

THE KANSAS CITY STAR • JANUARY 15, 2006

# Star *magazine*

BY ELAINE GARRISON ■ PHOTOS BY ALLISON LONG

A story with a  
**SILVER  
LINING**

■ METAL URGES: ARTIST  
ROBYN NICHOLS NEEDS  
TO EXPRESS HERSELF  
WITH SILVER AND GOLD



INSIDE: 2006 QUILT: 'BIRDS OF A FEATHER' ■ MARY CAROL TURNS 50 ■ KC WOMAN: AN ADVERTISING GUIDE





BY ELAINE GARRISON  
 ■ PHOTOS BY ALLISON LONG

# SILVER & GOLD

HER ART REFLECTS THE STUFF ROBYN NICHOLS IS MADE OF

**R**obyn Nichols' conversation style reflects her art. Her hands and arms curl and swoop in the air. Wasn't that the outline of a leaf, the curve of a vine?

The wiry, petite woman with sparkling brown eyes, a riot of dark curls and enigmatic smile is as comfortable with an acetylene/oxygen torch as she is handling a strand of pearls. Nichols fashions the most durable and reflective metal on the planet into leaves, flowers and fruit.

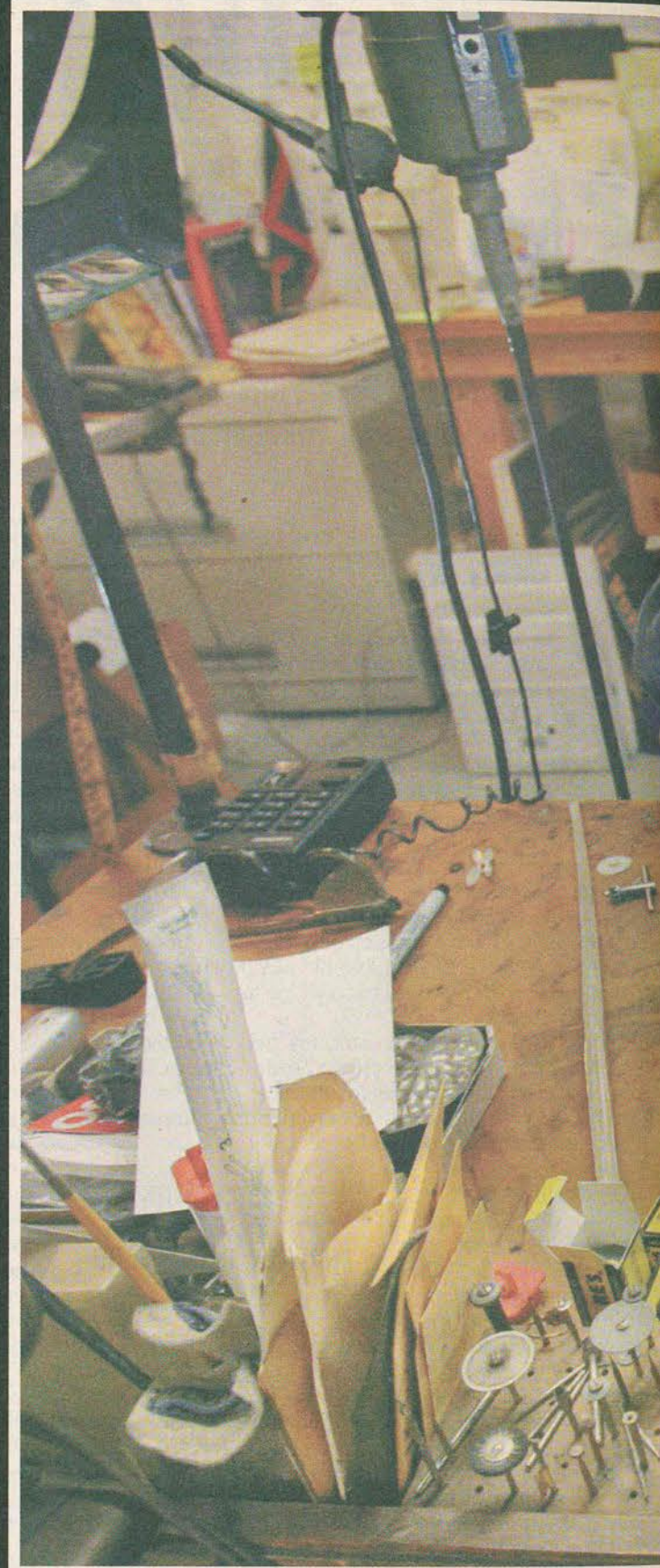
Her designs are in national museums, in the homes of Kansas City personalities and on the wrists of hundreds of women. Most of Nichols' work falls in an

exclusive — and very expensive — category.

