



# Folk Arts

## "When the Gift Comes"

A Profile of Traditional Artists  
Janet (Nowwa) and Alan (Kota) McMichael

by Jacqueline L. McGrath  
Missouri Folk Arts Program Intern

Walking into Janet and Alan McMichael's house in Florissant, Mo., after being greeted by four large but easy-going dogs, one first notices a very large collection of Native American art. At the center of their comfortable living room is a spectacular hand-made drum, which doubles as a coffee table. Follow Janet and Alan further into their home, and they point to a wooden rack off the hallway that holds at least two dozen beaded, leather-tooled, and ornamented knife sheaths. Janet herself beaded some of the sheaths, but Alan has acquired many of them from various artists, metal smiths, and traders throughout the United States. In addition to intricately patterned beads, many of the sheaths are decorated with feathers, strips of buckskin, and silver. Alan also displays one prized knife that has an antler hilt carved into a very lifelike, open-mouthed rattlesnake, poised to strike.

But the most remarkable thing about these objects is that Janet and Alan live with, touch, see, and feel these items every day. The impressive collections are not encased in glass as showpieces, separated off from the people who view them. These handsome pieces are not artifacts, and the McMichael's home is not a museum. It is a home, and in it lives two artists who are proud of the fact that their guests can directly experience such beautiful things. As Janet herself says, "People have to touch it to know what it's like." Even more important to the McMichaels, as they explain each object, is that these skillfully created pieces have great functional importance in their day-to-day routines.

From the moccasins and jewelry to the knife-sheaths, bow-cases and quivers, and war shirts, these objects are used for practical and symbolic purposes in their contemporary lives, both at special events like powwows. And Janet and Alan can make them all. The process is lengthy and involves many materials, from supple buckskin to delicate glass beads. Alan and Janet tan their own hides and obtain other materials from friends in their powwow network or from Native American sites located on the World Wide Web, constantly weaving the old ways and the new.

Janet is a little puzzled when people ask her what materials Native Americans "used to use" for traditional beadwork. As she explained during an interview at her home, "At many a rendezvous or a show I have done, or a powwow, the public comes up, and they say, 'Well, how did *they* do that? How did *they* do this?' And it's always past tense. But it's like, I'm here, please, just look at me. I'm trying to tell you, *we* do it this way." And she added, with a smile, "We're still here."

## The Artists

The McMichaels see beadwork as one way to carry on their family and tribal traditions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as well as a way for others to learn about the art and cultural practices of Native American people today. Janet was born and raised in Missouri. She is a member of the Cherokee Nation. Alan, her husband of 37 years, grew up in Pennsylvania before moving to Missouri to attend college. He is Lakota (Oglala). They have a son and a daughter. Though their tribal backgrounds are different, Janet

Approximately one million Native Americans currently live throughout the United States, and over 5,000 Native Americans from various tribes call Missouri home. Unlike many states, Missouri has no federally designated reservation lands. However, numerous Native Americans from diverse tribes make Missouri their home, including Iowa, Kiowa, Seneca, Chippewa, Pottowatomi, Osage, Comanche, Lakota and Dakota Sioux, and Cherokee, among others.

and Alan both learned many Native American stories, traditional arts, and ways of thinking from grandparents, parents and elders from numerous Native Nations. Those traditional ways remain central to the McMichaels' lives today.

Janet McMichael has said, "It's very important to remember where you came from but also to try and do as many positive things as you can."



As a master artist, Janet is proficient in various styles of Native American beadwork, particularly loom and lazy stitch styles. In 2000, she and daughter Lisa were selected by a panel of traditional arts experts as one of ten apprenticeship teams to participate

in Missouri's Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program (TAAP) through the Museum of Art & Archaeology's Missouri Folk Arts Program. TAAP pairs master traditional artists with accomplished apprentices in order to pass living traditions on to the next generation. Janet worked intensively with Lisa for nine months on loom beadwork techniques to produce a beautiful ceremonial dance sash for Alan. In 2001, Janet was chosen once again by the TAAP panel to serve as master artist on a project in which she and Alan created a highly decorated bow-case and quiver with a complex embroider technique that utilizes porcupine quills.

