

# GUGGENHEIM BILBAO

Press release



The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao presents on March 18, 2016

## **Louise Bourgeois** **Structures of Existence: The Cells**

Sponsored by

Fundación **BBVA**

Promoting the generation of knowledge and innovation, whether in core sciences, environmentalism, new technology, biomedicine and health, the humanities, or the arts, is a hallmark of Fundación BBVA. Supporting high-impact initiatives in the arts is one of the Fundación BBVA's strategic priorities, which it pursues by teaming up with prestigious partners and investing in long-term programs. This is the context for our collaboration as a Strategic Trustee of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, dating back to when it first opened, over eighteen years ago now. Since that time, our partnership has made it possible to organize major exhibitions, offering audiences a chance to see works never shown in Spain before and experience truly original approaches to exhibition concept and design.

On this occasion, the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao offered us the chance to lend our support and play an instrumental role in organizing the largest survey to date of the *Cells*, a series by renowned Franco-American artist Louise Bourgeois. For Fundación BBVA, this sponsorship represents a unique opportunity to contribute to a better understanding of a vital aspect of this artist's work, which reflects many of the preoccupations that permeated her entire oeuvre.

Bourgeois herself stated that her art is existentialist, allowing her to make sense of everything. Like an exercise in psychoanalysis, it enabled her to plumb the depths of her unconscious and sublimate certain aspects of the past, especially those related to her childhood and family relationships. The *Cells* have a dual symbolism and can be interpreted as lairs or as spaces of protection or reclusion. Several characteristic aspects of contemporary art—the objectual, the formal, the spatial, the psychological, experience, and subjectivity—converge in these works.

The majority of the *Cells* are recreations of the past made out of recycled furniture and architectural elements, such as doors, windows, wire mesh, industrial containers, and even an elevator car. Many of the objects inside them come from the artist's own biographical context: perfume bottles, tapestries, lamps, mirrors and glass balls, and also sculptures, which often represent parts of the human body (hands, heads, torsos). These enclosures, as well as the works included in this exhibition that can be considered precursors to the *Cells*, are proof of the infallible equation that Bourgeois applied when conceiving her pieces: if grief subsides, tension is reduced, compulsion disappears, and pain is eliminated, then the sculpture works.

With the desire and determination to contribute to the dissemination of art and culture that characterizes us, once again Fundación BBVA has, by supporting this exceptional exhibition, given the many thousands who visit the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao a chance to admire and enjoy the most influential art of our time.

I would like to congratulate Juan Ignacio Vidarte, Director General of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, and the entire team of people who made this exhibition possible, especially curators Julienne Lorz and Petra Joos. I have no doubt that we will all be enriched by this unique opportunity to discover Louise Bourgeois's intensely personal universe through her *Cells*. Enjoy! Francisco González  
Chairman of Fundación BBVA

Francisco González  
Presidente de la Fundación BBVA

## *Louise Bourgeois. Structures of Existence: The Cells*

- Dates: March 18 – September 4, 2016
  - Exhibition organized by Haus der Kunst, Munich, in collaboration with the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao
  - Curators: Julienne Lorz and Petra Joos
  - Sponsored by Fundación BBVA
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- **Occupying a space somewhere between a museal panorama, a theater set, an environment or installation, the *Cells* deal with memory and emotion, pain and anxiety, and, in particular, the fear of abandonment.**
  - **In these unique architectural spaces, the artist composed found objects, garments, furniture, and distinctive sculptures into emotionally charged theatrical sets.**
  - **For Bourgeois, the word “cell” had several connotations, referring to both the isolation of a prison or monastic cell and the biological cell of a living organism.**

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao is pleased to present *Louise Bourgeois: Structures of Existence: The Cells*, an ample selection of the innovative, sophisticated sculptural works developed by Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010) over the course of two decades. In this exhibition, organized by Haus der Kunst, Munich, in collaboration with the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, visitors will be able to discover and experience 28 emotionally charged architectural spaces, each an individual microcosm separating the internal from the external world, by one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century. The exhibition in Bilbao was made possible by the remarkable sponsorship of Fundación BBVA.

