



## Louise Bourgeois - About the Artist

Louise Bourgeois was born on 25 December 1911 in Paris, France.

After graduating from the Sorbonne in 1935, where she concentrated on math and philosophy, Bourgeois studied at art schools such as the École du Louvre, Atelier Bissière, and the École des Beaux-Arts. Three years later she enrolled in classes taught by the Modernist artist Fernand Léger, who was so impressed by her talent that he allowed her to attend without paying tuition. With a desire for first-hand experience, Bourgeois frequented the studios of Paris, learning techniques from the artists and assisting with exhibitions that toured throughout Europe. Although Léger made it clear to her that she should be a sculptor, it was not until 1941 that she had begun to create sculptures in wood.

When Bourgeois was 26, she met Robert Goldwater, a 32-year-old art history teacher from the United States. They married and, two years later in 1938, moved to New York. Bourgeois immediately enrolled in the Art Students League and spent her days in the public library reading up on art. She participated in exhibitions such as *The Arts in Therapy* (1943), which promoted art as rehabilitation for those wounded in the war. Her first solo show, *Paintings by Louise*

*Bourgeois*, took place in 1945 at the Bertha Schaefer Gallery in New York.

Bourgeois's work from 1949 to 1953 consisted of wood sculptures, often driftwood or junkyard scraps, which she carved and cut into thin, rigid, upright "figures." The wood was painted to conceal its grain and texture, then driven with nails and gouged out, leaving holes, nicks, and scratches. Viewed on their own, these figures expressed isolation, each one representing a personality, raw and exposed. Seen together, they created a social circle that represented interaction and conveyed the security of a geometric system - closed, definite, and eternal - that, to Bourgeois, represented emotional preservation. In 1949 she had her first sculpture show at Peridot Gallery, *Louise Bourgeois, Recent Work 1947-1949: Seventeen Standing Figures in Wood*. In 1951 the Museum of Modern Art acquired her work *Sleeping Figure* (1950).

In 1954 Bourgeois joined the American Abstract Artists Group with several contemporaries, among them Barnett Newman and Ad Reinhardt. At this time she also befriended the artists Willem De Kooning, Mark Rothko, and Jackson Pollock. Artistically, Bourgeois was exploring such issues as internal distress, fear, vulnerability,





and loss of control. Working with bronze, plaster, and marble, she changed her forms from rigid, upright structures to smooth, organic shapes. She exhibited at the Whitney Biennale in 1973 and began teaching at the Pratt Institute, Cooper Union, and the New York Studio School.

Although she remained very active on the New York art scene, fame came late to her, at the end of the seventies, when she was almost seventy. In 1982 the Museum of Modern Art in New York organized a major retrospective exhibition entitled *Louise Bourgeois: Retrospective*. In experimenting with performance art, she produced *A Bouquet, A Fashion of Body Parts* (1978), whose cast paraded through a room wearing latex dresses with globular protrusions. In 1991 at the Carnegie International Exhibition in Pittsburgh, Bourgeois exhibited her "environmental sculpture" *Cells*, a series of closed, object-filled spaces.

During the last two decades, Louise Bourgeois has had numerous solo exhibitions in some of the most established art institutions in the world. Between 1989 and 1991, a retrospective exhibition organized by the Frankfurter Kunstverein traveled to Munich, Lyon, Barcelona, Bern and Otterlo. In 1993, Bourgeois was selected to represent

the United States in the Venice Biennale. An expanded version of the latter exhibition entitled *The Locus of Memory* traveled to various locations in Europe and North America, including the Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montréal. In Canada, the Art Gallery of York University organized an exhibition of her work in 1988 entitled *Recent Sculpture by Louise Bourgeois*. The Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation has displayed Bourgeois' work on three different occasions in 1989, 1991 and 1992.

Bourgeois' work is included in the collections of numerous major art institutions: Australian National Gallery, Canberra; British Museum, London, England; Guggenheim Museum, New York; Hirshhorn Museum, Washington, DC; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Musée d'art Contemporain de Montreal; Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris; Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; Tate Gallery, London; Uffizi Museum, Florence; Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation, Toronto; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.





At 93 years of age, Louise Bourgeois is considered to be one of the most significant artists of our time. At this late stage in her career, when many artists would be slowing down, Bourgeois appears to be making some of her most ambitious work to date. In a general sense her subject has always been “the pain of the human condition, understood through experiences that are both personal and universal.”<sup>i</sup> The artist has been making art for a long time and it is difficult to adequately categorize her practice. Her highly personal sculptural language has often been discussed in relation to artists such as Duchamp, Léger, Brancusi, Giacometti and movements such as Art brut, inform, Baroque, Surrealism, Minimalism, Abstract Expressionism, Feminism and Existentialism.<sup>ii</sup> Her work is often described as autobiographical and is said to provide a therapeutic way for the artist to work through the fears and resentments she has carried with her since childhood. While not always evident, her sculptures are portraits, or perhaps put more succinctly, portraits of Bourgeois’ relationship to others.<sup>iii</sup>

In recent decades, Bourgeois’ sculptural work has explored many new directions and received great attention. One of the more contemporary strands of investigation includes prints, drawings, installations and sculptures devoted to the representation of

spiders. In one instance, a sculpture of a spider hovers on the wall, in another, a drawing, Bourgeois portrays a big spider looming over a room occupied by a person and a smaller spider. *Maman*, one of the works in this genre and by now an icon of contemporary art, is a monumental and terrifying freestanding sculpture.<sup>iv</sup> Eight towering legs that impinge directly on the viewer’s space support the arachnid’s spiraling body and cage-like sac holding 26 pure white marble eggs.

