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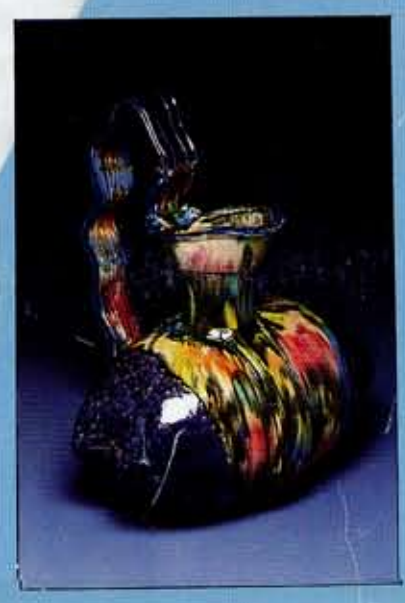
Carpenter's Glass Menagerie

The Woodmans: Pattern and Place



The Real Chair?

Visible City: Philadelphia

Pattern and Place

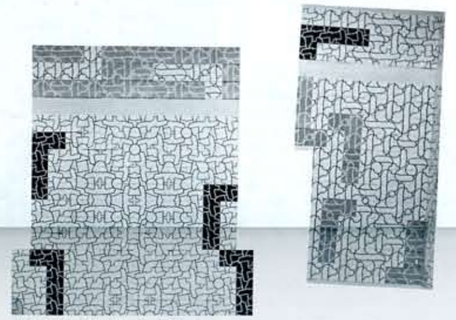
To George and Betty Woodman managing one marriage, two careers, and three houses brings new meaning to the maxim out of chaos comes order.

Gini Sikes

'Impruneta,' three-panel painting

Betty Woodman

The window cells in his New York loft, the furniture in Colorado, and the doors of his Italian studio are painted the same pale blue. George calls the visual motif "one of my little mystifications." Photo: Sharon Lee Ryder.



Ceramic Tile Mural for the Delavan College subway station in Buffalo, New York

Turandot Doorway, silk screen on cotton canvas and satin. Photo: Will Brown.

Aspen Garden Room installation

Three Japanese Ladies Visiting Athens, shadow vases. Photo: Max Protetch Gallery.

Inside her cluttered pottery studio, Betty Woodman searches for space to store her large, decorated pots for the next three months. Clay dust covers the room's furnishings like fresh snow, leaving tell-tale traces on the 54-year-old potter's baggy corduroys and whitening the tops of her rainbow-colored tennis shoes. The faint smell of paint drifts in from husband George's studio, where he uses a hand-held hair dryer on his latest canvas so it might be packed quickly.

The Woodmans are moving—again. The couple is leaving their New York loft for home base in Boulder, in time to teach spring semester at the University of Colorado; in four months they will make their annual summer sojourn to their farmhouse in Florence, Italy. In between packing and answering farewell phone calls, Betty complains to a visitor, "Moving three times a year seems to some like la dolce vita, but it can be horrendous. I have trouble arriving. George has trouble leaving. Together we have six emotional hellos and good-byes a year."

Although their combined incomes from teaching and art are relatively modest, the Woodmans change environments as casually as some people change hairstyles. This flexibility is mirrored in their art. After years of nonfigurative painting, George, 52, has replaced his patterns of geometric shapes with those of flowers and human forms. In the United States Betty creates bright, sometimes garish-colored pots; in Italy she shifts to monochromatic glazes, adapting to the clay indigenous to the country.

It has been change, too, in the art world that has lead to their recent suc-

"I don't think my work has changed; my attitude has. My pots have always been sculptural, but once in New York I was consciously aware of art issues."

cess, as both have benefited from the resurgence of ornament. In the early 1980s what has been dubbed "post-modernism" provided an antidote to 1970s' minimalist anorexia: a visual feast of color, pattern, and decoration. These elements became evident in all the arts—from referential architecture to "new wave" graphic design through neo-expressionist and pattern painting. The interest in decoration also coincided with the acceptance of ceramics as art. For Betty, the better-known Woodman, her pots moved out of crafts fairs and into fine art galleries. Last January her one-woman show at the Max Protetch Gallery in Manhattan received praise from the art press and collectors. Her pieces evoke pots throughout history, from peasant soup bowls to Chinese vases, but with wild shapes and sinuous handles that make them appear the creations of an ancient potter under the influence of hallucinogenic herbs. Since 1980 her prices have leaped from $400 a piece to upwards of $4,000. "We have no trouble asking that for Betty's work," says gallery owner Max Protetch, "and her prices aren't ready to level off yet."

