



**Artist at Work with Youth
with DC-based artist Mary Coble**

The Art of Louise Bourgeois

Lesson Packet

Winter 2009

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Smithsonian
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden

From Feb. 26 to May 17, 2009, the Hirshhorn presents a major retrospective of the works of Louise Bourgeois. The exhibition includes more than 120 sculptures, paintings, and drawings made throughout the course of Bourgeois' remarkably prolific 70-year career.

Born in Paris in 1911, Bourgeois first started drawing as a child when she helped her parents, who owned a textile business and repaired tapestries. She studied art formally under Fernand Léger and others before moving to New York City in 1938 with her husband. Once in New York, she continued to study at the Art Students League and was introduced to the vibrant circles of expatriate artists who fled Europe on the eve of World War II. Since her early days in New York, Bourgeois has always been in dialogue with the major avant-garde artistic movements of the 20th century, from surrealism to Conceptual art, and yet she has always retained her own unique aesthetic that is distinctly separate from any particular movement. Though she had her first solo exhibition in 1945 and was included in many important group exhibitions throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Bourgeois was 71 before she had her first major retrospective in 1982. It was the first-ever retrospective given to a woman at The Museum of Modern Art in New York. Since then, she had been awarded many honors for her achievements in the visual arts and has received much-deserved recognition for her role as one of the leading figures in 20th- and 21st-century art and for her influence on several generations of artists.

The Hirshhorn's presentation of "Louise Bourgeois" is the last chance for the public to see the exhibition that began its tour in London in 2007. The show has been expanded to include five more major sculptures, including "Crouching Spider" (2003), which has been "guarding" the Hirshhorn's Independence Avenue entrance since December, and several works from the Hirshhorn's permanent collection. The exhibition encompasses a startling array of images and materials, demonstrating the vastness of Bourgeois' artistic career. Her materials range from the traditional: plaster, bronze, marble and wood, to the untraditional: resin, latex, glass, rubber, electric lights and found objects like toy dolls, old furniture and clothes.

A walk through the Hirshhorn's galleries reveals much about the artist herself—about her memories, dreams and fears. The exhibition begins with early drawings and paintings that are laced with symbolic content and images that recur and evolve in her later work. Among them are the "Femme Maison" paintings (1945–47), in which Bourgeois replaces a woman's head with a house, initiating what has become a career-long investigation of femininity and, more specifically, of motherhood.

The first significant sculptures on view are nearly abstract, totemic standing figures from the late 1940s known as "Personages." For Bourgeois, these figures are representative of the family and the troubled childhood she left behind in France a decade earlier. Though the "Personages" are comparatively simple in execution, Bourgeois continues to use these same personal memories in her later work to develop complex meditations on such universal themes as personal identity, family relationships and the power of art to express deeply felt emotions.

Subsequent galleries house several examples of her "Cell" sculptures, large structured environments of the 1990s that Bourgeois has explained "represent different types of pain: the physical, the emotional and psychological, and the mental and intellectual." Some of these works, like "Red Room (Parents)" (1994), which is surrounded by wooden doors that do not open, only partially reveal their contents to viewers who peer in through restricted apertures, suggesting the impossibility of completely understanding someone else's past. The circular "Cell (Twelve Oval Mirrors)" (1998), on the other hand,

faces only outwards with nothing in the center, inviting viewers to contemplate themselves and to dwell on their own memories.

Another sculpture, "Spider" (1998), features a giant black arachnid straddling a steel cage containing an empty child's chair. The image is mystifying, and at first, disturbing. Nevertheless, there is no need to be afraid, since the artist describes the spider, a reoccurring presence in her work since the 1940s, as a motherly "guardian" and as a "defense against evil." Bourgeois is now best known for her spider sculptures, which exist on all scales, from tiny to monumental, and like the rest of her work, are made from a diverse and thoughtfully chosen array of materials. In "Spider" (2003), also on display in the exhibition, Bourgeois' use of fragments of old tapestries to cover parts of the creature's steel body helps illustrate the positive symbolic value of the spider as mother, since the artist's own mother repaired textiles for a living just as the spider weaves and repairs its web.

These sculptures, along with the rest of exhibition, invite viewers to let their own imaginations run wild, to intuit and invent meanings of their own. In today's world of instantaneous information, this is a rare opportunity to revel in an intriguing domain of mystery, ambiguity, symbols and double meanings.

3. Introduce the Creation of the day and show examples.

This discussion will not only educate students about the work of this particular artist, but will also help relate her process and art to new terms and ideas, which they will, in turn, use to create their own work.

