
10 OCTOBER 2007- 20 JANUARY 2008

LOUISE BOURGEOIS



MODERN

TATE

RESOURCE PACK

Resource pack for educators and group leaders

This pack can be used to plan a visit to the exhibition and as a stimulus for discussion surrounding the artist's work with complementary activities. Our aim is to provide a useful resource beyond the life of the exhibition and to support projects for individual and group use. The pack's activities and discussion points can be adapted to suit the needs of educators and group leaders from a broad range of learning environments, and are suitable for groups who may not be able to visit the exhibition, as the images have been carefully selected to give an overall flavour of the works and themes in the exhibition.

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This pack has been produced to accompany the *Louise Bourgeois* exhibition at Tate Modern, London, 10 October 2007 – 20 January 2008. It contains a selection of images which highlight four emerging themes present in the exhibition, along with a selection of related discussion points, activities and links to other contemporary artists and art works.

School, young people and community groups are welcome to visit the exhibition. To book tickets at the discounted group rate, call 020 7887 8888.

Written by Michele Fuirer and the Interpretation and Education team at Tate Modern

Cover image: *Maman* 1999, Bronze, 927.1 x 891.5 x 1023.6 cm, 1999, Courtesy Cheim & Read, Galerie Karsten Greve and Hauser & Wirth, Photo: Tate

Introduction

Despite radical changes over the past 20 to 30 years in the acceptance of art made by women in mainstream culture and in museums and galleries, the work of women artists can still be considered by these institutions as lesser than that of their male counterparts. Louise Bourgeois is a female artist and a senior female artist; these two facts together make her and her work hugely significant in contemporary art.

Born in Paris in 1911, Bourgeois studied art under Fernand Léger and others in the French capital. In 1938 she moved to New York with her new husband, the American art historian Robert Goldwater. Bourgeois held her first solo exhibition of paintings in 1945, followed in 1949 by her first solo exhibition of wooden sculptures. Before this she made mainly paintings, drawings and prints. In the 1950s and 1960s, discovering new materials, she participated in many group exhibitions, culminating in 1966 in an important exhibition called *Eccentric Abstraction* curated by Lucy Lippard. In 1982, aged 71, she had her first major retrospective at The Museum of Modern Art in New York – the first ever retrospective given to a woman by that museum. Since then, she has been awarded many honours for achievement in the visual arts and has exhibited internationally at the highest levels, finding a deserved respect and admiration for her work.

Theme One:

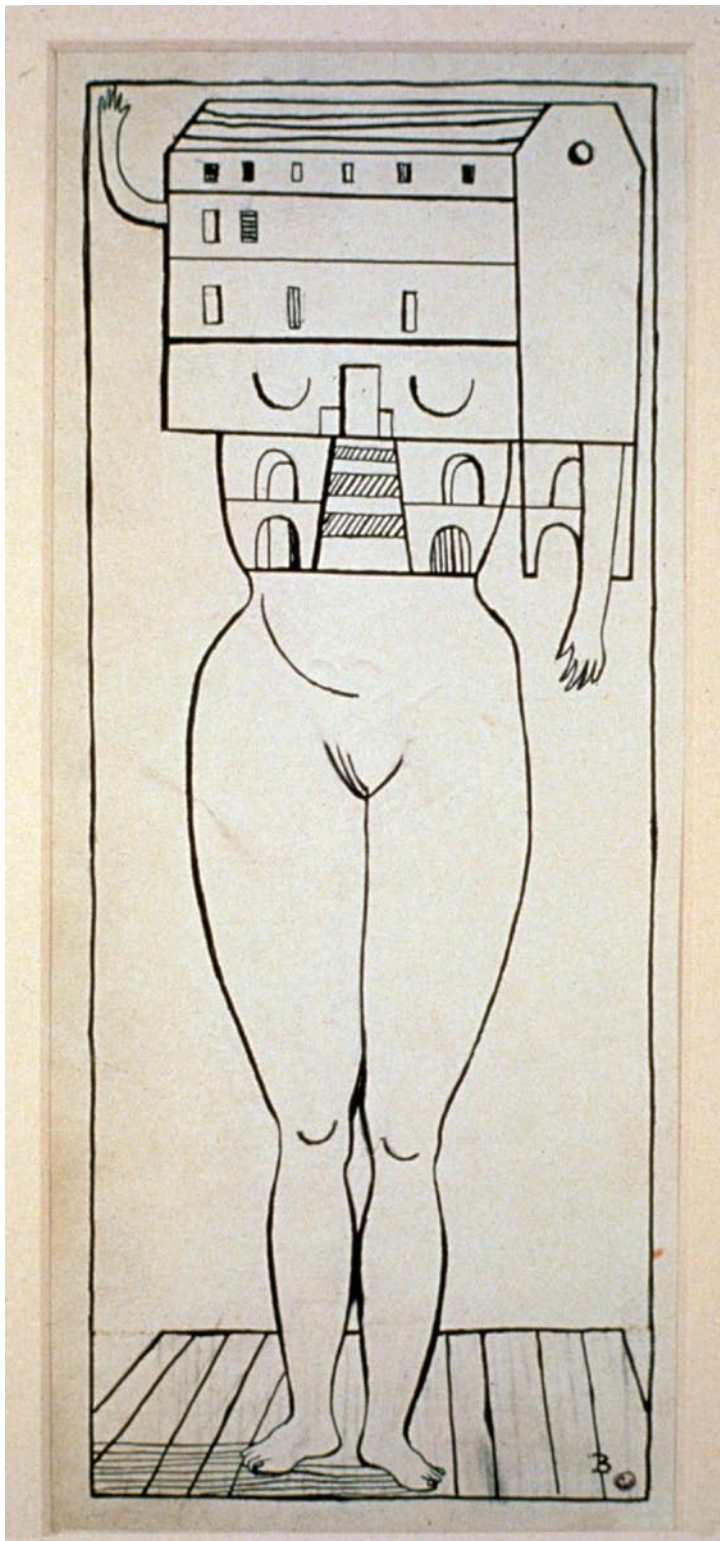
The Relationship between Art and Everyday Life

