

The MOLA

Traditional Kuna Textile Art

Edith Crouch



Schiffer

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Traditional Kuna Textile Art



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Edith Crouch



4880 Lower Valley Road Atglen, Pennsylvania 19310



Huacas mola, 24 1/4" x 17 1/4", c. 1960. This mola may represent a golden frog huaca. Huacas were gold objects created by the ancient natives of Central and South America as early as 300 A.D. and were buried with their leaders and warriors. A golden frog huaca represented life, health and good luck. This mola of many colors (Mor gonikat) was exquisitely fabricated utilizing the small dots (gwini gwini) complicated space filling technique and three or more textile color outlines of the central foreground figures and the stars. The harmonious use of color, compositional balance and fine fabric selection and stitch work differentiate and distinguish this excellent mola. Author's collection, photograph by author.

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The molas pictured in this book were all made in Kuna Yala (the San Blas Islands) of Panamá. The majority of them feature appliqué, reverse appliqué and some top stitching or embroidery. Measurements, when indicated, are stated as width by height.

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The Mola





Frontispiece. Three Kuna women sew molas while sitting on benches under the smiling tropical sun surrounded by tropical foliage, a dwelling and their sewing baskets; one woman smokes her pipe in this very detailed mola by Diana "La Bruja", c. 2005. The topstitching details, use of color and balance of the design elements and the inclusion of head scarf and sarong skirt fabric swatches distinguish this mola. Copyrighted photograph by and courtesy of Sue Murray "Molagirl" Gomez.

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Huacas mola, 24 1/4" x 17 1/4", c. 1960. This mola may represent a golden frog *huaca*. *Huacas* were gold objects created by the ancient natives of Central and South America as early as 300 A.D. and were buried with their leaders and warriors. A golden frog *huaca* represented life, health and good luck. This mola of many colors (*Mor gonikat*) was exquisitely fabricated utilizing the small dots (*gwini gwini*) complicated space filling technique and three or more textile color outlines of the central foreground figures and the stars. The harmonious use of color, compositional balance and fine fabric selection and stitch work differentiate and distinguish this excellent mola. *Author's collection, photograph by author.*

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Dedication

Seymour & Leah Barkowitz
moved to the Panama Canal Zone
and loved the people, cultures and
beauty of Panama
and shared and inspired their children
with their love;
this book is dedicated in their memory.



Author's Note

Seymour and Leah Barkowitz left the comfort of their home town in the United States, family and familiarity to move to the tropics with their toddler son and infant daughter. Their adventuresome spirits and love of travel took them to the Panama Canal Zone in the mid-1950s. My parents raised their children, adding two sons over the years; this beautiful and unique time and place was home. We were introduced to the many beauties of Panama—its lush tropical beaches, rainforests and mountains, rich history, indigenous cultures and arts – by my parents and their Panamanian friends. My parents began collecting molas in the 1950s and continued through the 1980s; purchased from the Cuna women of the San Blas Islands (now known as the Kuna of Kuna Yala.) The women would bring their colorful textiles to places that Canal Zonians, Panamanians and tourists would gather – Stevens Circle in Balboa, the visitor's center at Miraflores locks and the El Panama hotel to Flory Saltzman's craft shop. My parents collected their molas from these places and while visiting the San Blas Islands. They framed and displayed them; some of the molas were made into functional art pieces such as pillows and a skirt or presented to other family members as gifts from Panama. Mola art was a vibrant accent in our lives in Panama and was appreciated by us all. The three decades my parents spent in Panama forever changed and enriched our lives and theirs. The personal motivations for this book grew from this appreciation, inspired by my parent's love for Panama and mola art, and the pull to return to the place of my childhood and life in Panama with the perspective of time, and to experience the familiar things I once loved and love still.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Paul, Joe, and Daniel Barkowitz for the wonderful experiences and memories of growing up together in the Panama Canal Zone. In honor of our parents, we reunited their mola collection, which has been divided among us, to be photographed and included in this book.

Thank you to Larry and Ben for your love and support.

Thank you to Ben for the computer support and especially for your excellent photography of the Seymour & Leah Barkowitz mola collection; your grandparents would have been so very proud.

