

The Museum of Modern Art

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THE PRINTS OF LOUISE BOURGEOIS

September 13, 1994 - January 3, 1995

The first exhibition to present the printed work of Louise Bourgeois, one of America's most distinguished contemporary artists, is on view at The Museum of Modern Art from September 13, 1994 to January 3, 1995. **THE PRINTS OF LOUISE BOURGEOIS** reveals an aspect of the artist's work which, until now, has been relatively unknown. Comprised of approximately 140 works, the exhibition provides an overview of the artist's remarkable achievements in the print medium and reveals the way in which she uses printmaking as a vehicle for her powerful imagery. Organized by Deborah Wye, Curator, Department of Prints and Illustrated Books, the exhibition and the accompanying catalogue, *The Prints of Louise Bourgeois*, celebrate the artist's extraordinary gift to the Museum of her entire printed oeuvre, which totals some 600 sheets.

It is the potential the medium provides for experimentation through the reworking and reprinting of plates that the artist embraces. Bourgeois says of printmaking, "the whole history of the creative process is there. In painting or in sculpture it would be gone." Examining these stages in sequence provides the viewer with a glimpse of the artist's thoughts as they unfold.

In the printed medium, as in her sculpture, the examination and expression of the self preoccupy the artist and constitute a kind of self-portraiture. Her deeply personal subjects have remained consistent throughout

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her artistic career; using them as the basis of her art provides what she characterizes as a kind of "exorcism." Created from 1938 to 1949 and from 1973 to 1993, her compositions are often concerned with memories of her past, troubling situations, and unpredictable and disturbing moods. They also enable her to savor joyous moments.

Issues of parenthood are of importance in several works, including *Stamp of Memories I* (1993), in which the three eggs nestled in the figure's elaborate hairdo represent three children. Similarly, in *Les Trois Fees (The Three Fairies)* of 1948, three fairy godmothers emerging from abstracted, repetitive strokes protect an egg-like form; and in *Self-Portrait* (1993), a mother, father, and child are depicted in "a closed eternal circle."

In *Pont transbordeur (Drawbridge)* of 1946-47, threatening storm clouds hover above a central architectural structure and a smaller, radar-like tower, which, according to the artist, provides a means to watch for danger. Her best known print series, *He Disappeared into Complete Silence* (1946-47), consists of nine engravings and nine parables. In Plate 8 of the series, the artist explains that the ladders suspended from the ceiling depict a need for stability, while the window implies a simultaneous means of escape.

Ste Sebastienne (1990-93) is one of Bourgeois's most complex printed images, and is an excellent example of the way in which the artist works. Derived from a drawing done in 1987, the work has evolved through thirty-one states and variant impressions, resulting in *Ste Sebastienne (small)*, *Ste Sebastienne (large)*, and *Stamp of Memories I and II*. The prints were executed in drypoint, a technique involving digging or scratching a metal plate with a needle. These are tools the artist prefers because, she says, "They are an effective way of directly converting antagonism."

Born in Paris in 1911, Louise Bourgeois married an American in 1938 and moved to New York City. For many years she worked in relative isolation, pursuing a singular path in her art after World War II. During this time, Bourgeois created a body of sculpture and installations that was first surveyed in a retrospective exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art in 1982, which was also organized by Deborah Wye. Bourgeois's increasing recognition since then culminated with the selection of her work to represent the United States at the 1993 Venice Biennale. Her decision in 1990 to donate her complete printed work to the Museum has made it possible for her achievement in prints to be catalogued and presented to the public comprehensively.

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