Artist Resources – Louise Bourgeois (French-American, 1911-2010)



Bourgeois at the Academie de la Grande Chaumière, Paris, 1937
Photography: Brassaï

Bourgeois at Hauser & Wirth | Bourgoise at Tate Modern | Bourgeois at MoMA | Bourgeois' Easton Foundation

"A work of art doesn't have to be explained. If you do not have any feeling, I cannot explain it to you. If this doesn't touch you, I have failed," commented Bourgeois in a 2001 *Art21* interview in which she discussed her family background and the importance of craftmanship in association with her black granite *Helping Hands* sculpture series on permanent display in Chicago Women's Parks and Gardens in honor of feminist activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Jane Addams.

In 2007, Hauser & Wirth presented a suit of new work by Bourgeois, including a new series of sculpture intertwining rubber, fabric, and bronze, as well as drawings and prints – all exploring the artist's skill in balancing soft and hard aesthetics with themes of loss, love, and optimism. In conjunction with the exhibition, the gallery published a reprint of Bourgeois 2004-06 portfolio, *Nothing to Remember*.

"My works are portraits of a relationship, and the most important one was my mother. Now, how these feelings for her are brought into my interaction with other people, and how these feelings for her feed into my work is both complex and mysterious. I'm still trying to understand the mechanism," Bourgeois reflected in a 2007 interview with *The Guardian* in which she discussed sexism, spiders, and structure.

The Guggenheim's eponymous 2008 retrospective was the most comprehensive survey of Bourgois' career to date. The show, organized in partnership with the Tate Modern and the Centre George Pompidou, filled the entire Guggenheim rotunda and adjacent galleries, tracing 70 years of the artist's prolific and diverse practices in creativity. In conjunction, the Guggenheim's Sackler Center produced an exhibition of archival photographs and Bourgeois' diaries, a habit she kept up for her entire life.

The Tate Modern inaugurated its *Artist Rooms* series in 2016 with a display of Bourgeois' work. Tate director Frances Morris, and Bourgeois' assistant Jerry Gorovy discussed the artist's work in a *Tate Shots* interview, interspersed with footage of Bourgeois in the late 1980s and early 1990s. "The artist has the privilege of being in touch with his or her unconscious. And this is really a gift. It is the definition of sanity, the definition of self-realization," she reflected. In summer 2021, Bourgeois will return to the return to the Tate's gallery.

Bourgeois' lesser-known yet no less prolific printing and book-making practice was on full display in MoMA's 2017 exhibition, which showcased over 300 works highlighting the artist's creative process and was generated primarily from the museum's comprehensive collection and archive.

From 2017 to 2019, SFMOMA displayed a selection of Bourgeois' *Spider* sculptures, which she began crafting in the 1990s to confront childhood trauma.

Sculpture took pride of place in the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami's 2018 survey. Inspired by a work in the museum's permanent collection, *Untitled* (2001), the show explored Bourgeois' interest in textiles and clothing in three dimensions.



Bourgeois, 2009
Photography: Dmitris Yeros



Louise Bourgeois (French-American, 1911-2010)
Spider 1, 1995
Bronze

Private Collection; L2026:85.1

Born and raised in Paris, Louise Bourgeois began studying art after the death of her mother in 1932. Her subsequent career was one of the most prolific of her generation, exploring themes of trauma, family, memory, sexuality, the human body, and feminine identity. **Spider 1** is one of the earliest examples of her iconic spiders, which she first explored in drawing in 1947 and began casting as bronze sculpture in the 1990s. The artist once said: "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.... I shall never tire of representing her."

On view November 11, 2026 – March 8, 2027

Louise Bourgeois (French-American, 1911-2010)
Spider, 2000
Steel and marble

Private Collection; L2025:45.4

Louise Bourgeois was born and raised in Paris, where she began studying art after the death of her mother in 1932. Her subsequent career was one of the most prolific of her generation, exploring themes of trauma, family, memory, sexuality, the human body, and feminine identity. **Spider** represents one of Bourgeois's iconic subjects, which she began exploring in the 1990s through her towering *Maman* series. This smaller arachnid guards a single marble egg, amplifying the heavy weight of motherhood. The artist once explained: "The Spider is an ode to my mother… Like spiders, my mother was very clever. Spiders are friendly presences that eat mosquitoes. We know that mosquitoes spread diseases and are therefore unwanted. So, spiders are helpful and protective, just like my mother."

On view September 10 – December 14, 2025





Louise Bourgeois (French-American, 1911-2010)
Dagger Child, 1947-1949
Painted bronze and stainless steel, Edition 4/6 + 1 AP

Private Collection; L2025:18.1

Louise Bourgeois moved to New York City in 1938 after marrying an American art professor that she met at her Parisian gallery. Struggling with the transition to her new life in the United States, the artist began to create a series of *Personages* as surrogates for her family and friends that she left in France. **Dagger Child** is part of this group of abstract sculptures that vaguely represent human figures. Seventeen of these works were shown at Peridot Gallery in 1949, reflecting Bourgeois's homesickness, desire for family connection, and ongoing struggle with childhood traumas. The artist once said: "Every day you have to abandon your past or accept it, and then, if you cannot accept it, you become a sculptor."

