



A Free Course on the History of Western Art

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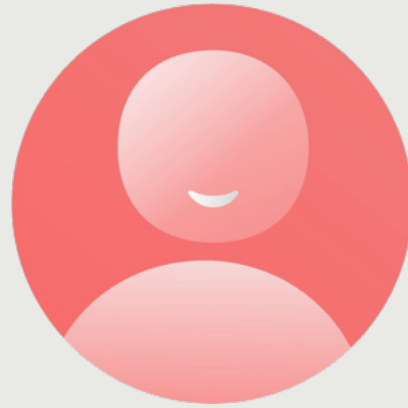


Louise Bourgeois, *Maman*, 1999,
Musée Des Beaux-Arts Du Canada

61-19 LOUISE BOURGEOIS

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- This is Section 61 on recent artists and this talk is on Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010) a French-American artist celebrated for her powerful sculptures and installations exploring themes of memory, trauma, sexuality, and family. Best known for her monumental spider series *Maman* (pronounced “mah-mahn”, French for “mummy”), she drew on childhood anxieties and a troubled relationship with her father to create intensely psychological, deeply personal work.

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Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010)

Femme Maison, 1946-47

Oil and ink on linen

91.4 × 35.6 cm

Private Collection

Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010), *Femme Maison*, 1946-47, Oil and ink on linen, 91.4 × 35.6 cm, Private Collection

BIOGRAPHY:

- Louise Bourgeois was born in Paris on 25 December 1911 to Joséphine Fauriaux and Louis Bourgeois. She grew up in Choisy-le-Roi, where her parents ran a tapestry restoration workshop. From childhood, she helped restore damaged tapestries by drawing missing sections.
- Her father had an affair with her governess that by some accounts she found out about when she was 10. She later described it as a “double betrayal” and the lasting anger and insecurity shows up repeatedly in her work. She said, “it is the anger that makes me work”.
- After obtaining her baccalaureate in philosophy in 1932, she initially studied mathematics at the Sorbonne. Following her mother's death in September 1932, Bourgeois turned to art, studying at the École des Beaux-Arts, École du Louvre, and working in Fernand Léger's atelier.
- In 1938, she married American art historian Robert Goldwater and emigrated to New York. Raising three sons whilst creating art, Bourgeois underwent psychoanalysis for thirty years, using her work to process childhood trauma, particularly her father's infidelity. Recognition came late—her landmark MoMA retrospective occurred in 1982 when she was 70. She continued creating

groundbreaking work until her death at age 98 in 2010.

- *Femme Maison* exemplifies Bourgeois's early development. Arriving in New York in 1938, she felt profoundly displaced. Speaking broken English, raising three sons alone whilst her husband travelled for work, she experienced domesticity as imprisonment. This painting crystallises that entrapment—a woman literally consumed by architecture, her identity erased by domestic space.
- The series drew on Surrealism, which Bourgeois had encountered in Paris through André Breton's circle. Yet her approach was personal rather than theoretical. She wasn't interested in automatic drawing or collective unconscious—she was excavating her own childhood trauma. The house references her parents' home in Choisy-le-Roi, where her father's infidelity with her English tutor poisoned family life.
- In 1947, New York critics ignored her work. Women artists were marginalised; figurative painting was considered passé. Clement Greenberg's formalist doctrine dominated—flatness, abstraction, masculine gesture. Bourgeois's narrative, psychological, bodily work had no place. She exhibited occasionally but sold nothing. Financial survival depended entirely on Goldwater's academic salary.
- The work's resurrection came thirty years later. Second-wave feminism recognised what 1940s critics missed: a devastating critique of domesticity's violence. Art historian Rosalind Krauss wrote: "Bourgeois mapped the prison-house of gender before feminism had the language to describe it". The woman's raised arms suggest both surrender and supplication—she's architectural caryatid and captive simultaneously.
- This painting from her early New York period depicts a naked woman whose head has been replaced by a house. The architectural structure sits atop her shoulders like a grotesque helmet, windows acting as eyes. Her arms reach upward, perhaps in desperation or prayer. The French title translates as 'Housewife' or 'Woman House'—a brilliantly compressed visual pun.
- Bourgeois created this shortly after arriving in America, homesick for France yet trapped in domestic life with three young sons. She later said: 'The *Femme Maison* is a woman whose head is a house. She is blocked, she cannot escape.'

