

# **Kuna Mola: Maintaining Tradition Amid Change**

**Teacher Resource Packet**



**The Sheldon Art Galleries, St. Louis  
February 19 – May 8, 2010**

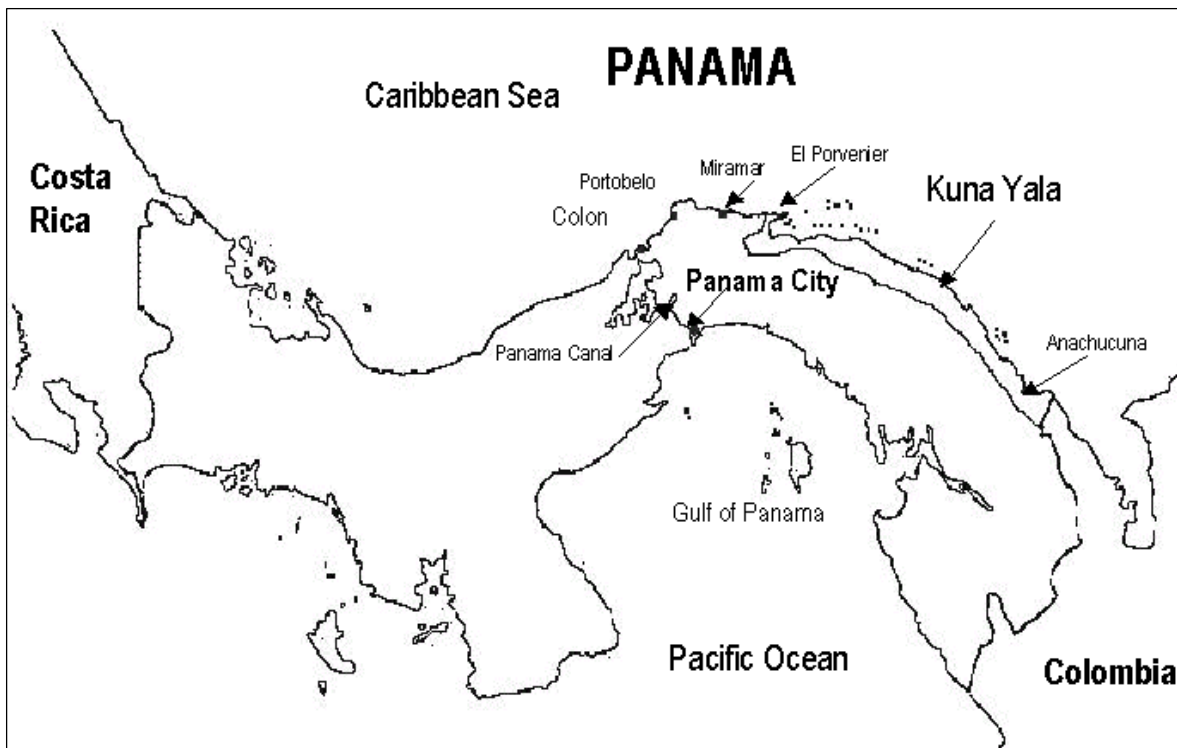
## Kuna Mola: Maintaining Tradition Amid Change

The largest of seven indigenous groups in Panama, the approximately 47,000 Kuna population call their homeland Kuna Yala. They inhabit and control the San Blas archipelago, a chain of over 350 islands stretching 140 miles along Panama's Caribbean coast. The Kuna (also spelled Cuna) refer to themselves as both Tule and Dule.

The Kuna Indians of Panama are best known for their molas. The term "mola" generally refers to the hand sewn blouses worn by Kuna woman as well as to the elaborate reverse appliqué panels that make up the front and back of the blouse. Strictly speaking, the term "morro" or "mor" refers to the handwork, and "mola" means the blouse or other finished item. Molas are recognized worldwide as textile folk art. Not only do they provide an important source of cash income, they also act as a vital symbol of cultural identity and independence for the Kuna people.

Molas are a living folk art, and mola sewing techniques, styles, and even the uses of molas are always in flux. While many older women still wear traditional garb, including molas, some younger women dress in more contemporary clothing. Traditions and attitudes also vary from island to island, so some communities embrace Western fashion more wholeheartedly than others.