Louise Bourgeois’s concepts and formal inventions, such as her engagement with psychoanalysis and feminism, and her use of environmental installation and theatrical formats, have since become key positions in contemporary art. A prime example of this is the *Cells*, a series comprising approximately 60 unique pieces that Louise Bourgeois began in 1986 with *Articulated Lair*.

This exhibition reunites *Cells* I to VI for the first time since 1991, when they were first shown at the Carnegie International in Pittsburgh. The term “cell” originated during the preparations for the Carnegie show. For Bourgeois, this word had many connotations, as it refers to the biological cell of a living organism as well as the isolation of a prison or monastic cell.

Three years later, in 1994, the artist produced her first spider sculpture. Although Louise Bourgeois was already over 80 years old at the time, she once again succeeded in reinventing her working methods and went on to create some of her greatest works, aided by the acquisition of her first large studio in 1980. Up to that point she had worked in her Chelsea townhouse, where the size of the rooms—barely four meters wide—conditioned the dimensions of her sculptures. Her new studio in Brooklyn paved the way for large-scale works.

The studio also supplied Bourgeois with a wealth of new materials. Objects from the surrounding neighborhood and the artist's private life were incorporated in her *Cells*, such as steel shelves from the studio's prior use as a garment factory (*Articulated Lair*, 1986) and a water tank taken from its rooftop (*Precious Liquids*, 1992). When she eventually had to vacate the Brooklyn studio in 2005, she kept and later incorporated its spiral staircase into the final piece in this series: *Cell (The Last Climb)*, 2008.

The *Cell* series revolves around the desire to simultaneously remember and forget. "You have to tell your story and you have to forget your story. You forget and forgive. It liberates you," Louise Bourgeois once claimed. In this respect, the *Cells* contain references to individuals and experiences from the past. The needles, thread, and spindles incorporated in these works allude to the artist's childhood and her parents' work—Bourgeois's mother restored valuable tapestries.

The *Cells* also speak of abandonment, betrayal, and loss, rooted partly in the strain under which the Bourgeois family lived for years. Louise's father had an ongoing affair with the family au pair, Sadie, who lived in their home for nearly a decade. Furthermore, in a reversal of conventional roles, Louise had to nurse her mother, who contracted a serious illness and asked Louise to help keep her worsening condition a secret from her husband. Louise thus found herself entangled in a web of conflicting emotions: admiration and solidarity, anger and powerlessness.

The artist herself drew the connection between her work and her personal traumas. In 1982, she created an illustrated autobiographical text for *Artforum* about her traumatic childhood experiences. During that same period, the Museum of Modern Art in New York honored the artist, who by then was already 70 years old, with a Retrospective—the first this museum ever dedicated to a woman artist.

As a new sculptural category, Louise Bourgeois's *Cells* "occupy a place somewhere between a museal panorama, a theater set, an environment or installation which, in this form and quantity, is without precedent in the history of art" (Julienne Lorz).

## Overview of the exhibition

### Gallery 208

"When I began building the *Cells*, I wanted to create my own architecture and not depend on the museum space, not have to adapt my scale to it. I wanted to constitute a real space which you could enter and walk around in." Louise Bourgeois

*Cells* from different years are assembled in this space. Bourgeois considered *Articulated Lair* (Gallery 205) her first *Cell*, although she did not use this word in a title until 1991, when she created *Cells I–VI* (Gallery 208) for the Carnegie International. She employed architectural elements such as doors, windows, and wire mesh screens that came from her own studio (formerly a garment factory) or from demolished buildings. *Cells I–VI* address the themes of secrecy, voyeurism, and physical and psychological pain. These *Cells* are accompanied by the piece entitled *In and Out*, 1995. Louise Bourgeois was interested in the controversial neurologist Jean Martin Charcot (1825–1893) who, like his student Sigmund Freud, attempted to investigate what caused the body to arch during an attack of hysteria. Like them, Bourgeois was concerned with how the human body physically expresses anxiety and fear. As hysteria was often characterized as a female condition, Bourgeois decided to show a man in that arched-back position, wondering whether the figure was in a state of pain or pleasure.

