Pattern and Place

To George and Betty Woodman managing one marriage, two careers, and three houses brings new meaning to the maxim out of chaos comes order.

Clei Sikes

Inside her clustered pottery studio, Betty Woodman searches for space to store her large, decorated pots for the next three months. Clay dust covers the room's furnishings, like fresh snow, leaving tell-tale traces on the 54-year-old potter's baggy trousers and whitening the tops of her rainbow-colored sneakers. The faint smell of paint drifts in from her husband George's studio, where he uses a hand-held hair dryer on his latest canvas so it might be packed quickly.

The Woodmans are moving—again. The couple is leaving their New York loft for home base in Boulder, in time to teach spring semester at the University of Colorado. In four months they will make their annual summer sojourn to their farmhouse in Florence, Italy, in between packing and answering incoming phone calls. Betty complains to a visitor, "Moving three times a year seems like a chore, but I can be enthusiastic. I have trouble leaving. Together we have six roommates and good-byes a year."

Although their combined incomes from teaching and art are modestly modest, the Woodmans' change environment as casually as some people change bathtubs. This flexibility is mirrored in their art. After years of figurative painting, George, 52, has replaced his patterns of geometric shapes with those of flowers and human forms. In the United States Betty creates bright, sometimes garish-colored pots. In Italy she shifts to monochromatic glazes, adapting to the clay indigenous to the country. It has been change, too, in the art world that has led to their recent suc-

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Genevieve explains. “We both believe in beauty and don’t have a political statement to make.” He says they believe in art “to act as a filter” after all, both despite the motives that art must be purely contemplative. Instead, they often create usable art, decorating walls, furniture, clothing, and other furnishings, thus preserving boundaries between utility and art.

The two have been exploring such borders, albeit not always consciously, since the 1950s and the beginning of their relationship. Both native of New England, they met while George was pursuing a philosophy at Harvard. Because his father had selected a school for his son that didn’t teach him painting, George took painting classes at the Boston Museum School. To indulge an amateur interest in ceramics, he also attended a workshop in Cambridge, where he began dating the teacher. Betty. She recently had finished studying ceramics at the School for American Craftsmen at Alfred University and was about to become a professional potter. “I was more rebellious, more independent than George. Nobody told me where to go to school,” she says. “I decided to play around with making living as my family didn’t have much money. The idea of not being an artist was important to me, to be one non-resource. I wanted to be a craftsman so that I could create objects and somehow serve society—something inevitable. I wanted to be an artist.”

At the time Betty began pottery, American contemporary ceramics was considered a minor art—no art at all—at best finding its way into museums as a period artifact, along with era furniture and costumes. Yet even Woodard considered Betty’s craft inherently inferior to painting. She had an idea about being a craftsman that captured my imagination,” remembers George. “When she started, pottery wasn’t nearly as popular as it is now, and it seemed more novel to be a potter than an artist,” Betty adds. “There were no debates about what was better, our competitive feelings. We had compatible interests that overlapped,” yet we weren’t vying for the same audience. Those who came to my pottery sales weren’t the same who viewed his exhibition.”

Although the art world would formally welcome Betty only recently, her work has long contained sculptural elements, largely the result of Italy’s influence. She first spent a year there in 1951, later returning with George on academic scholarships and continuing yearly visits until the couple bought a small factory in Florence in 1956. Italy exposed her to corticini, the clay found in the Tuscan countryside. Initially apprenticed under a painter and a sculptor who made pots to earn their living, Betty learned that because the clay matures at a low temperature, its greater ease in firing allows the potter to mold it into sculptural expressions.

At the Archaeological Museum in Florence, Betty spent hours examining Tuscan, Greek, and Etruscan earthware, yet avoided the material firsthand. “I know she worked on it, but I can’t say she worked on it. Instead, I preferred someware, a high-temperature clay with characteristics of function, not art. Making self-supporting pots,” however, proved to be as easy as making soups—just another step in the process of the potter’s art that had taken place in the living room. Betty set up studios in the cellars of the Tuscan house, where she would lay out the pots on the wheel or literally throwing clay on the floor to stretch it into conical shapes, a kind of almost autonomous activity akin to the sculptor’s practice. The decorative essence of drift painting. Because she was unable to emulate the bright polished glazes she would later use in the United States—southern California, for example, later carbon monoxide that alters glass—she concentrated solely on the pot’s shape, leaving its surface untouched.

For both Betty and George, ha’penny pottery remains endless. From its earlier design to its proper form, in all its architecture. Painting a converted bank barn George thinks of the colored stone patina of Romanesque churches. Betty’s work...
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stage working with patterns composed of mathematically pure triangles and squares, as he wrote in an essay: "Patterns may be the lifeline of decoration, but in turn, its life is founded on the power of the mind to create them. It is radically different from more familiar psychological aspects of art production such as emotion or desire. Patterns can not be will or felt into existence."

