

Louise Bourgeois, *Femme Maison*, 1982. Courtesy Cheim and Read, New York. Photo: Allan Finkelman.

Chapter Fifteen

Louise Bourgeois: "The She Wolf Is My Mother"

Louise Bourgeois has often described her work as autobiographical—as a way of distancing fears and resentments that arose from tensions in her family in her childhood. The presence of her father's mistress in the household led to a girlhood fantasy that she and her siblings would dismember their father and devour him on the dining room table. The installation tableau *Destruction of the Father* (1974), which critics have described as like the leavings of a cannibalistic feast, refers to this fantasy. This autobiographical account extends through the oeuvre. In addressing the figure she calls the "She Wolf," for example, Bourgeois says: "The She Wolf is simply my mother." And the smaller creature sheltered protectively beneath the She Wolf's right paw? "The kid is myself."¹

At times, taking another stance, Bourgeois has spoken of her works in broader terms, as dealing with sexuality, or with the presexual roots of life, the life force, and so on.² In line with remarks of this type, some critics have connected her work with icons from ancient religions. Lucy Lippard, for example, brought the Venus of Willendorf into the discussion of Bourgeois's work, along with the omphalos of Delphi.³ Barbara Rose mentioned the Artemis of Ephesus.⁴

The two approaches, it seems to me, are not really antithetical. Psychology leads, by way of the unconscious, from an individual into something like a universal dimension. One could follow a path through the childhood neurosis into the unconscious and out the other side into the world of ancient religious archetypes. As Freud wrote, "In the mental life of children today we can still detect the same archaic factors which were once dominant generally in the primeval days of human civilization."⁵ Bachelard noted, "Great images have both a history and a prehistory."⁶ In Bourgeois's case, the explicit autobiographical references may be regarded as the history of the works. But they also have a prehistory that, with their determined driving of repressed contents into the light, they cannot renounce.

The Artemis of Ephesus is an ancient Greek icon. Her most striking feature is a nest of protuberances on her torso. In some examples these convexities appear through tight-fitting holes in a fabric garment. Bourgeois's *Cumul 1* (1969) and *Blind Man's Bluff* (1984) could be described as unmistakable partial examples of this icon. Other Bourgeois pieces recall it even more unmistakably, especially the costumes for her performance *The Banquet/A Fashion Show of Body Parts*, which was

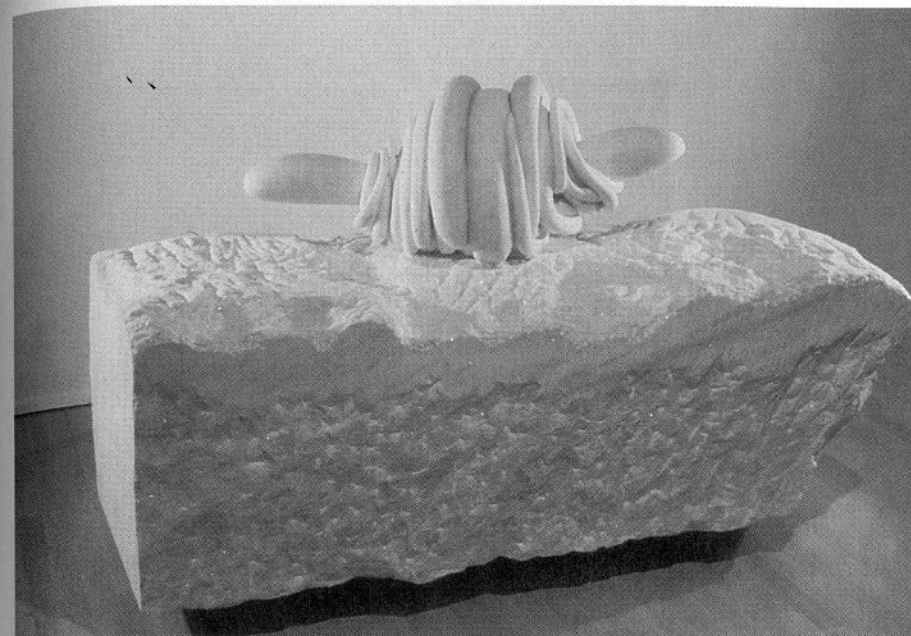
held in 1978 in conjunction with the installation *Confrontation*, a later form of the cannibal feast in *Destruction of the Father*.⁷