- The work was largely ignored until feminist critics rediscovered it in the 1970s. It appeared on the cover of Lucy Lippard's influential 1976 book 'From the Center', becoming an icon of feminist art. Yet in 1947, Abstract Expressionism dominated New York—Pollock was dripping, de Kooning was gestural. Bourgeois's figurative surrealism seemed old-fashioned, European, and worse, feminine.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

- Femme Maison: fem may-ZOHN
- André Breton: ahn-DRAY bruh-TOHN
- Clement Greenberg: KLEM-ent GREEN-burg

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Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010)

Torso, Self-Portrait, 1963-

64

Plaster

62.3 × 40.5 × 38 cm

Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New
York

Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010), Torso, Self-Portrait, 1963-64, Plaster, 62.3 × 40.5 × 38 cm, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York

- This plaster torso marks a pivotal shift in Bourgeois's practice. Created during her intensive psychoanalysis, the work represents her fragmented psychological state. Unlike traditional self-portraits showing the face, Bourgeois presents a headless, armless, legless torso—vulnerable, exposed, incomplete. The breasts and rounded belly suggest femininity and maternity, yet the absence of identifying features makes it universal.
- Critics initially found her work difficult to categorise. Robert Storr wrote that Bourgeois "made sculpture that was unabashedly corporeal at a time when formalist abstraction ruled". The piece confounded the minimalist aesthetic dominating 1960s New York—it was organic, psychological, deeply personal.
- It can be read in many ways, as a foetus, a vulva, ribs, breasts, belly or a protective armour. It is deliberately multi-symbolic, its power lies in its ambiguity.
- In 1963, Bourgeois was 52, still relatively unknown despite two decades in New York. Her marriage to Robert Goldwater was stable but her relationship with her deceased father remained toxic. She told her analyst: "**The past is a vise—I am caught in it and I cannot move forward or backward**". This torso embodies that paralysis—a body frozen, unable to act.
- The work presages her later latex and fabric pieces. Art historian Mignon Nixon

notes Bourgeois was "**turning psychoanalytic concepts inside out, making the unconscious visible**". Few knew she'd stored this plaster in her basement for decades before casting it in bronze in 1989, when fame finally arrived.

THE WORK:

This plaster torso represents a crucial turning point—the headless, limbless form isn't immediately recognisable as a self-portrait, yet Bourgeois insisted it was. The fragmentation reflects her psychoanalytic exploration of the divided self.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

- Bourgeois: boor-ZHWAH
- Joséphine Fauriaux: zho-zeh-FEEN foh-ree-OH
- Choisy-le-Roi: shwah-ZEE-luh-RWAH

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Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010)

***Janus Fleuri*, 1968**

Bronze with golden patina,
hanging

25.7 × 31.8 × 21.6 cm

Centre Pompidou, Paris

Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010), *Janus Fleuri*, 1968, Bronze with golden patina, hanging, 25.7 × 31.8 × 21.6 cm, Centre Pompidou, Paris

- Janus Fleuri represents Bourgeois's transformation from figurative sculptor to psychological excavator. The 1960s brought profound changes. In 1964, she began working with marble in Pietrasanta, Italy, discovering organic forms through direct carving. Hard stone paradoxically yielded soft, flesh-like shapes. She abandoned the totemic verticality of the Personages for horizontal, biomorphic clusters—tumescient, vulnerable, ambiguous.
- The sculpture's hanging presentation is crucial. Suspended, it rotates slowly, never offering a single viewpoint. Front becomes back, male becomes female, flower becomes phallus. Art critic Donald Kuspit wrote: "Bourgeois makes hermaphroditic sculpture that refuses the violence of gender certainty". The golden patina—unusual for her—suggests precious metal, Byzantine icons, something sacred.
- In 1968, Bourgeois was 57. Robert Goldwater was ill (he'd die in 1973). Political upheaval convulsed America—Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were assassinated that year, riots erupted, Vietnam raged. Yet Bourgeois's work remained resolutely internal, psychological rather than political.
- The title's classical reference is telling. Janus guards thresholds, boundaries, beginnings and endings. Bourgeois was transitioning from sculpture as object

to sculpture as psychological space. Within five years, she'd create *The Destruction of the Father*—her first installation, her first use of latex, her first explicit reckoning with paternal violence.

