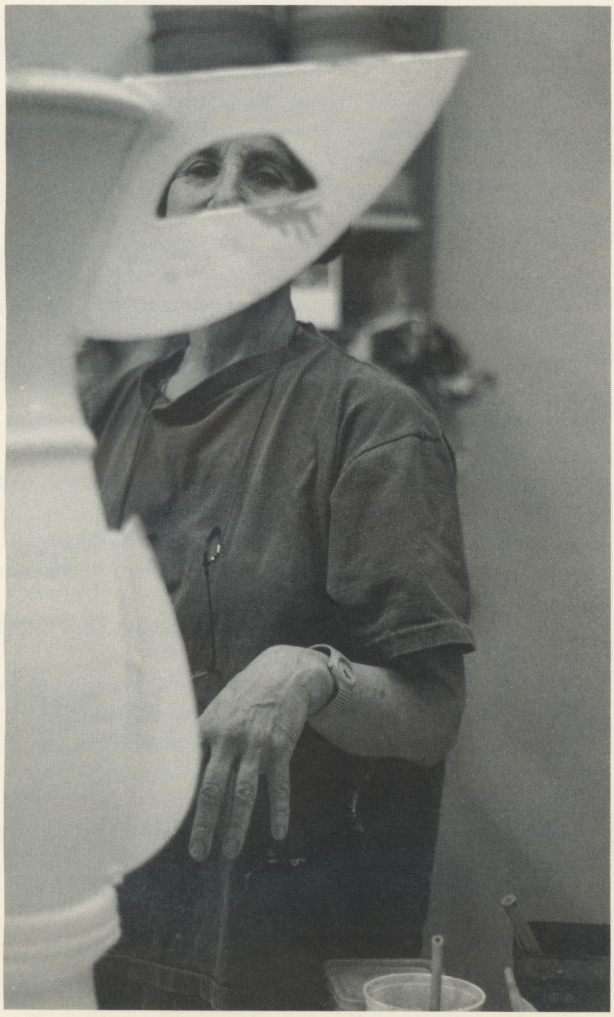
Wadsworth Atheneum
HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT

Betty Woodman / MATRIX 119

May 24 - August 23, 1992



Betty Woodman Photo: George Woodman

MATRIX is supported in part by funds from Aetna Life & Casualty, the Lannan Foundation, and by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency.

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During the past two decades, Betty Woodman has moved beyond her reputation as a leading ceramist to earn the interest of a broad audience dazzled by her inventions with form and her expansive, painterly use of color. She liberates clay into sensuous folds and bulges, impudent extensions, and a playful, informed dialogue with the history of Eastern and Western decorative arts traditions.

While Woodman retains, to be sure, her worthy craft credentials, she has moved gracefully beyond the traditional domain of craft. Her ambitious experimentation has produced a series of innovations that are conceptually daring and aesthetically bold.

This exhibition, Woodman's first one-person show in New England, includes a select overview of more than three dozen works, allowing Atheneum visitors to see the rich array of historical references, from Etruscan and Minoan to Tang, Majolica and Sèvres, that Woodman has so frequently incorporated into her pieces. The exhibition presents two of her well-known "Pillow Pitchers" and a number of the brightly glazed, multi-part constructions, including both "Shelf, Vase, and Handles" and "Shelf, Vase, and Bouquet" wall pieces. There is also a selection of porcelains from her four visits as a guest artist to the Atelier Experimental de Recherche et de Création at the Manufacture National de Sèvres, France, and a small group of stoneware vases that she made in Italy many years ago. Also featured are examples of Woodman's newest works whose grand scale gives her the opportunity to paint even more extensively than on earlier, smaller pieces.

A quick survey of the objects in this exhibition, which represent but a small portion of Woodman's prodigious output, suggests that her work has changed in dramatic ways over the years. Nevertheless, certain key attributes have remained consistent. Most noteworthy is her distinctive aesthetic -- baroque, expressive and contemporary. It makes each of the pieces immediately identifiable as hers alone.

Woodman always has planted herself proudly and unequivocally within the ceramics tradition. Through travel and research, she has vigorously mined that tradition's long, rich, world-wide history for information and inspiration. As a young woman living in Boston, coming from a socialist background, she began her career "with the intentions of being a folk potter, making ordinary things for ordinary people."[1] (She herself notes the irony in her extravagantly labor-intensive efforts at Sèvres.) Though her work now is considered far from ordinary (and often is called "extraordinary"), it is always based, even if only theoretically, on the idea of a utilitarian vessel -- a vase, pot, pitcher, cup, or bowl.

Furthermore, her pieces always begin on the potter's wheel, and Woodman endeavors to keep the evidence of familiar clay processes clearly visible in the final statement.