This exhibition opens a series of small windows on Kuna life through the art of the mola. **The** exhibition explores mola techniques and mola designs, giving the viewer a sense of daily life, spirituality and natural environment, as well as the influences of pop culture and tourism on the Kuna and their ever-evolving folk art form.



## Making Molas



Mola is the word for both the Kuna women's traditional blouse and the blouses' decorated front and back panels. According to the anthropologist Mari Lyn Salvador, mola designs evolved from Kuna body painting, first reported by Lionel Wafer, a 17<sup>th</sup>- century doctor who lived among the Kuna. By the late 19th century, Kuna women began to wear cotton chemises and painted these undergarments instead of their bodies. As imported cloth became available in the early 20th century, women began sewing the designs onto blouses. Early blouses were loose, with

short close-fitting cap sleeves, while today's styles dictate snug bodices and puffed sleeves. Pre-1920s mola panels were large, with rough designs and stitching, but little embroidery.

Geometric patterns and one-color designs (one color plus background) were common and are referred to as grandmother molas. A great range of styles can be found in every decade since the 1920s, as seamstresses re-create older patterns.

According to legend, mythical figures brought the earliest designs to Kuna spiritual leaders. Today the meanings of mola designs are a matter of speculation, and mola-makers draw on both traditional designs and more idiosyncratic, personal meaning and inspiration. The eclectic character of Kuna culture suggests that this folk tradition will continue to evolve. Kuna seamstresses take pride in their work, as individuals, as members of an extended family and tribal community, and because the market place demands high quality products. Mola panel quality is judged by criteria such as: sewing technique, layering and visual arrangement, design originality, color, and contrast.

The small size of hand stitching, evenness of cutting and hemming, the complexity of layering, and spacing of design are all essential features of a good mola. There should be no large, solid-color spaces; spaces should be filled with small shapes such as triangles, dots, squares, and zigzags. Traditional mola colors are both intense and saturated, including maroon, black, and orange, some of which relate back to the colors of body paint. Black and maroon are often used as the top and base layers with bright tones layered between, creating a sense of color randomness. Though pastels and pale, muted colors are not usually included in molas for personal use, they are often found in molas made for trade.

Molas arrive in the market place for various reasons. Those made for personal use may be sold when they become worn or go out of fashion or when a family needs cash. Molas are also made directly for sale. In addition, seamstresses mix traditional mola techniques with new colors and designs to create trade items such as pillows, patches, and dresses. While often simpler in design, these trade molas and other items may be as skillfully sewn as those for Kuna use.

## Daily Life



Daily life is community and family-based, with extended families sharing home and work. Traditionally, husbands move into the homes of their wives' families. Three or more generations, and a dozen or more people, may hang their hammocks under one roof. The elder male delegates men's work, which includes fishing, maintaining boats, farming, building houses, gathering firewood and weaving baskets. Men are largely responsible for governing, though women are increasingly serving in this arena.

Every night, citizens gather in the *Congresso*, a thatch-roofed pavilion, to discuss and act on island issues in a collective manner.

Mola-making, along with household management, is women's chief responsibility. Some women sell their products directly to buyers, while others participate in mola cooperatives. Cooperatives are organized to maintain mola quality or a particular style, share equipment, and coordinate marketing in Panama City and other outlets, including the World Wide Web. Sewing molas is a major and often life-long responsibility for Kuna women, from as early as the age of five, until they lose their eyesight for fine work. While women sew the vast majority of molas, mola-making is not a completely gendered occupation. Largely accepted in Kuna island society, some gay men support their extended families through sewing. As for the children, school is free through sixth grade but it is not required. Some children attend fulltime, while others divide their time between school and family chores.

The Kuna have a rich spiritual tradition that permeates their daily lives, folktales, ceremonies, rituals, and healing traditions, and this is reflected in mola design. The Kuna belief that spirits inhabit all natural things and explain natural phenomenon. The flora and fauna from the Kuna islands and Caribbean, provide a wide variety of subjects for mola design. The Kuna complete various rites to maintain positive spiritual lives, including weddings, funerals, and female initiation ceremonies. While certain islands are closed to missionaries, some Kuna islanders elsewhere have blended Christian beliefs with their own traditions. This blending is explored in Kuna molas.