So many people contributed with such generosity and kindness to make this book possible and I thank you all: Linda and Carson Brown and Sam Lowder for photographic equipment support; Bill Harp for the detailed and fine map, mola art and historical Panama background information and for sharing your unique perspective of Panama with me in the past and present; Sue Gomez, *Molagirl*, for your generosity in sharing so *many* of your gorgeous contemporary mola images and conversations about the beauty of magnificent molas, and for enlightening me about the relevance of contemporary molas as art; Thomas Hannaher for all of the excellent images from Captain Kit S. Kapp's mola collection; Charlotte Patera for sharing her mola fabrication techniques and images; LuAnne Ripley for sharing your sewing talents in making the mola pillow pocket; Carol Muse Skinner for sharing your images of molas, Kunas, Panama, and digital paintings fine art; Nancy Schiffer for your support of, enthusiasm for, and for publishing this mola book and the two Tiffany books, too; Al Sprague for sharing several of your painting masterpieces of polleras and Panama for this book and for sharing your love of painting with your art students at Balboa High School, an experience I'll always treasure; Sherry Thorup for information about mola making; and Anita McAndrews in memory of your love for and insight into Kuna cosmology and mola art.

I would also like to acknowledge my brothers, family, friends, neighbors and teachers for their knowledge, love and support.

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Introduction

You must have a shawl to hide your loveliness from strangers. Kuna Woman must have golden earrings, and a gold ring to mark her Kuna nose. Kuna Woman should wear beads and bells, small shining shells, and cloth woven in all the Kuna colors. Dark ships are slowly gathering far out on the oceans. Great ships...not like our cayucas, but tall ships that dance upon the water.¹

The multi-layered textile mola is a metaphor for the story of many levels it represents. The vibrant cloth panel tells a story of the fascinating Kuna culture; of an indigenous people living in a lush tropical paradise. Mola art tells a magical tale of the Kuna woman and is emblematic of her artistry, observation, and beliefs. Her cultural cosmology, sense of humor and exposure to foreign elements are represented in her textile art designs.

Molas are vibrantly colorful, multi-layered hand appliquéd textile panels of blouses made and worn by the Kuna women of Panama.

The Kuna people live in a region called the Comarca de Kuna Yala, which translated from the Kuna language means "Kuna Land." A chain of more than 365 coral islands, known as the San Blas Archipelago, is located in the Caribbean or Atlantic Ocean off the eastern coast of Panama, south of the Panama Canal. Kuna Yala also includes a 140-mile landmass of rainforest and coastal mainland stretching to the border of Columbia to the south.

The mola's history is also multi-layered and developed after Spanish colonization. Early mola designs were drawn from pre-Hispanic body painting and themes from basketry and pottery. In the past century, as cotton yard cloth and sewing implements became commonly available to the Kuna, the mola evolved.

The intricately designed and sewn molas are attached to the fronts and backs of women's blouses and reflect the artistic expression and ethnic identity of the Kuna women artists.

The mola designs are paired for each blouse and represent a duality that is an intrinsic design and cultural element.

Single mola panels are also created for the tourist industry.

Molas are created in a technique referred to as appliqué or reverse appliqué, and consist of two or more layers of cloth, hand-sewn and cut through cloth layers in an astonishing variety of design motifs to reveal the layers of colored cloth beneath.



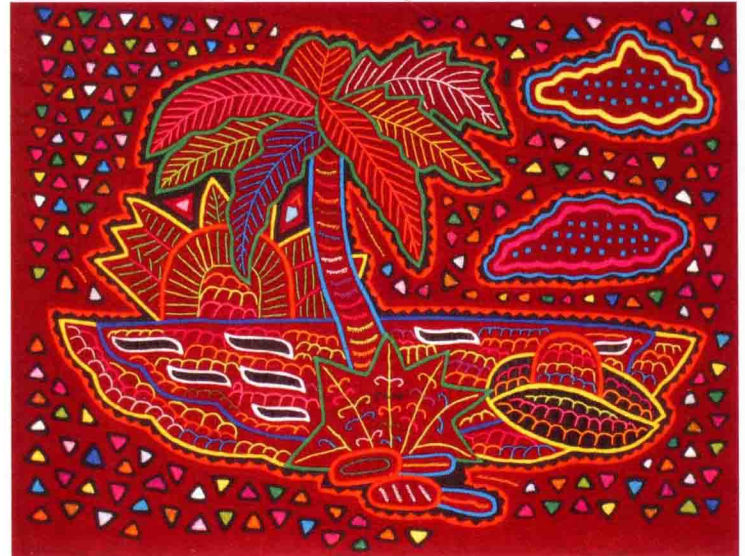
Mola panel depicting Kuna woman wearing traditional attire surrounded by tropical birds, flowers and environment, c. 2005. Excellent detailed borders with sawtooth appliqué, top stitching, embroidery and space-filling techniques are found in this mola and its companion. Copyrighted photograph by and courtesy of Sue Murray "Molagirl" Gomez.¹