The naked, headless body exposed here is distorted and fragmented by the mirrors and reflective spheres. Meat grinders attached to the walls of the *Cell* symbolize the dissolution of the body, while the pink organic form outside the structure suggests the body's internal organs.

### Gallery 206

In *Cell (Choisy)* 1990–93, Bourgeois rendered a replica of her childhood home in pink marble, a material reminiscent of human flesh. The guillotine blade hovering above it symbolizes the past, cut off by the present. *Passage Dangereux*, 1997 (*Dangerous Passage*, Gallery 207) and *Precious Liquids*, 1992 (Gallery 209) are narratives about a young girl going through the rites of passage.

This room also contains the “cabinet of wonder” or cabinet of curiosities, filled with drawings and sculptures that Bourgeois created between 1943 and 2010 and are united by, among other things, the theme of space: domestic, physical, isolated, and symbolic space.

Space takes the form of an imaginary building in the sculptures she named *Femme maison*, 1982, 1994, 2001 (literally “house woman” / “housewife”). In contrast, *The Rectory* is modeled on an actual rectory located opposite Bourgeois's New York townhouse. The artist frequently refers to the female and maternal body as another kind of enclosure, while a chair beneath a bell jar suggests isolation and loneliness, both recurring themes throughout the *Cell* series. In the various *Lair* sculptures, space is suggested but only partially visible, in keeping with the idea of a hiding place or den evoked by the works' titles.

In *Cell IX* 1999, the marble hands, posed in a gentle caress, express their interdependency. Bourgeois said, “It is the relationship to the other person that motivates me. The human condition is what I sculpt and my forms emanate from within my body.” The angled mirrors of three *Cells* multiply their contents while incorporating the viewer's body, providing different perspectives on the scene within. As the artist pointed out, “Reality changes with each new angle.”

*Models / Do, / Undo, / Redo* (1999), presented as life-sized towers that could be ascended at Tate Modern in London in 2000, are on display here

In this same gallery, Bourgeois's *Personage* sculptures are arranged in small interrelated groups. The spatial interaction of these works, the relationship between proximity and distance, and their connection to visitors make these an unusually early example of environmental installation art.

### Gallery 207

The more open structure of *Culprit Number Two*, 1998 is reminiscent of precursors to the *Cells*, such as *No Escape*, 1989 (Gallery 206). The seated person, the "culprit", is confronted with his or her own reflection in the mirror; the arrows signify aggression and hostility.

Bourgeois once stated, "Mirror means the acceptance of the self. So, I have lived in a house without mirrors because I couldn't stand, I couldn't accept myself. The mirror was an enemy."

### Gallery 209

*Spider*, 1997 is one of Bourgeois's most iconic forms, conceived as an ode to her mother. Its web is transformed into architecture, containing tapestry fragments and other objects.

*Red Room (Parents)*, 1994 and *Red Room (Child)*, 1994 are the only paired *Cells* in the series. For the artist, the color red stood for blood, violence, and danger, shame, jealousy, malevolence, and guilt. Significantly, their outer shells are made of discarded doors from a courthouse in Manhattan.

*Red Room (Child)* houses elements associated with Bourgeois's childhood: the red and blue spindles and needles recall the tapestry workshop run by her family; the child's hands resting in those of an adult suggesting a longing for security; and a pair of mittens embroidered with the words *moi* [me] and *toi* [you] reinforce that desire. Mementos, mysterious objects, spiral shapes, and everyday items combine to create an atmospheric composition, giving the impression of a psychological character study.

