, essays, letters, and interviews today, she was nothing if not a contradiction. She dined with Communists and attended parties with activists like NAACP field investigator Walter White, an African American (about which her South Carolina friends gossiped endlessly), but she lived her entire life benefitting from the exploitation of black labor in near feudal conditions."

The heart-breaking truth of South Carolina's racial history provides the backdrop for all of the women at the Supper Table, as it does for all of us today. There is no sugar-coating this cringe-worthy reality and, sadly, we still live today in the horrible amalgamation of pain, prejudice, disquietude, and economic and opportunity disparity that history bestowed upon our state and the South at large. In her essay on Eliza Lucas Pinckney, a Colonial plantation daughter who experimented with and ultimately developed indigo into a critical cash crop, Eva Moore writes honestly that Pinckney could not have achieved the level of success she did without not only the labor of enslaved individuals but also the information they shared with the young botanist. Pinckney was charged with maintaining three coastal plantations when she was only 16 years old and had no more say in the economic institution in place during her lifetime than we do in the system of capitalism we practice now. Did she experience guilt or unease as she took authority over the lives of the women, men, and children who suffered on her South Carolina plantations? Moore points out that we have no indication she did. However, the first American abolitionists did not begin their campaign until 1780 in Pennsylvania when Pinckney was 58 years old and widowed for 22 years. Had she had the example before her of her neighbors in place, if not in time, the Charlestonian abolitionists, Sarah and Angelina Grimke, who were born in 1792 and 1805 respectively, we can only hope she might have made the brave move of renouncing the inhumanity of slavery, but there is no reason to suspect she would have other than to allay our own qualms and compunctions. Over 200 years after her death, Pinckney was the first woman inducted into the South Carolina Business Hall of Fame, and for that reason and more, we honor her and recognize that we are all products of the time and place in which we live.

In 2019, and for many of the people reading this text, it is tempting to minimize the obstacles the women seated at the Supper Table contended with as they fought and schemed for a better world, and even more tempting to overlook how recently these battles took place. Battles for freedom of expression, yes, but also battles for the freedom to exist in one's authentic form and the seemingly simple freedom to breathe deeply of what the world has to offer. But the reality is that the battles lull and rouse but they never go away and it's possible they never will. This is why we not only fight for what is right, but we also fight for equality with the most peaceful and precious tools we have at our disposal—our words and images and the finest and most priceless expressions of our souls.

As visual artist Heidi Darr-Hope quotes within her place-setting honoring the Grimke sisters, "The ground upon which you stand is holy ground; never, never surrender it. These are causes worth dying for." Make no mistake. This project, the Supper Table, is both a gift of beauty and history to

the culture of South Carolina as well as a battle cry that, as we have known well since our state's founding in 1670, women will not stay silenced and we will use whatever our hands can reach to make better this place where we make our homes.

Cindi Boiter