For most (if not all) artists there is an autobiographical element within their work. The autobiographical content may, or may not, be clearly identifiable within the art work. For example, the work of minimalist artist Carl Andre, such as *Venus Forge* 1980 (online at www.tate.org.uk), shows no obvious personal references, yet he talks about working on the railroads and how metal and long perspectives influenced his thoughts on making sculpture. If, in our reading of art, we insist too much upon autobiography, we may be missing an opportunity to experience a sensory explanation of the work; to explore and investigate it from many different angles.

The art of Louise Bourgeois maintains a close link to her personal life. Her art becomes a way of processing emotions and a lens through which to examine relationships within the family. Her identity as an artist, and as a wife, a mother and a daughter, is also explored through her art. The artist has said, 'As an artist I am a powerful person. In real life, I feel like a mouse behind the radiator. (...) You transcend real life in your art'. Art draws upon the personal, but goes beyond illustrating life.

Bourgeois has described how after moving to New York she missed her family and friends, and her sculptures from that period represent the people she missed. The wooden sculptures are referred to as Personages or important people (see Theme Three: Processes and Materials on p12). She has also kept her old clothes and recycled them into her work.

The types of everyday objects that appear in many of the artist's works, such as mirrors, chairs, beds, glass vessels and clothing, provide an historical context and connect her identity with a specific time and place. The objects convey personal meanings for the artist and reference her own history. They also reference universal domestic rituals particularly related to the body, such as personal grooming, sleeping or dressing. Reusing objects and clothes is not unlike the process of recalling and reviving memories.



Femme Maison 1947,
Ink on paper,
Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation,
New York. Photo Eave Inker

In *Femme Maison* 1947 there is a visual and verbal play upon the term housewife. A woman's body and a building are united. It is hard to say whether the house is carried by the woman or whether the woman is emerging, waving from the house. The house could represent a strong centre, a creative anchor; or, it could represent a potential smothering trap or enclosure. In this painting a range of different interpretations and ideas come together, for example: women's visibility (the body has no face), the perceived role of women as the heart of the home, and the relationship of women to society and to their responsibilities in the 'world at large' (the naked figure shoulders the weight of the building).



Red Room (Parents) 1994,
Mixed Media, 247.7 x 426.7
x 4242 cm, Hauser & Wirth
Collection, Zurich

In this three-dimensional environment, or installation, the symmetry of objects placed within the space creates a sense of calm and orderliness, but the screaming red of the bed and its pillows strikes a high note of drama. Multiple doors and windows that offer no way in or out create a sense of enclosure and of everyday life suspended and held, trapped before the onlooker's gaze.

In the gallery

Look at the work discussed above on p5, *Femme Maison* 1947. This was an image that the artist returned to many times between 1945 and 1994. She made several versions as paintings in the 1940s, and later on in marble in the 1990s. Find the other works in the exhibition with the same title and compare and discuss them. Does the meaning change in the different versions? How does the work change when it is a painting from when it is represented as a sculpture? Which version do you prefer, and why?