- *Janus Fleuri* marks a radical transformation. Bourgeois presents an organic, sexually ambiguous form—part flower, part genitalia, part internal organ. The title references the Roman god Janus, who looks simultaneously forward and backward, embodying duality and transition.
- 'Fleuri' means 'in bloom'—the golden patina suggests flowering, ripeness, fertility. Yet the form is deeply unsettling. Multiple phallic protrusions emerge from a central mass, whilst folds and openings suggest female anatomy. Bourgeois called this her **favourite sculpture** and considered it a possible self-portrait, though it shows neither face nor conventional body.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

- Janus Fleuri: JAH-nus fluh-REE
- Pietrasanta: pyeh-trah-SAHN-tah
- Kuspit: KUSS-pit

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Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010)

***Cumul I*, 1969**

White marble

51 × 127 × 122 cm

Centre Pompidou, Paris

Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010), *Cumul I*, 1969, White marble, 51 × 127 × 122 cm, Centre Pompidou, Paris

- *Cumul I* epitomises Bourgeois's 1960s material experiments. Working in Pietrasanta's marble workshops, she developed a tactile, bodily relationship with stone. Unlike male sculptors who drew designs for artisans to execute, Bourgeois carved directly, feeling her way into form. The rounded shapes emerged through touch, accumulating like cells dividing or clouds gathering.
- The title is French—*cumul*, accumulation. Bourgeois remained linguistically split: French for private thoughts, English for public speech. This work speaks French—intimate, bodily, maternal. The clustered spheres suggest breasts swollen with milk, a mother's body pressed against nursing children. Yet they're also tumours, growths, something pathological.
- In 1969, Bourgeois was 58 and still relatively obscure. Major museums owned nothing. Galleries showed her sporadically. Male critics found her work distastefully corporeal. Hilton Kramer wrote: "Mrs Bourgeois makes sculpture that insists on its own neurotic origins"—intended as critique, now read as prescient. She was doing psychoanalysis in three dimensions decades before confessional art became acceptable.
- These horizontal phallic clusters suggest bodies lying down—hooded figures crouching together, sleeping, making love, dying.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

- Cumul: kew-MEWL
- Pietrasanta: pyeh-trah-SAHN-tah
- Hilton Kramer: HIL-tun KRAY-mer

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Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010)

The Destruction of the Father, 1974

Latex, plaster, wood, fabric, red light

238 × 362 × 249 cm

Glenstone Museum, Potomac, Maryland

Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010), *The Destruction of the Father*, 1974, Latex, plaster, wood, fabric, red light, 238 × 362 × 249 cm, Glenstone Museum, Potomac, Maryland

- This is an important work. *The Destruction of the Father* detonated like a bomb in Bourgeois's career. After thirty-five years making relatively modest sculptures, she suddenly creates a **room-sized installation** depicting **cannibalistic revenge**. The work externalises **decades of rage toward her father**, [[Louis Bourgeois, whose affair with her English tutor poisoned her adolescence. She'd been in psychoanalysis since 1952—twenty-two years of excavating this trauma.
- The installation **depicts a fantasy**: the **family rises from the dinner table**, overpowers the boastful patriarch, dismembers him, and consumes him. The bulbous latex forms are simultaneously body parts, food, and faeces—everything enters and exits the body cyclically. Red light suggests blood, menstruation, violence, birth. The cave's interior resembles both womb and tomb.
- Robert Goldwater had died in 1973. Bourgeois, **newly widowed** at 62, erupted into furious productivity. She told critic Stuart Morgan: "**The Destruction of the Father is a very murderous piece, a fantasy of violence against the oppressor**". Critics initially recoiled—Lawrence Alloway called it "pathologically self-indulgent". Yet it pioneered installation art's psychological possibilities.

- The work's materials were revolutionary. Latex was cheap, industrial, flesh-like—the opposite of bronze's heroic permanence. Bourgeois cast body parts from friends, creating uncanny anatomical debris. Nothing was precious, everything was visceral.
- This is Bourgeois's **masterpiece**—a cave-like installation depicting patricidal fantasy. Viewers enter a **womb-like grotto** lined with bulbous latex protrusions. A central table holds dismembered flesh-coloured forms bathed in red light. The scene suggests both dinner table and operating theatre, nursery and abattoir.
- Bourgeois explained the work's violent genesis: '*The Destruction of the Father* relates to a scene at the dinner table. My father would go on and on, showing off, and I got so mad I would have liked to push him down and sit on him and make him shut up.'
- Critics were shocked. Lawrence Alloway wrote: '**This work crosses boundaries of taste and decorum that sculpture should respect.**' The installation used latex—cheap, fleshy, impermanent—rejecting sculpture's traditional permanence. It was unabashedly psychological, violently Oedipal, and disturbingly visceral.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

- Latex: LAY-tek
- Patricidal: pat-rih-SY-dal
- Alloway: AL-oh-way

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Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010)
Femme Couteau, 1982
Collection Ellen Kern, New York

Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010), *Femme Couteau*, 1982, Collection Ellen Kern, New York

- *Femme Couteau*—'Knife Woman'—depicts a reclining female figure whose body has become a blade. Is she weapon or victim? The ambiguity is deliberate. Bourgeois explained: **'Woman has been knife and victim of knife. She is afraid of the knife because she is afraid of being killed. But she is also attracted to it because she would like to have the power of the knife.'**
- Created in 1982, the year of her triumphant MoMA retrospective, this work channels decades of rage into sleek, seductive form. At 71, Bourgeois finally achieved recognition. The retrospective travelled internationally; museums competed to acquire her work. Yet success brought no peace. She told interviewer Christiane Meyer-Thoss: 'The knife is my favourite instrument. It is a very sexual symbol, male and female.'
- Critics praised its formal sophistication. Roberta Smith wrote: **'Bourgeois transforms aggression into elegance without defusing either quality.'** The work bridges her psychological installations and her growing interest in archetypal feminine symbols—spiders, spirals, houses, knives. Each carries double meaning: protection and threat, nurture and violence, mother and weapon.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

- Femme Couteau: fem koo-TOH
- Meyer-Thoss: MY-er TOSS
- Roberta Smith: roh-BER-tah SMITH

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Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010)

Cell (Eyes and Mirrors), 1989-93

Marble, mirrors, metal, glass

236.2 × 218.4 × 210.8 cm

Tate Modern, London

Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010), *Cell (Eyes and Mirrors)*, 1989-93, Marble, mirrors, metal, glass, 236.2 × 218.4 × 210.8 cm, Tate Modern, London

- ***The Cells*** revolutionised installation art. Unlike traditional sculpture viewed from outside, Cells are architectural enclosures containing memories, objects, anxieties. Viewers peer through metal screens at intimate interiors they cannot enter—voyeurs of someone else's psyche. *Cell (Eyes and Mirrors)* contains marble spheres resembling eyeballs, surrounded by mirrors that fragment and multiply vision. You see yourself seeing yourself being seen.
- Bourgeois explained: '**Each Cell deals with fear. Fear is pain. The physical reaction to fear is pain in the shoulders and the back. What moves you is what is frightening, is pain.**' The cell references both prison and biology—punishment and growth, isolation and generation. Metal mesh creates permeable boundaries; you see in but cannot touch.
- By 1989, Bourgeois was 78 and producing her most ambitious work. The Cells drew on decades of psychoanalytic exploration, combining found objects, sculptures, and architectural space. Critic Robert Hughes wrote: 'These Cells are like dreams you can walk around—Freud made solid.' The mirrors create infinite regression; the marble eyes stare eternally. Who watches whom? Viewer becomes viewed, subject becomes object.
- The work sold for £28.5 million in 2019, setting auction records. Museums worldwide acquired Cells, cementing Bourgeois's position as one of the

twentieth century's most important sculptors.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

- Cell: SELL
- Voyeurs: voy-YURZ
- Robert Hughes: ROB-ert HYOOZ

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Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010)

Cell (Choisy), 1990-93

Marble, metal, glass

306.1 × 170.2 × 241.3 cm

Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow

Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010), *Cell (Choisy)*, 1990-93, Marble, metal, glass, 306.1 × 170.2 × 241.3 cm, Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow

- *Cell (Choisy)* recreates Bourgeois's **childhood home**. A marble sculpture of the house in Choisy-le-Roi sits behind chain-link fence, fragile and vulnerable. Above it hangs a **guillotine blade**—metaphor for memory's violence, for the constant threat of loss. The house represents both sanctuary and prison, childhood safety and paternal betrayal.
- Bourgeois carved the house from memory, obsessively detailed. She told curator Paulo Herkenhoff: '**The house is the body. It is the first universe.**' In that house, her father Louis openly conducted his affair with the family's English tutor, Sadie. Young Louise, forced to dine with her father's mistress, experienced betrayal as architectural. Rooms witnessed infidelity; walls absorbed shame.
- The guillotine references French Revolutionary violence but also psychological decapitation and castration—the severing of past from present, child from adult. Memory cuts both ways: it preserves and destroys. At 79, Bourgeois was still processing trauma from sixty years earlier. Psychoanalysis hadn't healed her; it had given her language for wounds that never closed.
- Critics recognised the Cell series as **Bourgeois's greatest achievement**. Jerry Gorovoy, her longtime assistant, noted: 'The Cells allowed Louise to reconstruct

