



Betty Woodman: Works in Clay

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Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art

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Betty Woodman's astonishing ceramics conjure up myriad associations: ancient Chinese vessel forms, ninth-century T'ang Dynasty glazes, Japanese screen prints, Persian textiles, Italian majolica ware, Greek and Minoan and Etruscan vases.

Her inventive shapes and surfaces are always in balance, always equally interesting. Her application of paint is unabashedly decorative and sensual, but one senses no less intellectual rigor than if she had employed the most systematic scheme for surface treatment.

And to top it all off, the woman has a sense of humor.

A vase with a dipped handle is named *Veronica Lake*; its languorously curved handle suggests the signature hairstyle of the glamorous 1940s movie star. The three pieces that make up *Iraklion Muscle Men* have angled handles at their necks that mimic a bodybuilder showing off his biceps.

Now widely acclaimed, exhibited and represented in the collections of major world museums, Elizabeth Abrahams Woodman began her career as a production potter, turning out accomplished but utilitarian teapots, casseroles and flowerpots. Born in Norwalk, Conn., in 1930, she attended the School for American Craftsmen at Alfred University in western New York State from 1948-1950, and then spent a year in Italy working with Giorgio Ferrero.

After her return from Italy, she worked and taught in the Boston area, where she met her future husband, painter George Woodman, a student at Harvard University. The Woodmans lived for two years in Albuquerque, where George pursued graduate studies in art, and in 1956 they settled in Boulder, Colo., with their infant son, Charles. A daughter, Francesca, was born in 1958.

For the next 15 years, Betty made functional pottery that she fired in backyard kilns built by George, who became a professor in the fine arts department at the University of Colorado. (Betty Woodman eventually became a full professor there herself, in 1979.) She supervised the city's pottery program, and twice a year she invited the public to her studio in the shadow of the Rocky



Passion Flower, shelf, vase and flowers, 1987, 34" x 14" x 7 1/2", Collection Dean E. Thompson

Mountain foothills for pre-Christmas and spring sales.

In 1973, Betty started applying color to her pots herself; before that, George had done the painting.

Although at times she preferred to leave her surfaces plain, she proved to be a born painter. Taking brush in hand freed her imagination; she splashed on vivid, exuberant hues. She let go of function, but did not banish it from her work: it stays on as a memory, a vestige of a tradition that she very much continues to draw from and work within.

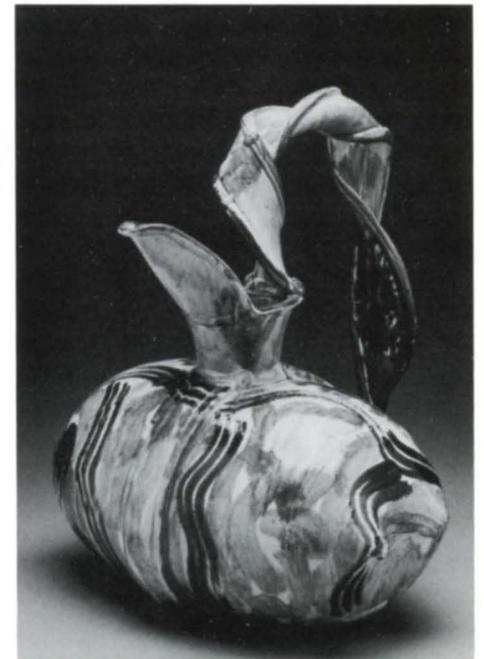
"I'm still interested in the idea of function. My work is about function, there's an implied function," Woodman told an interviewer in 1990.¹ Some pieces truly are functional: A person could daintily sip coffee from a Woodman cup, or drop wildflowers into a Woodman vase. But actual usage is almost beside the point. The large scale of Woodman's work – her new *Still Life Vases* are up to 4-feet high – emphasizes that these pieces are not meant to blend comfortably into anybody's daily routine. Viewers are nonetheless never allowed to forget the original meaning of these vessels. Woodman has set a distinct reference point and forced herself to stay within shouting distance of it. The poet Robert Frost, who compared writing free verse to playing tennis without a net, would no doubt approve of the way discipline and

absolute clarity of intent have enabled Woodman to fully explore her art.