‘You transcend real life in your art’ Louise Bourgeois

Many feminist artists use everyday life as the basis of their work to communicate about personal and political issues. For example, Mary Kelly became a talking point when she exhibited her son’s used nappies at the ICA in a work about motherhood. Research some women artists from the feminist period of the 1970s onwards and find out what you think about their work and the idea that in art, as in life ‘the personal is political’

Activities

Changing Rooms

Think about a room you spend a lot of time in at home. How would you change it into a Louise Bourgeois type of cell? Which doors and windows would you block, move or change? What would you put over the walls? Which special objects would you bring into your new room? Which objects would you keep that are already there? What colour scheme would you adopt? What materials would you use to change your room? What is the title of your new room or cell? Find samples and swatches of lots of different materials to support this activity and to build up a picture of your new room. (Science activity kits include interesting metal, wood and plastic samples or go to your local DIY superstore for inspiration. Maybe ask them for spare off-cuts).

Hybrid Bodies

Play the drawing game in which you draw just a head and neck, fold the paper to leave a few marks visible and pass to the next person who draws the torso, folds and passes on again to draw the legs, then the feet. Unfold the drawing to find a hybrid body. Change the activity by drawing in some objects, such as a shoe or table to see what can evolve. You could follow up this activity by making objects from paper or cardboard boxes to attach to different parts of the body. Photograph yourselves wearing your body objects. Look at the work of Rebecca Horn for inspiring ideas.

Artist Links

Alberto Giacometti *Spoon Woman* 1926–7 is influenced by African and Oceanic sculpture and uses the shape of a giant spoon to form the body of a female standing figure.

Doris Salcedo uses domestic items in her sculptures. In *Untitled* 1998 (online at www.tate.org.uk) she fuses a chair into a wardrobe using cement.

Richard Wentworth uses everyday objects and materials in his sculptures. See for example *Siege* 1983–4 (online at www.tate.org.uk) which is a play on words and on the function of furniture.

Theme Two: The Artist as Mischief Maker

Louise Bourgeois insists that we look at 'private things'. She invites us to peep, peer and prod into quite intimate scenes. We are given permission by the artist to do this, of course; but the feeling persists that these things may come from a place of secrets and privacy.

Like the giant spider who presides over the exhibition, we are drawn by the threads that connect up different parts of the artist's extensive body of work: installations, drawings, prints and sculptures. The work also sometimes plays tricks on the viewer and ties us up in the equivalent of visual or mental knots. The artist demands that we look from strange viewpoints, that we peer voyeuristically into mirrors or glass cases, or that we climb towers or enter restricted spaces.

When the artist makes an installation, the experience of the spectator is a direct, immersive relationship to the art. But in many of the Cells we are held off by a mesh, we cannot fully access the work. There is also an inevitable theatricality to large-scale installations. The Cells present an unfinished story or scene which is hard to resolve; a puzzle, an open-ended game with the viewer's interpretation.

Bourgeois became an artist in the period when surrealist artists had set out to challenge the conventions and conformity of establishment art. Many of these artists made work that would destabilise the viewer's sense of security in the visual image. Bourgeois did not ally herself to these artists. However, she seems to carry forward the spirit of the artist as a maker of mischief. See for example, the excessively long, black rubber legs in *Legs* 1986 and *Femme Maison* 1982, a Barbie doll smothered with clay which develops the theme of *Femme Maison* discussed in Theme One: Art of the Everyday (p4).

Chief amongst her weapons is a sense of humour, visually, verbally and in her personality. A sharply honed sense of humour has the capacity to convey very serious issues and intentions.



Maman 1999,
Bronze, 927.1 x
891.5 x 1023.6 cm,
1999, Courtesy
Cheim & Read,
Galerie Karsten
Greve and Hauser &
Wirth, Photo: Tate

The vast scale of this work plays with our emotional responses. What would normally be a small insect creeping along the ground has been scaled up into a solid structure that literally towers over us. Repulsion and attraction mix with excitement and curiosity. A spider draws out a thread from her body to create a web structure of immense beauty in order to capture and kill her prey. How can something as potentially horrific as a giant spider be identified with the idea of a nurturing mother? In creating *Maman*, Bourgeois has captured and entertained us, but she is also demanding that we question and think.



