

Wadsworth Atheneum  
HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT

*Betty Woodman / MATRIX 119*  
*May 24 - August 23, 1992*



Betty Woodman Photo: George Woodman

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## Betty Woodman/MATRIX 119

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England, includes a select overview of more than three dozen works, allowing Atheneum visitors to see the rich array of historical references, from Etruscan and Minoan to Tang, Majolica and Sèvres, that Woodman has so frequently incorporated into her pieces.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."<sup>1</sup> (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."<sup>2</sup>

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."<sup>3</sup> (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."<sup>4</sup> 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,"<sup>5</sup> 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."<sup>6</sup> 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."<sup>7</sup> 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."<sup>8</sup> (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,"<sup>9</sup> 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



- <sup>1</sup> Woodman, Betty. In conversation with Andrea Miller-Keller, 11 May, 1992.
- <sup>2</sup> Woodman, Betty. In conversation with AMK, 3 March, 1992.
- <sup>3</sup> Conversation 11 May, 1992.
- <sup>4</sup> Conversation 11 May, 1992.
- <sup>5</sup> Woodman, Betty. In conversation with AMK, 19 May 1992.
- <sup>6</sup> Woodman, Betty. In *Betty Woodman/Thinking Out Loud*. Charles Woodman Video, 1991.
- <sup>7</sup> Woodman, Betty. In conversation with AMK, 20 November 1991.
- <sup>8</sup> Conversation 20 November, 1991.

PLEASE NOTE:

Betty Woodman will deliver a MATRIX lecture about her work on Sunday, May 31, 1992 at 2:00 p.m. in The Hartford Courant Room. A reception in her honor will follow the talk. This event is free with museum admission.

A taped interview with Betty Woodman, *Betty Woodman/Thinking Out Loud* (twenty minutes, 1991), will be screened in the Main Lobby during this exhibition. This tape was produced by Charles Woodman Video and is available for purchase in the Museum Shop. In this tape Betty Woodman demonstrates her technique and talks with critic and curator John Perreault about her work.

### ***Works in MATRIX:***

*All works are glazed earthenware and lent by the artist, courtesy of the Max Protetch Gallery, New York City, unless otherwise noted.*

**Untitled**, 1966, all glazed stoneware (forms by Betty Woodman and decoration by George Woodman): A. 9 1/2" x 12" x 8"; B. 7" x 9 1/2" x 7"; C. 12" x 9" x 8"; D. 9" x 9 1/2" x 9"; E. 9" x 9 1/2" x 9"; F. 13" x 8" x 7"; G. 15 1/2" x 7 1/2" x 9"; H. 15 1/2" x 9 1/2" x 8"; I. 16" x 8 1/2" x 6". Collection of Charles and Jocelyn Woodman, Washington, D.C..

**Primrose** (Shelf, Vase, Bouquet), 1986, 25" x 22" x 6". Lent by Bunty and Tom Armstrong, New York City.

**Nasturtium** (Shelf, Vase, Bouquet), 1987, 36" x 18 1/4" x 9".

**Clematis** (Shelf, Vase, Bouquet), 1987, 36" x 17" x 8". Lent by the artist, courtesy of The Greenberg Gallery, St. Louis, MO.

**Orchard**, (Pillow Pitcher), 1987, 21" x 24" x 17". Collection of the artist.

**Snap Dragon** (Shelf, Vase, Bouquet), 1989, 25" x 19" x 7 3/4".  
Lent by the artist, courtesy of The Greenberg Gallery, St. Louis,  
MO.

**Tropicana** (Shelf, Vase, and Handles), 1989, 37 1/2" x 22" x 7".

**Rose of China** (Shelf, Vase, and Handles), 1989, 33" x 7"  
x 28".

**Monte Carlo** (Shelf, Vase, and Handles), 1989, 30" x 36" x 8".

**San Marco** (Winged Pitcher Vase), 1989-90, 19" x 27" x 14".

**Hydra** (Pillow Pitcher), 1990, 22" x 23" x 19". Collection of the  
artist.

**Athens** (Triptych), 1991, 35" x 74" x 9 1/2". Glazed earthenware  
with epoxy resin.

**Zeus** (Diptych), 1991, 27" x 47" x 6 1/2". Glazed earthenware  
with epoxy resin.

**#13** (Still Life Vase), 1991, 43" x 36" x 10". Glazed earthenware



**Zeus**, 1991 Photo: George Woodman

with epoxy resin. (This work is exhibited in the Main Lobby.)

**#15** (Still Life Vase), 1991, 44" x 34 1/2" x 10 1/2". Glazed  
earthenware with epoxy resin.

**Ballustrade Vase #21** (Wall Piece), 1991, 54" x 40" x 8".

*All of the following works are soft paste porcelain and were made  
by Woodman at the Manufacture Nationale de Sèvres:*