George, who has used patterns in his painting and "paper-tile" installations since the early sixties, has also profited from the art world's new focus. In 1981 the Guggenheim included him in its exhibition "19 Artists: Emergent Americans"; currently he is represented in New York by the Haber-Theodore Gallery. Having just completed a three-wall ceramic tile mural for the Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority in Buffalo, New York, he has been contracted to do similar work for the future United States embassy in Syria.

The decorative character of their art implies a common philosophy as well as stylistic orientation, although Betty and George rarely show together. (An exception was last year's show of married-couples' art at the Bernice Steinbaum Gallery in Manhattan.) "Our work is philosophically compatible," George explains. "We both believe in beauty and don't have a political statement to make." He says they believe in "art to look at"; however, both defy the notion that art must be purely contemplative. Instead, they often create usable art, decorating walls, fireplaces, folding screens, and other furnishings, thus penetrating boundaries between utility and art.

The two have been exploring such borders, albeit not always consciously, since the 1950s and the beginning of their relationship. Both natives of New England, they met while George was majoring in philosophy at Harvard. Because his father had selected a school for his son that didn't teach art, George took painting classes at the Boston Museum School. To indulge an amateur interest in ceramics, he also attended a workshop in Cambridge, where he began dating the teacher, Betty. She recently had finished studying ceramics at the School for American Craftsmen at Alfred University and was intent on becoming a professional potter. "I was more rebellious, more independent than George. Nobody told me where to go to school," she says. "I also had to be practical about making a living as my family didn't have much money. The idea of *not* being an artist was important to me; to be one seemed pretentious. I wanted to be a craftsperson so that I could create objects and somehow serve society—itself a pretentious goal in retrospect."

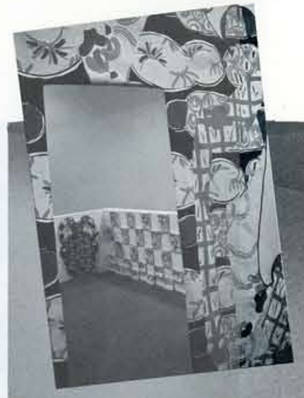
At the time Betty began pottery, American contemporary ceramics was considered a minor art—if an art at all—at best finding its way into museums as a period artifact, along with era furniture and costume. Yet neither Woodman considered Betty's craft inherently inferior to George's painting. "She had an ideology about being a craftsman that captured my imagination," remembers George. "When she started, pottery wasn't nearly as popular as it is now, and it seemed more novel to be a potter than an artist." Betty adds: "There were no debates about which was better, nor competitive feelings. We had compatible interests that overlapped, yet we weren't vying for the same audience. Those who came to my pottery sales weren't the same who viewed his exhibitions."

Although the art world formally welcomed Betty only recently, her work has long contained sculptural elements, largely the result of Italy's influence. She first spent a year there in 1951, later returning with George on academic scholarships and continuing yearly visits until the couple bought a small farmhouse in Florence in 1968. Italy exposed her to earthenware, the clay found in its countryside. Initially apprenticed under a painter and a sculptor who made pots to earn their living, Betty learned that because the clay matures at a low temperature, its greater ease in firing allows the potter to mold it into sculptural expressions.

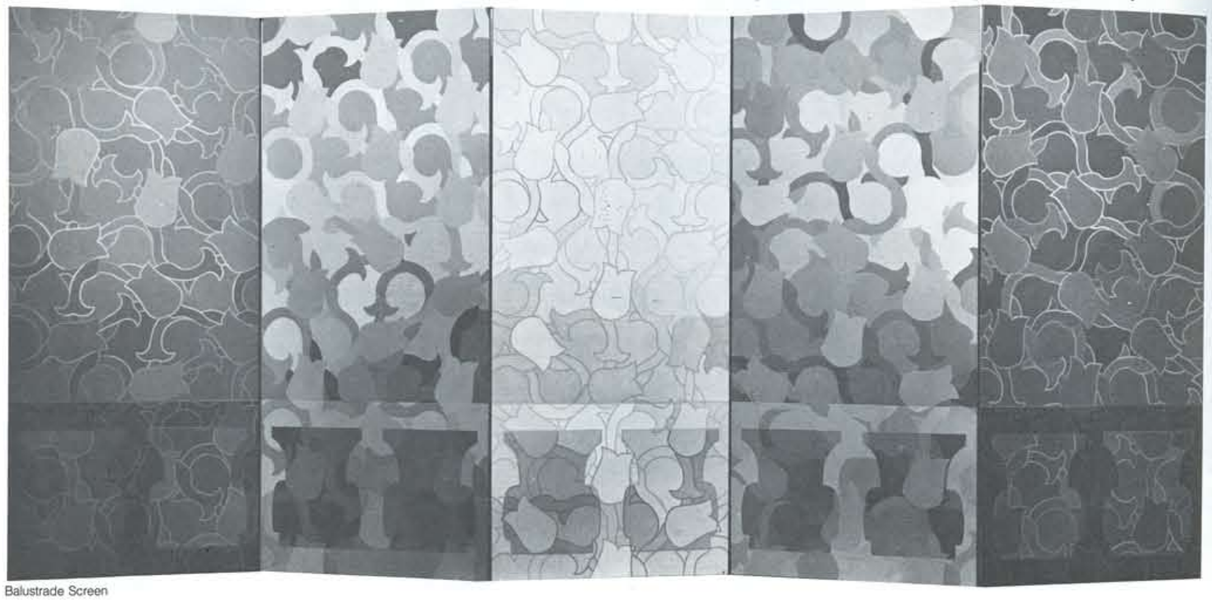
At the Archaeological Museum in Florence, Betty spent hours examining Minoan, Greek, and Etruscan earthenware, yet avoided the material herself, fearing her work would border on mimicry. Instead she preferred stoneware, a high-temperature clay with connotations of function, not art. Making stoneware pots in Italy, however, proved to be as easy as making snowmen in the desert: shelves melted, clays sagged, and glazes turned green. Once the Woodmans moved into the farmhouse—first evicting the cows that had taken lodgings in the living room—Betty set up studio in the wine cellar, where she explored earthenware's possibilities.

