



arts & entertainment



Star Ceramist

Betty Woodman at her studio in Antella, Italy

The first living artist with a one-person clay show at the Met exhibits at Birmingham's David Klein Gallery.

Suzanne Chessler
Contributing Writer

When Betty Woodman was a high school student in Massachusetts some 60 years ago, her art teacher passed along pottery skills learned during a summer at Cranbrook.

Those experiences set the direction for Woodman's artistic achievements, including being the first living artist with a one-person clay exhibit at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Woodman, in a way, recently has been able to return the favor to Cranbrook. In late April, when she opened a one-person exhibit at the David Klein Gallery in Birmingham, she met with Cranbrook students and answered their questions about her approach to ceramics.

The Woodman exhibit continues through June 2.

"Whenever I have an art exhibit, there's a chance to see the work separated from myself," says Woodman, 81, who divides her time between studios in New York and Italy.

"When I'm working and see it all every day, I'm too familiar with it. I like that first moment of walking into a gallery and thinking that I'm entering what seems like a really nice show."

The Birmingham show is all recent work with various materials — sculptures with ceramic pieces, canvas with clay mounted on it and drawings.

Red Vases and White Lines exemplifies the artist's work with triptych vessels having winged appendages. *Anthony and Cleopatra* suggests space within architectural environments using ceramics on wall-hung canvases. *Bench 7* gives painterly effects to patinated bronze in three



Left: Red Vases and White Lines, 2011, glazed earthenware



Below: Bench 7, 2011, patinated bronze

dimensions.

Many works offer vase on vase with earthenware atop wood.

"Originally, I was interested not in being an artist but in being a potter and making functional pieces and in some way serving society," says Woodman, whose work is part of the collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts. "My interest in being an artist evolved over the years.

"While clay interested me at 16, I'm now still attached to clay but interested in other materials and connecting them with painting. The work goes back and forth, and the drawings happen after I've done a ceramic, wall piece or ceramic sculpture.

"I sort of use that piece as the subject

matter in a drawing so the drawing is not a study for it; it's a study for it afterward. From the drawing, I might decide to do a piece which has the painted canvas with ceramic elements. One thing leads to the next."

Woodman, who studied art at the School for American Craftsmen at Alfred University in New York and taught at the University of Colorado in Boulder, was drawn to the vessel form because of her early attention to pottery. She defines the vessel as the main form made with clay.

Although it was very unusual for women to pursue artistic careers when Woodman was starting out, she was encouraged by her parents, who were

Jewish but did not encourage religious observance.

"I believe I got my professional strength from my mother, who worked and was interested in what she did," says Woodman (nee Elizabeth Abrahams), whose husband, George, is not Jewish.

"She was an office manager for the Associated Jewish Philanthropies in Boston and was secretary for Abram Sachar as he became president of Brandeis University."

From her dad, a woodworking hobbyist, Woodman believes she gained motivation to pursue crafts.

"Art has been what it was all about in the home where my husband and I raised our children," Woodman says. "There certainly wasn't pressure for our children to become lawyers."

Woodman's husband, George, is a painter who has explored other art forms. Their son, Charles, is a video artist, and their late daughter, Francesca, was a photographer.

As Woodman keeps up with her own artistry, she also is advancing public interest in the artistry of her daughter, who took her own life at age 22. The Guggenheim Museum has mounted a retrospective of the camera images.

"There recently have been exhibitions of the work done by our family," the three-dimensional artist says. "It's interesting to see the four of us represented together.

"We all have worked very differently, yet there are connections. We were never aware of them until we walked into a show in Boston. It's hard to put your finger on the connection, but you can see that the work is related."

Woodman and her husband have separate studios in their New York loft.

"Maybe I should say our home is in our New York studios," she says. "In Italy, the studio is just down the hill from the house.

"I probably work seven days a week. I don't work in the evening. Dinner often is at 9 p.m."

Breaks from work include running, swimming, listening to music and entertaining.

"I'm a very disciplined person,"

Woodman says. "I think one has to be to have a family and make work in a studio.

"It's been a long time since I had a show in Michigan, and I've enjoyed meeting curators, collectors and students. I also enjoyed seeing the work of the graduating students at Cranbrook." □

The work of Betty Woodman will be on exhibit through June 2 at the David Klein Gallery, 163 Townsend, Birmingham. Hours are 11 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Monday-Saturday. (248) 433-3700; www.dkgallery.com.