



**AT THE MET BETTY WOODMAN**



View of "The Art of Betty Woodman" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art with, right foreground, *Tang Pillow Pitcher*, 1981, glazed earthenware, 19 3/4 by 11 by 13 inches, promised gift to the museum by Inge Peters. OPPOSITE PAGE: In the Great Hall of the Met, 2006, Woodman's *Japanese Lady*, 2005, glazed earthenware, epoxy resin, lacquer, paint, 33 by 35 by 17 1/2 inches, one of five urns created by the artist for the hall. Photos/courtesy Max Protetch Gallery

BY THOMAS PICHÉ JR.

**B**etty Woodman has an unerring eye for composition and for color, texture and placement. She takes complicated shapes and combines them with complicated patterns to create metaphoric objects. She employs a scale that suggests big ideas. She contrasts volume and plane, mass and interval with an appeal to the eye and the mind, all in measured balance. The memory of "The Art of Betty Woodman," her retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (April 25-July 30), fortified by the posh monograph published to coincide with it,\* is like the lingering taste of a rich dessert that manages to be good for you, too.

Woodman's work is smart, knowing, well-traveled and well-read. Although the medium and techniques she employs are based in conventional ceramic tradition, her allusions and illusions point in a multitude of directions. One is variously reminded of the classically antique (Greece and Etruria, for example), of the Asian (Chinese Tang, Japanese Oribe) and the European (Italian baroque, French rococo). An account of formal and conceptual strategies includes nods to Cubism and Matisse, expressionistic gesture and flat stain, Pattern and Decoration, and Jasper Johns.

The exhibition begins with a historical preamble that offers a quick survey of ceramic works made by Woodman during the 1950s, 60s and 70s. Here, the viewer is shown objects that illustrate the artist's early grounding in functional forms, a foundation that is soon complicated by her regard for historical precedent and conceptual play. Included are Woodman's signature "pillow pitchers" of the 1970s, objects that acknowledge utilitarian Cretan vessels, but which she makes her own through the application of a knowledgeable range of historical glaze types. Similarly, several examples from her 1966 series of vases based on Etruscan ceramics herald the sort of synthesis that will become standard practice in her work during the 1980s.



The bulk of the exhibition is devoted to the large-scale vases and groupings of vessels for which Woodman has become well-known during the past 20 years. One does not think of vase first off with these objects, but of sculptural assemblage (although the floral installations in her five large urns in the Met's Great Hall highlight the work's potential for utility). The basic composition has at its core a tall, cylindrical vessel to which is attached flat, irregularly shaped flanges. The combination produces an eccentric, glyphic shape that emphasizes the means of the work's construction as a cut-and-paste-on aesthetic that juxtaposes volume and silhouette, center and adjunct, torque and stasis. The artist treats these stuttered assemblages as supports for expressive decoration calligraphically applied in vivid hues. There is a spontaneity to the surface treatment, an all-at-once quality, as if a moment's inspiration were quickly captured. This characteristic well matches the flutter of the shapes themselves. In the most successful examples, such as *Still Life Vase #11*, 1990, loosely brushed decoration mimics and accentuates the jigsaw puzzle-piece outline of the overall shape. Other times, there is a fragmentary or cropped aspect to the surface painting, as if a preexisting figural pattern had been attached to the irregular shape, and the area that did not conform to the ceramic was cut away.

Absence, shadow, interval and rupture are important components of Woodman's work. What is not there is as important as what she sculpts, shapes and paints. The space around her objects, enclosed within her forms and between assembled elements is as compelling as what is tangibly articulated. The works seem to reach out into space, beckoning the viewer to approach and complete the equation. Scale is also a component of this engagement: inflated beyond mere domestic functionality, Woodman's vases seem to demand an audience, not just a single beholder.

This quality is made explicit in her balustrade relief assemblies, so-called for their allusions to the gap between balusters used in architectural settings. These wall reliefs are anchored by a columnar vase set on a wall-mounted ceramic shelf and elaborated by the addition of flat, cutout ceramic forms that attach directly to the wall. The compositions are usually the size of a large easel painting, but at 13 by 21 feet, *House of the South*, 1996, takes on an architectural

sensibility that dominates its wall. This installation is composed of dozens of largely two-dimensional painted cutout fragments that evoke high-shouldered, baluster shapes and other vessel forms, mixed up with architectural bits and squiggles. The overall effect is schematic but animated. The wall becomes as important in these works as what the artist has fabricated and highlights the conceptual basis of Woodman's mature oeuvre, which is imbued with evocative meaning rather than homely purpose. Her constructions might hold the occasional bouquet, but they are better contemplated on their own.

In 1929, Adelaide Alsop Robineau was the first American ceramist to be given a retrospective exhibition at the Metropolitan; few others (if any) have been so favored during the subsequent 76 years. Today, Robineau's painstaking work in ceramics is considered to be among the best produced in America during the last century. Although the formal considerations of Robineau and Woodman are quite different, their conceptual aims are not so far apart. These include a focus on the vessel tradition; their masterful balance of form and decoration; the amalgamation of aesthetic inspiration from eastern and western models, historical and contemporary, ceramic and not; and the urge to stretch the boundaries of their chosen medium to reflect ideas explored in other, non-craft, media. Is Woodman the 21st-century Robineau? Is that even a useful question to ask? Given the nature of the infrequent honor accorded Woodman by the Met, one feels challenged to work harder to determine what it is that sets her life's work apart from that of her peers. Although Robineau, too, enjoyed the enthusiastic support of the museum's curators during her lifetime, her standing has ultimately been confirmed by history. Whether Betty Woodman takes up this mantle is a consideration that will be best settled by time's passing. ■

*\*Betty Woodman, 288 pages, essays by Janet Koplos, Arthur C. Danto and Barry Schwabsky, is \$60 from Monacelli Press, 212-777-0504.*

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BELOW: *The Ming Sisters*, 2003, earthenware, epoxy resin, lacquer paint, 32 by 81 inches, collection of Metropolitan Museum of Art, purchase, gift of the A. L. Levine Family Foundation by exchange, photo ©2005, Metropolitan Museum of Art. OPPOSITE PAGE: Woodman at the Met with the installation *House of the South*, 1996, glazed earthenware, epoxy resin, lacquer, paint, 13 1/4 by 21 1/3 by 3/4 feet, photo/Katarina Jerinic, courtesy of Max Protetch Gallery.