**Sèvres Prototype #1**, 1986-88, 8" x 8 1/2" x 8 1/2".

**Sèvres Prototype #2**, 1986-88, 9 1/4" x 8 1/2" x 8 1/2".

**Sèvres Prototype #3**, 1986-88, 10" x 8 1/2" x 8 1/2".

**Plaisir d'Amor**, 1985, 5" x 19" x 9".

**Saint-Saens**, 1985, 2 1/2" x 2 1/2" x 4 1/2".

**Rabelais**, 1986, 7 1/2" x 14" x 9".

**Boucher**, 1986, 4" x 9" x 6 1/2".

**Madame Curie**, 1986, 3 1/2" x 5 1/2" x 5 1/2".

**Mme. de Pompadour**, 1988, 5 1/2" x 6 1/4" x 5 3/4".

**Eleanor of Aquitaine**, 1988, 3" x 6 1/4" x 4 1/2".

**Coco**, 1988, 5" x 4 1/2" x 4 1/2".

**Odilon Redon**, 1988, 2 1/2" x 5" x 5".

**Tarte au Citron**, 1988, 2 1/2" x 5" x 5".

### *Selected One-Person Exhibitions:*

Archie Bray Foundation, Helena, MO *Salt Glaze* '69; Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, NE *Salt Glaze* '70; Kunsthandel Ina Broerse, Amsterdam, Holland *Raku* '72 (collaboration with George



**Boucher**, 1986 Photo: George Woodman

Woodman); The Nelson-Fosdick Gallery, Alfred University, Alfred, NY '75; Helen Drutt Gallery, Philadelphia, PA '81; Fashion Institute of Technology, NYC *An Interior Exchanged* '82 (collaboration with Cynthia Carlson); Garth Clark Gallery, Los Angeles, CA '83, '84; Max Protetch Gallery, NYC '83, '84, '85, '86, '88, '89, '90, '91; Freedman Gallery, Albright College, Reading, PA *The Ceramics of Betty Woodman* '85; The Fabric Workshop, Philadelphia *Presenting Food* '85; The Greenberg Gallery, St. Louis, MO '87; The Denver Art Museum, CO *Somewhere Between Naples and Denver* '88 (and in revised version to the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia '92); Museum of Modern Art, NYC '88, '89 (work exhibited in Main Lobby); Museum of Contemporary Art Het Kruihuis, 's-Hertogenbosch, The Netherlands *Opera Selecta* '90 (traveled to the Musée des Arts Moderne, Aix-les-Bains, France '91).



### *Selected Group Exhibitions:*

Museum of Contemporary Crafts, NYC *Salt Glaze Invitational* '72, *Objects for Preparing Food* '73 (traveled to the Renwick Gallery of the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C. '73); Philadelphia Museum of Art, PA *American Crafts* '77; Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, NY *A Century of Ceramics in the United States* '79, *American Ceramics Now: The 27th Annual Ceramic National* '87, *Fragile Blossoms, Enduring Earth: The Japanese Influence on American Ceramics* '89; Renwick Gallery of the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. *American Porcelain* '80 (traveled extensively); Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI *Ritual and Function* '81; Museum of Contemporary Art Het Kruithuis, 's-Hertogenbosch, The Netherlands *Who's Afraid of American Clay* '83; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA *Directions in Contemporary American Ceramics* '84; Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC *High Styles: 20th Century American Design* '85; Laguna Gloria Art Museum, Austin, TX *Tradition + Innovation: Decorative Art by Castle, Chihuly, Paley, Woodman* '85; American Craft Museum II, NYC *Architectural Ceramics: Eight Concepts* '85; Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England *American Potters Today* '86; Goldie Paley Gallery, Moore College of Art, Philadelphia *The Fabric Workshop: A Tradition Continued* '86; Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art, Snug Harbor Cultural Center, Staten Island, NY *Feats of Clay* '87; American Center, Paris, France *Four Americans at Sèvres* '87; National Museum of Modern Art, Seoul, Korea *Contemporary American Ceramics* '87; Seattle Art Museum, WA *Clay Revisions* '87; Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, MI *Power over the Clay: American Studio Potters* '88; Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia *A Decade of Pattern* '88; Seoul, Korea *Olympics Art Festival* '88; Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, France *Craft Today USA* '89; Kansas City Contemporary Art Center, MO *Raku Transforming the Tradition* '89; American Craft Museum, NYC *Vessels from Use to Symbol* '90; The Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park, Shigaraki-yaki, Japan '91.

### *Selected Bibliography about Betty Woodman:*

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Clark, Garth and Marie Hughto. *A Century of Ceramics in the United States: 1878-1978*. Everson Museum of Art (Syracuse, New

York), 1979, p. 204+, p. 342.

Wechsler, Susan. "Betty Woodman: New Work," *Ceramics Monthly* vol. 28 no. 9 (November '80), p. 40.

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McTwigan, Michael. "An Interior Exchanged: Cynthia Carlson and Betty Woodman in Collaboration," *Arts Magazine* vol. 56 no. 9 (May '82), p. 134+.

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Rubin, Michael. "Betty Woodman," *Ceramics Monthly* vol. 35 no. 6 (June/July/August '87), p. 90.

Kuspit, Donald. *Betty Woodman: Somewhere Between Naples and Denver* (exhibition brochure), Denver Art Museum (Denver, CO), 1988.

Lippard, Lucy R. "Visual Arts/Betty Woodman," *Boulder Daily Camera* February 12, 1988, p. 15D.

Schmidt, Linda. "Beyond the Boundaries of History and Form," *American Ceramics* vol. 7 no. 3 (July/August '89), p. 18+.

Schjeldahl, Peter and Gert Staal. *Opera Selecta: Betty Woodman* Museum of Contemporary Art Het Kruihuis ('s-Hertogenbosch, The Netherlands), 1990.

Koplos, Janet. "From Function to Form," *Art in America* vol. 78 no. 11 (November '90), p. 166+.

Schjeldahl, Peter. "Vases in Flower," *The Village Voice* December 10, 1991, p. 99.

Tannenbaum, Judith. *Somewhere between Naples and Denver* (exhibition brochure), Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia, PA), 1992.