She delighted in throwing the pot on the wheel or literally throwing clay on the floor to stretch it into exaggerated shapes, a kind of autonomous activity akin to Jackson Pollock's process of drip painting. Because she was unable to employ the brightly colored glazes she would later use in the United States—Italian kerosene kilns generate carbon monoxide that alters glazes—she concentrated solely on the pot's shape, leaving its surface monochromatic.

For both Betty and George, Italy's influence remains endless, from its ordered landscape to its farms to, of course, its architecture. Painting in a converted hay barn George thinks of the colored stone patterns of Romanesque churches. Betty's work



Various views of the Aspen Garden Room installation



Balustrade Screen

echoes Baroque columns or arches in the ribbony, extravagant handles that run riot down the sides of her vessels.

Italy represents one half of a dichotomy in the Woodmans' lives; Colorado is the other. If the former offers inspiration and a retreat from the workaday routine, the latter provides the stability of a home base, and the steady income that give the Woodmans mobility. They moved there in 1956 because George had accepted a teaching position at the state university. When their two children, Charlie and Francesca, were born, the Woodmans rejected the traditional husband and wife roles that dictated most couple's lives in the 1950s. Betty put the playpen in her studio, allowing her to remain at the wheel while George shared in domestic responsibilities and continued to paint and teach. As a craftsperson, Betty could count on selling her pots and contributing to the family's income; had she been an "artist," she believes she would have had difficulty rationalizing her work. "My pots proved easier to sell than George's paintings," she says. "Even now there is tremendous pressure on female artists. If they don't make money they can't hire a babysitter, and have trouble devoting time to their art. I didn't have that problem because my pots produced money and I could justify what I did. I had the finances for day-care and also had a career that let me stay in the home."

The role she assumed was an independent one for a woman in the fifties and early sixties, yet Betty admits she was more dependent on George's response to her work than he was on hers. "When I moved to Colorado, few people were working in clay. One of the things I have had to deal with most of my life is that I didn't have many people to talk with about my work. Part of the reason I started teaching was so that I could have a conversation about glaze technology with somebody."

George did more than speak with Betty; he collaborated on her pieces for ten years. Originally she had felt uncomfortable decorating her pots and preferred George to paint them, leaving her to concentrate completely on form. The two engaged in a dialogue: she made a statement with the pot's shape and George responded with color. When Betty's pots became so popular that George had to neglect his own work, the situation began to resemble an assembly line to him. "I started to resent the work I was asked to do," he remembers. "Finally, Betty was forced to decorate on her own. I feel my painting her pots freed her to develop a very sculptural consciousness. My bowing out allowed her to approach decoration with a tremendous freshness and vitality." With his usual, gently self-effacing humor he adds: "In a short time I was rendered obsolete."

George had approached decorating pots from a ceramic tradition; for his own work as a painter of patterns since the heyday of minimalism, he viewed art as an activity guided by reason toward rational ends. During an early

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Tile fireplace for house in Amagansett, Woodman collaboration.

Plump Napkin Holder. Photo: Max Protetch Gallery.

Pattern and Place

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stage working with patterns composed of mathematically pure triangles and squares, he wrote in an essay: "Pattern may be the lifeblood of decoration, but in turn, its life is founded on the power of the mind . . . It is radically different from more familiar psychological aspects of art production such as emotion or desire. Patterns can not be willed or felt into existence."

