

JULIA WOODMAN

BY COURTNEY AHLSTROM CHRISTY

SILVERSMITH JULIA WOODMAN readily admits to being a “toolaholic.” Descend a flight of stairs lined with framed renderings of her past designs to the ground level of Woodman’s Georgia townhome, and you’ll understand why. Her guest bedroom has been converted into a studio filled with metalsmithing tools, including a prized pulse welder. The space is bright, cozy, and organized with workstations holding projects at various stages of completion. After decades of acquiring supplies, it is no surprise that some have overflowed into the nearby garage, where a suspended metal-feathered creature presides over the makeshift storage near the parked MINI Cooper. Without windows in her studio to distract, Woodman is in subterranean bliss, constructing the tessellated pieces that have become her signature style.

One might call this Asheville, North Carolina, native a late bloomer in metal. As an army wife and homemaker, she was beginning a new life chapter with her husband recently retired and youngest daughter starting college. While taking time to reflect on this path during a retreat at Mount Angel (a Benedictine monastery in Oregon), Woodman had an epiphany. Near the end of the retreat, she asked Father Bernard, “Do you think it’s a harebrained idea for a forty-nine-year-old woman to go back to art school?” The monk bristled and responded, “Young lady, how do you know that God

has not put that on your heart? God has created you with a sound mind, and one of the ways he trains people is through artists.”¹ The encounter led Woodman to integrate spiritual devotion into her pursuit of artistry, declaring, “All of my success has to do with the power of prayer.”²

When Woodman returned from the retreat, with her family’s support,



Portrait of silversmith Julia Woodman at work in her studio, 2012

Photo: Richard Woodman

she enrolled in the MFA program at Georgia State University. Woodman had previously been a student at the Pratt Institute during the 1950s, where she studied industrial design. It was there that she was introduced to the Bauhaus principle of synthesizing beauty and utility. This aesthetic philosophy, which resonated so strongly with her as a young artist, resurfaced as a calling to create her own type of unique simplicity. Always sculpturally inclined, Woodman quickly discovered that she had talent in silversmithing after she took a three-dimensional design class taught by the esteemed Richard Mafong. One of her early works, *Immaculate Egg Tea Service*, won an award at a national sterling competition. When laid on its side, the design steeps tea to one’s liking. Once turned upright, the strainer separates leaves from liquid and is ready to pour. This combination of clever



A selection of tessellation components at the ready for Woodman’s next creation, 2018

Photo: Courtney Ahlstrom Christy

Julia Woodman and
Kenny Pieper

Gong Cocktail Service, 2014
Sterling silver,
purpleheart wood, shakudo,
fine silver, blown glass
Shaker: 8 x 6 in.;
Tray: 1 x 16 in.;
Goblets (each): 6 x 4 in.
2014.1768.1-10; Museum of
Fine Arts, Boston; Gift of
Penland School of Crafts
Photo: David Ramsey

Woodman's
work has been so
popular at Penland
that the school
commissioned her
to create the *Gong
Cocktail Service*,
as a gift to the

construction, geometric form, and playful title is common to her creations. After completing her MFA in 1995, Woodman attended the metalsmithing program at Lahti University of Applied Sciences in Finland on a Fulbright scholarship. When she earned her certification in 2000, she was informed that she was the first American to be designated as a Master Finnish Silversmith. "I'm real glad they didn't tell me before I passed," Woodman recalls with amusement.

The Penland School of Crafts, nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, is a second home of sorts to Woodman. She has regularly attended this Appalachian oasis since 1986. It was at one of these sessions that Woodman met renowned artist Heikki Seppä, and was inspired by his unconventional approach to metalsmithing.³ She began her own exploration of new forms, and was drawn to tessellation, having observed the technique in glass mosaics, in which the same shape is repeated to make an appealing pattern. Woodman translated this concept into three dimensions with such success that it became her trademark. She created more than twenty tessellated motifs with whimsical names like *Carolina Moon*, *Birds of a Feather*, and *Swiss Cheese*. Her *Honeycomb Processional Cross* for St. Philip's Cathedral in Atlanta is an example of tessellation on a large scale. For the cross, she was inspired by the imagery of Psalm 19: "God's word is sweeter than honey, even the honey that drips from the comb." Comprised of a series of gold comblike shapes, the cross vividly evokes nectar with a spiritual aura.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston in 2014.⁴ Once again, thoughtful details make each piece a pleasure to use. Woodman was intrigued by the Viking technique of card weaving, as a result of an experience with weaving in her youth.⁵ To begin the process, she created a 28-gauge thread in an alloy known as shakudo, and wove it together with fine silver.⁶ The resulting effect gives the intricate weaving a dark maroon hue that contrasts with the bright white sheen of silver. Meanwhile, the cocktail shaker's push valve allows concoctions to be poured without removing the lid. An orthopedic surgeon-turned-metalworking student helped engineer the valve, while an expert welder who used to work on race cars assisted in attaching it permanently. Glass artist Kenny Pieper made accompanying martini goblets using a complementary *reticello* caning technique. When Woodman first viewed the set on display, she was charmed by how the glassware transfigured the service.

Like the tessellation found in her metalwork, Woodman's home displays a similar type of fragmented cohesion. Her creative space extends beyond her studio to the entire house, through the careful interspersions of objects made by her own hands and gifts from fellow artists. The result is an environment that reflects a life well lived, even to a visiting stranger. It is no wonder that Benedictine monks committed to praying for Woodman's artist soul. She wisely concludes, "Creativity keeps body and soul together. And keeps me off the streets."

www.juliawoodman.com

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¹ All Woodman quotes sourced from a conversation between Courtney Ahlstrom Christy and Julia Woodman at the silversmith's home studio in Marietta, Georgia, April 20, 2018. / ² As part of her spiritual practice, Woodman is an oblate for the Mount Angel monks. They pray for her five times a day, and in return, she prays for them twice daily. / ³ Heikki Seppä is widely respected in the metals world for his contribution to design of shell structures and book *Form Emphasis for Metalsmiths*. He encouraged a new approach to metalsmithing by exploring shapes beyond conventional forms such as a box or pitcher. / ⁴ The *Gong Cocktail Service* was gifted by the Penland School of Crafts to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston in October of 2014. / ⁵ Also known as tablet weaving, card weaving is a method mainly used in textiles to create decorative bands. Warp threads are threaded through holes in tablets or cards. The cards are then turned to form different shapes creating a strong and narrow woven pattern. / ⁶ Shakudo is a metal alloy developed in Japan that is comprised of copper with a pinch of gold.