Mola panel depicting Kuna woman wearing traditional attire in sailboat surrounded by fish swimming in water and tropical birds, animals and house, c. 2005. Copyrighted photograph by and courtesy of Sue Murray "Molagirl" Gomez.



Carol Muse Skinner, *Kuna in the Park, Casco Viejo*, digital photo painting, Copyrighted photograph by and courtesy of Carol Muse Skinner.



These molas depict a tropical island with a coconut palm tree, possibly inspired by the islands of Kuna Yala (San Blas Islands) in Panama, c. 2005. In one mola, a sailfish leaps from the water. In the other mola, a sombrero hat, tropical foliage, clouds and a sunset are rendered in a vibrant color palette. Detailed embroidery, sawtooth (*diente*) borders, triangular space filling appliqué elements and small cut circles in the clouds distinguish these superb mola designs. Copyrighted photographs by and courtesy of Sue Murray "Molagirl" Gomez.



A Kuna woman on the San Blas Islands (Kuna Yala) of Panama, c. 2005. Photograph courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.



Carol Muse Skinner, *Kuna Woman*, digital photo painting, Copyrighted photograph by and courtesy of Carol Muse Skinner.



Carol Muse Skinner, *Molas on a Line*, digital photo painting of San Blas Island, Kuna Yala. Copyrighted photograph by and courtesy of Carol Muse Skinner.

View of an uninhabited San Blas Island covered with coconut palm trees (Kuna Yala) from a dugout canoe, c. 2005. Photograph courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

A fishing pier on a San Blas Island (Kuna Yala), Panama. The coastal mainland of Kuna Yala, Panama, is visible in the background, c. 2005. Photograph courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

An inhabited San Blas Island, Kuna Yala, Panama with concrete and palm roofed structures, c. 2005. The building on the right is a Mola Cooperative where the Kuna's molas are sold to visitors. Photograph courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

"San Blas Indian Women in Native Dress" or "Two Women, Both in Native Dress with Ornaments 1910", from an 8" x 10" glass negative collected by the Bureau of American Ethnology from 1850s – 1930s, courtesy of the National Anthropological Archives of the Smithsonian Institution, BAE GN 04307B1. "The necks of the women are loaded with necklaces made of red, white, or blue beads to which are added old Columbian silver coins. They also wear, occasionally, in their ears gold rings or disks...and in their noses always another ring of the same metal..." Henry Pittier, "Little Known Parts of Panama." National Geographic 23 (July, 1912); p. 637.





Double mola, 48 ½" x 17 ¼", c. 1960. These two molas (front and back of dismantled mola blouse) may represent an eagle and golden frog *huaca*. Huacas were gold objects created by the ancient natives of Central and South America as early as 300 A.D. and were buried with their leaders and warriors. An eagle huaca symbolized power and authority; the frog represented life, health and good luck. These companion molas were exquisitely fabricated utilizing the small dots complicated space filling technique and three or more textile color outlines of the central foreground figures and the stars. *Diente* or sawtooth details were added to the eagle's wings. The harmonious use of color, compositional balance and fine fabric selection and stitch work differentiate these excellent molas. *Author's collection, photograph by author.*

A Kuna woman wearing mola attire, jewelry, headscarf, Kuna Yala, Panama, c. 1975. *Photograph by the author.*

Two Kuna women sewing molas, Kuna Yala, Panama, c. 1975. *Photograph by the author.*

A Kuna woman sewing molas, Kuna Yala, Panama, c. 1975. *Photograph by the author.*



Mola in palette of blues fabricated for the tourist industry, c. 2005. Copyrighted photograph by and courtesy of Sue Murray "Molagirl" Gomez.