Silver — from its beginnings as sheets and wires — becomes earrings, necklaces, tableware, even mezuzahs and baby spoons. Nichols calls it "illustrating in precious metals." She also works in gold.

"Horticulture and botany have been a passion throughout my life. The mysteries of life thrive there. I am in continual awe of nature," she said. The path to her future was paved by a spiritual relationship with nature that began when she was growing up in Independence.

It was encouraged by her grandmother Opal, by the gardens behind her grandmother's home and by the 20 acres on which Nichols and her twin sis-



Robyn Nichols designs serving pieces at her Kansas City studio. Above left: Dancing Ginkgo pendant.



## WHO IS ROBYN NICHOLS?

■ **Born:** 1955, in Los Angeles. Grew up in Independence.

■ **Favorite foods:** Mostly vegetarian, anything Greek or with complex flavors.

■ **Family:** "I'm from the Nichols Lunch (39th Street at Southwest Trafficway) Nicholoses." The family is Greek, originally Nicolopolis. Sisters, Peggy and Penelope. Mother, Helen.

■ **Education:** Kansas City Art Institute, bachelor's degree in fine arts.

■ **Lives with:** Krypto, a huge rottweiler/Newfoundland mix and Nikkal, a tabby and white Manx.

■ **Early influences:** Nature, art and shop classes, Salvador Dali and Antoni Gaudi.

■ **Relaxation:** She retreats to 58 acres of wilderness near Excelsior Springs.

■ **Early work:** Fashion illustrator, poster designer for musicians, clubs.

■ **Years as a professional metalsmith:** Twenty-five. Her business is Personal Works of Art.

■ **Work for sale at:** Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art gift shop, the Blue Gallery in the Crossroads Arts District and The Pearl, 1818 McGee St.

■ **Most recent kudos:** Exhibition in Print 2005 "Flatware: Function + Fantasy" in the Society of North American Goldsmiths' August edition of *Metalsmith* magazine. This year Nichols is part of "Feeding Frenzy," an exhibit of tableware at the Smithsonian Institution's Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York.

■ **Putting art on the map:** With the Crossroads Community Association, Nichols helped formally establish First Fridays in the arts district.



Robyn Nichols creates art with a hammer and a strand of silver.

ters played. Today Nichols has 58 acres of wilderness near Excelsior Springs where she continues to seek inspiration.

"I can't remember a year of my life that I didn't tend my own garden."

Artistic talent runs in her family, as does dyslexia. Illustration was sometimes a method of communication. If a word wouldn't come to mind, a quickly drawn picture would do.

### A talent blooms

Truman High School in Independence was given jewelry-making tools, and, with the help of a book, Nichols taught herself how to use them. In 1972 she became the first female student allowed to take metal shop and wood shop, she says.

"They let me make sculpture, not just mailboxes," she said. "I went back and forth between big and small things" and eventually focused on jewelry. Her first jewelry projects, she recalls, were pins in the shape of animals.

A bracelet from the earliest days of her career is a cuff with seaweed for a background. In the center is a circle with fish, finished with a few stones.

She shakes her head at the bracelet. Although it reflects some of the subjects she still uses, it's clunky compared to the refined work she does now.

After working for a time to get the



Nichols prepares a silver piece for her soldering torch.

money needed for college, Robyn Nichols began studying at Kansas City Art Institute in 1975.

"The KCAI didn't and doesn't offer metal arts (gold or silversmithing), so I went to my professors in the design department, Victor Papanek and Stephen Sidelinger, and asked if I could go into an independent studies program and work out of my own studio," she said. They agreed.

