

*"My work for the past 50 years or so has been involved with a sort of "setting the stage" for a performance. At times the theatrics happened at breakfast, dinner or tea; at times the scenery has included flowers in vases in architectural settings. References to other works of art have also always been present as a constant in my practice. Such work is intended to be read with the inclusion of our knowledge of other works of art. These have ranged from Korean folk art painting to Matisse and Bonnard to Classic Greek and Roman vases. Recently, I have been looking at Roman Frescos and various other wall paintings where images of architecture are painted on the actual walls. These give the illusion, with their columns and windows, of architecture within architecture. I have also observed how often these frescos include images of vases... There are a series of cross-references in ceramic, wood, glaze and paint which return us to the "theatrical" domain of the wall pieces. We go to the theater to see plays and "play" is fundamental to the spirit of my recent work. Character, mise en scene, costume, plot and denouement are all important here.*

—Betty Woodman, 2010

Betty Woodman (1930-2018) was a sculptor whose nearly seven-decade engagement with clay is widely recognized for integrating ceramics into the sphere of contemporary art. The vase—clay's most iconic form—was Woodman's subject, product, and muse. In deconstructing and reconstructing its form and considering its relationship to function and history, she created an exuberant and complex body of work that incorporated painting and sculpture, as well as works on paper. Woodman worked with a deep awareness of the characteristics and possibilities of her chosen material, which both defined the art that she made and inspired her to push the medium far beyond its typical bounds. Her oeuvre's signature is an inventive use of color merged with assemblages of ceramic forms. It reflects and synthesizes a wide range of influences and visual traditions from Modernist painting to Italian frescos and folk art to Tang Dynasty vessels and Ukiyo-e prints. Many of these traditions Woodman experienced first-hand: she traveled extensively, finding inspiration in cultures around the world.

Woodman was born Elizabeth Abrahams in Norwalk, Connecticut and raised in the Boston area. After a pottery class at Newton High School introduced her to clay and glazes, she studied ceramics in a journeyman program at The School for American Craftsmen in Alfred, New York, from 1948–1950. She began her career inspired by the Bauhaus, with the aim of creating beautiful, functional objects to enhance everyday life. Upon finishing school, she returned to the Boston area where she worked in a borrowed basement studio and taught a consequential pottery class; among her four students was Harvard University freshman and young painter, George Woodman, whom she later married in 1953. In 1951, Woodman traveled to Italy for the first time, alone, having worked to save money for the year-long trip. At the invitation of friends, she found her way to Fiesole, outside Florence, and began working in a pottery studio established by painter Giorgio Ferrero and sculptor Lionello Fallacara. It was through these two artists that Woodman first realized that the accepted rules of pottery need not be followed. And it was there that she was introduced to the colorful, folk-oriented traditions of Italian ceramics, which stood in stark

contrast to the more restrained approaches predominantly practiced in the United States at the time.

After a year in Italy, she returned to Boston, followed by moves with George Woodman to Albuquerque, New Mexico in 1954, and finally to Boulder, Colorado in 1956, where they raised their two children, Charles and Francesca. In Boulder, she established her own studio, producing functional works for daily use which she sold in twice yearly pottery sales until the early 1980s. She taught ceramics in the Boulder community into the 1970s, and later as a professor at the University of Colorado from 1977 until 1997. While in Boulder, Woodman began to show her work widely in the U.S. alongside peer artists including those well-known on the West Coast for moving ceramics towards abstract forms. In 1964, Woodman was included in the Scripps Annual in Claremont, California, a highly-regarded invitational exhibition representing the best of contemporary ceramics (Woodman would exhibit in the Scripps Annual again in 1967, 1974 and 1984). In 1970, Woodman had her first one-person exhibition at the Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha, Nebraska.

Italy and its culture and traditions remained crucial influences on Woodman's practice. After a second trip in 1959, when she and her young family spent the year near Florence, Woodman began to incorporate looser ways of working with clay on the wheel learned from Sicilian potters. She returned for another year in 1965, this time on a Fulbright Fellowship, and focused on stoneware pots inspired by Etruscan folk pottery, which directed her towards new forms and larger scales. The profound impact of time spent living and working in Tuscany—and the travels throughout Italy and Europe to see art and architecture that it allowed—convinced the Woodmans to buy a farmhouse in Antella, just outside Florence, in 1968 and establish studios there. Woodman spent a part of each year living and working in Antella for the rest of her life.