Many islanders rely solely on traditional practitioners for healing, believing that illness is about spiritual imbalance or possession. Others combine traditional beliefs with western medicine. Islanders may seek the services of herbalists, chanters, or men and women who perform healing rituals and ceremonies. Themes of spiritualism and ritual healing are echoed in mola design.

## Outside Influences



From pre-Columbian times to the present, the Kuna culture has been shaped by many influences. Indigenous groups, gold-seekers, pirates, colonists, Christian missionaries, and more recently, pop culture and tourism have all influenced Kuna culture. Indigenous groups and gold-seekers pushed the Kuna from the highlands of Panama to the lowland jungle during the 16th century. Due to epidemics brought to the mainland by colonial settlers, by the mid-1800s the Kuna moved to the San Blas archipelago on Panama's northern coast. They settled on small islands near the mouths of rivers so they could return

to the mainland daily to tend to crops and gather water. The Kuna were first exposed to Spanish Catholic missionaries in the 17th century. Today Catholic, Baptist and Mormon missionaries work alongside the Kuna. The introduction of Christianity to the Kuna culture has produced a blending of spiritual traditions for some island communities, while other communities have maintained their own traditional beliefs.

Throughout this complex history, the Kuna have maintained a strong sense of independence. Politically astute, the Kuna allied themselves with French and English pirates against the Spanish colonists. In 1925, just after Panamanian independence, the Kuna rebelled against the newly created government. In doing so they established their own semiautonomous entity, called *La Comarca de Kuna Yala*, and protected their right to wear traditional dress.

As their molas demonstrate, though the Kuna have a large measure of independence, they are not completely isolated. For the last 40 years, increasing numbers of Kuna people have traveled outside Kuna Yala. Today, three out of ten Kuna leave the islands, at least temporarily, for education or cash-based jobs on the mainland. Pop culture comes to the islands, in part, by way of television sets powered by car batteries. Kuna family and community life has been shifting from a more extended family and tribal focus to a more individual and private focus. The Kuna economy has been shifting from an agricultural and fishing livelihood to a cash economy, and the impact of tourism takes increasing precedence in Kuna life.



Kuna opinions are mixed about the increased role of tourism in Kuna Yala. On some islands, elders staunchly oppose tourism, but so far, most Kuna see it as a great economic opportunity. Jeronimo de la Ossa, one of four Kuna representatives in Panama's Congress, said in 1998: "Tourism is the future of the Kuna. Our culture, our customs, we are not changing. We do want tourism, but on our own terms."

## Looking at Molas



*“Basketball” ( Child-Sized Panel), 1980s*  
Artist Unknown  
cotton; 3 layers (black, orange, maroon);  
reverse and direct appliqué, embroidery (#18)

Basketball is very popular among Kuna men.

### *Tree of Life, 1, 1980s*

Artist Unknown  
cotton; 3 layers (maroon, orange, black); reverse  
and direct appliqué, embroidery (#28)

Artisans worldwide have crafted trees of life  
designs containing various plants and animals.  
These Kuna trees of life are filled with  
monkeys.



### *RCA Dog, 1970s*

Artist Unknown  
cotton; 3 layers (black, orange, maroon); reverse  
and direct appliqué, embroidery (#44)

“Perro (dog) Musica” is the famous RCA  
advertisement of a dog listening for its master’s  
voice. This mola is a wonderful example of  
how images from popular culture are  
incorporated into Kuna mola designs.





*Cruise Ship Trade Mola, 1998*

Artist: Renelio Robles

cotton, synthetics; direct applique, embroidery

This mola is different from most traditional molas in several ways:

- it was sewn as a single panel for sale to tourists,
- colors were chosen to appeal to tourist tastes,
- it uses only direct appliqué,
- it includes solid areas,
- it was made by a gay man, and
- the subject matter is new.