Nichols knew she was headed in the right direction when, in 1976, she got a one-woman show at Lawrence Whittington Gallery, then at 4524 Main St.

"I sold things!" she exclaimed.

Laura Kruger, curator of museum exhibitions at Hebrew Union College in New York City, has watched Nichols' work grow and change. About 1980, when Kruger had her own gallery, she began representing Nichols. Although Nichols earned a degree at KCAI, she is mostly self-taught. Not a problem, Kruger said.

"Much of the knowledge needed ... falls outside the academic tradition," Kruger said, pointing to Henri Matisse, whose background included little formal art training. "Much of that is totally irrelevant. It's the nature of

## LONG ROAD LED TO THE PEARL

"You are seeking the pearl and you have found her," a voice in a dream told Robyn Nichols about the building at 1818 McGee St. Her studio and display areas occupy part of the space. The rest is used for special events.

The path to the Pearl was long.

"I have worked for a paycheck since I was 7 years old. My first job was cleaning restrooms for my relatives' swimming lake and picnic area in Independence," Nichols said.

At Douth's Lake, she became a basket room clerk, then cashier and then ran the concession stand.

She was about 15 when the facility closed in 1970. "I made great hot dogs."

On the way to becoming an artist she maintained interior botanical landscaping, worked for greenhouses and in retail sales for Hallmark.

"Believe it or not, after graduating from the KCAI in 1979, during my insecurities of selling my own work full time, I sold real estate — condominiums in Kansas. These earnings paid for my first out-of-the-basement studio at 2000 Grand Blvd. in 1982."



Charlene Welling (left) and Mary Bridgens examine Robyn Nichols' jewelry during opening night of Nichols' 24th annual open house.



Peggy Haddad (left) and Carol Vermeil joined Nichols at a recent open house.

is under way at the Pearl, her headquarters in an 80-year-old building at 1818 McGee St.

The woman whose hands are often stained and who usually wears sweats to work is transformed into the queen of all she surveys.

Wearing red silk and a modicum of her own work, she greets the Big Names of Kansas City. An assistant, Byron Phillips, and other helpers offer food and wine while visitors look at and try on works, many costing several hundred dollars.

A silver drinking straw: \$1,500. A life-size cotton bud pendant on a rubber necklace: \$600.

This is the heart of her business, selling to clients on the who's who list of the area.

Nichols' gift for presentation has made the open house a favorite with many.

Previous shows have included scantily clad performance artist models as devil and angel characters ("naughty" and "nice"); and in 2004 a model displayed jewelry dressed as an edible bride — her gown was made of sugar clinging to her skin. The 2005 show is a bow to simplicity, with directional lighting and basic black serving as a background for Nichols' jewelry and tableware.

Some in the crowd are here simply to celebrate Nichols' gift for design.

"Her work is wonderful. ... Her forms are intriguing. She has such an intimate relationship with nature," says Kathy Smith-Williams, a Johnson County resident who has been collecting Nichols' work for more than 20 years.

Smith-Williams points to her favorite items on display. They're timeless, says the Hallmark employee.

There's a Japanese influence in Nichols' work, as well as a hint of art deco. She calls it Robynesque. In her 25 years in the business, Nichols' style has become a little more wearable, Laura Kruger says.

"When I first started to show her work, the pieces were very theatrical," she said in a telephone interview from New York. She recalled a large fantasy necklace with an aquatic theme that was strikingly beautiful but very expensive and somewhat impractical.

For the wearer, jewelry has to be functional, Kruger said, and Nichols' work has become more utile. "But in pieces that do not have to be modified by function, her fantasy is still very rich and widespread. ... She has not retreated to the 'least I can offer the public that I can get away with' attitude."

Nichols recently added a silver-and-rubber collection to her work. She has always wanted to find a way to bring men

how we put the information together (that's important)."

Nichols has been studying and making judaica for several years, and her work has an international reputation. The collection at the museum where Kruger works includes a mezuzah that Nichols crafted. A stylized fish is surrounded by swirling lines and Hebrew letters.

In judaica (Jewish ceremonial art), "the fish has always been a symbol of God's protection. A fish's eyes never

close, like the eye of God," Kruger said.