Woodman's pieces almost all start with a central core form, most often a vase or pitcher. As if by centrifugal force, the shape flings itself outward; handles flatten into flanges and spread into buttresses. Things come to a point, but rarely do they meet at right angles, and edges are more likely curved than straight. Although Woodman's pieces aren't figurative in any representational sense, the outstretched appendages of her *Kimono Vases* are easily likened to arms. Her work is often described as "gestural," both because her spontaneous brushstrokes call to mind abstract expressionist painting and, more literally, because the vases resemble dancers striking poses, elegantly saluting each other and their audience.

Beginning in the mid-1980s, Woodman made a series of vases that contain their own clay "bouquets" of flowers. *Passion Flower* (1987) is from this series. Its bouquet doesn't imitate the appearance of real flowers. It looks more like a colorful cloth napkin folded and tucked inside a wine glass, the scarf the magician is pulling out of a top hat, the first flare of a torch. The allusion to flowers – and therefore, to function – is nonetheless effectively and cleverly made.

Another significant thing about the bouquet vases is that they are meant to



Quixotic Bird, pillow pitcher, 1986, 22" x 20" x 18", Collection Mrs. Francis Mesker



Still Life Vase, no. 17, 1991, 42 1/2" x 39" x 10 1/4", Courtesy The Greenberg Gallery, St. Louis

sit on shelves attached to the wall; they have a definite front and back. In this way, they align themselves more with painting, which traditionally has been hung on a wall and seen from the front only, than with sculpture, which was usually intended to be freestanding in space. The same is true of *Kachina* (1985), in which a vase with a false front (like a stage set) sits on a narrow wall shelf; its handles are behind it, flattened and fastened to the wall. In other pieces, Woodman takes the three-dimensional form of a pitcher and turns it into an outline or silhouette; she makes shadows tangible and timeless by cutting them out of clay and positioning them where an object's real shadow would fall.

All this is wonderful and fascinating. It suggests an interest in illusion that is more common among painters than sculptors – especially among sculptors who started as potters. At the same time, painting itself, the pure joy of brush stroke, has become increasingly important in Woodman's work. In her most recent works, such as the pair of vases titled *Orpheus* (1991) and especially her *Still Life Vases*, painting acts more independently of form than ever before. It is more counterpoint – or even contradiction – than complement.

The works for which she is perhaps best known, her extraordinary pillow pitchers, also thrive on contradiction. The

bases of the pitchers are plump and puffed up like balloons or down-filled pillows, but they are made, after all, of clay and not fabric. Woodman invites the viewer to consider the implied contradictions of stuffed and hollow, soft and hard. The twisted handles and beaklike spouts are reminiscent of a type of ancient Chinese pottery known as "k'uei" (and probably other antecedents as well). With glazes Woodman adds entirely new sets of associations, say, the brown, yellow and green that is characteristic of Chinese T'ang Dynasty ceramics.

Woodman does not set out to copy a particular T'ang Dynasty piece, however; she's more interested in recreating its spirit, in symbolizing or signifying rather than replicating. Although occasionally she will look to a specific model, her influences are usually more general and something short of deliberate.

"I get ideas from all kinds of things," Woodman has said. "Certainly I get ideas from all kinds of art."² Moving each year between her studios in Boulder, New York City and Antella, Italy, just outside Florence, Woodman spends a great deal of time sketching in museums, steeping herself in art and architecture for hours and hours. When she clears her mind and enters the studio with a good idea of what she wants to make, she has within herself a compendium of ceramics history, a tremendous bank of visual

knowledge on which to draw. She borrows from it liberally and without conscious deliberation: "I think I usually do something first and make the connection later. It's often not that I look at something and then go home and do it. It's that I do something and look at it and it reminds me of something else and then I may choose to pursue that."³

Changes may also come about due to the kind of clay she is using, which can vary considerably depending on whether she is working in the United States or Italy. Glazes are thought out ahead of time as far as color scheme but are open to suggestion as to pattern: "I usually have in mind glaze as I make the piece, but not necessarily the way it will be painted."⁴

Intelligence and delight are the common denominators of anything Betty Woodman makes. With thousands of years of art history behind her, and a keen awareness of the world around her, she continues to fashion objects that are of a tradition and yet wholly her own.

*Laura Caruso,
independent art critic/curator,
Boulder, Colo.*

Notes:

1. "Betty Woodman: Thinking Out Loud," videotaped interview with John Perreault, 1990.
2. Videotaped interview with Perreault.
3. Videotaped interview with Perreault.
4. Written response to author's questions, July 1991.

