



# Folk Arts

## "When the Gift Comes"

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

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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.

## The Art

Janet McMichael takes great satisfaction in beading a piece according to its pattern, which Alan often designs incorporating the appropriate traditional images. Some of Janet McMichael's pieces can take a matter of days; others, especially on a loom, can take months. But Janet does not mind the amount of time she invests in her work. Once she starts a project, Janet always finishes it. As she explains, "It's better that the project is done. Because I think they are all such patterns of who we are that if you leave it short it's like an unfinished life. You want to do it as proud as you can."

Janet and Alan always rely on the lessons they learned from their families and friends, and they also actively search for more patterns and designs, pouring over books and visiting museums, trying to find traditional patterns, colors, and themes for Cherokee and Lakota beadwork. Alan draws the patterns and chooses the colors to create various symbols, animals, shapes, and scenes. For many of the designs, he relies on Lakota traditional colors (blue and white) and patterns (the image of his clan, the wolf, or waterfowl). Janet and Alan both place a high priority on only using traditional materials like glass, metal, or bone beads, in all their work.

Loom beading creates a tight stitch through a handmade loom that weaves the thread and the beads into the ultimate design. Alan makes Janet's looms out of dowel rods and adjustable wooden blocks. The warp, the thread that goes lengthwise, is spread across the length of the loom. The weft, the width of the pattern, is the thread upon which the beads are strung and then stitched in between each thread of the warp. The process of loom beading is much like weaving cloth, except that Janet uses a big magnifying lens to see the holes in the beads in order to thread them on

the needle. Large projects can be made with the loom, including sashes up to six feet long. After removing beaded patterns from the loom, Janet sews them directly onto buckskin.

The beading technique known as "lazy stitch" is very different than beading on a loom. Janet sets up several bowls, each containing a different color bead, for each particular project. She then picks up the beads with a

needle, threads eight or nine beads at a time, and sews them directly onto the buckskin. Lazy stitch is commonly used on moccasins and smaller items. Lazy stitch is a very strong stitch and is a different process than loom beading. In contrast to the smooth, flat texture of completed loom beadwork, lazy stitch beadwork is sewn in a "raised-lane" pattern that lies a little more loosely on the buckskin itself. Janet explains that lazy stitch is an "older" style of beadwork, but she adds, "Good lazy stitch will hold up a long time."

Janet is also accomplished in porcupine quillwork, an increasingly rare art form because of its exacting, time-consuming nature as well as the



pain that can be inflicted through handling the sharp quills. Quillwork predates the use of beads in Native American art. However, quillwork shares certain characteristics in common with beadwork—the use of related patterns and the use of a variety of colors—but quillwork's texture is like dried woven grass. In 2001, Janet and Alan undertook an ambitious and difficult project: a quilled bow-case and quiver. Alan and Janet first tanned the buckskin hides to be used for the project. Porcupine quills were then dyed, using various natural dyes and plants from their garden. Then, the quills were soaked in water or chewed in the mouth to soften the quill. The sharp point itself was trimmed off and the remaining quill was flattened and folded while soft and pliable into intricate woven patterns. The final result reminds one of embroidery, on a much larger scale.

## The Gift

"I think the greatest thing about beading is when you get good at it and maybe when the gift comes, you can bead and talk at the same time—it's the stories that are important...I truly believe that the stories go into those beads, because it makes sense. Because otherwise it's only a pattern." Clearly, beading is much more than the patterns themselves; there is a process to this art, which includes history and heritage. Native American beadwork is an important and very tangible way to pass on tribal traditions, including family history, traditional stories, and even the beaded pieces themselves.

Janet and Alan *never* sell their work nor take money. Instead, they will trade, barter, or present their work as a gift:

And we do ask people, "Why do you want this? What is the importance of it?" Because, if it's not right, I can't bead it. But if it's something for your family, that you love, then I'll knock myself out doing it for you. And if *you* can't do it, there is a reason. But you may do something else that is wonderful. So we'll trade. Then, I'll tell people when I go to a show, 'this is from so and so, and they do this'.... You know, people ask us all the time, 'Do you sell this?' and [we] can't. I can't sell them. It's like selling my heritage. And I understand that people need to make a living but as long as I don't have to, I'll barter for it."

Ultimately Janet returns to an issue she feels is essential to communicate to the public—that Native American people are not just figures from a distant past. She likes to tell people about a painting she once saw with a similar message. "There is a great painting. There's a great picture of an Indian woman, and it says, 'You cannot ignore us. We are still here. We are alive.'"

Without question, the McMichaels' art and the way they live their lives is a vibrant gift and example of their traditions' enduring presence. Janet adds, "It's very hard to explain to people. I guess that's what I'd want to get across.... that we're all still here, and I'm talking about across the board for every nationality that came here. We're very much alive."

### From left to right

- Alan displays his completed bow case and quiver at the Big Muddy Folk Festival, Booneville, MO, April, 2002. The bow case and quiver are decorated with both quillwork and lazy stitch beadwork. *Photo by Brett R. Dufur.*
- Janet (on right) looks on while her apprentice and daughter, Lisa McMichael, picks up tiny glass beads with a thin needle for weaving. *Photo by Deborah A. Bailey.*
- Lisa's hands weave her bead pattern on the loom. *Photo by Deborah A. Bailey.*
- The raw materials of quillwork—porcupine quills and the antler tool Alan McMichael used to flatten and shape the quills. *Photo by Deborah A. Bailey.*
- A spectacular dance sash Janet made for her husband Alan. The design of loom beadwork includes the symbols of Al's clan—the wolf. *Photo by Deborah A. Bailey.*