The most common view of the unusual upper body of the Ephesian Artemis is that the rounded elements on her torso are representations of breasts. Clearly this is intended, at least in part, since one of Artemis's cult names was *Polymastos* (Many-breasted). But the apparent breasts lack nipples, which is not characteristic of Greek sculpture and may be intended to ambiguise the identification—as in a number of Bourgeois's works. It has been proposed that the appendages are intended to suggest both breasts and eggs. It has also been argued, on the basis of iconographic parallels in Old Carthage, that the egglike shapes in the Artemis icon are intended to represent bull testicles, referring to the theme of sacrifice. The bull testicles seem to have been slung around the neck of the statue of the goddess when the bulls were castrated. The closely related Phrygian cult of the Magna Mater, or Great Mother, is known to have emphasized ritual castration.⁸ Artemis was so closely associated with bloody sacrifice that in Sparta, according to Pausanias, she was called "the Butcher." She was particularly associated with sacrifices of males. In Attica, at shrines to Artemis, small incisions were made in the necks of male worshippers through which their blood was extracted.⁹ At Hierapolis in Pammukale, in Turkey, the heads of male human sacrifices were nailed to trees outside the temple of Artemis.¹⁰ This aspect of the tradition echoes the internal connection that links Bourgeois's multi-breasted works, with their message of nurturing, with the castrating *Destruction of the Father*.¹¹

Bourgeois's *Femme-Maison* (Woman-House) paintings and drawings show a woman's naked body topped by a house. Sometimes the house starts from her waist, sometimes from her neck; in either case the woman's face is not seen. Deborah Wye notes that the woman's face, her individuality, has been replaced by the house. "Domesticity becomes the very definition of these women," she says. "They are prisoners of the house."¹² No doubt that theme is prominent here; but there is another aspect to the woman-house icon. The Artemis of Ephesus is sometimes portrayed with a house on her head, or rather the walls of a city; the city of Ephesus was considered to be perched on her head, carried by her like her crown. There are also icons of the Virgin Mary that show her crowned with city walls, or with her torso opening into a house or a church. The woman-house icon, seen in this context, indicates the goddess, or the female, as the foundation of the human community.

The painting *Femme-Maison* (c. 1946–1947) echoes another ancient iconography, the Displayed Female position, which also occurs in some of Bourgeois's drawings. The Displayed Female has her legs spread to signify the act of giving birth, though the emerging infant may or may not be depicted. *Untitled* (c. 1954), an ink drawing on paper, is an instance of the Displayed Female motif. Another of the ink drawings, *Untitled* (1941), depicts a Displayed Female giving birth.

Variants of the breast icon include Paleolithic ivories, which show two breasts on an upright member. Bourgeois's *Nature Study* (1984) closely resembles them. Still others of Bourgeois's variants, including *Trani Episode* (c. 1971–1972),

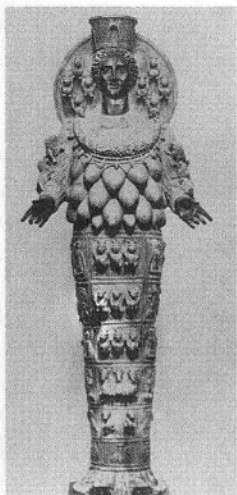


Louise Bourgeois, Nature Study, 1986.