Acknowledgments

We are extremely grateful to Betty Woodman for her enthusiastic cooperation in organizing this exhibition.

In addition, we extend special thanks to Sissy Thomas, director, The Greenberg Gallery, for all her assistance and support. We are also deeply indebted to the numerous private collectors who, through their generous loan of works, made this show possible.

Finally, we would like to express warm thanks to Laura Caruso for her fine essay on Woodman's work.

*Bruce Hartman, director
Gallery of Art*



Kimono Vases "Plum Blossom" (view B), 1991, 38 1/2" x 44" x 9 1/2", Courtesy The Greenberg Gallery, St. Louis

Checklist of the Exhibition

1. *Quixotic Bird*, pillow pitcher, 1986, glazed earthenware, 22" x 20" x 18", Collection Mrs. Francis Mesker
2. *Tang Dynasty*, pillow pitcher, 1981, glazed earthenware, 13 3/4" high, Collection Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Werner
3. *Persian Pillow Pitcher*, 1980, glazed earthenware, 13 1/2" high, Collection Mr. and Mrs. Edwin R. Thomas Jr.
4. *Etruscan Pillow Pitcher*, 1979, earthenware, 18" x 19" x 13", Collection The Nerman Family Collection
5. *Blue Swirl*, pillow pitcher, 1986, glazed earthenware, 20 1/2" x 25 1/2" x 21", Collection Mr. Frederick Beihl
6. *Pillow Pitcher*, 1981, glazed earthenware, 22" x 13" x 19", Collection Mr. and Mrs. John L. Hoffman
7. *Passion Flower*, shelf, vase and flowers, 1987, glazed earthenware, 34" x 14" x 7 1/2", Collection Dean E. Thompson
8. *Kachina*, shelf, vase and handles, 1985, glazed earthenware, 30" x 20" x 9", Courtesy The Greenberg Gallery, St. Louis
9. *Water Lily*, shelf, vase and flowers, 1989, glazed earthenware, 34" x 9" x 23", Collection Hallmark Fine Art Collection, Hallmark Cards Inc, Kansas City, Mo.
10. *Bony Breadstick Server*, 1981, glazed earthenware, 7 3/4" x 31 1/2" x 9 1/4", Collection Mr. and Mrs. Edwin R. Thomas Jr.
11. *Exaggerated Executive Letter Holder*, 1981, glazed earthenware, 5 1/2" x 35" x 9", Collection Mr. and Mrs. William Nussbaum
12. *Dark Falette Mussel Server*, 1985, glazed earthenware, 8 1/2" x 28 1/2" x 9", Collection Mr. and Mrs. Donn Lipton
13. *Parrot Caffè Latte Tray*, tray with two pitchers, 1986, glazed earthenware, 10" x 28 1/4" x 17", Collection Dean E. Thompson
14. *Sunrise Vase and Shadow*, 1986, glazed earthenware, 27" x 22" x 11", Courtesy The Greenberg Gallery, St. Louis
15. *Ostia, Italy*, Italian vase and stand, 1986, glazed earthenware, 26 1/2" x 17" x 7", Collection Dean E. Thompson
16. *Kimono Vases "Plum Blossom,"* 1991, glazed earthenware, 38 1/2" x 44" x 9 1/2", Courtesy The Greenberg Gallery, St. Louis
17. *Still Life Vase, no. 17*, 1991, glazed earthenware, 42 1/2" x 39" x 10 1/4", Courtesy The Greenberg Gallery, St. Louis
18. *Okinawan (Triptych Vases)*, 1991, glazed earthenware, 34" x 64" x 9", Courtesy The Greenberg Gallery, St. Louis
19. *San Paolo (Winged Vase)*, 1991, glazed earthenware, 21" x 24" x 11", Courtesy The Greenberg Gallery, St. Louis
20. *Orpheus (Diptych Vases)*, 1991, glazed earthenware, 25 1/2" x 44" x 6 1/2", Courtesy The Greenberg Gallery, St. Louis

Cover: *Kimono Vases "Plum Blossom" (view A)*, 1991, 38 1/2" x 44" x 9 1/2", Courtesy The Greenberg Gallery, St. Louis