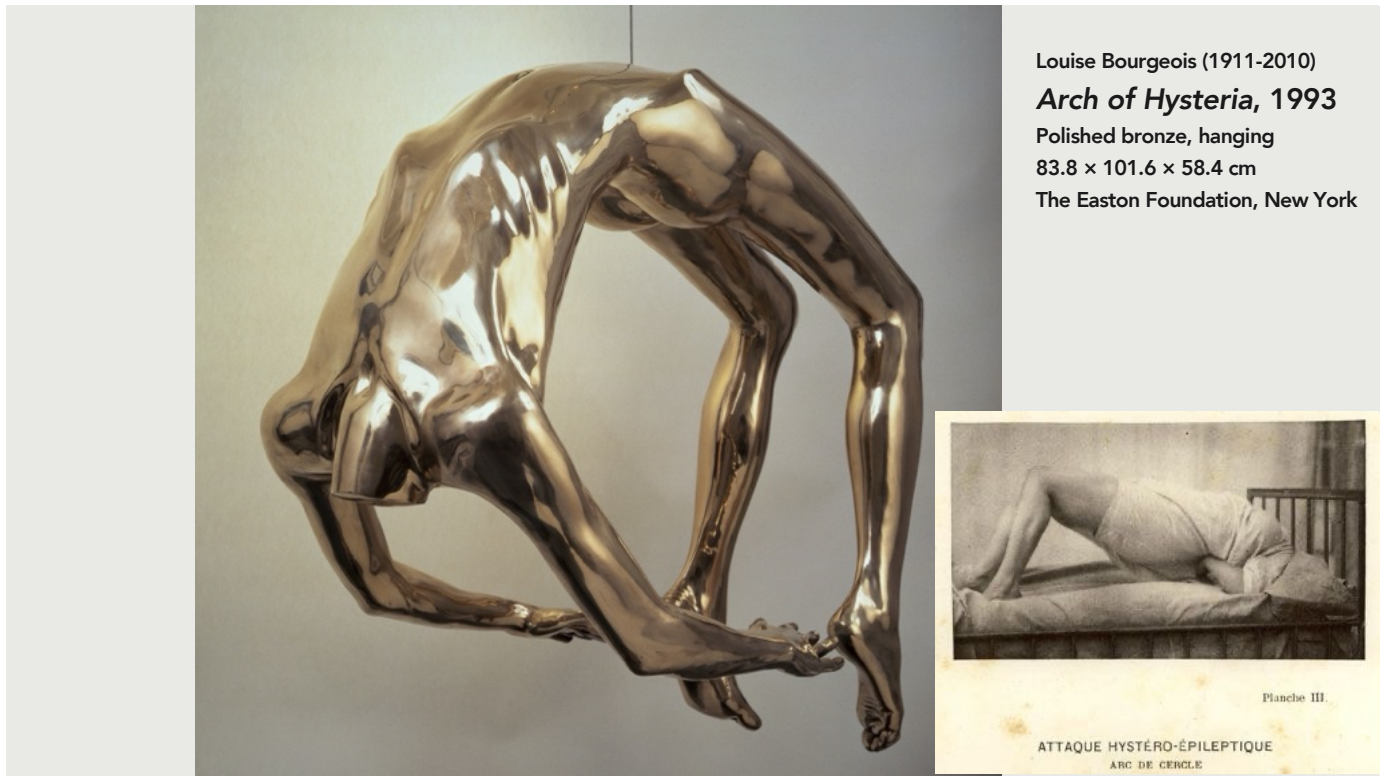
her entire psychological landscape. Each one is a different room in the architecture of her unconscious.'

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

- Choisy: shwah-ZEE
- Guillotine: GIL-uh-teen
- Paulo Herkenhoff: POW-loh HER-ken-hoff

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Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010)
***Arch of Hysteria*, 1993**
 Polished bronze, hanging
 83.8 × 101.6 × 58.4 cm
 The Easton Foundation, New York

Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010), *Arch of Hysteria*, 1993, Polished bronze, hanging, 83.8 × 101.6 × 58.4 cm, The Easton Foundation, New York