The collection at the Smithsonian Institution's Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York includes Nichols' Nasturtium Salad Servers. And the Contemporary Art Museum of Virginia Beach, Va., has added her work to its permanent collection.

### An annual event

It's November, and winter's chill is lying in wait. Nichols' annual open house



A silver sculpture consisting of a bouquet, tray and vase was designed for Henry Bloch. The piece is 18 inches long.

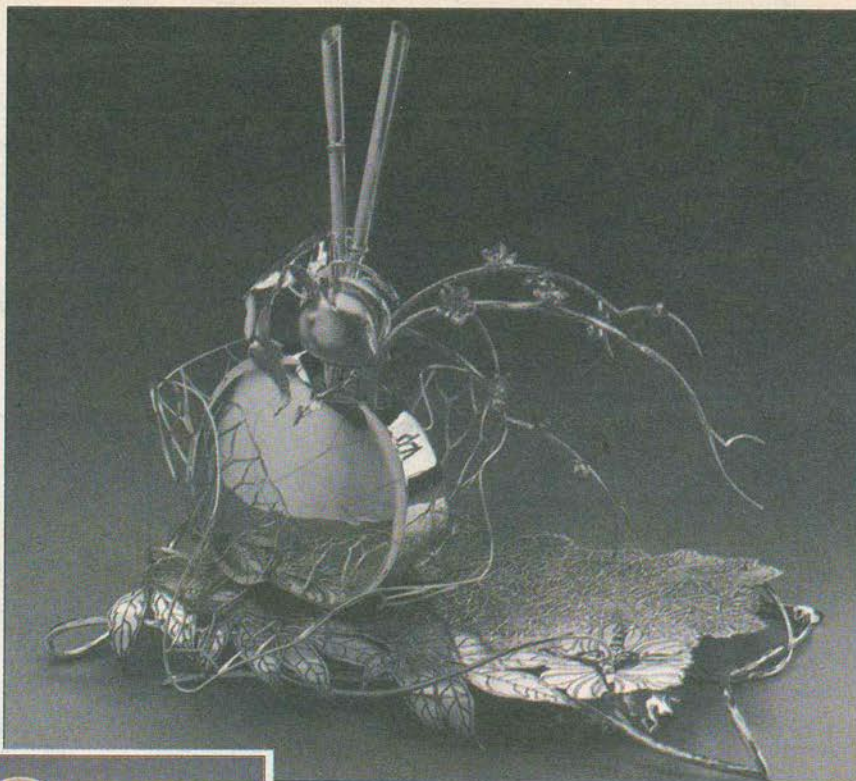
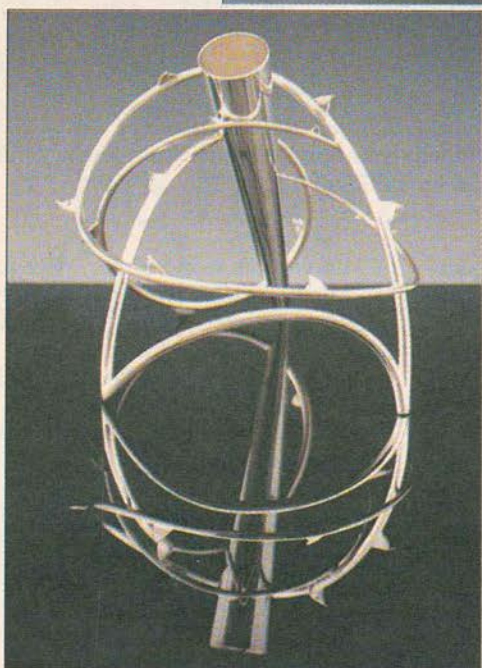


Photo by Hollis Officer



Brambles inspired this bud vase.

into the fold and believes this might be it. The straighter lines and harder edges of the designs mean men will wear the jewelry, too.

### The big project

One man, however, is already a big fan of Nichols' work. The silver sculpture she designed for Henry Bloch is possibly the most elaborate piece she has crafted to date.

The sculpture, made in three parts that form a single unit, is a result of at least six months of research and sweat.

