

# Louise Bourgeois



Louise Bourgeois was born in Paris in 1911. She studied art at various schools there, including the Ecole du Louvre, Académie des Beaux-Arts, Académie Julian, and Atelier Fernand Léger. In 1938, she emigrated to the United States and continued her studies at the Art Students League in New York. Though she began as an engraver and painter, by the 1940s she had turned to sculptural work, for which she is now recognized as a twentieth-century leader. Greatly influenced by the influx of European Surrealist artists who immigrated to the United States after World War II, Bourgeois's early sculpture was composed of groupings of abstract and organic shapes, often carved from wood. By the 1960s she began to execute her work in rubber, bronze and stone, and the pieces themselves became larger and more referential to what has become the dominant theme of her work — her childhood. The anthropomorphic shapes her pieces take — the female and male bodies are continually referenced and remade — are charged with sexuality and innocence and the interplay between the two. Bourgeois's work is in the collections of most major museums around the world. She lives in New York.

## Before Viewing

Discuss with students: Is it necessary to understand the artist's meaning in a work of art in order to appreciate it? (Bourgeois herself has said, "A work of art doesn't have to be explained. If it doesn't touch you, I have failed.")

## After Viewing

### To Think About and Discuss

- Bourgeois has said, "I am not what I am. I am what I do with my hands." Discuss the meaning of this statement and reflect on why you think hands are such an important element in Bourgeois's work.
- As a student at the Sorbonne, Bourgeois studied mathematics and geometry. How is this knowledge reflected in her work?
- Bourgeois states that it might be true that an artist has "something in them that either refuses or is unable to grow up." What do you think she means by this?
- What is Bourgeois's concern in putting her sculpture outside in a public setting? How does she resolve this issue?
- Develop a list of materials one might use for a sculpture. Compare and contrast the characteristics of each of these materials. Tell which you would select for a self-portrait and why.

## To Do

- Pick a partner and study one another's hands. Create a drawing or three-dimensional artwork of your partner's hands that you think expresses his or her identity.
- The art historian Charlotte Kubik has written, "The universal themes that have long obsessed Bourgeois — anxiety, alienation, love, identity, sex, and death — dovetail with and illuminate the contemporary issues of gender, sexuality, and the right to freedom and individuality." Research and select a work by Bourgeois and discuss it with respect to these themes.
- It is said that much of Bourgeois's work exhibits her childhood conflicts with her father, who was at the same time loving, attentive, demanding and betraying. Based on what you have seen, do you see this conflict reflected in her work? Think about an individual who evokes strong conflicts in your life. Create a work of art expressing that conflict.

## Images on the Web

- *Eyes* at [www.metmuseum.org/collections/view1.asp?dep=21&full=0&item=1986%2E397](http://www.metmuseum.org/collections/view1.asp?dep=21&full=0&item=1986%2E397)
- *The Nest* at [www.sfmoma.org/collections/recent\\_acquisitions/ma\\_coll\\_bourgeois.html](http://www.sfmoma.org/collections/recent_acquisitions/ma_coll_bourgeois.html)
- *St. Sebastienne, second version, State VI* at [www.moma.org/docs/collection/printsbooks/c48.htm](http://www.moma.org/docs/collection/printsbooks/c48.htm)
- *The Blind Leading the Blind* at [www.walkerart.org/resources/res\\_msg\\_mapframe.html](http://www.walkerart.org/resources/res_msg_mapframe.html)



Louise Bourgeois, *Untitled (No. 2)*, 1996. Pink marble on steel base, 26 x 31 x 25 inches. Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York. Photo by Peter Bellamy.