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ART

Yes, They’re Clay, but Don’t Dare Call Them Ceramics

“The Ming Sisters” is among her works being shown at the Met.

By TED LOOS
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IN 1988, the artist Betty Woodman had an idea: wouldn’t it be wonderful to replace the traditional urns in the Great Hall of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the ones that hold enormous flower arrangements, with vases of her own design?

Ms. Woodman, now 75, makes exuberantly painted clay vessels, often referring to art of the past, from ancient Roman pottery to paintings by Bonnard. Working with the Public Art Fund, Ms. Woodman came up with a proposal to transform the museum’s lobby. The Met’s answer was firm.

“They said, ‘Don’t be silly,’ “ she recalled the other day, seated in her light-filled studio, part of the large Chelsea loft she shares with her husband, George. Ms. Woodman, who is five feet tall, was wearing hip Camper shoes and a bright yellow corduroy dress that telegraphed her passion for color.

As for the rejection, she’s over it. First of all, the vases ended up in the Museum of Modern Art’s lobby a year later, primarily because of the art world powerhouse Agnes Gund, a collector of Ms. Woodman’s work.

More important, the Metropolitan has come around, in spades. It has given Ms. Woodman its highest compliment: a full retrospective, something it doesn’t often do for living artists.

“The Art of Betty Woodman,” featuring about 70 examples of her work from the 1950’s until this year, will be on view from Tuesday through July 30. As part of the show, Ms. Woodman also got what she wanted originally: the Great Hall flowers, endowed by Lila Acheson Wallace, will be placed inside five of her one-of-a-kind creations for the run. The blossoms will have to get used to being upstaged.

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“I am coming out of left field,” Ms. Woodman said with a laugh as she discussed her relatively late-blooming career and her dynamic presence in the museum. “They don’t know what they’ve got hold of.” Framed by the neon-yellow trim of the studio’s large north-facing windows, she sat in a well-worn gray office chair, the same height-adjustable model she uses when working at her potter’s wheel nearby.

This may finally be the moment when Ms. Woodman’s work enters the public’s art consciousness. Though she has been known in the art world for years — she joined the influential Max Protetch Gallery in 1983 — she has never achieved the fame of many of her peers.

No doubt that is partly because what she does crosses artistic boundaries. “She’s in her own category,” said Jane Adlin, the curator who organized the exhibition. “I can’t find anyone comparable.”

Ms. Woodman’s work frequently incorporates some kind of vessel, but it is not usually intended to be used as a vase or cup. (Even the Met’s flower vases must have liners placed inside so that they don’t leak.) Outsized and exaggerated, the pieces are part conceptual artwork and part well-wrought sculpture.

“Her work is easy to look at, but there are layers of information,” Ms. Adlin said.

Ms. Woodman has scoured many sources, including Islamic and Asian art, for her works. “I’ve been interested for a long time in Roman and Egyptian wall paintings,” she said. “Always, in these paintings, are images of pots. The vessel is always there, throughout the history of man. It’s a very universal image.”

Triptychs are a favorite approach. In “The Ming Sisters” (2003), featured at the Met, three white vases stand side by side. They are painted all over with bright motifs from old Chinese vases, as well as more abstract markings. Where handles would be on a conventional vase, Ms. Woodman, riffing on that shape, added flat, winglike pieces that gave her space to extend the decorative pattern.

Some of her hanging works have shapes and colors that may remind viewers of Matisse’s cut-outs. In “Roman Panel” (2006), an 18-foot-high work designed specifically for the high-ceilinged Kimmelman Gallery at the Met, Ms. Woodman attached curving pottery shards directly to a painted canvas.

These works are far removed from the dinner sets and decorative bowls she started making in the 1940’s. At some point along the way — when exactly, she isn’t sure — Ms. Woodman made a leap into a new realm. As she put it, “I’m not making pots anymore, even if I use that language.”

Ms. Woodman has spent decades trying to avoid being placed in a ceramics and craft ghetto, while at the same time defending her chosen medium as worthy. It’s definitely a case of wanting it both ways, partly because she has heard every confused or dismissive reaction to her work, starting with, Ms. Woodman said, “ ‘My wife has a hobby, too.’ “

She said that a woman recently told her, upon hearing of her Metropolitan exhibition, “ ‘Oh, I

didn’t know they were interested in showing ceramics.’ “

Because of this history, she can be touchy on the topic of labels. “I think I’m sort of happy to call myself a potter,” Ms. Woodman said, “but it’s a different thing if you call me a potter.”

“In my most recent work, I’m much more interested in the history of painting than in the history of ceramics,” she added. “I think what I am is a sculptor. It’s awkward for me, but that’s how I would refer to myself. I have to learn to say, ‘I make sculpture.’ “

Even so-called experts haven’t always known what to make of her work. “I’ve gotten negative reactions for 25 years,” said Mr. Protetch, Ms. Woodman’s dealer and friend, from “narrow, unthinking art world people who are more impressed by superficial things than they are by substance.”

With his artist ensconced at the Met, Mr. Protetch can feel that his perseverance was justified. “I’m exonerated, and Betty is recognized for the really important figure that she is,” he said. (His gallery in Chelsea has a concurrent exhibition, “Betty Woodman: New Works,” through May 27.)