In comparison, the space within *Red Room (Parents)* is more orderly. The bed, a place of closeness and sexuality, is flanked by two marble sculptures of naked torsos partially covered in cloth. A xylophone case and a toy train on the bed recall the presence of a child. In children's eyes, sexuality is a mystery that is usually concealed. Tucked between the two adults' pillows, just as a child might nestle between his or her parents, is a pillow embroidered with the words *Je t'aime* [I love you].

### Gallery 202

A portrait is the depiction of a person's outward appearance, but it should also express that individual's character and emotions. The hand-sewn patchwork heads in the *Portrait Cells* seen here, 2000-01, function as symbolic forms representing elemental human feelings; in this sense, they are portraits of emotional states. Many of the heads were fashioned out of clothes and

blankets from Bourgeois's personal collection. Working with textiles is characteristic of the artist's late oeuvre and recalls her early childhood, when she observed her mother sewing and restoring tapestries.

The title *Peaux de lapins, chiffons ferrailles à vendre, 2006 (Rabbit Skins, Scraps, Rags for Sale)* refers to the familiar cry of ragpickers hawking their wares in the street, which Bourgeois remembered hearing as a young girl. The suspended cloth sacks sewn from cheesecloth and dyed with tea symbolize the empty womb, while furs allude to the rabbits that the artist's father and brother hunted in her youth and her sister bred later in life.

In *Cell XXVI, 2003*, the hanging fabric figure is a variation on an earlier sculpture, *Spiral Woman, 1984*. For Bourgeois, the *Spiral Woman* was a self-portrait and signified a confrontation with the self that we all experience. Its state of suspension symbolizes fragility and vulnerability. The artist was fascinated with the spiral and its ability to spin in two directions: inward to the point of disappearance, and outward to infinity.

Along with *Cell XXVI* and *Peaux de lapins, Cell (Black Days), 2006* is one of the few works in this series that Bourgeois produced in oval form. It accommodates elements that appeared in earlier works, such as a chair beneath a bell jar, spheres, and personal garments which, for Bourgeois, were a vehicle for memories of people from her past and the emotions she experienced while wearing them. The isolated chair beneath the glass sphere evokes a feeling of seclusion, but for the artist it was also a protective space. Once again, the spindles and threads refer to her parents' tapestry workshop, but also to a sense of trauma and the reparation and healing of psychological wounds.

### Gallery 203

A staircase leading nowhere first appeared in the work *No Escape, 1989 (Gallery 206)*. The spiral staircase in *Cell (The Last Climb), 2008* was originally located in Bourgeois's Brooklyn studio. Transparent spheres that seem to float and the see-through wire mesh walls lend this work an almost weightless appearance. For Bourgeois, the light blue rubber droplet was a self-portrait: like a spider's web, the thin threads emerging from this form connect to spools attached to the walls of the *Cell*, while the wooden spheres on the floor symbolize both the female and the male body. *Cell (The Last Climb)* is one of the last works in the series. Here it is surrounded by six panels of the work on paper entitled *I Give Everything Away, 2010*, which Bourgeois made shortly before her death on May 31, 2010.

### Gallery 204

Finally, in *The Destruction of the Father, 1974*, the artist presented a fictitious act of revenge: one evening at the dinner table, the mother and children overpower the father and destroy him in a cannibalistic act. This piece reflects Bourgeois's conflicted relationship with her father since childhood.

## Biography

Born in Paris on December 25, 1911, Bourgeois spent part of her childhood in the nearby suburb of Antony, where her parents ran a tapestry restoration workshop. She enrolled at the Sorbonne to study philosophy and mathematics, but after her mother's untimely death in 1932, she dropped out of her math courses and began to study art at various academies, schools, and studios, including that of Fernand Léger. In 1938, Bourgeois met the American art historian Robert Goldwater; they married that same year and moved to New York City.

Her early *Femme maison* paintings, 1945–47, reveal Bourgeois's interest in architecture and the body, emotion and memory, the conscious and unconscious, and the symbolic and the real. In the mid-1940s Bourgeois, by then a mother of three boys, created her first wooden sculptures.

