

Traditional Ojibwe Dolls by Joyce La Porte

I am 69 years old and I love being in the woods from the smell of wood fire to the leaves making crunching sounds under foot. It is that love of nature of being in the woods that took me to my craft today. At the age of 5, my grandmother introduced me to the needle and the way of making dolls. I remember she used to have a basket of leather scraps and pieces of cloth. She used to stuff her dolls with cattail and put her own hair on them. When I was a small girl, I was curious why her dolls didn't have faces. I asked, "Whose face are you going to use on that doll?" She took me by the hand and took me down to the creek. We both knelt there and looked into the water and she said, "Whose face should I take from the water spirits?" That day I learned our legend that your face is supposed to stay with the water spirits.

25 years ago, I started making dolls much like my grandmother used to do, although I use buffalo hair instead of cattails for stuffing, and horse hair instead of my own hair. Like hers, my dolls are dressed simply and give me great satisfaction when I give them down to my grandchildren. I make small dolls approximately 2 ½ to 3 inches tall. I also make men and women dolls 5 to 6 inches in height. I had no clue there were so many people who collected dolls; people from all over the world, Germany, Australia, France, England, call me to order dolls. I go to many art shows to sell my dolls and I go into the schools across the reservation to teach the students how to make them. I also try to teach people about the legends of our Ojibwe culture. In 2005, I was invited to demonstrate doll-making at the National Museum of American Indian in Washington DC. I took my granddaughters and it was a lot of fun.

I feel good about using natural materials and using our ancient of gathering and preparing materials. I make an offering with cedar and offer a small prayer from my heart. Afterwards, I simply walk in the woods and walk until I can see what I can use. I know I am using the environment in a way that is in harmony with the land. It is important to carry on our traditional crafts with the young ones who are coming behind us.