In her private life, part of her charm is her renowned cooking ability, which didn’t hurt in securing the retrospective.

“Betty seduces people with food,” Ms. Adlin said. A few years ago, she was having breakfast at Ms. Woodman’s studio with a museum colleague. “In her wonderful, inimitable style, she asked us when we were going to give her a retrospective,” Ms. Adlin recalled, adding, “She was doing these incredible blueberry pancakes.”

They talked briefly, but nothing was definite. “The next thing I know, she’s calling to follow up,” Ms. Adlin said. “It’s within Betty’s nature to push for what she wants.”

Ms. Adlin expected resistance from the museum’s higher-ups. But her boss — Gary Tinterow, who directs the department of 19th-century, modern and contemporary art — knew Ms. Woodman’s work and loved it. Even the Met’s director, Philippe de Montebello, signed on right away. “I was pleasantly shocked that the director wanted to do this show,” Ms. Adlin said.

Ms. Woodman was not surprised. “Probably more square footage there is covered by ceramics than at most other institutions,” she said. “It shouldn’t be that big a step to accepting my work, and I don’t think it was.” She pointed out that the museum owned several of her pieces.

“Obviously, I’m thrilled,” she added. “I just wish my parents were alive to see it.”

She was born Betty Abrahams and grew up in Newton, Mass. Her father, an amateur cabinetmaker, worked for a supermarket, and her mother was a fund-raiser for a Jewish philanthropy. By high school, she had enrolled in her first pottery class. “I’ll never forget it,” she said. “We painted this glaze, and it was a rust color. And then it went into the kiln, and it came out green and black. It was magic!”

Part of the appeal was finding something to do with her restless hands. To this day, as Ms. Woodman talks, she repeatedly smoothes the available surface in front of her, as if she were shaping it

out of clay.

In 1948, Ms. Woodman entered the School for American Craftsmen, then in Alfred, N.Y., making a custard cup as her first object. When she moved to Boston two years later, she began teaching a pottery class at night. It had four members: Ms. Woodman’s mother, a young couple, and her future husband, a Harvard student named George Woodman.

The teacher and student soon began dating. (“You’re not allowed to do that,” Ms. Woodman admitted.) But Mr. Woodman was two years younger, and his parents didn’t want the couple to marry yet. So Ms. Woodman went to Florence for nine months, and Italy was a revelation.

What impressed her? “The possibilities of color,” she said. “It was certainly Etruscan forms and Classical forms, the whole Mediterranean tradition. I saw the possibilities of what one can do with clay.”

The Florence stay also introduced her to what she called “the nonpurity of the thrown object.” There was an offhandedness to the way that clay objects were made and used in eras past.

Today Ms. Woodman’s work, with its brio and rough textures, has a dashed-off look, even though it is anything but. “I’m not an artist who wants the viewer to wonder, ‘How did they ever do that?’ “ she said. “It may be a huge amount of work to do, but I don’t want it to look like a lot of work.”

From the beginning, the unusual process of making ceramics appealed to her, with its combination of spontaneity and planning.

“Clay is interesting because you have two separate periods of working at it,” Ms. Woodman said. “One is where you’re working with wet clay, and it’s plastic and it’s all about form. It’s a moment when clay is at its most seductive and most beautiful.”

Ms. Woodman’s homage to this moment, “Joined Vases” (1972), featured in the retrospective, is composed of four shiny white porcelain pots squashed together. The lips of each are joined together with extra material in a kind of kiss.

The second phase comes a month or so later, after the clay has dried, when the piece is glazed and placed in the kiln. There are plenty of ways to go wrong in each. “After 50 years you know what you’re doing, but clay can always put you down,” Ms. Woodman said. “Things can break. They fall apart, they blow up in the kiln. There’s an element of not being in control.”

Until the early 1970’s, her husband decorated all of her pottery, but that ended in an argument when she felt he wasn’t taking it seriously enough. “We decided we’ll stay married, but he’ll stop doing it,” Ms. Woodman said.

Mr. Woodman, a painter and photographer, began teaching at the University of Colorado in Boulder in the late 1950’s, and the couple settled there. Ms. Woodman also taught there for 20 years, until 1998. Since the late 1960’s the couple have spent part of the year at a home in Antella, Italy. They have a son, Charlie, but their daughter, Francesca, committed suicide in 1981.

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“It changed us totally,” Ms. Woodman said, “but I don’t think it has really worked its way into my pieces. It got more into George’s work than mine.”

Perhaps their most definitive action as a couple came in 1980, when they decided to buy their current Chelsea loft and enter the shifting currents of the New York art world. “We said, ‘We’re 50 years old, and we’re middle-aged,’ “ Ms. Woodman recalled. “ ‘We can live a comfortable life in Colorado or we can figure out a way to do something that would certainly be more interesting.’ So we opted for that.”

Lately, she has been working nonstop to prepare the Met exhibition, where her work will be given a whole new audience. “The remark that I perhaps hear most from the viewer about my work is, ‘It makes me feel good,’ “ Ms. Woodman said. “Often, I think that’s what’s in the way of me being taken as a serious artist.”

She has been around a long time, however, so she takes the long view. “I’m not offended when someone has that response,” Ms. Woodman said. “If something makes you feel good, you might look at it again and realize there’s more to it than just that.”