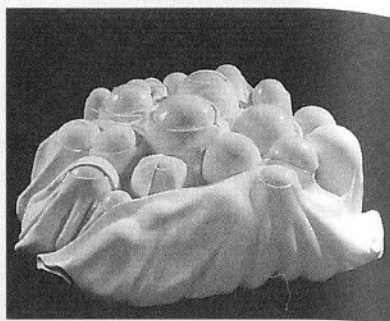
Courtesy Cheim and Read, New York. Photo: Peter Bellamy.

Point of Contact (c. 1967–1968), and at least one drawing show rounded bulbous volumes that, whenever they establish a boundary or outside layer, do so in the shape of a breast; they are multiple breasts seemingly growing out of one another. Versions of this type of icon are also found in some traditional cultures, such as the three- and four-breasted ceramic vessels known from pre-Columbian Peru.

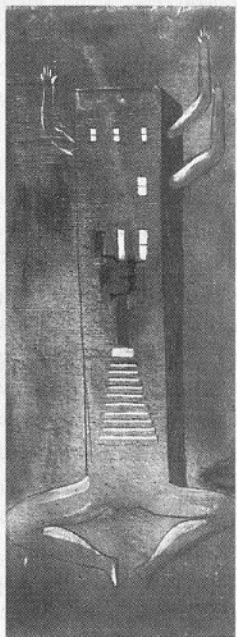
Some of Bourgeois's multibreasted figures, such as *Nature Study* (1984), *The She Wolf* (1984), and *The She Fox* (1986), are of a sculptural type anciently called the sphinx—a composite monster with a human head, the upper body of a human female, and the lower body of a lion; wings are optional. Bourgeois's headless sphinx is bigendered, appearing to have both a penis and breasts, as is the sphinx at Giza in Egypt, which has a man's head and a woman's upper body. Bourgeois's sphinx has more visually in common with the Greek monster that proposed the riddle of human nature to Oedipus.¹³ This resemblance connects Bourgeois's iconography with the myth of Oedipus and returns it yet again to the subject of the Freudian tragedy of the nuclear family and the destruction of the father. Here is another overlap of the imagery of childhood neurosis and religious history. Bourgeois's characteristic autobiographical reduction ("The She Wolf is simply my mother") does not allow the piece to fully express itself. In recent years Julian Schnabel and Leon Golub have also used the sphinx image. It is a meaningful motif in the 1980s because it points to the riddle of human nature, a riddle whose answer seems to be changing.



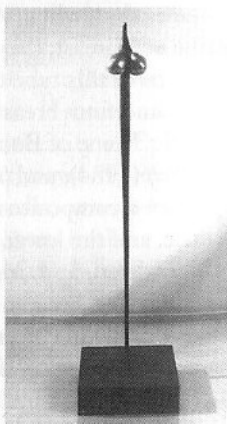
Artemis of Ephesus (left);
Louise Bourgeois, *Blind
Man's Bluff* (above)



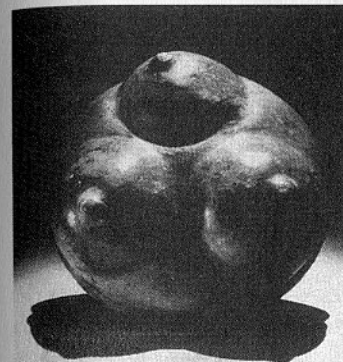
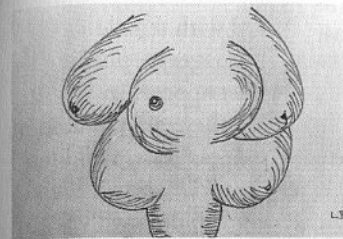
Louise Bourgeois, *Cumul 1*



Femme-Maison, ca. 1946–47 (left); Sumerian cylinder seal
impressions showing the Displayed Female iconograph
(top); Louise Bourgeois, *Untitled*, 1941 (bottom)



