

Noted ceramic artist, Betty Woodman, dies at 87

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Betty Woodman, Coffee Pot
Vase, Gift to Museum by Garth
Clark and Mark Del Vecchio

“She was one of the very best history has so far offered the world of ceramics,” says Wayne Higby, talking about Betty Woodman, a seminal ceramic artist for the past seven decades who died Wednesday, January 3, 2018 at the age of 87. “She was my teacher, my dear friend.”

Woodman was also an esteemed student at the School for American Craftsmen when it was located in the liberal arts program at Alfred University. [The School for American Craftsmen was first conceived in 1943 to develop and raise the standards of the hand arts in the United States, opening in Hanover, New Hampshire in January 1945 under a joint sponsorship with Dartmouth before it associated with Alfred University the following year and became a part of the College of Liberal Arts; the program transferred to R.I.T. in 1950].

“Betty Woodman was my ceramic teacher when I began my journey with clay,” continues Higby, who is the Wayne Higby Director and Chief Curator of the Alfred Ceramic Art Museum, reflecting on a “close personal friendship” that lasted more than 50 years. Her husband of 57 years, George Woodman, who died last year, was also his teacher. Higby learned of Woodman’s passing directly from her son, Charles, an electronic artist, the day she died. (Woodman also had a daughter, Francesca, a photographer, who died in 1981 at the age of 21). And it was thanks to Higby’s longstanding relationship with the Woodmans that Betty also taught a semester as a visiting artist in the acclaimed Ceramic Art Division of the School of Art and Design at Alfred in the mid 1970s.

Higby calls Woodman “an unapologetic visionary of 20th century ceramics.” This opinion was echoed in Art News, which stated recently that “although not explicitly feminist, [Woodman’s ceramics] were indeed a reaction to the male-dominated art world of the 1960’s and 1970’s.” Her most well-known work defies categorization and walks the line between painting, sculpture and design, which has inspired many younger, contemporary artists—especially women such as Arlene Schechet and Simone Leigh, who continue to push the boundaries of clay.

Born in 1930 in Norwalk, CT., Woodman was the daughter of open-minded parents; her mother worked in an office and didn't believe that women should stay home to be fulltime caregivers. When she was 16, Woodman discovered ceramics in a high school art class and never looked back. After studying at Alfred, she began producing ceramics in the 1950s, traveled, fell in love with Italy and was inspired by Old World Baroque staircases and Majolica pottery with its stylistic quirks, some of which found its way into her work.

According to ArtNews, when ceramics revolutionary Peter Voulkos (who also passed through Alfred in the 1950s) and some of his male cronies began rebelling against creative convention, elevating imperfection and crude cracked clay to an art form, embracing as part of the work mistakes that occurred during firing, Woodman admired their bravado but felt that it was too macho for her. Instead, she developed and defined her own sculptural style. "It was a man's world," she told The Huffington Post in 2016. "Being a woman was not easy to achieve some kind of recognition."

But achieve some kind of recognition she did. Working from her home studio in New York's Chelsea neighborhood, she juggled art with family life, according to ArtNews. "We had breakfast, the kids went to school, I went into my studio," she once said. "Ceramics is time-based work. When a piece [is] the right thickness you put the handle on, turn on the kiln, walk out of the studio, put the stew in the oven, give it a stir. It's a personal taste, but it's how I like to work."

Among her most celebrated works were her "Pillow Pitchers," for which she fitted together two cylindrical pots, their bottoms touching, tops pinched closed and a spout and handle added. Her influences for the series include Tang Chinese pots, Islamic ceramics, and Persian decorative works. "With their abstracted patterns and their curvaceous forms, these works literally mash together elements of art history and create something new in the process," said Art News.

The "Pillow Pitchers" were included in a 2006 Metropolitan Museum of Art retrospective—the institution's first for a living woman and for an artist working with ceramics. She was also the subject of a U.K. retrospective at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London in 2016. And her work has been exhibited throughout the United States and Europe; it has been featured often in exhibitions at the Alfred Ceramic Art Museum and its predecessor, the Schein-Joseph International Ceramic Art Museum at Alfred University, as well as in exhibitions at the Fosdick-Nelson Gallery in Harder Hall.