In the 1970s, the influence of Mediterranean traditions became more apparent in Woodman's work, both in the form of handles which extended or re-defined the profile of a vessel, and her use of bright colors. She became invested in capturing the soft plasticity of wet clay in her finished work, which was realized through flat handles, rippling edges, and the pinched and folded forms of her *Joined Vases* and *Pillow Pitchers*. She first incorporated color with a sponge-applied palette inspired by Majolica pottery and Tang Dynasty ceramics, and later applied glaze in painterly brushstrokes approaching patterns. While her work in Colorado remained functional, her practice in Italy became more daring and experimental.

By the early 1980s, Woodman began to shift away from functional objects altogether, instead using function and the history of ceramics as the subject of her sculptures. Her exaggerated, almost absurdly proportioned vases, soup tureens, napkin holders and other transitional works covered in richly-colored glazes referred to domestic objects but were not necessarily meant to be used. She assembled groups of vessels together as triptychs and attached ceramic elements to the wall in installations that nodded to the material's historical role in architecture. During this period, she and George Woodman began to spend part of each year in New York City in addition to Boulder and Antella. They bought a loft in Chelsea in 1980 and became friends with many artists, including those connected to the Pattern and Decoration Movement, such as Joyce Kozloff and Cynthia Carlson. In the mid-1980s, Woodman pivoted decisively, identifying fully as a sculptor



working in clay, rather than a potter making functional objects. She started showing her work in contemporary galleries and museums in New York and Los Angeles, as well as nationally and internationally.

Woodman recognized early on that the history of ceramics is tied to painted forms and that the way a three-dimensional form is painted can shift the way a viewer sees and understands it. In the 1990s, her practice began to embody this idea. She enlarged the flat slabs that had once formed handles into façades attached to her vessels, which became surfaces for paintings. She covered these surfaces with images of vases, domestic interiors, plants, figures, abstract forms and patterns extending across multiple vessels and negative spaces and created an entirely separate image on the piece's other side. Her painting began to contradict her forms, becoming more ambitious and concerned with illusion. With her *Balustrade Relief Vase* series—born of her observations of the vase-shaped negative spaces in staircase balustrades—she fully occupied the wall, a painter's space, with ceramics. She further expanded these wall-based ceramic works into sprawling installations recalling Roman friezes and frescos and created tableaux across floor and wall comprised of figure-like vessels engaged in conversation. In the 2000s, she incorporated canvases into these arrangements which together with her painted brushstrokes formed illusory images of architecture and domestic spaces. These, too, were inspired by the frescos observed over decades spent in Italy, but also by the works of Renaissance and Modernist painters, with whom Woodman increasingly considered herself in conversation.

Woodman was the recipient of numerous awards including National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships in 1980 and 1986. In 1992, she had solo exhibitions at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Connecticut and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia. She received a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship to work at the Bellagio Study Center, Italy in 1995 and had her first major international museum solo exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam in 1996. Woodman was the subject of the first solo exhibition by a living woman artist at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York in 2006. She received honorary doctorates from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in 2006, the University of Colorado Boulder in 2007, and the Rhode Island School of Design in 2009, as well as the Brooklyn Museum Modernism Award for Lifetime Achievement in 2008. Woodman completed major commissions at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing for the U.S. Department of State's Art in Embassies program in 2008; the U.S. Courthouse in Jefferson City, Missouri through the General Services Administration in 2012; and the Liverpool Biennale in 2016. Major solo exhibitions followed at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London in 2016 and K11 Art Foundation, Shanghai in 2018.

Betty Woodman's work is included in more than ninety public collections including Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Baltimore Museum of Art; Philadelphia Museum of Art; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris; Albertina Museum, Vienna; Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain, Geneva; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; and Museu Nacional do Azulejo, Lisbon.