

THE ART WORLD

DECORATION MYTHS

Betty Woodman's ceramics.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL



A set of Woodman vases, titled "The Portuguese in Japan" (2000).

Too Matissey," a woman complained while viewing the spectacular Betty Woodman retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum, a show that, on the day that I saw it, piqued a good deal of chat among strangers. The profusion of ceramic vessels and abstracted images of vessels, ranging from teacups to vast installations, shocks with aggressive forms and blazing colors, and its obvious, hellbent determination to please solicits opinion. None of the work is too Matisse-like. Though the master of color is very much evoked, nothing could less reflect his ideal that art should be like a good armchair than Woodman's rough-and-tumble theatricality. The show can put you in mind, too, of Picasso, Miró, and Joan Mitchell, and of Cubism, Surrealism, and Abstract Expressionism—elements of modernity that, over a half-century career, Woodman has thoroughly rethought in low-fired clay. At the age of seventy-six, she is beyond original, all the way to *sui generis*. She has been well known in art circles since the nineteen-seventies, when her work was associated (incorrectly but advantageously, given the art world's chronic disdain for anything that smacks of

"craft") with a briefly fashionable movement called Pattern and Decoration. A dearth of wider fame is due to the strangeness of her project, which entails a simultaneous emphasis on painting and sculpture in a disrespected medium, with references to arcane Mediterranean and Asian decorative traditions. An approving critic, on this occasion, is tasked with discovering significant questions to which Woodman's art is the right answer. How can something be important that seems, at first blush, so capricious?

Start in the Met's entrance hall, where the massive, banal urns that are routinely filled with bouquets of fresh flowers have been replaced, for now, with Woodmans: cylindrical vases fronted with flat, jaggedly cut out slabs bearing glazed and painted, shattered representations of vase forms. When I was there (the arrangements change, week to week), masses of cherry blossoms, lilies, and subtly accenting blue-green eucalyptus complemented such opulent hues as, in a vase titled "Portugal," an indigo like an organ chord, at once rumbling and clarion. It's only décor, but what décor! I found myself reflecting, glumly, on the timid or arch

character of most decoration today. Since decoration is art that is meant not to be looked at directly but to be taken in peripherally, Woodman's work may seem overqualified, in its peremptory splendors. But, in effect, the work dreams of a world in which beautiful invention is to be expected, as an aesthetic civil right. It's not Woodman's fault that the rest of the culture won't perform at her level—though the rest of the Met certainly does. Leaving the show, I wandered into the museum's collections of Italian Renaissance and ancient Greek pottery with eyes pried open. Those pieces were made not to be pedestalled, as treasures, but to enhance lived protocols of perception and feeling. I also checked in with Matisse. Woodman is indeed a comparable colorist. Her conjunctions of high-keyed and earthen shades, often with swift black lines and chalk-white grounds, first startle, then gladden. She lacks Matisse's Arcadian harmony—her color jangles—but this is not a failure so much as an authentic note of an American sensibility too restless and pragmatic to dawdle in regions of *calme, luxe, et volupté*.

Born Elizabeth Abrahams, Woodman became a potter at an early age, in her home town of Newton, Massachusetts, where her father worked for a supermarket and her mother for Jewish charities. She was enchanted by the alchemy of glazes: drab when brushed on, brilliant when they came out of the kiln. In 1948, she entered the celebrated ceramics program of Alfred University, in western New York, where she absorbed—but always resisted—the gospel of Japanese-influenced functionalism preached by the Englishman Bernard Leach, who was then preeminent in the field. While teaching pottery two years later, in Boston, she met her future husband, the painter and photographer George Woodman, who regularly decorated her pots, until she took over that job, in the early seventies. They lived in Boulder, Colorado, where George taught, and they had two children. They moved to New York in 1980. She joined the Max Protetch Gallery, which is committed to cross-currents of art, architecture, and design, in 1983. (A terrific show of her pieces there, which runs through the end of

this month, confirms that she is now doing her best work.) The late furniture sculptor and radical aesthetician Scott Burton, who disparaged distinctions between art and utility, encouraged her ambition—she has said that she finally dared to think of herself as an artist, period, around that time. The Woodmans now divide their year between a loft on West Seventeenth Street and a hilltop house in Antella, Italy, with a view of Florence.

Woodman is an omnivore of ceramics traditions, among them Etruscan pots, Italian majolica, the Baroque, Tang-dynasty glaze techniques, Islamic tiles, Okinawan folk pottery, and Moorish-Spanish ware. The Mississippi potter George Ohr is also a likely influence. But she resents being termed a "ceramicist," quite properly, in that her work is superior to even the best professional ceramics as art, yet it's impossible as craft. It's hard to think of a principle of good potting that she doesn't violate. To make her slab forms—which sprout like eccentric wings from the sides of many of her vases, glued on with epoxy—she throws platterlike expanses on a large wheel, then stretches and cuts them. The slabs crack frequently, and she repairs them with flattened globs of the same clay. (You can tell the patches by the imprints of her shoe soles.) Colors that she can't achieve with glaze are slathered on in paint. More generally, Woodman trashes an aesthetic cynosure of ceramics: tactility. What we identify as fine art functions at a middle distance, where eyesight is most efficient. Ceramics claim space within arm's reach, where vision blends with touch. The arid, rough surfaces of Woodman's earthenware give exploring fingers scant welcome. (You mustn't touch, of course; but you wouldn't want to.) Her anti-craftsiness sharply distinguishes her from another major ceramic artist, Ken Price, who exaggerates tactile seductiveness and chromatic beauty at the same time; his parti-color, glass-smooth recent works are too well made for any conceivable human need. I'm a fan of ceramics, which should not require distortions as violent as Woodman's or Price's to merit serious consideration. But there it is, in a civilization that has gone numb to qualities of the handmade.

Hybridizing painting and sculpture was a collective project of avant-gardists in the nineteen-sixties. (Frank Stella's work has been forcing the issue ever since.) Woodman demonstrates that in this pursuit art aspires to the condition of ceramics, which naturally marries decorative surface to three-dimensional shape. She does so by deconstructing that unity, divorcing surface from shape as dramatically as possible. The sculptural character of her outsized, flamboyant vases is a given. (It is weaker in teacups, tureens, and other service genres; suggestions of dinner-table amenity plainly exasperate Woodman's belligerent muse. She is a vase artist, first and last.) She concentrates on aggrandizing the pictorial, to the point of incorporating actual paintings, in mediums including ceramic-slip glaze on paper or unstretched canvas, as grounds for wall reliefs of curved shards and shelved vessel forms. The marvelous "Roman Panel" is eighteen feet high. Suites of winged vases offer two viewing points, not front and back but front and front. Each side deploys a different over-all design that leaps the gaps between the vases. Her aim is to charge negative space—the air around her pieces—with active presence. It doesn't always work; sometimes shapes just sit or hang there. But the dynamic is miraculous in "Aeolian Pyramid," a stepped array of thirty-five big, slab-presenting vases of abstracted Greek design in black, yellow, and pale terra cotta. The composite keeps squeezing out real space, which keeps muscling back in. The result is a visual "Hallelujah" Chorus. The freshness, variety, and unquenchable inventiveness of her work at the Met, and in the show at Protetch, bespeak a great insight: that seemingly exhausted formal repertoires, such as those of canonical modern art, can be made brand-new by translation into an independent artistic language. ♦