Materials

Cardboard (various sizes)

Pencils, markers

Glue

Tape

Scissors

Various materials such as magazines, fabric, construction paper

Creation

1. Brainstorm a list of characters/images that will be present in your collage. For example, if you have dreamed of being lost in an ocean or of running into a snake. Consider what could visually best express these ideas. Also think about how the fears associated with the dream might be conquered or positively dealt throughout this exploration.



2. Use a piece of cardboard as the base for this 3-D collage. Build outward from the base. The base could be the ocean, so one could draw fish and seaweed on the surface. Dimension could be added by cutting out a cardboard shape of a wave, drawing onto that shape and then gluing it to the base.

3. There are no limits as to how this object is to be created as long as it incorporates both 2-D and 3-D imagery. Encourage the students not only to plan in advance but also to react to the sculpture as it is being created.

Week Two: Family Part One

Overview

Louise Bourgeois's art often centered on the idea of family. In the late 1940s, although she had no training or experience with wood working, she began to construct figures that represented "lost" family members that she left behind in France. Later, she continued her figure making by using a material a little more familiar to her: fabric. Her family owned a textile business. She used nylon, terry cloth, and many other kinds of soft materials to sculpt, sew together, and create bodies.



We will explore our own families by creating figures out of fabric.

Pre-Creation Discussion

1. Discuss Louise Bourgeois's figural sculptures
 - 1.1 *Personages*: figures made out of wood that stood as surrogates for people from her past.
 - 1.2 Bourgeois's background was in painting and so created these with little formal knowledge of woodworking techniques.
 - 1.3 Also used fabric to create bodies and was more familiar with this due to her family being in the tapestry business.
2. Continue with how the students might choose to represent their own families
 - 2.1 Bourgeois's sculptures contained little specific detail, making them unidentifiable to everyone but the artist.
 - 2.2 *How might you create work about specific people without using much detail?*
3. Introduce the Creation of the day and show examples.

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Materials

Stockings or pantyhose (these can be full length or knee highs)
Pillow stuffing (or anything soft to fill the tights with such as fabric)
Yarn or string
Scissors
Glue
Fabric
Plastic needles with large eyes
Buttons

Creation

1. Decide if each family member will be depicted with a separate stuffed stocking or if multiple members be created out of the same one
2. Fill the stocking with pillow stuffing.
3. Use the string to tie certain areas of the stocking to create body parts such as heads, arms etc.
4. Individual "bodies" can also be sewn together to create a central unit of people.
5. Create rough details on the bodies by using the fabric, buttons and other materials.

Week Three: Family Part Two

Overview

Spiders have been a central character in Louise Bourgeois's work since the late 1940s; first appearing in drawings and later created out of materials as varied as fabric, steel, bone, rubber, and wood. These spiders are as tall as thirty feet. The spider, to Bourgeois, represents a repairer, a protector and, most importantly, her mother.



Through the conception and construction of our spiders, the goal will be to reflect the feelings and unique relationships that we have with our own families.

Pre-Creation Discussion

1. Begin by asking questions about spiders and showing images.
 - 1.1. *What do they look like? What makes a spider physically unique?*
 - 1.2. *How do they feel? Has anyone ever touched one?*
 - 1.3. *Where do spiders live? How do they catch food?*
2. Discuss Louise Bourgeois's view on her spider and how they relate to her mother.
 - 2.1 Ask students to consider how Bourgeois could think of a spider as being a protector, repairers or a guardian.
 - 2.2 Ask students to consider how these things could also relate to the spider representing her mother.
3. Continue the discussion with how the students visually represent the "spider" of their family?
 - 3.1 *Who might be the "spider" of your family?*
 - 3.2 *What colors, body shapes, and leg lengths would you use to create your spider?*
4. Introduce the Creation of the day and show examples.

This discussion will not only educate the students about the work of this particular artist, but will also help relate his process and art to new terms and ideas, which they will, in turn, use to create their own work.



Materials

Styrofoam balls or other various shapes
Colored tape
Armature wire (or other lightweight and malleable wire used for large-scale sculptures)
Materials to cover the spider's body with, such as paint, fabric, and paper.

Creation

1. Each person will create their own spider based on a family member or a representation of multiple family members. Begin by choosing foam shapes for the body of the spider.
2. Create eight legs by bending the armature wire and sticking them into the foam body of the spider. Use the colored tape to secure the legs to the wire.
3. Cover the foam body and the wire with materials of your choosing. (This can be done with the legs removed if it is easier to do so).