

## A Look Inside the Louise Bourgeois House, Just How She Left It

January 20, 2016 | By Arthur Lubow

page 1 of 6

---

Unlike Paris, where the homes and studios of Auguste Rodin, Eugene Delacroix and Gustave Moreau are on the standard tourist itinerary, New York has a paucity of artist's house museums. Painters and sculptors in Manhattan have typically inhabited lofts, and when they move on, others take over the spaces. One of the few examples is 101 Spring Street, the Donald Judd house in SoHo, which is open by reservation for tours. A pristine cast-iron building, with sunny rooms that accommodate beautifully installed Minimalist art and Judd-designed furniture, it stands as a shiny, bright masculine yang. At long last, it has its corresponding yin: the recessed, cluttered Chelsea townhouse that was occupied by Louise Bourgeois.

It seems fitting that the Judd house is supported by columns, and the Bourgeois home is topped by an oval skylight that is painted in the artist's favorite aquamarine tint, a blend of Prussian blue, white and a touch of ochre. A wildly original artist, Bourgeois lived for almost half a century at 347 West 20th Street, a narrow, 19th-century brick rowhouse. A nonprofit organization, the Easton Foundation, which she set up in the 1980s, has opened the house to small arts-related groups. And this summer, the house will be accessible to the public, through tours arranged on the foundation's website, [theeastonfoundation.org](http://theeastonfoundation.org). Shortly before she died in 2010 at 98, Bourgeois purchased the adjacent house from her neighbor, the costume designer William Ivey Long. It now functions as a small exhibition gallery of her work, temporary quarters for visiting scholars, and the site of a library and archive.

Her own residence, though, is the chief attraction. More than five years after her death, the house still feels inhabited by the woman who called it home. Dresses and coats hang in the closet. Magazines and diaries fill the bookshelves, which display the breadth of Bourgeois's interests, including the "Joy of Cooking," the Bhagavad Gita and J.D. Salinger's "Nine Stories."

A sense that at any moment Bourgeois might walk through the door is heightened by the atmosphere of bohemian dilapidation: Surely this place is in no shape to be seen by anyone other than its owner. Crude patchwork testifies to the cave-in of a plaster ceiling. A two-burner gas hot plate that fills in for a stove and an ancient television that stands next to a small metal folding chair further the impression of a home not ready to receive company. "I'm using the house," she told a visitor, when she was in her mid-70s. "The house is not using me."



The townhouse adjacent to Bourgeois's home now functions as a small exhibition gallery of her work, a temporary residence for visiting scholars and the site of a library and archive. Credit... All rights reserved The Easton Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York; Daniel Krieger for The New York Times

It is being maintained as closely as possible to the way it looked during its owner's lifetime. "The house has a vibe," said Jerry Gorovoy, who was Bourgeois's assistant and friend for 30 years and is president of the foundation. (Bourgeois's two surviving sons, Jean-Louis and Alain, also serve on the foundation's board.) "It has a heart and a soul. People are very moved when they come here." The utilitarian décor is in keeping with Bourgeois's pragmatic nature. "If the floor was good and she could stand on it and it would hold the sculpture, that's all she cared about," Mr. Gorovoy explained. "She was not interested in decoration or embellishment or pretty things."

Bourgeois purchased the townhouse in 1962 for less than \$30,000 with her husband, the art historian Robert Goldwater, whom she met in her native Paris in August 1938, and married a month later. She moved with him to New York, where they raised three sons. Upon Goldwater's death in 1973, Bourgeois drastically reconfigured the house. She moved out of their rear second-floor bedroom, leaving it and Goldwater's third-floor library mostly untouched as a kind of memorial. She installed a single bed in the front room of the second floor. (Many years later, after arthritis had made climbing the staircase difficult, she relocated her bedroom to the front parlor on the first floor.) In her years as a wife and mother, Bourgeois had used the basement for her work. Now, she turned the whole building into an art studio. "I think from a psychological point of view, she was transforming it so radically that it was her way of dealing with extreme loss," Mr. Gorovoy said.

