



Louise Bourgeois

FOR YOUR CLASSROOM

CLASSROOM CONNECTION

1. Think of a person that you care about. What animal would best represent that person? Why?

2. Artists often use anthropomorphic techniques to express their ideas. Give each student a rock and ask them to write a “character study” of their rock. Ask: What is your rock’s name? Describe your rock’s personality. Does your rock have any hobbies or interests?



Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art

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Louise Bourgeois, *Maman*, 1999,
bronze, stainless steel and marble.
Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art,
Bentonville, Arkansas. Photography by
Marc Henning.

Louise Bourgeois was born in France on Christmas day, 1911, to Josephine and Louis Bourgeois. Her parents owned an antique tapestry gallery in the suburbs of Paris, and Josephine repaired the worn tapestries. By the age of ten, Louise began weaving with her mother and other seamstresses. Josephine contracted the flu during the Spanish flu pandemic and never fully recovered. It was during that time that Louis hired a live-in English nanny with whom he carried on an affair for ten years. As a result, Louise spent her adolescence nursing her ill mother while vying for the affection of her father. Describing her experience with the governess, Bourgeois said: “the motivation for the work is a negative reaction against her.”ⁱ

Bourgeois was a good student who took a keen interest in mathematics. She attended the Sorbonne as a math student, but she became disillusioned with her studies and dropped out to study art under painter and sculptor Fernand Leger. Leger informed Bourgeois that she was a sculptor, not a painter.

Bourgeois set up a small print shop in the back of her parents’ gallery and it was there that she met her husband, the art critic Robert Goldwater. They married in 1938 and made their home in New York. Louise and Robert started a family shortly after their marriage with the adoption of a son, and they then had two more boys in quick succession.

When her father passed away in 1951, Louise fell into a deep depression and, for eleven years, did not show any new work. Her former assistant, Jerry Gorovoy, stated: “She didn’t feel that she was the greatest mother. She said, ‘I realized I had to make this art, that maybe it was more important than the children.’ It was not a happy household—in her diaries, you really see her beginning to unravel.”ⁱⁱ This resulted in her taking up an entirely new art form now known as “Confessional” art. Confessional art utilizes autobiographical information to inform the narrative or theory behind a work.

Bourgeois created *Maman* in 1999 as homage to her mother, explaining it this way: “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 disease and are therefore unwanted. So, spiders are helpful and protective, just like my mother.”ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱQuote came from: newyorker.com/magazine/2002/02/04/the-spiders-web

ⁱⁱQuote came from: telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/10890373/Inside-artist-Louise-Bourgeois-New-York-home.html

ⁱⁱⁱQuote from: crystalbridges.org/press-releases/