From painting patterns on canvas George went to creating them out of paper. He devised tile designs that work from principles similar to those used in American quilts; he talks about repeating, contrasting, grids, and the use of positive and negative spaces. He positioned abstracted jigsaw shapes on each hand-painted square so that the lines of a neighboring square connected no matter how the tiles were placed. The result—a grid-bending number of compositional possibilities. These tile installations mirrored the belief of mathematics that patterns are an manifestation of order in the universe. To balance the intellectual, logical quality of his work, George says he paid closer attention to color.

George's work led the Woodhams to move to New York when the pattern movement surfaced there in the late seventies. He had been working in patterns for 15 years—he even dreamed in them—and the late art critic Amy Golden was showing interest in his work. With Betty's encouragement they traded their home in Colorado for a loft in New York for the fall of 1978. Although George says Betty came to New York solely to keep him company and had instigated the move without thoughts of her own success, the city proved more receptive to her pots than it did to his paintings. She met other female artists and, for the first time, began to think consciously about ceramics as art. Ironically, the experience was disillusioning: "I wanted to make contacts and find a gallery to show my work. When that didn't happen immediately I left, trying to shake off the experience like a dog shaking off water. When I returned, it was more for Betty than me."

On the wall of the Woodhams' Chelsea loft is a poster that George designed for his brother, Betty's last pottery sale in Boulder. That sale marked her decision to cease production pottery and create one-of-a-kind pieces; soon afterward the Woodhams bought a space in New York where they now spend each autumn. "I don't think my work has changed; my attitude did," Betty explains. "I have never done simple things with my pots. Some have always been elaborate, sculptural. But once in New York I was more consciously aware of art issues. This happened concurrently with the galleries' interest in ceramics."

Her recent pots explore ideas intrinsic to modern painting, such as illusion and reality. In one series the pots cast a "shadow," that is, placed beneath each is a flat ceramic piece that vaguely echoes the form of the original. These pots also deal with ceramic history—"their shapes evoke Greek vessels and their turquoise and gold colors suggest late glazes. Yet despite the different levels on which her pots work, Betty's art is accessible to those viewers not just knowledgeable in either art or ceramics. "You don't have to be an intellectual to appreciate Betty's work," says Max Protetch, whose gallery represents the potter in Manhattan. "People respond to it in a very personal, individualistic way. I don't think anyone would be intimidated by it."

Betty's early supporters, however, might be intimidated by the rise in price. For Betty herself, the new cost presents a double bind. The pots can't reasonably be made in a manner that doesn't legitimize objects as art. It is still the prime barmometer of their acceptance. On the other hand, its owner will not likely consider a pot for everyday use. It will have ceased to be functional, defeating Betty's original reason for becoming a potter. She responds: "I have long made functional pots, so I feel it's valid to change. The vases without shadows are still suitable for holding flowers. They move into and out of function. I'm still trying to bring the two groups together. I don't feel stuck working in just one way."

As Betty was discovering a new way of thinking, George was too. The sudden death of the Woodhams' daughter several years ago led to a transformation in his work. While creating patterns, he frequently superimposes silhouettes of human figures on top of interlacing tulips and lilies in pastel blue, green, and rose. The effect these canvases give is one of lightness and joy, with an intimacy not readily evident in earlier work. George admits that his tragic personal experience joined him out of accomplished art craftsmanship and exposed him to raw alternatives. His first major canvas to feature the human body was a sheep who the mythical Greek god turned into a tree. In the painting flowers and leaves entangle themselves in the outline of a graceful nude. I needed some kind of metaphor to convey a template of the characteristic of my experience I hadn't been aware of before, an image that combined a sense of loss with transformation," George says. "I thought about the painting for a year and half before executing it, doing two similar studies in the interim. I would say emotion finds its place in my artistic life in a more comfortable way than before."

Even in George's recent work without figures—his tile mural in Buffalo, for example—the floral patterns add a romantic and expressive dimension to what previously had been a manipulation of symmetrical design elements. "The flowers are more approachable," he says. "I'm interested in very complicated paintings, and with flowers people can follow the story more easily."

Watching George in his loft preparing to move again—wrapping through boxes of clay, paint, pencil, sculpture, and stepping over Flo, the family feline—one wonders if grand designs lies behind his and Betty's own story of wanderlust. Then two entertaining thoughts of selling their Colorado home to make New York their permanent base, but realist one says the pots are making a decision. "Between us we have the ability to do something without making plans," George says. "I imagine we'll make an income comparable to young professional couples who want to go abroad—wage an Islamic society and perhaps make an income that will allow us to go to Europe. If you try and figure out the angles you're probably not going to do too much. We haven't lived our lives looking into the future. We live a full life in just one week."