These *Personages* were exhibited as an environmental installation at the Peridot Gallery in 1949 and 1950. Bourgeois also participated in several group shows with the Abstract Expressionists and kept in touch with European artists like Marcel Duchamp and Joan Miró. The death of her father in 1951 sent Bourgeois into a deep depression, and she began seeing a psychoanalyst. During this period she exhibited sporadically, but she did not have another solo show until 1964, when the Stable Gallery in New York presented a series of organic shapes in plaster, latex, and rubber. In 1982, the Museum of Modern Art in New York made Bourgeois the subject of the first Retrospective it had ever devoted to a woman artist.

In 1980, Bourgeois met her long-time assistant Jerry Gorovoy and acquired a studio in Brooklyn that allowed her to begin working with larger formats. She created a total of sixty-two *Cells* between 1986 and 2008, five of which are considered precursors, such as *No Escape*, 1989 in Gallery 206.

## DIDAKTIKA

The Museum's didactic project invites visitors to learn more about the artist's unique universe through a dedicated educational area, gallery hosts, and specific activities. This project reviews the key ideas in Louise Bourgeois's oeuvre, highlighting the most personal side of an artist whose own life experiences are intimately bound up with her work.

Located in the corridor next to the exhibition space, the educational area shows themes based on key concepts which, like routes across the artist's universe, trace the importance of the human body, architecture, personal memory, the psyche, and emotional states in her work. These concepts are complemented by a section that takes a closer look at the person, with texts penned by Bourgeois herself that reveal her rich inner life and exceptional personality.

In addition, the gallery hosts—a free service offered daily at the Museum—have extended their hours and will be using their iPads to show visitors additional information about the artist and her work that will reinforce their understanding of her art.

Additionally some of the complementary activities designed to mark the exhibition are described below.

#### Shared Reflections

These special tours reveal the behind-the-scenes work involved in the installation and other fascinating details about the exhibition. Petra Joos, curator of the show in Bilbao, will share the Curatorial Vision on April 13, and Luz Maguregui, Education Coordinator of the Museum, will lead the Key Concepts tour on April 20.

#### Creative Sessions

The Didaktika project also includes creative sessions, which examine the show from a perspective under the theme "do it yourself." Examples include the workshops *On Materials in Art*, where young people will review the materials found in Bourgeois's creative output and make their own sculptures or installations, and *On Fabrics and Stitches*, where participants will learn more about the "stitches" that appear in many of Bourgeois's works and design their own pieces using upholstery or similar materials.

#### Conversation about Louise Bourgeois

Jerry Gorovoy, Louise Bourgeois's assistant for 30 years, and Julienne Lorz, exhibition curator, will talk about the Franco-American artist's personality and career in the Museum Auditorium on March 16.

#### Screening: *Louise Bourgeois. The Spider, The Mistress and the Tangerine*

For a period of ten years Marion Cajori and Amei Wallach filmed the artist Louise Bourgeois in her New York studio, at exhibitions, working... the result is the movie *Louise Bourgeois. The Spider, the Mistress and the Tangerine* (produced 2008), which will be screened in the Museum Auditorium on the occasion of the exhibition.

Sundays, May 8 and 22

#### **Catalogue**

Louise Bourgeois's *Cells* are among the most innovative and challenging sculptural works in her extensive oeuvre. The catalogue published for this exhibition represents the most comprehensive survey of the *Cells* series to date. It includes a complete listing of each *Cell* with selected exhibition and bibliographic information, and brings to light key facets of Bourgeois's working process, touching on her ideas about space and memory, the body and architecture, the conscious and unconscious through insightful essays by Bart De Baere, Lynne Cooke, Kate Fowle, Jerry Gorovoy, Julienne Lorz, Griselda Pollock, Dionea Rocha Watt, Nancy Spector, and Ulrich Wilmes.