“Zormay” is probably the name of a ship that cruised the islands in a previous season. The “x” marks the ship’s door which lowers into a ramp, allowing passengers to disembark. This mola, which is well-designed and well-made, is a fitting one with which to end, as it is a multifaceted example of the Kuna’s mola tradition continuing amid change.

## Related Projects

Some reference photos are included in this packet, but there is no substitute for seeing the real thing. You can schedule a visit for your class by calling Rebecca Gunter, Gallery Coordinator and Education Manager at 533-9900 x18.

### Art/ Social Studies



#### Projects:

1. Molos often show the influence of the world outside of Kuna culture. Draw your own “mola” pattern with colorful markers, choosing an image that you connect with from popular culture.
2. Some molos depict traditional myths and legends and others depict aspects of daily life. Draw your own mola design based on an aspect of your own life.

### Social Studies/ Language Arts

#### Project: Research paper / Class presentation

1. Have the students research the attributes of the country of Panama. Using this information, discuss some of the imagery found in the Kuna molos and why they might be using them.

#### Some Questions:

What do these molos tell us about the people who created them?

Choose one which you think may demonstrate the influence of European culture on the Kuna and discuss why you think it is a good example.

How might the making and wearing of molos relate to clothes you wear? Can you give an example?



## Mathematics

### Theme: Symmetry



#### *Manatees (sea cows) and Stingray, 1980s*

Artist Unknown

cotton; 3 layers (orange, maroon, green); reverse and direct appliqué, embroidery

This mola uses symmetry and negative space to create additional imagery. Inside the two facing manatee forms can be found a stingray. Though the design uses symmetry in the two manatee forms, the artist has varied their design by using different colors on the additional decorations on either side.

#### **Projects:**

In the exhibition, find an example of a mola with a “symmetrical” design. Analyze its parts.

Draw a rectangle. Divide the rectangle again into four equal parts. Create a design so that the top left, top right, bottom left and bottom right parts are symmetrical.

#### **Questions:**

How many opposites can you find? How are the sides similar? How do they differ?

Can you point out the similarities and differences in the design?

Can you count the different colors in this mola? How many are there?

## Kuna Womens' Clothing



The traditionally dressed Kuna woman wears a red *muswe* (scarf) draped untied over her head. She may unfold the *muswe* and cover her face for privacy or shade. Her *mola* (both the blouse and its decorative panels are called “mola”) is a style fashionable in the late 1990s with bright polyester yoke, full sleeves, decorated banding on the sleeves and yoke and elaborately appliquéd and embroidered panels front and back. This is a maternity *mola*, with a zipper hidden underneath the horizontal white braid

across her upper chest. Her *sabured* (skirt) is an unhemmed cotton wrap, often blue with orange, green or yellow designs. Styles of *wini*, (leg and arm beads) have evolved from narrow bands in earlier years to the fuller types shown here. Each segment of beads (two per arm, two per leg), is made from a single strand of beads wound round and round the limb and carefully planned to create patterns which can range from simple stripes to elaborate geometric mazes. Women wear plastic sandals, or go barefoot.



In this picture you will see:

*Muswe* (scarf)  
printed cotton

*Sabured* (skirt)  
Printed cotton

*Wini* (arm and leg beads)  
Made from commercially made glass beads

Photographs by Barbara Drake Blevens.

## Kuna Mola Bibliography

Auld, Rhoda L. 1977. *Molas: What They Are, How to Make Them*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold. A well-illustrated how-to book.

Caraway, Caren. 1981. *The Mola Design Book*. Owings Mills, MD: Stemmer House. Black and white drawings of mola designs.

Howe, James. 1986. *The Kuna Gathering: Contemporary Village Politics in Panama*. Austin: University of Texas Press. Number 67 in the series, *Latin American Monographs*.

Mathews, Kate. 1998. *Molas! Patterns, Techniques, Projects for Colorful Appliqué*. Asheville, NC: Lark Books. Information about the Kuna and their molas, many mola illustrations in color, plus step by step instructions for making molas and mola projects.

