Living in New York during the mid 1940s, when World War II cut her off from friends and family in France, Louise Bourgeois created vertical wood sculptures that she exhibited as loosely grouped, solitary figures. These objects represented sorely missed people and her own loneliness and isolation in America. In 1948, Bourgeois made the first of five variations of The Blind Leading The Blind as pairs of legs which, unable to stand alone, were bound together for strength by lintel like boards. The figures appear to walk tentatively on tiptoe under the boards, the weight of which presses down on the individual pairs even as it holds them together as an uneasy collective. One of the artist’s most abstract works, this sculpture takes on an anthropomorphic presence by resting directly on the floor and sharing the viewer’s space.

In 1949, after being called before the House Un-American Activities Committee, Bourgeois named the series The Blind Leading the Blind. The title paraphrases Jesus’s description of the hypocritical Pharisees and scribes (Matthew 15:14): “Let them alone, they are blind guides. And if a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit.” Exposing the folly of untested belief, unscrutinized ritual, and regimented thinking, the parable has been used as a subject by other artists. This work and others by Bourgeois exemplify the universal and timeless theme of individuality within a societal structure.

1. Can you see the “pairs of legs?” How many are there?
2. Can you imagine this sculpture moving or “walking” on its legs? Why or why not? In which direction do you think this group is moving? Why?
3. Why do you think the artist painted this sculpture pink?
In 1932, while studying mathematics at the Sorbonne in her native city of Paris, Louise Bourgeois determined that she wanted to be an artist. She studied at various schools, including the École du Louvre, Académie des Beaux Arts, Académie Julian, and atelier Fernand Léger. She became an acquaintance of Marcel Duchamp and spent time in the studios of many Surrealist artists. In 1938, Bourgeois married American art historian Robert Goldwater and permanently relocated to New York City where she continued her studies at the Art Students League. At first an engraver and painter, she had turned her attention to sculpture by the 1940s. Bourgeois’s early sculptures were composed of groupings of abstract and organic shapes, often carved from wood, and reflected the influence of the European Surrealists who immigrated to the United States in the 1930s and 40s. 

*Personnages*, her sculpture series representing family and friends in France with whom she had lost contact during World War II, was made of scavenged wood, which she painted. Continuing to make wood constructions through the 1950s, Louise Bourgeois married the grotesque with the beautiful in work that is sometimes aggressive and disturbing, yet often defines the fragility of relationships. By the 1960s Bourgeois began to execute her work in rubber, bronze, and stone. The pieces themselves became larger and more referential to what has become the dominant theme of her work—her childhood. Bourgeois has stated “*My childhood has never lost its magic, it has never lost its mystery, and it has never lost its drama.*” Her work symbolically functions as a vocabulary by which to understand and remake the history of her relationship with her parents and her early family life. The anthropomorphic references of her pieces—female and male bodies remade—are charged with sexuality and innocence and the interplay between the two.