- *Arch of Hysteria* references nineteenth-century psychiatric photography. Jean-Martin Charcot, French neurologist, photographed female patients at Salpêtrière Hospital experiencing 'hysterical' seizures—bodies arched impossibly backward in spasms of psychosomatic pain. Victorian medicine pathologised female emotion as disease; women's psychological suffering became medical spectacle.
- Bourgeois subverts Charcot's images. **Her figure is male**—a headless, limbless torso cast from her assistant's body. The polished surface reflects viewers, implicating them in historical voyeurism. Suspended, the body dangles helplessly, frozen mid-convulsion. Without head or hands, identity and agency vanish. Only suffering remains.
- At 82, Bourgeois increasingly explored trauma's physical manifestations. She told interviewer Donald Kuspit: '**Hysteria is not a woman's disease. It is the disease of powerlessness.**' The arch represents pain that cannot speak, trauma that escapes language and inscribes itself on flesh. Bourgeois, who'd spent forty years in psychoanalysis, understood hysteria intimately—not as madness but as legitimate response to intolerable circumstances.
- The work's beauty is disturbing. Polished bronze glamorises agony, aestheticises suffering. Critic Eleanor Heartney wrote: 'Bourgeois forces us to

confront art's complicity in violence. **We're drawn to this tortured body because it's beautiful.**' The sculpture hangs in space, eternally falling, never landing—suspension as metaphor for unresolved trauma.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

- Hysteria: hiss-TEER-ee-ah
- Jean-Martin Charcot: zhon mar-TAN shar-KOH
- Salpêtrière: sal-peh-tree-AIR

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Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010)

Red Room (Parents), 1994

Wood, metal, rubber, fabric, marble, glass, mirror

247.7 × 426.7 × 424.2 cm

Private Collection

Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010), *Red Room (Parents)*, 1994, Wood, metal, rubber, fabric, marble, glass, mirror, 247.7 × 426.7 × 424.2 cm, Private Collection

- *Red Room (Parents)* pairs with *Red Room (Child)* to explore primal scenes from both perspectives. The adult room contains a bed with marble torsos—headless, fragmented bodies entwined. Children's clothing hangs nearby—witness to mysteries beyond comprehension. The outer shell uses antique courthouse doors, suggesting judgment, law, patriarchal authority. Everything bathed in red: blood, violence, sexuality, shame.
- Bourgeois explained: 'The red is the colour of blood, of pain, but also passion. As a child, I could hear my parents making love. I didn't understand what was happening. It was terrifying.' The work recreates childhood confusion witnessing adult sexuality—curiosity mixed with revulsion, fascination with fear. The marble bodies are simultaneously beautiful and monstrous, intimate and alien.
- At 83, Bourgeois created her most sexually explicit work. She'd survived Robert Goldwater by twenty years; her sons were middle-aged. Yet childhood trauma remained vivid. Psychoanalyst Juliet Mitchell wrote: 'Bourgeois demonstrates that childhood sexual trauma doesn't fade—it calcifies, becoming more solid with age.'
- The work's architecture is crucial. Viewers peer through doorways, becoming voyeurs exactly as young Louise was forced to be. The installation reverses power—we violate their privacy as Louise's privacy was violated.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

- Primal scenes: PRY-mul SEENZ
- Juliet Mitchell: JOO-lee-et MITCH-ell
- Calcifies: KAL-sih-fyz

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Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010)

Spider, 1997

Steel, tapestry, wood, glass, fabric, rubber, silver, gold, bone

449.6 × 665.5 × 518.2 cm

The Easton Foundation, New York

Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010), *Spider*, 1997, Steel, tapestry, wood, glass, fabric, rubber, silver, gold, bone, 449.6 × 665.5 × 518.2 cm, The Easton Foundation, New York

- Spider represents **Bourgeois's mother**, Joséphine, a tapestry restorer. **The spider weaves, repairs, protects**—maternal qualities Bourgeois cherished. Yet spiders also trap, paralyse, consume. The sculpture is both tribute and accusation, love letter and indictment. At nearly fifteen feet tall, it dominates space, hovering over a steel cage containing a chair, tapestries, and bones—domestic relics, maternal inheritance, mortal remains.
- Bourgeois explained: '**The Spider is an ode to my mother. She was my best friend. Like a spider, my mother was a weaver.** My family was in the business of tapestry restoration, and my mother was in charge of the workshop. 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.'
- At 86, Bourgeois created monumental work when most artists retire. The spider became her **signature motif**, repeated in various scales and materials. In 2019, one version sold for \$32.1 million at Christie's—a world record for a woman artist at auction. The sale vindicated decades of critical neglect, though Bourgeois, dead nine years, never knew.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

- Joséphine: zho-zeh-FEEN
- Ode: OHD
- Christie's: KRIS-teez

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Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010)