On view April 2 – July 6, 2025

Louise Bourgeois (French-American, 1911-2010)
Untitled, c. 1940
Oil on board

Private Collection; L2023:1.3

Louise Bourgeois is perhaps best known for her large-scale sculptures and installations, but she also engaged with painting and printmaking throughout her career. Bourgeois studied in Paris as a young aspiring artist and opened her own gallery space in 1938. Later that same year, she moved to New York City with her American husband and focused on two-dimensional work at the Art Students League of New York. **Untitled** is an early painting from this stage in the artist's remarkably long and prolific career. The slim, abstract figure is a precursor to Bourgeois' famous *Personages,* her first series of sculptures that would not be developed until 1946 (see *Sleeping Figure II).* As the artist describes: "The look of my figures is abstract, and to the spectator they may not be appear to be figures at all. They are the expression, in abstract terms, of emotions and states of awareness."



Louise Bourgeois
Sleeping Figure II, 1950
Bronze, Edition 3/6 + AP

On display at the JSMA April 13 – July 17, 2022



On view April 12 – July 16, 2023



Louise Bourgeois (French-American, 1911-2010)
Sleeping Figure II, 1950
Bronze, Edition 3/6 + AP

Private Collection; L2021:184.7

Born and raised in Paris, Louise Bourgeois moved to New York City in 1938. Though she often exhibited with the New York Abstract Expressionists, Bourgeois' work was more tied to European Surrealist themes of sexuality, death, and the unconscious. **Sleeping Figure II** and **The Three Graces** belong to the artist's series of *Personages,* a group of over eighty wooden sculptures created between 1945 and 1955. Struggling to adapt to her new life in America, Bourgeois saw these figures as surrogates for the family and friends she left in France. The series was gradually cast in bronze from the balsa wood editions and continues to be exhibited internationally. As the artist describes: "The look of my figures is abstract, and to the spectator they may not appear to be figures at all. They are the expression, in abstract terms, of emotions and states of awareness."

On view April 13 – July 17, 2022

Louise Bourgeois (French-American, 1911-2010)
The Three Graces, 1947
Bronze, painted white, and stainless steel, Edition 1/6 + 1 AP

Private Collection; L2021:184.6

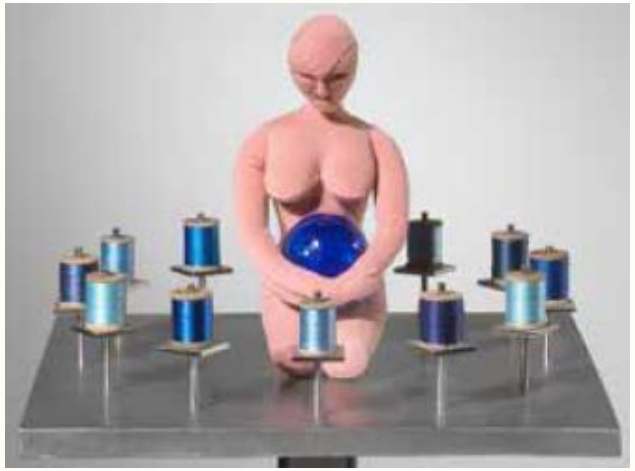
On view April 13 – July 17, 2022





Louise Bourgeois (French-American, 1911-2010)
The Eternal Thread is You, 2003
Fabric, thread, glass, white oak, and stainless steel

Private Collection in Los Angeles; L2020:100.1



Over an eighty-year career influenced by childhood anguish and the upheaval of two world wars, Louise Bourgeoise established herself as one of the most conceptually inventive and materially diverse artists of the twentieth century. Bourgeois acquired her first artistic skills—drawing and sewing—working in her parents' tapestry restoration shop in Paris. After immigrating to the United States in 1938, she embraced painting, multi-media sculpture, and printmaking in striking explorations of trauma, family, and memory, sexuality, the human body, and feminine identity.

The Eternal Thread Is You is a superb example of her multifaceted career, expanding on images of confined domesticity from the 1940s and the fabric sculptures and found-object *Cell* installations begun in the 1990s. The work also speaks to Bourgeois' artistic roots and cherished relationship with her mother, a weaver and seamstress who died when the artist was just twenty-two. Within her wood and glass enclosure, a hand-sewn female figure kneels with a glass sphere cradled to her womb, encircled by twelve spools of thread that represent the hourly positions of a clock, the stagnation and passing of time. Moving through successive shades of blue, the thread further expresses Bourgeois' use of her practice to connect with, reflect on, and transition through her life experiences. As she remarked: "Blue represents peace, meditation, and escape."

On view February 24 – May 30, 2021