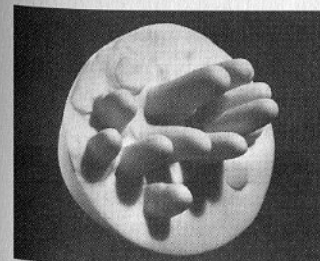
Early Gravettian or
Pavlovian Mammoth
Ivory Figurine (top);
Louise Bourgeois, *Nature
Study*, 1984 (bottom)



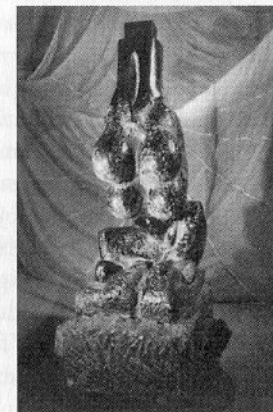
Louise Bourgeois, *Untitled*,
mid-1960s (left, top);
Three-breasted vessel,
terracotta, Pre-Columbian
Peru (left); Four-breasted
vessel, terracotta, Pre-
Columbian Peru (above)



The Goddess Rati, Wood,
Bali, 19th Century (top);
Louise Bourgeois, *Germinal*,
1967 (bottom)



Oedipus and the Sphinx, Attic cup of the fifth century
B.C., Faliscan Museum, Rome



Oedipus and the Sphinx,
Attic cup, 5th Century B.C.
(top); Louise Bourgeois, *The
She-Wolf*, 1984 (bottom)

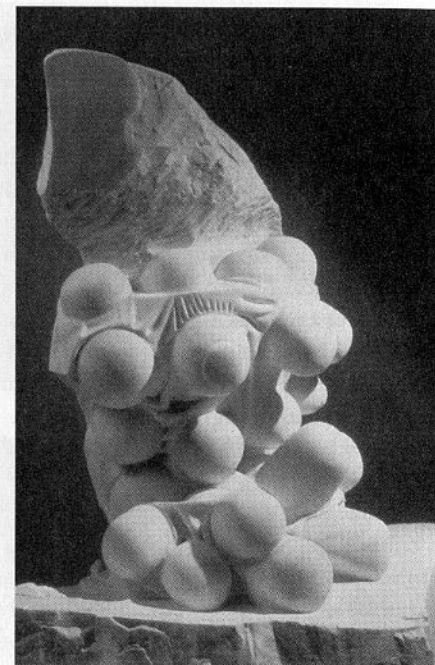
Bourgeois has said, "Sometimes I am totally concerned with female shapes—clusters of breasts like clouds—but often I merge the imagery—phallic breasts, male and female, active and passive."¹⁴ The phallic breast appears in numerous Bourgeois works, such as *Geminal* (1967), and again there are parallels in traditional goddess religions, as in the icons of the Balinese goddess Rati, a goddess with phallic breasts. The image system suggested by the breast works, the phallic breast works, and the works involving androgyne, castration, and so on, involves also the phallic icon.

Bourgeois has made works which would commonly be interpreted as representations of penises and which also have resonances in ancient iconographies. Two, for example, *Janus Fleuri* (1968), and *Hanging Janus* (c. 1968–1971), have Greco-Roman forebears in popular icons of abundance and well-being.¹⁵ But Bourgeois, the fantasied destroyer of the father, reverses the energy in the ancient icon, choosing the limp moment in the penis's cycle to record.

The breast and the penis in Bourgeois's oeuvre go beyond the particular into the realm of the universal. They are emblems of complementary forces that pervade nature. This is expressed in part by a slippage from biology to zoology. In many of her works, such as *Clamart* (1968), penis- and breastlike things seem to sprout from the ground in throngs. Again, there are traditional analogues. Bourgeois feels these works as representing groups of people clustering together for safety (the mother and children seeking safety from the father?). In some cases, such as *Eye to Eye* (1971), this is apparent. But in others, such as *Colonnata* and *Clamart* (both 1968), the specific biological association is unavoidable. In any case, there is not a big difference, really, between saying that it's a group of people and saying that it's a group of penises, breasts, or breast-penises. Something similar is involved when Freud, in the *Interpretation of Dreams*, says that the penis, in a dream, stands for the whole person. The two basic signs in Bourgeois's iconography, at least in this thematic area of it, are the breast and the penis—Mom and Dad. On one level they restate the plaint of the Greek tragedy again, the lament of the nuclear family hovering in the air. But again, as with the *Femme-Maison* icon, there is another side to it.

