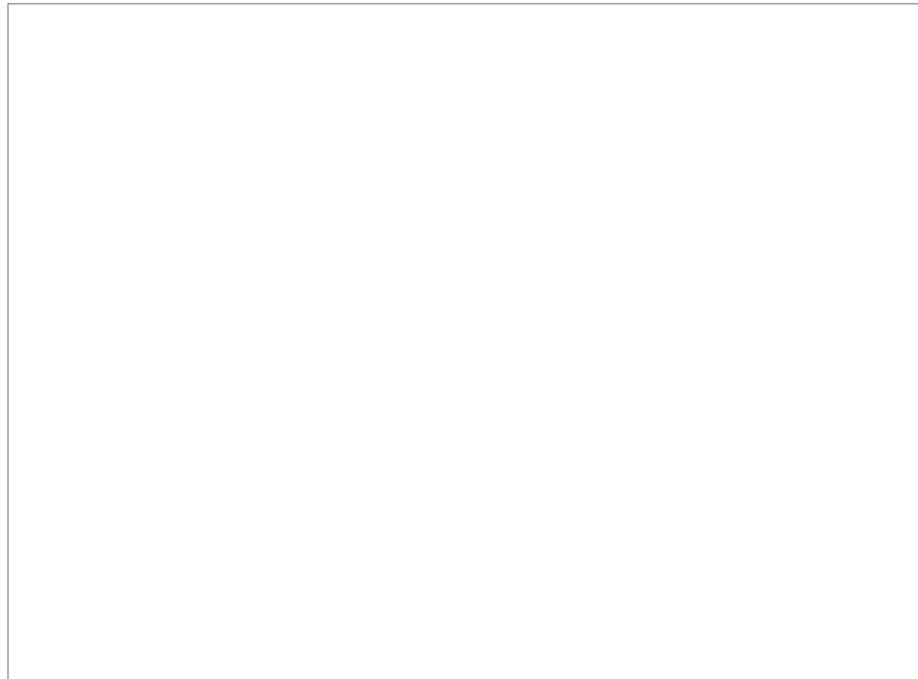


# Louise Bourgeois: No Exit

**LOUISE BOURGEOIS** (American, born France, 1911–2010) took up art in 1933. Her early work was influenced by surrealism, an artistic, intellectual, and literary movement that championed the creative potential of the subconscious mind. Yet the artist bristled at the association with that movement. As she wrote: "At the mention of surrealism, I cringe. I am not a surrealist."



Annie Leibovitz, *Louise Bourgeois, New York City, 1997*. © Annie Leibovitz

Bourgeois preferred instead to identify herself as an existentialist. She imbibed the writings of the philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus — her generational peers — and often quoted Sartre. She even named one of her sculptures after his 1944 existentialist play *No Exit*, in which three strangers are forever trapped

together in a room. To a great extent, her work addresses existentialist concerns born of a period of war, conflict, and distress: the struggle of choosing to live meaningfully and authentically in an uncertain, hostile, and indifferent universe. While Bourgeois's illogical spaces, irrational juxtapositions, and distorted anthropomorphic forms might appear sur-

realist in nature, her subjects testify to her commitment to existential thought. *He Disappeared into Complete Silence* (1947), an unbound book on view on the opposite wall, is exemplary in this regard. The engravings of eccentric structures and strange apparatuses, which recall the cold and impersonal architecture of surveillance or imprisonment, are paired with pithy parables described in the book's introduction as "tiny tragedies of human frustration."

*This exhibition is organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington.*

[x.56479/DEX 31]

## Untitled

c. 1939–1940

crayon, ink, and graphite

Promised Gift of Tony Podesta

Bourgeois made this drawing soon after immigrating to the United States in 1938 and settling in New York. A tiny female torso, encapsulated in what appears to be a series of bell jars, rests on the bow of a ship. Nearly five decades later, Bourgeois placed a tiny glass cup in the shape of a female torso inside a series of glass forms and used it in one of her spatial environments, known as Cells. She said, "The tiny figure inside the stacked glass shapes is cut off from the world. . . . That's me."

[x.56480/DEX 32]

## Untitled

1947

brush and ink

Promised Gift of Tony Podesta

[2014.136.212/DEX 9]

## **La tapisserie de mon enfance – montains in Aubusson (Tapestry of My Childhood – Mountains in Aubusson)**

1947

brush and ink with gouache

Corcoran Collection (Gift of William H. G. FitzGerald,  
Desmond FitzGerald, and B. Francis Saul II), 2015

Bourgeois spent part of her childhood in Aubusson, a tapestry-producing region of France. Her family sold and restored antique tapestries, and Bourgeois helped repair them by filling in worn areas, using lines to indicate where stitches should be made. The strokes that invigorate this and other drawings on display evoke such stitches, as well as yarn and needlework, recalling this seminal experience.

