

Museum show embraces as art ceramic works once called 'craft'

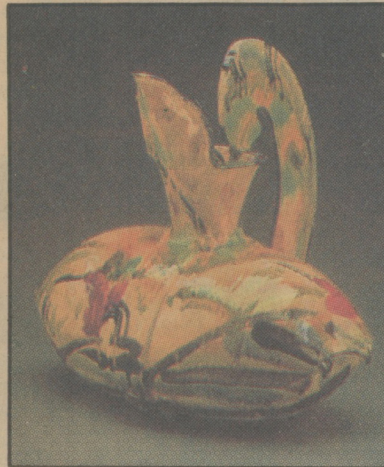
By OWEN McNALLY
Courant Staff Writer

Betty Woodman, a ceramist, was quite cozy in the early 1970s, basking amid her hard-earned success as a potter in the craft world.

"I had no interest in being part of the art world then, and was quite happy to be part of the craft world," Woodman said from her home in Boulder, Colo.

"That's where I belonged then," said Woodman, who early in her career had helped support her family by peddling her pottery.

But that was before the fine arts community broke with tradition and embraced her innovative works. Over the past dozen years, Woodman's works, with their expressionistic shapes and brilliant painterly colors, have been accepted into the permanent collections of such prestigious arts institutions as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the



■ Pillow pitchers are among Woodman's glazed earthenware on display at the Wadsworth Atheneum exhibit.



Photos courtesy of the Max Protech Gallery

■ The fine arts world has discovered Betty Woodman's innovative pottery.

Please see Atheneum, Page A12

Atheneum exhibit highlights ceramist's innovative, brilliant pottery

Continued from Page A8

Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum.

In recognition of the 62-year-old Norwalk native's giant leap from crafts fairgrounds to fine arts salons, Hartford's Wadsworth Atheneum is presenting a 40-piece retrospective of her work. The show opened Sunday and runs through Aug. 23 in the Matrix Gallery, the museum's venue for cutting-edge art.

"I had fought long and hard to get a place in the male-dominated craft world. In some ways, I was lucky that the first wave of feminism came along, and men were embarrassed that they never had a woman in a show, so I got invited," said Woodman.

Traditionally, the fine arts world discounted ceramists, dismissing them as mere crafts people.

But more open attitudes during the 1970s about craft helped lower

ancient elitist boundaries.

Woodman's feats of clay have since transformed her into a global village potter whose works have been exhibited throughout the United States, Europe and Japan.

The turning point in her career occurred when she and her husband, George, moved to New York City in the 1970s, just as a growing interest in pattern and decoration was bringing new-found acceptance to craft work in fine arts galleries.

The Woodmans moved from Boulder to New York, thinking the pattern art boom would be a big boost for George, who had been doing pattern and decorative painting for 15 years.

Ironically, it was Betty's career that profited most from the move.

"The interest in patterns and decorations helped break down that hierarchy of high art vs. low art. I got to know more artists who got to know my work and spread the word. I joined the Max Protech Gallery, a

fine arts gallery open to exhibiting a variety of non-traditional works as art, including architectural drawings and furniture," Woodman said.

Even today, she said, there are still signs of a patronizing attitude toward ceramics.

"It's there. Some people do look down on it. I don't have a lot of problems with my work, but it isn't an issue that has disappeared."

Woodman's ceramic pitchers, vases and a variety of vessels glory in exaggerated forms, as in her celebrated "pillow pitchers" — amusing, bulging, bulbous, sensuous ceramic pillows. Her sculpturelike clay pieces are done in brilliant glazes, exuding the vigor and freedom of abstract expressionist paintings.

"What Woodman has done," said Andrea Miller-Keller, curator of the Matrix show, "is to push the boundaries of ceramics."

"She straddles the worlds of art

and craft, crossing over to art by being adamantly craftful," says Miller-Keller, the Atheneum's curator of contemporary art.

"What I do," Woodman said, "is a marriage between painting and sculpture. I see myself as an artist, and at one point saw myself as a potter."

"But I don't see myself in that craft context today. I don't feel superior to that or believe that I've somehow moved to a higher elevation of being."

"I just don't think the kinds of issues my work is involved with are the kinds of issues most craft work deals with," she said.

The Woodmans, a mobile art couple, divide their time between their homes and studios in Boulder, New York and an old farmhouse outside Florence, Italy.

"We work in separate studios and meet during the day for meals:

breakfast, lunch, which is very important, and dinner at 10. In Italy, George works in the old hay barn while I work in the wine cellar.

"We critique each other's works candidly, travel together, go to museums and the opera together, and run and swim together. We've learned to work next to each other and not bother each other very much," she said.

"*Betty Woodman/Matrix 117*" runs through Aug. 23 in the Wadsworth Atheneum's Matrix Gallery, 600 Main St., Hartford. Hours: Tuesday-Sunday, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Admission: adults, \$3; students and senior citizens, \$1.50; free to museum members and children under 13; free all day Thursday and from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Saturday. Woodman will lecture May 31 at 2 p.m. Her talk and a reception that follows are free with museum admission. Call: 278-2670.



■ Betty Woodman
 Ceramist