Tourist trade mola in shades of blue, c. 2005. Photograph courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.



Bird molita in traditional double frame, 12" width x 9 1/2" height (molita) and 16 1/2" width x 14 1/4" height (framed), c. 1970. This bird with flowers molita depicts flowers, stems and leaves and a bird in profile among the foliage and was created in the appliqué technique only (no reverse appliqué or background details) with topstitching details throughout. The molita is double framed with burlap fabric and wood trim in a style developed in the Canal Zone and Panama for framing molas and molitas in the 1960s. Author's collection.



Bird molita in carved wood frame, 9" width x 7 1/2" height, c. 1970. This molita depicts a bird in profile with an open beak and an appearance of walking. The topstitching detail in a circular pattern around the eye and the chain stitching as feather details is well stitched; the overall simplistic nature of the molita indicates this may be a child's piece. The frame was made in Panama. Author's collection.



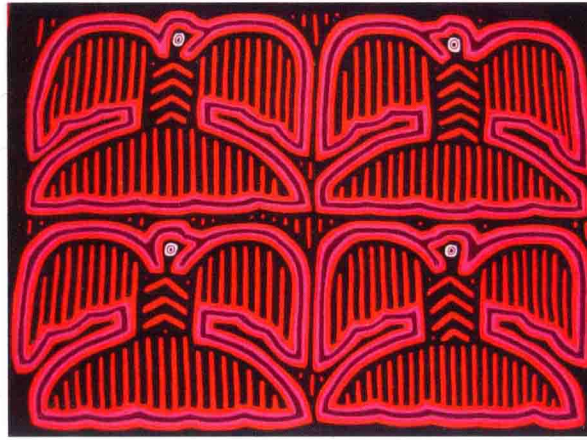
Two tropical birds on branches are depicted in this mola with a birdwatcher in the background, c. 2005. Detailed topstitching and crisp sawtooth detailing are found in this colorful mola design. Copyrighted photograph by and courtesy of Sue Murray "Molagirl" Gomez.



A heron uses its beak to reach into the dog's throat to remove a lodged bone in a display of friendship and cooperation in this mola design complete with detailed topstitching, appliqué and reverse appliqué, c. 2005. Copyrighted photograph by and courtesy of Sue Murray "Molagirl" Gomez.



Four Eagles mola originally collected by Capt. Kit S. Kapp, c. 1960. Copyrighted photograph by and courtesy of Thomas Hannaher.



Four Eagles or Thunderbirds mola, c. 2005. Copyrighted photograph by and courtesy of Sue Murray "Molagirl" Gomez.

The designs and patterns created in mola textile art by Kuna mola artists are unique in their creation, although many designs and concepts are adapted from historical molas' motifs and shared. This collective cultural art form is practiced by many Kuna women, is usually unattributed to the artist and is therefore anonymous to collectors.

Contemporary mola designs incorporate traditional and modern elements, and may reflect abstract geometric designs, motifs from the natural world, themes related to politics, popular culture, and Kuna legends and depict many details of their lives.

The Kuna are strongly rooted in their culture, yet have assimilated contemporary influences and motifs into their mola design vernacular.

These dazzling textile molas tell a multi-layered story and—with their engaging design motifs, brilliant color palette and meticulously fine stitching—embody an extraordinary art form.



Abstract geometric mola design depicting a Kuna woman's nose ring (*Olasu Olo*), c. 2005. This geometric/abstract mola represents the *olasu*, a traditional nose ring worn by Kuna women. Photograph by Jesse Samuel, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.



Two Kuna women fishing mola, c. 2005. The molas of "Diana La Bruja" (Diana the sorceress or witch) as she is known in Kuna Yala, are some of the most extraordinary examples of fine contemporary mola design and workmanship. Her mola compositions illustrate in elaborate detail, fine stitch work and color palettes many aspects and activities of Kuna life, ceremonies and other creative motifs. Diana was born in Kuna Yala, on the island of Soledad Mandinga, off the coast of the Caribbean side of the Isthmus of Panama. Copyrighted photograph by and courtesy of Sue Murray "Molagirl" Gomez.