## He Disappeared into Complete Silence

1947

nine engravings, three with drypoint

Purchased as the Gift of Dian Woodner, 2010

The nine engravings and parables that make up this unbound volume signal the imagery and themes that would engage Bourgeois for the remainder of her long career, among them loss, misfortune, miscommunication, and rejection. She paired her texts with engravings that she made at Atelier 17, a print studio displaced from Paris to New York during the Second World War. The images are of unpopulated spaces occupied by eccentric structures resembling buildings and mechanical devices, and even an instrument of torture in one instance. A small number of complete copies of the book were issued in 1947; the Gallery's is one of the few still known to exist.

[1992.101.3/DEX 20; note text refers to DEX 18 and 21 as well]

## Spring

1949

painted balsa

Gift of the Collectors Committee, 1992

[1992.102.2/DEX 18]

## Mortise

1950

painted wood

Gift of the Collectors Committee, 1992

Bourgeois referred to these and other early upright sculptures as *Personages*. They were meant to be seen in groups and to stand directly on the floor "like people," she said. While they populate a space, they also stand isolated and detached. Made from modest, often cast-off materials and employing simple construction methods, these totemic figures reflect a wartime sensibility of salvage and reuse.

[1992.102.1/DEX 21]

## Untitled

1952

painted wood and plaster

Gift of the Collectors Committee, 1992

[X.40315/DEX 7]

## Untitled

1950

brush and ink

Promised Gift of Dian Woodner

[X.49557/DEX 8]

## Germinal

1967

marble

Promised Gift of Dian Woodner

Almost forty years after making this work, Bourgeois was invited by the Museum Ludwig in Cologne to contribute a design for a sculpture to be executed in chocolate. (The museum was founded by chocolate industrialists Peter and Irene Ludwig.) Her selection of *Germinal* to be cast in luscious chocolate speaks to the marble sculpture's sensual nature.

[2007.41.1/DEX 3]

## Paris Review

1994

aquatint and drypoint with additions in white gouache

Gift of Carolyn Kaplan, 2007

[2009.131.1.1-8/DEX 4]

## **the puritan**

1990

bound volume with eight hand-colored engravings  
on handmade paper with chine collé

Gift of the Heather and Tony Podesta Collection, 2009

This book pairs a story written by Bourgeois in 1947 with prints made in 1990. The enigmatic tale, set in New York, is one of lost love. "With *the puritan*," she said, "I analyzed an episode forty years after it happened. I could see things from a distance . . . I put it on a grid. . . . I considered the situation objectively, scientifically, not emotionally. I was interested not in anxiety, but in perspective, in seeing things from different points of view."

[x.37781/DEX 6]

## **My Hand**

1997

pen and ink

Promised Gift of Dian Woodner

[2008.72.1/DEX 1]

## **M is for Mother**

1998

pen and ink with colored pencil and graphite

Gift of Dian Woodner, 2008

Bourgeois inscribed the undulating letter M with great flourish, fashioning its ends into something resembling a 1960s flip hairstyle. The letter's oversize scale and formidable tresses can be read as a larger-than-life maternal figure whose influence never relaxes.

*left*

**Untitled**

1952

painted wood and plaster

Gift of the Collectors Committee, 1992

*center*

**Spring**

1949

painted balsa

Gift of the Collectors Committee, 1992

**Do not touch the works of art**

**Do not touch the works of art**

**Do not touch the works of art**

## Plate 1

Once there was a girl and she loved a man.

They had a date next to the eighth street station of the sixth avenue subway.

She had put on her good clothes and a new hat. Somehow he could not come. So the purpose of this picture is to show how beautiful she was. I really mean that she was beautiful.

## Plate 2

The solitary death of the Woolworth building.

## Plate 3

Once a man was telling a story, it was a very good story too, and it made him very happy, but he told it so fast that nobody understood it.

#### Plate 4

In the mountains of Central France forty years ago, sugar was a rare product.

Children got one piece of it at Christmas time.

A little girl that I knew when she was my mother used to be very fond and very jealous of it.

She made a hole in the ground and hid her sugar in, and she always forgot that the earth is damp.

#### Plate 5

Once a man was waving to his friend from the elevator.

He was laughing so much that he stuck his head out and the ceiling cut it off.

#### Plate 6

Leprosarium, Louisiana.

## Plate 7

Once a man was angry at his wife, he cut her in small pieces, made a stew of her.

Then he telephoned to his friends and asked them for a cocktail-and-stew party.

They all came and had a good time.

## Plate 8

Once an American man who had been in the army for three years became sick in one ear.

His middle ear became almost hard.

Through the bone of the skull back of the said ear a passage was bored.

From then on he heard the voice of his friend twice, first in a high pitch and then in a low pitch.

Later on the middle ear grew completely hard and he became cut off from part of the world.

## Plate 9

Once there was a mother of a son. She loved him with a complete devotion.

And she protected him because she knew how sad and wicked this world is.

He was of a quiet nature and rather intelligent but he was not interested in being loved or protected because he was interested in something else.

Consequently at an early age he slammed the door and never came back.

Later on she died but he did not know it.