The emphasis on gender duality is a cosmogram. At least as early as Sumerian iconography, and devolving into Tantra, the universe was modeled as an interplay of two opposed yet complementary forces which were pictured through gender-specific body parts as male and female. The neurotic milieu of the nuclear family is writ large in religious history—cosmically large. Many of Bourgeois's works resemble the Hindu icon of the lingam and yoni, an abstracted representation of the engaged male and female genitals, which are pictured forth as a cosmic or world-sustaining act of sexual intercourse. But Bourgeois's drama has a neurotic and sinister edge. It is more in line with the Greek tragic view of the family. Her drawings of a man devouring children—ultimately versions of the ancient icon of Saturn eating his young—show both the father's crime for which his body was feasted on and, in a different time frame, his revenge for the feast.

The emphasis on gender duality in traditional non-Western religious iconography involves assertions of gender complementarity and even at times fusion



Louise Bourgeois, *Blind Man's Bluff*, 1984. Courtesy Cheim and Read, New York. Photo: Allan Finkelman.

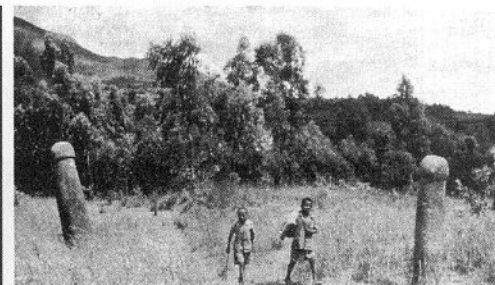
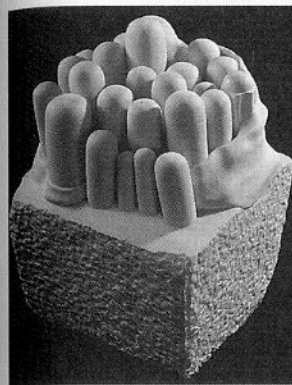
of genders into bisexed or intermediate icons. Both Freud and Jung felt that the human psyche was fundamentally male and female at the same time. Bourgeois too has declared that at times she combines male and female in one image, as in *The She Wolf* and the clusters of oblong shapes, like *Clamart*, that suggest breast and penis about equally. This seems to correspond to her statement that much of the subject matter of her work is not sexual but presexual. Its aura often evokes the period before the gender distinction dawned, the polymorphous-perverse state of the presexual infant secure among the fields of swaying flesh blossoms.¹⁶

Bourgeois's blending, mixing, and recombining of body parts led her in time to the sexual metaphor of the eye. In some of her eye works, such as *Eye* (1981), the pupil is sculpturally differentiated from the iris in a configuration much like the lingam-and-yoni icon of Hindu erotic theosophy. The pupil of the eye thrusts forward in the midst of the open iris. In others, such as *Nature Study, Pink Eyes* (1984) and *Nature Study, White Eyes* (1986), the pupil is an empty hole awaiting penetration. The sexual metaphor of the eye, found in the midst of a congeries of goddess-related iconographs dredged up from both art history and the unconscious, also has a linkage to an ancient vein of meaning. In ancient Nineveh, in the early Sumerian period, the Eye Goddess was a common icon.¹⁷ Her eyes were thrust up as empty holes atop a featureless body. The entrance of the image into the eye is

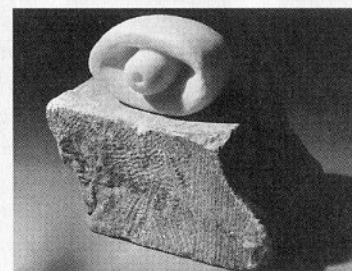
pictured as a kind of penetration into a receiving matrix of consciousness. Like an analogue of sexual intercourse, the image thrusts into the black hole of the eye; subject and object meet—in the eye.