Despite her strong affiliation with and affection for these ancient practices, Woodman is best known for her innovations. As we can see in every effort -- from the early pots and the "Pillow Pitchers" to her recent "Still Life Vases" -- Woodman relentlessly challenges the limits of the medium. Says Woodman, "I like to handle the material myself, so I can take it right to the edge."[2]

Exhibited here publicly for the first time are nine pots made by Woodman in Italy in 1966 and decorated by her husband, George Woodman, a widely recognized painter, photographer, and teacher. They not only represent an important development in the artist's approach at that time but also embody many of the essential elements that characterize her work to this day. These stoneware

Orchard, 1987
Photo: George Woodman

pots, made of a special clay from the medieval town of LaBourne, France, are loosely inspired by her study of Etruscan and Roman vessels in places such as the archeological museum in Florence. She parses the formal aspects of these pots, often delineating and accentuating foot, body, belly, neck, or lips. Of particular interest to Woodman at this time was the Mediterranean tradition of "using the handle as a way to extend the form."[3] (Consider, in this light, both her "Pillow Pitchers" and "Vase, Shelf, and Handles" wall pieces of two decades later.) Both Woodman's formal analysis of the parts and her free-wheeling assembly and exaggeration of these parts are central to much of her subsequent work.

Also evident in these early pots is Woodman's life-long commitment to her work's being "about the material it is made of and about the process of making it."[4] Woodman is clear-thinking and articulate about her work, but her passion lies in the doing.

She loves the physicality of handling the materials, of making the work. Eschewing commercial preparations, she formulates her own clays, slips, and glazes. Knowing from experience that "if you use a different material, you will soon find yourself making different pieces,"[5] she will often switch clays and techniques to move herself forward. Although an acknowledged expert, she is interested in what still remains to be learned in the field. She enjoys experimenting, and often her most interesting inventions follow from disappointing "failures."

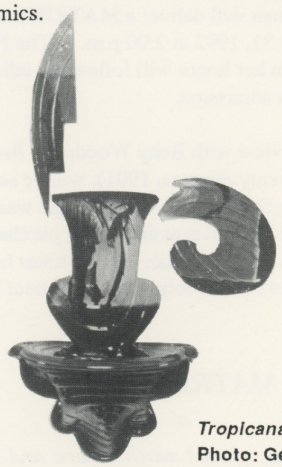
Woodman's work has been hailed for crossing over from ceramics to sculpture. It is important to acknowledge, however, that Woodman sees herself "dealing with painting as much as with sculpture. That is really what ceramics is all about. It's about form and about painting and about painted three-dimensional form."[6] A dynamic tension common to ceramics (and only occasionally

Madame de Pompadour, 1988
Photo: George Woodman

present in sculpture) arises from the fact that painting stresses flatness while a clay form is volumetric. Woodman energetically exploits this contradiction in her recent work, such as the triptych **Athens** (1991), the diptych **Zeus** (1991), and the two **Still Life Vases** (1991). Each of these works is large and distinctly two-sided. Their ample scale gives Woodman an increased area to paint, and the bipartite format allows what Woodman sees as "two chances."[7] She delights in how surprisingly different the two sides can be. But even as she expands her opportunities for painting (**Zeus**, for instance, includes specific reference to Matisse.), she continues to reaffirm her ties to the ceramic tradition. These pieces often include bold, black silhouettes of vessels, or what she has called "a pot within a pot."[8] (This same notion, by the way, can be seen literally rendered in several of her early pots from 1966.)

These recent works are "made, cut and assembled,"[9] using, on

occasion, epoxy resin. With epoxy Woodman takes a step away from the clay tradition and flirts with the history of constructivist sculpture, which features whole works pieced together from clearly visible parts. Of greater significance to Woodman in this regard, however, is the issue of where in the art-making process her decisions take place. With clay, all decisions are usually made before the piece is fired. In several earlier large installation pieces and in a work such as **Ballustrade Vase #21** (1991), she has enjoyed the liberty of assembling the pieces after they are fired. She is currently searching for ways to incorporate this flexibility into her free-standing work. We see the artist again at a crossroads both conceptually and in terms of exploring the limits of her medium. Engaging such challenges in her own unique vocabulary has earned Woodman her reputation as a pioneer in the history of contemporary ceramics.



Tropicana, 1989
Photo: George Woodman

Betty Abrahams Woodman was born in Norwalk, Connecticut in 1930. She attended the School for American Craftsmen at Alfred University in Alfred, New York from 1948 to 1950. She first visited Italy in 1951, and, in 1968, she and her husband bought a small farmhouse in Tuscany. She received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1980 and 1986, and has been a frequent guest artist at the Manufacture de Sèvres in France. She has lectured and exhibited widely both here and abroad. Woodman, a professor in the Fine Arts Department at the University of Colorado, divides her time between New York City, Antella, Italy (near Florence), and Boulder, Colorado, where she and her husband have taught for many years.

Andrea Miller-Keller
Curator of Contemporary Art