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Top: "The Ming Sisters," to 32 in. (81 cm) in height, earthenware, epoxy resin, lacquer and paint, 2003.
Middle left: "Etruscan Series Vase," 11 in. (28 cm) in height, stoneware, 1966.
Middle right: "Balustrade Relief Vase #97-15," 82 in. (208 cm) in height, earthenware, 1997.
Bottom: "Vase and Carpet Diptych" (two views), 32 in. (81 cm) in height, earthenware, epoxy resin, lacquer and paint, 2003.
All pieces above by Betty Woodman.

review:

The Art of Betty Woodman

by Holly Hanessian

The Betty Woodman retrospective, on view recently at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (www.metmuseum.org), received high praise from the *New York Times* and beyond. This particular retrospective is big news for those of us in the ceramics realm, as it is the first exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art of a contemporary artist who works in clay. Woodman's ebullient and dynamic art offered a contemporary vision of the vessel reinterpreted. A member of the New York artist community for years, Woodman must have been quite gratified to have her retrospective at this familiar, yet prestigious, museum.

Organized by Jane Adlin, "The Art of Betty Woodman" included over sixty of Woodman's artworks, many based on the bold colors and loose vessel shapes that she has used as a source of inspiration from the beginning of her career. Woodman is a master at using vibrant, gestural lines and intuitive brush strokes to envelop the space on her forms. The majority of these works were displayed in a large, tall rectangular gallery partitioned off with two smaller gallery spaces at either end. Works were placed up high, at waist level and in larger installations. This kept my eye roving from the spacious, middle room to the smaller outer rooms. It was evident from the body of work she presented that Woodman has spent long hours researching the museum's collections of Islamic, Etruscan, Chinese and Korean ceramics. These various cultural influences rhythmically weave a history of world ceramics onto Woodman's vessels and surfaces. It would be a pleasure to play a game of hide and seek in the museum finding these jewels tucked away in the vast quarters of the Met's collection.

The first glimpse of her artwork started when one entered through the Great Hall, where four of Woodman's recent large vase forms were displayed in wall niches overflowing with flowers. Each of these exuberant and fanciful sculptural vessels had been placed at eye level. All had the stylistic patterning and cutout shapes that define Woodman's more recent artwork. Each contained shapes made from cut slabs of wheel-thrown clay. Woodman has an intuitive ability to create interesting forms by removing parts of the clay slabs as she makes each piece in the wet stage. This helps to create a framing device



Betty Woodman's "Frivolous Vase and Shadow," 27 in. (69 cm) in height, earthenware, 1983; at Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.

in the artworks. Then, coupled with her bold use of glazes and lines, Woodman organizes a visual space on her vessels for patterning and imagery.

From the initial entry point in the Great Hall to the main exhibition spaces, one could easily be seduced away while walking towards the show. The first distraction was the Greek and prehistoric pottery, an important collection to consider before going to the Woodman retrospective. The influence of these early terra-cotta amphoras and vases substantially impacted Woodman, and those that followed in her path during the last fifty years. The vessel has been celebrated over time and, in this exhibition, it culminated in the natural talent, innovation and longevity of Woodman's legacy in the field of ceramic art.

Her own ceramics history began at a young age when she became enamored by the alchemy of glaze and fire. Enrolling at the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University in the late forties, Woodman learned the skills needed to make useful pots. She chose to bypass the fashionable Leach-inspired ideas for becoming a potter, and frequently looked to other cultures for inspiration in forms and surfaces. Her early trips to Italy in the 1970s opened Woodman's eyes to the inherent beauty of terra cotta as an alternative aesthetic clay choice during a time when stoneware reigned. In the 1980s, Woodman began splintering her time between Boulder, Colorado, New York City and Florence, Italy. These different places offered a broader perspective to the way she lived and worked. In New York, she became intimate with a larger community of artists and ideas on making and showing art. It gave her a wider context to consider how and where her art fit in, while Italy offered a slower way of life that affirmed her appreciation for making vessels and living fully.