According to Bourgeois, the spider, as both protector and predator, is emblematic of her mother, Joséphine Bourgeois. In “Ode to my Mother,” the artist has written about Joséphine as a protective force within family life,

*The friend (the spider – why the spider?) because my best friend was my mother and she was deliberate, clever, patient, soothing, reasonable, dainty, subtle, indispensable, neat, and as useful as a spider. She could also defend herself, and me, by refusing to answer “stupid,” inquisitive, embarrassing, personal questions.<sup>v</sup>*





However, as the text continues the mother transforms into an untrustworthy figure,

Little Maman, tell me who's  
lying / I'm getting tired of  
conjuring tricks. Who's lying? /  
Don't slip on the sliding scale /  
Of the apparatus, the rings, the  
swing and / This giant stride.  
Who's lying?<sup>vi</sup>

This 'about face' might be a consequence of a childhood betrayal the artist suffered at the hands of her mother and her father, Louis Bourgeois. When the artist was a child, her parents hired a tutor named Sadie who lived with the family for 10 years. During that time, Sadie became Louis' mistress. Of the tutor, the artist has remarked:

Sadie was engaged to teach me English ... Now you will ask me: How is it that in a middle-class family this mistress was a standard piece of furniture? Well the reason is my mother **tolerated** it! And this is the mystery. I was betrayed by my father, dammit, but her too. It was a double betrayal. I'm sorry to get so excited, but I still, I still react to it.<sup>vii</sup>

The spider as mother metaphor is further heightened with the knowledge that Joséphine was a tapestry restorer by profession: both animal and human work with thread, but to very different ends.

The term sculpture is hardly adequate for *Maman* as it oscillates between the defining categories of sculpture and architecture. In a recent article devoted to *Spider* (1997), a precursor to *Maman*, critic Mieke Bal discusses the work in relation to domestic architecture and the body:

...they [spiders] invoke home. Which is where memories of spiders belong, and where little children spin their dreams out of spiders and their webs. Webs that catch and enfold whatever comes their way. Moreover, the legs of spiders, blown up to Bourgeoisian scale, are sturdy columns, supporting the weight of the body and its descendants. Through sheer aggrandizement, they become a skeleton of the house. Thus, they...endeavour to build a sense of habitat. Having become architectural in size, they become architectural in





essence: the body is a building. Size alone can do that. Or can it? The building is a body; here, memory comes in spinning the stories that allow the spider to grow big enough to be a building.<sup>viii</sup>

A spectator can wander in, around and beyond *Maman's* long and highly arched needle-like legs. At times, *Maman* is all around the viewer. Within the hugeness of *Maman*, the spectator becomes child-sized. Occupying this space has obvious psychic resonance. *Maman* defines a domestic social space where the more memorable and psychically invested childhood family scenarios occur. At the same time the space explicitly evokes entrapment.<sup>ix</sup> Is *Maman* a protector or a predator? In this sense, Bourgeois allows the spectator to experience the emotional life of a child. For children the spider is both fear inducing and an object of curiosity. Still, the horror and fear *Maman* engenders in the role of predator, is complicated by the presence of the eggs, which equally assert her role as a protector. *Maman*, not only recalls our emotional past lives, but also makes concrete the existence of our basic fears and desires in real-time.

---

<sup>ii</sup> Bourgeois is exceptional in that she is a time traveller, both modern and contemporary at once. In curator Stuart Morgan's words, "the very idea of re-aligning Bourgeois with art history seems impertinent. Instead, what is needed in order to provide her a place in the art-historical canon is nothing less than a redefinition of art history itself."

<sup>iii</sup> Christiane Meyer-Thoss, *Louise Bourgeois: Designing for Free Fall*, Ammann Verlag AG: Zurich, 1992, p. 69.

<sup>iv</sup> The sixth version of *Maman* was cast at Polich Foundry, subcontracted by Modern Art Foundry (inscription inside of leg #6 reads: LB 6/6 Polich Art Works/Modern Art Foundry 2003). The eggs are made of white Carrara marble that comes from Bourgeois's stonemason in Carrara, Italy.

<sup>v</sup> Louise Bourgeois, "Ode à ma mère," 1995, in *Louise Bourgeois, Destruction of the Father, Reconstruction of the Father: Writings and Interviews 1923-1997*, eds. Marie-Laure Bernadac and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, The MIT Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1998, p. 326.

<sup>vi</sup> Louise Bourgeois, "Ode à ma mère," 1995, p. 327.

<sup>vii</sup> Louise Bourgeois, "Louise Bourgeois: Album," in *Louise Bourgeois, Destruction of the Father, Reconstruction of the Father: Writings and Interviews 1923-1997*, pp. 283-284.

<sup>viii</sup> Mieke Bal, "Narrative Inside Out: Louise Bourgeois' Spider as Theoretical Object," *Oxford Art Journal*, 22.2, 1999, p. 104.

<sup>ix</sup> Alex Potts discussion of the Cells from 1986-1999, of which *Spider* (1997) is one, has been most useful in terms of understanding the space *Maman* creates. See, "Louise Bourgeois: Sculptural Confrontations," *Oxford Art Journal*, 22.2, 1999, p. 51.

---

<sup>i</sup> Diana Nemiroff in her justification for the acquisition, by the National Gallery of Canada, of the group of four sculptures: *Friendly Evidence* (1949), *Portrait of C.Y.* (1947-49), *Untitled* (1950) and *Untitled* (1950-54).