A psychological explanation is appropriate for an artist who demarcated her career by sharp lines of mourning. Upon the death of her mother in 1932, she turned from her studies in mathematics and philosophy to become an artist. Her mother, who restored antique tapestries in the family business in Paris, represented an ideal of care and protectiveness to Louise. Bourgeois's iconic spider sculptures, the artist said, were an allusion to her thread-weaving mother. A seven-and-a-half-foot-high pair of bronze arachnids from 2003, "Spider Couple," has been installed in the townhouse garden.

Her father's death in 1951 led Bourgeois to begin a decades-long Freudian psychoanalysis, and Goldwater's death freed — or forced — her to devote herself entirely to her art. Although her husband encouraged her to pursue her sculpture, she would hold back, wanting to be a good wife. "She was very guilt-ridden," Mr. Gorovoy said. In her late years, Bourgeois received widespread acclaim, which did not surprise her. "The art world loves young men and old women," she told Mr. Gorovoy.

Death, perhaps, trumps even old age. This fall, her sculptures were featured in the opening show of the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow, the talked-about public gallery in Gorky Park that was founded by Dasha Zhukova and renovated by Rem Koolhaas. (The exhibition, still on view, originated at the Haus der Kunst in Munich.) A small Bourgeois show entered on a 1947 series of engravings is currently at the National Gallery in Washington. One of the spider sculptures sold at auction at Christie's New York in November for \$28.2 million, a record for a postwar female artist. And when the annex of the Tate Modern opens in June in London, Bourgeois's work will inaugurate a series of Artist Rooms, dedicated to exploring the sensibility of a significant modern or contemporary artist.

That sensibility was not warm and cuddly. The art dealer Howard Read, who would attend some of the Sunday salons where young artists were invited to show Bourgeois their work in her living room, recalled that her critiques could be brutal. "That's the most uninteresting thing I've ever seen," she might say. "Give the next person a chance."



Bourgeois in 1975, wearing a latex cast of her work "Avenza," later incorporated into an installation at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, "The Confrontation." Credit...All rights reserved The Easton Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York; Mark Setteducati

Yet people kept coming. "Whether it was her accent or her Europeaness or her personality, people were in a trance," Mr. Read said. "You couldn't stop listening to her. It was magnetic." Her birthday fell on Christmas Day, so guests would arrive to celebrate both occasions. Mr. Read and his wife, Katia, would bring cases of her favorite Champagne: appropriately, Veuve Clicquot "La Grande Dame."

Eunice Lipton, a writer who visited for a Sunday family lunch in the late '60s while dating one of Bourgeois's sons, said: "The dining room was stark. There was nothing that was beautiful or welcoming. It was not a place where people hung out on comfortable sofas. And she seemed like an angry presence. I'm sure she didn't want to make that gigot."

Notwithstanding her ambivalence at playing a domestic role, Bourgeois regarded herself as a domestic artist. As early as 1945, she began a series of paintings she called "Femme maison"—woman house—in which the heads or torsos of women are depicted as buildings, with openings of windows, doors and staircases. She was always interested in architectural spaces, and the rooms of 347 West 20th Street can be compared to her other artistic creations.

In 1980, she obtained a large studio space, a former bluejeans factory in Brooklyn. There she began working on large installations that led to a series she called "Cells," which she started in 1991 and continued for much of her remaining productive life. Many of the "Cells" are scaled to the size of the rooms in the Chelsea house, and they contain staircases, doors and closets, as well as some of her possessions, including articles of clothing and empty bottles of Shalimar perfume. Bourgeois had to clear out of the Brooklyn studio at the end of 2005 to make way for the Barclays Center. In her home, however, she could continue to accumulate and rearrange objects that resonated with her emotionally.

"Louise never threw anything out," Mr. Gorovoy said. At the time of her death, she retained gas receipts from her first apartment in Paris. (Aside from the personal hoarding, she kept an artist's proof of every piece she made, from the 1940s on.) Mr. Gorovoy argues that the same spirit is visibly present in the art and the home. "The more you know the work, you can see that the way she lived is very close to what she created," he said. It is not that behind the scenes you will discover an unknown woman, but rather, you will see your impressions corroborated.

"Louise always described herself as a woman without any secrets," Mr. Gorovoy remarked. Her life was an open house.