ART REVIEW

The Humble Vase Shows Its Colors And Its Versatility

By GRACE GLUECK

FIXATING on the vase, a time-honored vessel that goes back maybe to the dawn of history, Betty Woodman has brought it to spectacular new life in contemporary art. Her work both challenges and invokes the traditional elements of vase and vesselhood soimaginatively that it lives in a class by itself. You can experience its power in her first retrospective, "The Art of Betty Woodman," at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The exhibition is also a first for the Met, a collector of pots from all ages that has until now never given

The Art of Betty Woodman
Metropolitan Museum of Art

a solo retrospective to a living maker of them.
Vessels in the shapes of pillows, bodies (human and animal), flowers and plants; vessels that range in form from Greek to Chinese to Aztec; vessels as baskets, cups, soup tureens and letter holders; vessels inspired by architecture and clothing; vessels that cast ceramic shadows of themselves; vessels that hug a wall or sit on a shelf; ceremonial vessels; even one in the form of an erotic burrito — Ms. Woodman has neglected no source that might be used as a basis for her exuberantly extravagant creations.

Although ceramics remain her basic medium, her art, with its wild colors and eccentric shapes, has gradually breached the border between craft and high art to intersect with painting and sculpture. "House of the South" (1996), a mural-size wall installation in the exhibition laid out in rectangular picture form, is composed of dozens of painted ceramic parts in

"Floral Vase and Shadow," a 1983 work by Betty Woodman, part of her solo retrospective at the Met.

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varied flat and relief shapes. Some actually project from the wall: full vases and cutout fragments, arranged so that there is lots of space between elements that is as much a part of the composition as they are.

Some of the spaces suggest the empty areas between the fancy uprights of a balustrade, a source of fascination for Ms. Woodman. Some of the uncompleted larger elements look like columns in the making. In another vein, wriggly free-form shapes invoke both vegetation and the handles of baroque urns. With its vibrant colors and complex interactions of spaces and shapes, "House of the South" is perceivable as a full-fledged painting rather than just an arrangement of ceramic forms.

Ms. Woodman's decision to become a potter goes back to her teenage years, when she took a high school class and became fascinated with the magic of ceramic glaze, which turned a piece from dull to brilliant when fired in a kiln. She studied ceramics at the School for American Craftsmen at Alfred University, where her first real effort was a custard cup made to fulfill the school's requirement that students create a production item. Her two-year course over, in the early 1950's, she sojourned in Italy, where she fell headlong in love with Mediterranean art. In its more Baroque aspects it seems to have provided the basic impetus for her work ever since, no matter how far-flung her inspirations.

By 1975 her painterly style was establishing itself, cued partly by the Pattern and Decoration movement of the 70's, whose participants (including her husband, George Woodman, then a painter) explored a wide range of art from every era. That year she produced what is probably her most popular and original creation, the pillow pitcher, whose form she invented. It was made using two cylindrical pots, each pinched together at one end, then joined mouth to mouth at the other, the joint concealed by a strap of clay leading to a traditional pitcher spout and handle. She still makes them from time to time.

Not meant for function, the generous, puffy shape provides a natural painting surface, exemplified in "Tang Pillow Pitcher" (1981), whose glazed white earthenware face is drippily splattered with dark green and rust-colored paint in Ms. Woodman's broad stroke. Its deliberately casual manner is perhaps influenced by Abstract Expressionism as well as by exposure to Italian ceramics. What makes her work so engaging is the very looseness of her approach to shape and paint application, refreshingly different from the tight intricacies of more punctilious ceramists, including some of her contemporaries.

This approach is seen at its best in her two-sided works in the form of double- or triple-related figures that play on the pot's relationship to the body. Essentially flat cutout pieces that flange off a columnar base, they are painted with different images on front and back, so that you can't say you've really seen them without looking on both sides. In "The Ming Sisters" (2003), a monumental triptych inspired by Japanese and Korean arts and crafts, each piece is cut out in a different but similar configuration. They stand coquettishly in a row, their bright white gowns adorned with childlike floral motifs.

Pursuing an early fascination with ceramics all the way to the Met.


"The Art of Betty Woodman continues through July 30 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fifth Avenue at 82nd Street, (212) 535-7710.