One problem with an exclusively autobiographical approach to any body of artworks is that it eliminates questions of larger context. Wye has remarked: "Bourgeois belongs to the line of twentieth-century sculptors that includes Brancusi, Arp, Giacometti, Moore, and Hepworth."¹⁸ That seems clear enough but says little about the content of the work, leaving it to be accounted for only as "a personal and deeply autobiographical content."¹⁹ There is a problem here. If the content is indeed strictly autobiographical, then the viewer, being outside of the autobiography, is left with only a formal appreciation of the work. Yet others do derive a sense of meaning from Bourgeois's work, indicating that its content goes somehow beyond the personal and autobiographical.

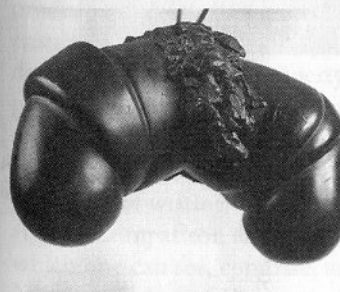
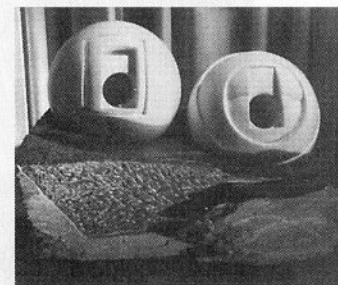
In fact, the work, in order to be fully appreciated, needs to be seen in a series of expanding contexts—first that of the artist's autobiography, then that of a certain formal tradition of modern sculpture, finally a much broader context, not merely art historical but cultural, including religious, philosophical, and psychological aspects. I have tried to shape here an approach to Bourgeois's work that does justice both to its specific autobiographical roots and to those broader cultural associations. The apparent relationship between many of her works and a variety of ancient icons does not invalidate the autobiographical subject matter but complements it. The autobiographical theme of the destruction of the father, for example, corresponds in religious history to the custom of king sacrifice found in matrilineal cultures around the world.²⁰ It is also universalized in individual psychology by way of the Oedipus complex, which in turn is named for a legend that survives at least in part from a period when matrilineal customs were in effect. The fact that the iconographical associations of Bourgeois's works are mostly from religions that featured goddesses also sharpens the feminist edge to the work. Its deep connection to the imagery of matrilineal cultures in turn bears meaningfully on the personal content of hostility toward the father and desire to be ruled by the mother. Psychoanalysis, Freud wrote in *On the Interpretation of Dreams*, is "concerned with the reconstruction of the earliest and most obscure periods of the beginnings of the human race." This is not so far from Bourgeois's remark that her work "was the reconstruction of the past,"²¹ whether the past is the childhood of an individual or "the earliest . . . beginnings of the human race," the images that will be encountered in its reconstruction will be found to be in close relationship. The roots in infantile experience, in psychological universals, and in ancient religious archetypes demonstrate the sources of the feeling, shared by many, that Bourgeois's work has a certain claim to universality, to dealing with a level of reality so fundamental that any human can recognize it.



Louise Bourgeois, *Clamart*, 1968 (left); Phallic menhirs from Southern Ethiopia (above)



Louise Bourgeois, *Eye*, 1981 (above); Eye symbol on pedestal, Ninevite period, Brak (top right); Louise Bourgeois, *Nature Study, White Eyes*, 1986 (bottom right)



Louise Bourgeois, *Hanging Janus*, ca. 1968–71 (left); Tintinnabulum, bronze, from Pompeii, 1st Century B.C. to 1st Century A.D. (right)