Untitled (I have been to hell and back) 1996, Fabric, lace and thread, Courtesy Cheim & Read, Galerie Karsten Greve and Hauser & Wirth Photo: Peter Bellamy

Some of the prints and drawings by Louise Bourgeois address the viewer with a text that may be a challenge or an exhortation. Didactic, ironic and sometimes moralising statements are presented with a sense of playfulness. Or, as critic Robert Storr says, 'with jarring psychological candour'. These text works are the visual equivalent of saying something outrageous with a wry grin – and leaving space for a reaction. As we read and internalise the words that are the musings of the artist herself (to herself), she plays upon our own stream of thoughts or our inner consciousness.

Discussion

To make mischief requires a careful train of thought and a plan of action. Mischief needs to be clever in order to attain maximum impact. There are different kinds of mischief. When you make mischief are you just 'being playful' or is there an intention to antagonise people? Discuss how people in your group interpret the idea of making mischief. What are the boundaries and no-go areas? Is making mischief mainly the preserve of the very young? Why, when people age, do they sometimes seem to 'revert' to and delight in being mischievous?

The artist Tracey Emin uses her personal life as the subject matter of her art. She has been criticised for doing this and for 'washing her dirty linen in public'. Look at examples of how different sections of the media have reported on her life and her work. Debate within your group what messages you think she is trying to get across to her audience. How are these different from the media's interpretation? If there is a personal message about her life story, are there also wider issues that relate to society and to our own experiences of life?

Activities

Graffiti Artist

When you were very young and enjoyed drawing, most likely you drew on the walls or the furniture, or yourself. You were probably told to stop doing this. But drawing on things you are not supposed to can be a lot of fun. Create a space in your class or meeting room where you can draw directly on the wall or on old pieces of furniture. Bring in some unwanted junk or clothes from home and draw on them too!

Spinning a Yarn

Sit under the sculpture *Maman* and tell a tall tale. A very tall tale! Do this as an individual activity with each person making up their own story. Or make up a group story with each member adding a new section as you go around in turn. Start off with a simple lead-in such as 'Once upon a time'. You could put words onto cue cards to serve as a prompt when building your story, for example, '... there was a ... and a ... it went ... then ... soon after'. Record your story. Back at your setting draw it out or illustrate it.

Shifting Scale

Experiment with the effect of dramatic changes in scale. Assemble a collection of dolls house furniture, food, small and large dolls and figures, and normal everyday objects such as cups, combs, mirrors etc. Play with different combinations of these objects to create strange juxtapositions of scale and relationships in size. Use paper or cardboard boxes to create a background, frame or setting for the objects. When you find some exciting combinations, sets or scenarios developing, photograph them to build up further work in imaginative or descriptive writing or a role play.

Artist Links

Marcel Duchamp changed the course of art with his work *Fountain* 1917 (online at www.tate.org.uk) which was a piece of plumbing that he reassigned as a work of art.

Meret Oppenheim created *Object (Le déjeuner en fourrure)* 1936. The fur-covered tea cup, spoon and saucer by this artist became a surrealist icon. It combines the familiar and the unexpected in a highly subversive gesture.

Bruce Nauman's works play with the normal rules of behaviour and language. In *Double No*, a video work from 1988 (online at www.tate.org.uk), the artist dressed as a clown, is jumping up and down shouting 'No'.

Theme Three: Processes and Materials

From an early age Louise Bourgeois worked in her family business repairing and restoring tapestries. A constant theme she refers to is 'doing' and 'undoing': 'Repetition gives a physical reality to experience'.

The work of stitching and repairing becomes a metaphor; it has the potential to heal wounds. Drawing and making prints form a very significant part of the artist's output. The process of drawing a line is to remember and make visible the presence of thought in the living body. Drawing is the link and the connecting thread between works made over the course of many years.

At the heart of what Bourgeois does is the importance of manual work, working by hand and through touch, and the formal aspect of making sculpture. Whether sewing stitches in fabric or shaping marble with a mallet and chisel, the connection between eye and hand is revealed. Tactile surfaces can be warm and inviting like rough wood and fabric, or cold and hard like polished marble or bronze.

After her arrival in New York in 1938, without a studio or a place to work away from her domestic responsibilities, the artist used the roof of her apartment building. The sky offered a huge backdrop and the tall, modern buildings a point of reference to the figures she was making. The physical environment had a strong relationship to the sculptures.

The Personages were shown in groups, creating a three-dimensional environment around the viewer. The fact that the sculptures could be moved around, placed in different locations, altered and remade meant that they were highly interactive with architecture, with people, with nature. These works represent the artist's first developments in creating installations.