Parker, Ann, & Avon Neal. 1977. *Molas: Folk Art of the Cuna Indians*. Barre, MA: Barre Publishing. Distributed by Crown Publishers, New York. A detailed study of mola art by

Avon Neal, illustrated with photographs by Ann Parker, including 186 in color and over 200 black and white.

Presilla, Maricel E. 1996. *Mola: Cuna Life Stories & Art*. New York: Henry Holt and Company. A book for children on the Kuna and their molas, illustrated with many color photographs of molas.

Rohmer, Harriet. 1976. *Cuna Song/Canción de los Cunas*. San Francisco: Children's Book Press. A Kuna legend for children, in English and Spanish. From the series, *Fifth World Tales*.

Salvador, Mari Lyn, editor. 1997. *The Art of Being Kuna: Layers of Meaning Among the Kuna of Panama*. Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History. This exhibition catalog is a large well-illustrated book with a wealth of information on the Kuna and their art.

Salvador, Mari Lyn. 1978. *Yer Dailege! Kuna Woman's Art*. Albuquerque: Maxwell Museum of Anthropology, University of New Mexico. A study of mola art.

Shaffer, Frederick W. 1982, 1985. *Mola Designs*. Forty-five mola designs shown in black and white. Small color illustrations of several of the molas are also shown on the inside front and back covers of the book.

Sherzer, Joel. 1983. *Kuna Ways of Speaking: An Ethnographic Perspective*. Austin: University of Texas Press. A study of Kuna speech and language.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1990. *Verbal Art in San Blas: Kuna Culture Through its Discourse*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press. A study of Kuna verbal practices, ranging from reporting, formal speech making, and oratory to chants and magical communication with the spirit world.

Tice, Karein E. 1995. *Kuna Crafts, Gender, & the Global Economy*. Austin: University of Texas Press. Explores the impact of the commercialization of mola production on Kuna society.

Ventocilla, Jorge, et al. Edited by Hans Roeder. 1995. *Plants and Animals in the Life of the Kuna*. Austin: University of Texas Press. An original and accessible book on how the Kuna relate to the natural world. Illustrated with drawings by Kuna artist Ologuagdi.

Ventocilla, Jorge. 1991, 1994. *We the Children of Mother Earth*. Washington: NOAS Center of the National Zoological Park with the Tropical Research Institute, Smithsonian Institution. A coloring book created for Kuna children, with information on the people and animals of the San Blas Islands. Illustrations by Kuna artist Ologuagdi. The text is in English and Spanish.

**Source for Bibliography:** The National Museum of the American Indian:  
[http://www.nmai.si.edu/exhibitions/the\\_art\\_of\\_being\\_kuna/](http://www.nmai.si.edu/exhibitions/the_art_of_being_kuna/)

## **Web Resources:**

### **Hood Museum of Art**

#### ***Learning to Look: Molas Education Packet***

<http://hoodmuseum.dartmouth.edu/docs/0109teachlearnlookmolas.pdf>

This site has examples of early 20th-century molas

### **Museum of Anthropology, University of Missouri**

#### ***Molas: Textile Art of Panama***

<http://anthromuseum.missouri.edu/minigalleries/panamamolass/intro.shtml>

### **Panama Canal Museum Exhibition brochure**

<http://www.panamacanalmuseum.org/images/MolaExhibitProgram.pdf>

### **National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution**

#### ***The Art of Being Kuna***

[http://www.nmai.si.edu/exhibitions/the\\_art\\_of\\_being\\_kuna/](http://www.nmai.si.edu/exhibitions/the_art_of_being_kuna/)

This site has examples of early 20th-century molas

### **Kelly Powell, Master's Thesis**

[http://kellypowellstudios.com/Kelly\\_Powell\\_Studio/\[\\_background\\_information\\_\]\\_files/KUNA\\_PAPER\\_lowres.pdf](http://kellypowellstudios.com/Kelly_Powell_Studio/[_background_information_]_files/KUNA_PAPER_lowres.pdf)

This artist wrote a master's thesis and presents graphic designs inspired by Kuna molas.

**The exhibition is from the collection of Joyce Cheney and was originally traveled by ExhibitsUSA.**

**Reference Photos**