Woodman takes obvious pleasure in making her work. The abundance and cackle of color combined with playful forms are joyful. The color evolves over time from subtle to exuberant. The earlier pieces in the outer rooms had little or no glaze. Woodman's husband, George Woodman, a photographer, started off as a painter and decorated her vessels up until the 1970s, when Woodman chose to figure out her own surfaces.

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The south entrance contained some of these earliest works. The other small gallery space had a series of small cups and saucers made of soft paste porcelain from time spent at Sèvres. These reflected the influence of preciousness emblematic of that baroque moment.

The center gallery space contained work made during the last ten years. Here the color shifted and became more complex and bold. These unitary or coupled sculptures housed on the floor of the room had visual heft. They compelled you to move around the piece and view the patterns, looking from side to side or on to the next companion piece. The word “lushness” comes to mind when looking at the runny glazes on pieces such as “The Ming Sisters” and “The Frivolous Vase and Shadow.” It’s viscerally satisfying to see the mark of Woodman’s finger on the seams of various thrown sections and to see how a glaze can hover over the edge making those marks more apparent.

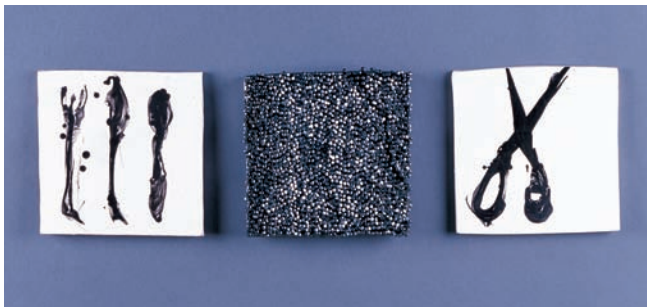
Woodman exalts in form, space and color with her wall installations. I found these pieces exceptional. In this work, her ability to communicate with vibrant color and sparingly placed interlinking forms ties Woodman to contemporaries like British artist Tony Cragg who made plastic, cast-off wall installations during the 1980s, or to the more famous artist, Henri Matisse with his brilliant cutout paper shapes.

Ultimately, this show was a milestone. It was both significant and captivating for those of us working in ceramics as their chosen material. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, with its huge collection of treasures, is the old guard and represents the high culture of museum royalty. Under its auspices, it extends its hand to those who have built a distinguished reputation in the art world. Woodman’s vibrant forms are a solid contribution to the art world and to ceramics, in particular. With the advent of this show, others, too, will become enticed by the deconstructed, painterly parts of an amphora.

Alyssa Wood

“Housekeeping,” the latest body of work by Davidson, North Carolina, artist Alyssa Wood, is on display through November 3 at Stretch Gallery (www.stretchgallery.com) in Pineville, North Carolina.

“After I had my daughter in 2004, I wanted to portray a more complete picture of parenthood and home life,” said Wood. “For so many years I had studied Renaissance portraits of the virgin with child or Mary Cassatt’s paintings and prints of women and children, but these did not seem to capture my personal experience of motherhood. The emotional vulnerability and fundamental shift



Alyssa Wood's *Untitled*, 28 in. (71 cm) in width, earthenware with glazes and slips; at Stretch Gallery, Pineville, North Carolina.

in priorities was overwhelming in the beginning. Now, it is easier, but I still want to convey something of that initial dissonance in my work.”

Steve Hansen

New work by Steve Hansen is on display through October 16 at Function + Art (www.functionart.com) in Chicago, Illinois. The exhibition is part of a series of exhibitions at the Gallery called the “Summer of Ceramics.”



Steve Hansen's "Speed Limit 25," 42 in. (107 cm) in height, slab-built, press-molded and extruded stoneware, salt fired to Cone 10, \$4200; at Function + Art, Chicago, Illinois.

“I create ceramic works that awaken trace memories of childhood experiences I had growing up in the rural Midwest,” stated Hansen. “My father’s side of the family has for generations been involved with carpentry, mechanics and farming. I have wonderful memories of visits to my grandfather’s farm in Grand Marais, Minnesota. In the barn, the horse harnesses were still hanging where they were left after the first tractor was brought in, and that first tractor was rusting on its metal wheels out back. There were