***Maman*, 1999**

Bronze, stainless steel, marble

927 × 892 × 1024 cm

Multiple casts: Tate Modern, Guggenheim Bilbao,
National Gallery of Canada, Crystal Bridges

Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010), *Maman*, 1999, Bronze, stainless steel, marble, 927 × 892 × 1024 cm, Multiple casts: Tate Modern, Guggenheim Bilbao, National Gallery of Canada, Crystal Bridges

- ***Maman***—French for 'Mummy'—is Bourgeois's most famous work. Created for Tate Modern's inaugural Unilever Series in 2000, this colossal spider stands over thirty feet tall. Eight slender legs balance an enormous body carrying a sac with thirty-two marble eggs—one for each year Bourgeois knew her mother before Joséphine's death in 1932. The eggs represent both fertility and fragility, life and loss.
- The sculpture's scale transforms viewers into children gazing up at a maternal colossus. You can walk beneath Maman's body, sheltered by her protective span yet aware of her massive weight overhead. The spider's delicacy—legs like stilts, precarious balance—contradicts her monumentality. She embodies maternal paradox: strength and vulnerability, nurture and threat, protection and abandonment.
- **At 88, Bourgeois achieved global icon status.** Maman installations appeared worldwide—London, Bilbao, Ottawa, Arkansas. The work became instantly recognisable, transcending art world boundaries. Critics praised its emotional directness. Adrian Searle wrote: 'Bourgeois's spider is more affecting than any amount of confessional art. It moves us because it's both gigantic and fragile, both threatening and tender.' The sculpture reconciles contradictions Bourgeois spent ninety-eight years exploring: mother as creator and destroyer, memory as preservation and wound.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

- Maman: ma-MAHN
- Unilever: YOO-nih-lee-ver
- Adrian Searle: AY-dree-an SURL

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Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010)
The Couple, 2003
 Fabric and stainless steel
 304.8 × 165.1 × 152.4 cm
 Private Collection

Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010), *The Couple*, 2003, Fabric and stainless steel, 304.8 × 165.1 × 152.4 cm, Private Collection

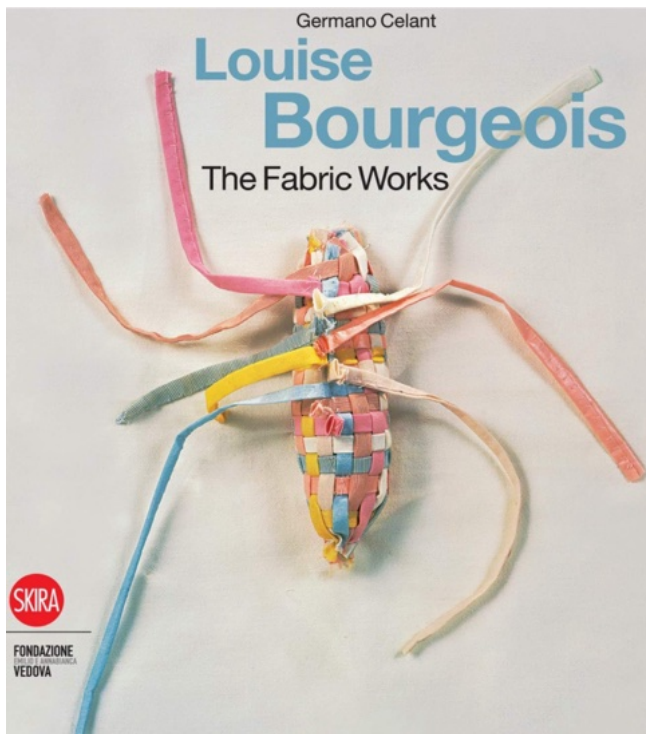
- The Couple depicts two fabric figures hanging from a steel frame, bodies intertwined in embrace. Are they lovers or combatants? The ambiguity is intentional. Bourgeois used old clothes—her own garments, Robert Goldwater's shirts—creating sculpture from intimate debris. The fabric bears traces of bodies: sweat stains, wear patterns, memory embedded in textile.
- This work inaugurated Bourgeois's late fabric period. **At 92, arthritis made bronze casting and marble carving difficult. Fabric offered new possibilities—**lightweight, flexible, emotionally resonant. She sewed figures using tapestry techniques learned in childhood, returning to her mother's craft after seventy years. The Couple references marriage's physical and psychological entanglement—two bodies becoming one whilst retaining separate identities.
- Robert Goldwater had died thirty years earlier, yet Bourgeois continued processing their relationship. She told curator Marie-Laure Bernadac: **'A couple is a strange thing. It's two people who have agreed to disappear into each other.'** The hanging presentation suggests both suspension and execution, intimacy and violence. Without heads, the figures lack individual identity—couple-hood erases personhood.
- The fabric's vulnerability contrasts with earlier bronze permanence. These figures could tear, stain, rot—mortality made visible. Bourgeois, approaching her own death, created work acknowledging impermanence whilst asserting continuity through maternal craft.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