Portrait of C.Y. 1947–9,
Painted wood and nails,
169.5 x 30.5 x 30.5
cm, National Gallery of
Canada, Photo: Allan
Finkelstein

This 'life size' sculpture, like a totem pole, is made of painted wood and has an elegant abstract form. An aperture carved through the top and a cluster of nails driven in just above the centre animate the figure, adding a significance or character that we can latch on to. The rusty nails evoke the everyday materials used for a fetish object. There is, perhaps, a hint of violence in their disruption to the smooth form. See also *Femme Pieu* 1970 in relation to fetish objects.



Spiral Woman 1951–2, Wood and Steel, 127 x 30.4 x 30.4 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York, Photo: Christopher Burke

Compare *Portrait of C.Y.* with *Spiral Woman* (above). A series of wooden sections twist and curve sinuously around a metal pole to create a floating, coiling, elaborate and energetic spiral. The spiral does not connect to the ground and seems to hover in space. In future works the artist returns to the theme of *Spiral Woman* several times using different materials, such as bronze. You could also compare *Spiral Woman* to *Arch of Hysteria* 1993 where a male body under extreme tension dangles in space.

Discussion

Women's Work/Men's Work?

Sewing and working with fabric has been traditionally thought of as 'women's work'. There are many male fashion designers whose reputations do not seem to diminish as a result of them working with sewing. But how many male artists use fabric and stitching as their main medium? (Find out about the work of Christo, Claes Oldenburg and Yinka Shonibare). Also, discuss the different cultures that you know about where both men and women sew. Talk about whether they get equal credit for their labour.

The artist has said 'If I am in a positive mood, I'm interested in joining. If I'm in a negative mood, I will cut things'. Similarly, she thinks of carving and modelling as destructive and assembling as reparative. Her whole persona is the tool that makes the work. Discuss your own experience of making things, whether in art, cooking, gardening, DIY or even dancing. How does the way you feel influence what you do, and why?

Activities

Finding Shapes for Feelings

In the gallery, find works from the mid to late 1960s such as *Amoeba*, *Germinal* or *Avenza*. Choose a sculpture and make a list of words to describe its shape. Words such as nubby, lumpy, stumpy might fit. Make up your own onomatopoeic words, such as currumpy, flumpity etc. Compose a short text, rhyme or poem to include as many of your words as you can. Recite or perform your word pieces directly in front of the sculptures.

Follow-up activity

Back at your setting try making 'shapes to describe feelings' using clay, soft modelling stuff or papier-maché. Perhaps start off by making more lists of words to describe a wide range of different feelings. Experiment with lighting your work with desk lamps or torches to create atmosphere and to reveal shadows and highlights.

Word Links

Take this list of words into the exhibition:

Stack, balance, join, pile, rest, combine, thread, link, fold, stretch, mould.

Ask students to look closely at the work on display and to find a link between each word and works of art. Explain what the link is and how it applies.

Personages

Find a busy place, for example the playground at lunchtime or a public square. Make very quick sketches of people using outlines and contours only. Use 'loose' materials such as charcoal, thick felt pen or brush and ink. Your drawings should show how individual each person is. Draw groups, pairs or solo figures. You could go on to work from these sketches to make sculptures using cardboard, wood off-cuts or rolled-up newspapers or wire. Use different scales and arrange your figures around a room in different combinations.

Artist Links

David Smith made many sculptures using a pared down, abstract language for the human form. See *Sawhead* 1933 (online at www.tate.org.uk).

Eva Hesse used organic and geometric shapes and a range of soft materials. Many have claimed she uses a distinctly 'female language' in her art. See for example *Addendum* 1967 (online at www.tate.org.uk).

Eileen Agar's *Angel of Anarchy* 1936–40 (online at www.tate.org.uk) has links to fetish objects and an interesting use of found materials.

Theme Four: Stories and Symbols

Louise Bourgeois's life span is just five years short of 100 years. She has a vast resource of experience and knowledge to draw upon. Her own life is the source of some imagery (see Theme One: The Relationship between Art and Everyday Life). Other sources are periods in art history as diverse as the Baroque, Art Nouveau (both architecture and decorative arts), the nineteenth-century movement Symbolism and the late twentieth-century movement Cubism. The works of other artists such as Edvard Munch, Francis Bacon, Paul Gauguin and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, as well as the architect Le Corbusier, have been cited by the artist as 'favourites'. Writing and literature also inform her art. Robert Storr in his essay *Louise Bourgeois: l'esprit geometrique* states that, 'she must be counted among the most inquisitive and best informed artists of her generation'. However, the artist deliberately chose not to fit into any particular group or movement and as a result her work remains highly individual.