From painting patterns on canvas George went to creating them out of paper tiles. He devised tile designs that work from principles similar to those used in American quilts; he talks about mirroring techniques, grids, and the use of positive and negative spaces. He positioned abstracted jigsaw shapes on each hand-painted square so that the lines of a neighboring square connected no matter how the tiles were placed. The result—a mind-boggling number of compositional possibilities. These tile installations mirrored the belief of mathematicians that patterns are a manifestation of order in the universe. To balance the intellectual, logical quality of his work, George says he paid closer attention to color.

George's work led the Woodmans to move to New York when the pattern movement surfaced there in the late seventies. He had been working in patterns for 15 years—he even dreamed in them—and the late art critic Amy Golden was showing interest in his work. With Betty's encouragement they traded their home in Colorado for a loft in New York for the fall of 1978. Although George says Betty came to New York solely to keep him company and had instigated the move without thoughts of her own success, the city proved more receptive to her pots than it did to his paintings. She met other female artists and, for the first time, began to think consciously about ceramics as art. For George, ironically, the experience was disillusioning: "I wanted to make contacts and find a gallery to show my work. When that didn't happen immediately I left, trying to shake off the experience like a dog shaking off water. When I returned, it was more for Betty's sake."

On the wall of the Woodmans' Chelsea loft is a poster that George designed, announcing Betty's last pottery sale in Boulder. That sale marked her decision to cease production pottery and create one-of-a-kind pieces; soon afterward the Woodmans bought a space in New York where they now spend each autumn. "I don't think my work changed; my attitude did," Betty explains. "I have never done simple things with my pots. Some have always been elaborate, sculptural. But once in New York I was more consciously aware of art issues. This happened concurrently with the galleries' interest in ceramics."

Her recent pots explore ideas intrinsic to modern painting, such as illusion and reality. In one series the pots cast a "shadow"; that is, placed behind each is a flat ceramic piece that vaguely echoes the form of the original. These pots also deal with ceramic history—their shapes evoke Greek vessels and their turquoise and gold colors suggest Islamic glazes. Yet despite the different levels on which her pots work, Betty's art is accessible to those viewers not highly knowledgeable in either art or ceramics. "You don't have to be an intellectual to appreciate Betty's work," says Max Protetch, whose gallery represents the potter in Manhattan. "People respond to it in an instinctual way. I don't think anyone would be intimidated by it."

Betty's early supporters, however, might be intimidated by the rise in price. For Betty herself, the new cost presents a double bind: though price doesn't legitimize objects as art, it is still the prime barometer of their acceptance. On the other hand, its owner will not likely consider an expensive pot for everyday use. It will have ceased to be functional, defeating Betty's original reason for become a craftsperson. She responds: "I have long made functional pots, so I feel it's valid to change. The vases without shadows are still suitable for holding flowers. They move in and out of function. I'm still trying to bring the two groups together. I don't feel stuck working in just one way."

As Betty was discovering a new way of thinking, George's art was changing too. The sudden death of the Woodmans' daughter several years ago led to a transformation in his work. Still creating patterns, he frequently superimposes silhouettes of human figures on top of interlacing tulips and irises in pastel blue, green, and rose. The effect these canvases give is one of lightness and joy, with an intimacy not readily evident in earlier work. George admits that his tragic personal experience jolted him out of accomplished art/craftsmanship and exposed him to raw alternatives. His first major canvas to feature the human body was *Daphne* who the mythical Greek gods turned into a tree. In the painting flowers and leaves entangle themselves in the outline of a graceful nude. "I needed some kind of metaphor to contemplate a characteristic of my experience I hadn't been aware of before, an image that combined a sense of loss with transformation," George says. "I thought about the painting for a year and half before executing it, doing two similar studies in the interim. I would say emotion finds its place in my artistic life in a more comfortable way than before."

Even in George's recent work without figures—his tile mural in Buffalo, for example—the floral patterns add a romantic and expressive dimension to what previously had been a manipulation of symmetrical design elements. "The flowers are more approachable," he says. "I'm interested in very complicated paintings, and with flowers people can follow the story more easily."

Watching George in his loft preparing to move again—weaving through boxes of clay, paints, and brushes and stepping over Flo, the family feline—one wonders if a grand design lies behind his and Betty's own story of wanderlust. The two are entertaining thoughts of selling their Colorado home to make New York their permanent base, but neither seems bent on making a decision. "Between us we have the ability to do something without making plans," George says. "Together we make an income comparable to young professional couples who wonder how they can afford to go to Europe. If you try and figure out all the angles you're probably not going to do too much. We haven't lived our lives looking into the future. We live a full life in just one week." ■