"I enjoy beautiful works of art by people who have great talent, amazing creativity and spe-

cial interpretive skills," Bloch said in a statement. "I was touched by the retirement gift created for me..." He stepped back from his career at H&R Bloch in 2000 but remains active in the company. The sculpture is in Bloch's office.

Terry Ward worked for H&R Bloch when the sculpture was crafted and helped Nichols gather the information she used to create the piece. He recommended Nichols for the project, and they went to Bloch's home to look at other pieces of art he owns.

Using symbolism Bloch recognized from his knowledge of art, the sculpture took form, reflecting the driving forces in his life, especially his family.

"It was presented to him at the officer retirement dinner ... under a Plexiglas cover with a black drape over it," recalled Ward, now the assistant vice chancellor-university advancement at the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

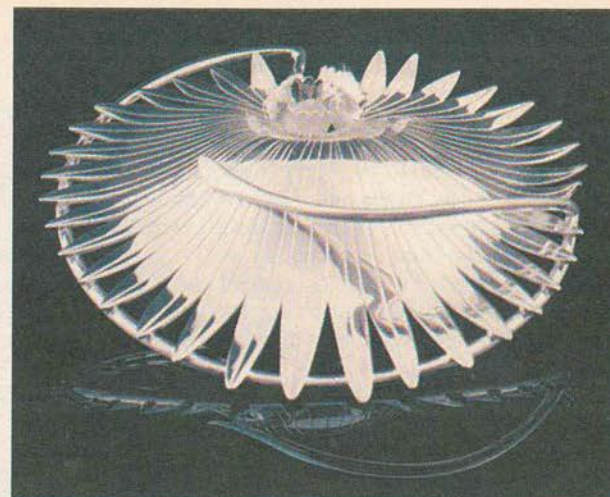
Her intense devotion to her work's perfection continues to drive her. And, she can't abide people who try to get her to lower her prices.

"We will pay the attorney's bill or the physician's bill without question but the artists still get asked, 'Is that the best price you'll give me?' Where did they learn this hair-raising behavior?" she groused.

Nichols the student knew that she might struggle financially as an emerging artist — her mother the illustrator told her so.

"It is necessary in life to do what speaks to your heart."★

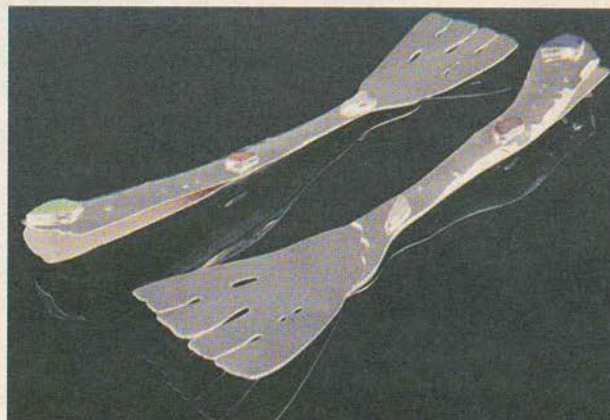
*Elaine Garrison is a writer for The Star. To reach her, call (816) 234-4384 or send e-mail to [egarrison@kcstar.com](mailto:egarrison@kcstar.com).*



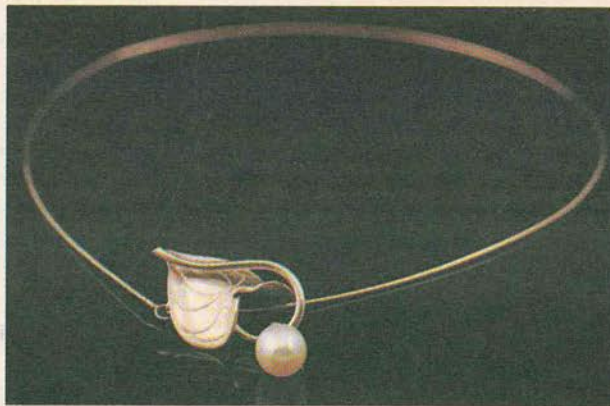
Thatch palms influenced Nichols' design of a brooch.



The Star Fruit Bracelet with Amethyst Beads and matching earrings are in 18 karat gold.



Nichols studied elk horn coral when making these salad forks.



A pendant was inspired by morning glories.