Many of the motifs and symbols found in her work can be linked to their appearance in tales and fairy stories. For example, spirals, circles, loops and labyrinthine structures recur frequently in her drawing and sculpture. In classical myths and stories a character often undertakes a journey of a circular nature as part of their personal discovery (eg Dante or Theseus). Fairy tales feature towers and tall buildings which confound and challenge the protagonist.

In the fabulous towers *I Do, I Undo, I Redo*, created by Bourgeois for the opening of Tate Modern in 2000, the viewer was able to climb stairs inside a steel tower (the tallest being 14 metres high) to emerge onto a viewing platform. Events and characters in fairy stories or fables fall outside the solidly rational world of logic and reason. In the same way, works by Bourgeois occupy the space of the imaginary and the fantastical as shapes metamorphose, melt and flow.



Fée Couturière 1963, Bronze, painted white, 100.3 x 57.2 x 57.2 cm, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Photo: Eeva Inkeri

Fée Couturière translates as *Fairy Dressmaker*. The white sculpture made of bronze hangs like a pod with bulges and half hidden entrances. At its peak there is a partly hinted at architectural form. Is it a house or a castle? The whole work closely resembles a carved out pumpkin and the entrances, exits and apertures resemble empty eyes and mouths. The large, dark spaces at the base, like a mouth or wound, open to emit a ghostly, silent scream. Compare the form of this work to several others titled *Lair*.



Blind Man's Buff 1984, White marble on wooden base, 92.7 x 88.9 x 63.5cm, The Cleveland Museum of Art, Leonard C. Hanna Jr. Fund 2002.29
Photo Allan Finkelman

1974, a menacing, gleaming marble form, hovers on the edge of definition; neither entirely female nor male (yet multi-breasted), neither human nor animal. The title evokes a children's game in which a person wearing a blindfold has to chase others round in a circle. The person who is caught then takes their turn with the blindfold.

Discussion

Discuss fairy stories that the group might be familiar with (either through reading, TV or film). Often a character will switch, change or morph into something or someone else (for example, in *Beauty and the Beast*, *Shrek* or *Frankenstein*). Choose a character and list their key qualities. Then make the qualities into a sculpture. What materials would you need to use to communicate the qualities of the character?

Discuss how contemporary media such as soaps and docu-soaps deal with similar themes to those found in fairy tales, such as overcoming tragedy, enduring personal tests and challenges, and transforming failure into success.

Read or find out about the Greek myth of Oedipus. The powerful themes in this story have been a reference point for a lot of the artist's later sculptures. Also, research the classical myths involving Penelope, Ariadne and Arachne and relate these stories to the images and ideas in Bourgeois's art.

Activities

A Personal Motif

A photographic portrait of the artist from 1946 shows her with extremely long, straight hair reaching to the base of her spine. Many of the figures in her drawings and prints also have long hair (*Fallen Woman*, *Femme Maison*, 1946–9 for example). A personal motif is incorporated into a symbolic language (look into the story of Rapunzel to develop this theme). Which of your personal attributes could you embellish and develop into a symbol? Create an imaginary image of yourself in drawing, painting or photography and incorporate your personal motif.

When each person in the group has made a portrait and they are displayed as a group, can people work out who belongs to which drawing?

In the gallery

Make sketches and notes of any images and objects from the exhibition that you think are symbolic. For example, a mirror, a hand without a body, a glass vessel, a knife. When the group has collected several examples, discuss how the symbolic objects might fit into a fairy tale or fable that you know about. What does the symbol mean? How does it work in the story? How does it appear in the artist's work? Is there a connection between the story and the artist's work?

Follow up-activity

Use your sketches and notes from the gallery visit to make up an entirely new fairy story using the symbols you collected. You could make props, write a script and perform the story for another group to watch. Make sure you find a really good title for the story.

Artist Links

Constantin Brancusi made many versions of a work titled *The Endless Column*, one of which from 1938 is 30 metres high. This work influenced many artists.

Katharina Fritsch is a contemporary artist whose sculpture and installation mixes fairy tales and popular culture with kitsch.

As a member of the surrealists, Max Ernst's work is rich in symbols and stories. See for example *Forest and Dove* 1927 (online at www.tate.org.uk).