- Garments: GAR-ments
- Marie-Laure Bernadac: ma-REE lore bair-nah-DAK
- Entanglement: en-TANG-gul-ment

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Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010)
The Fabric Works (series), 2006-2008
 Front cover of her book showing one of the works in
 Fabric, thread, and metal
 Dimensions vary
 Multiple collections worldwide

Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010), *The Fabric Works (series), 2006*, Front cover of her book showing one of the works in Fabric, thread, and metal, Dimensions vary, Multiple collections worldwide

- Between ages 95 and 97, Bourgeois produced **hundreds of fabric sculptures**. Using old clothes, bed linens, handkerchiefs, and tapestry scraps, she sewed figures, organs, and abstract forms. These late works possess extraordinary intimacy—stained fabric retains bodily presence, embroidered stitches reveal the artist's trembling hand. Curator Philip Larratt-Smith wrote: 'The fabric works are love letters written in thread to people long dead.'
- The series represents multiple returns: to her mother's profession (tapestry), to feminine craft traditionally dismissed as 'women's work', to childhood memories embedded in textiles. Bourgeois transformed domestic labour into high art, validating skills patriarchal culture had devalued. Each piece bears evidence of making—uneven stitches, knotted threads, visible repairs. Process becomes content; vulnerability becomes strength.
- Many works depict fragmented bodies—breasts, torsos, hands—echoing her early *Torso, Self-Portrait* but rendered in soft materials that sag, wrinkle, decay. Where bronze preserved flesh eternally, fabric acknowledged mortality. At 96, Bourgeois was dying, though she'd live two more years. These works anticipate death without fear, embracing impermanence.
- The fabric pieces achieved immediate critical acclaim. Museums competed to acquire them. Jerry Gorovoy noted: '**Louise worked until the day she died. The fabric allowed her to continue creating when physical strength failed.**'

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

- Larratt-Smith: LAR-at SMITH
- Tapestry: TAP-ess-tree
- Impermanence: im-PUR-mah-nence

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Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010)
***I Do*, 2010**
 Fabric and mixed media
 Dimensions vary
 Multiple locations / Freedom to Marry campaign

Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010), *I Do*, 2010, Fabric and mixed media, Dimensions vary, Multiple locations / Freedom to Marry campaign

- *I Do* was Bourgeois's **final work**, completed **weeks before her death** on 31 May 2010, aged 98. Created for the Freedom to Marry campaign supporting LGBT equality, it depicts two flowers growing from one stem—separate blooms sharing common roots. Bourgeois accompanied the image with a statement: **'Everyone should have the right to marry. To make a commitment to love someone forever is a beautiful thing.'**
- This political gesture from a 98-year-old artist carried enormous weight. Bourgeois had spent seven decades exploring love's complexities—its violence, tenderness, betrayal, loyalty. Her final word was affirmation: love deserves protection, commitment deserves recognition, marriage should be universal. The flowers suggest both fragility and resilience—delicate petals sustained by shared strength.
- The work appeared on posters, postcards, and protests. When **New York legalised same-sex marriage in 2011**, activists carried *I Do* banners. Bourgeois, who'd died the previous year, became posthumous icon for marriage equality. Art historian Jennifer Blessing wrote: **'Bourgeois gave the movement something invaluable—beauty married to conviction, aesthetics fused with ethics.'**
- *I Do* completes her journey from personal trauma to political solidarity, from psychoanalytic excavation to public advocacy. Her last gesture was generous—offering art's affirmation to those still fighting for recognition she'd never

sought.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

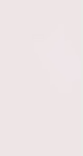
- LGBT: el-jee-bee-TEE
- Jennifer Blessing: JEN-ih-fer BLESS-ing
- Posthumous: POST-yoo-mus

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- Louise Bourgeois turned private pain into unforgettable art, reshaping sculpture with fierce honesty, psychological depth, and raw bodily imagery. Her work opened the door for feminist, autobiographical, and emotionally charged art, and her influence still shapes how artists explore memory, trauma, and the body.
- Thank you for watching this video part of my series on the History of Western Art.



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