**Cover image**

Louise Bourgeois

*Cell (The Last Climb)*, 2008

Steel, glass, rubber, thread, and wood

384.8 x 400.1 x 299.7 cm

Collection National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

Photo: Christopher Burke

© The Easton Foundation / VEGAP, Madrid

**For more information**

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For further information, please contact the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao Press Department: tel. +34 944 35 90 08 and email: [media@guggenheim-bilbao.es](mailto:media@guggenheim-bilbao.es)

**Louise Bourgeois**

*Cell (Choisy)*, 1990-93

Marble, metal and glass

306.1 x 170.2 x 241.3 cm

Collection Glenstone

Photo: Maximilian Geuter

© The Easton Foundation / VEGAP, Madrid



**Louise Bourgeois**

*Cell II*, 1991 (detail)

Painted wood, marble, steel, glass and mirror

210.8 x 152.4 x 152.4 cm

Collection Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh

Photo: Peter Bellamy

© The Easton Foundation / VEGAP, Madrid



**Louise Bourgeois**

*Cell VI*, 1991

Painted Wood and metal

160 x 114.3 x 114.3 cm

Courtesy Hauser & Wirth and Cheim & Read

Photo: Christopher Burke

© The Easton Foundation / VEGAP, Madrid



**Louise Bourgeois**

*Red Room (Parents)*, 1994 (detail)

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

247.7 x 426.7 x 424.2 cm

Private Collection, courtesy Hauser & Wirth

Photo: Maximilian Geuter

© The Easton Foundation / VEGAP, Madrid



**Louise Bourgeois**

*In and Out*, 1995

Metal, glass, plaster, fabric and plastic

Cell: 205.7 x 210.8 x 210.8 cm

Plastic: 195 x 170 x 290 cm

Collection The Easton Foundation

Photo: Christopher Burke

© The Easton Foundation / VEGAP, Madrid



**Louise Bourgeois**

*Spider*, 1997

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

449.6 x 665.5 x 518.2 cm

Collection The Easton Foundation

Photo: Maximilian Geuter

© The Easton Foundation / VEGAP, Madrid



**Louise Bourgeois**

*Passage Dangereux*, 1997

Metal, wood, tapestry, rubber, marble, steel, glass, bronze, bones, flax and mirrors

264.2 x 355.6 x 876.3 cm

Private Collection, courtesy Hauser & Wirth

Photo: Maximilian Geuter

© The Easton Foundation / VEGAP, Madrid



**Louise Bourgeois**

*Cell VII*, 1998

Metal, glass, fabric, bronze, steel, wood, bones, wax and thread

207 x 221 x 210.8 cm

Private Collection, courtesy Hauser & Wirth

Photo: Christopher Burke

© The Easton Foundation / VEGAP, Madrid



**Louise Bourgeois**

*Cell XXVI*, 2003 (detail)

Steel, fabric, aluminum, stainless and wood

252.7 x 434.3 x 304.8 cm

Collection Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, The Netherlands

Photo: Christopher Burke

© The Easton Foundation / VEGAP, Madrid



**Louise Bourgeois**

*Lady in waiting*, 2003

Tapestry, thread, stainless steel, steel, wood and glass

208.3 x 110.5 x 147.3 cm

Collection The Easton Foundation

Photo: Christopher Burke

© The Easton Foundation / VEGAP, Madrid



**Louise Bourgeois**

*Cell (The last climb)*, 2008

Steel, glass, rubber, thread and wood

384.8 x 400.1 x 299.7 cm

Collection National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

Photo: Christopher Burke

© The Easton Foundation / VEGAP, Madrid



**Portrait images:**

**Louise Bourgeois** in 1975 wearing her latex sculpture *Avenza* (1968–69), which became part of *Confrontation*, (1978)

Photo: Mark Setteducati

© The Easton Foundation / VEGAP, Madrid



**Louise Bourgeois** inside (*Articulated Lair*) (Coll.: MoMA, New York) in 1986

Photo: © Peter Bellamy

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