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THE UNIQUE ART OF MOLAS

This exhibition is part of the Statewide Touring Exhibition Project organized by the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska–Lincoln and made possible by a grant from the Nebraska Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Arts in cooperation with the Nebraska Library Commission, the Nebraska Art Association and the local sponsors.

A film, "The Cuna," has been provided by courtesy of the Nebraska Library Commission.

cover: No. 5. *Blouse, Pescado Enamorado*
University Collection, Gift of Mary Riepma Ross

THE UNIQUE ART OF MOLAS

The San Blas Islands, one for each day of the year, lie on the Caribbean side of Panama in a chain of tiny atolls. The Cuna Indians, who left the mainland long ago seeking peaceful isolation, live a quiet communal life in the thatched houses that crowd these Islands. The Cunas have always been self-sufficient, raising their food, building their houses and canoes and making their tools, medicines and clothing. Their economy has long been based on the sale of coconuts, but some men work in the Canal Zone and some sail as merchant seamen and this income enables them to buy cloth and manufactured items, although their wants remain simple.

The folk craft of making molas has existed for about one hundred twenty-five years, beginning when the Cunas moved from the mainland to the Islands where the cooler nights necessitated warmer clothing. The women sewed blouses with simple applique borders at first and gradually increased the size of these decorative strips until, with a panel in front and one in the back, only a yoke and short sleeves were needed to complete a kind of quilted garment. This blouse is worn with a dark colored, sarong-like wrapped skirt and bright red head scarf with painted yellow designs. Once every woman wore a gold nose ring and painted a black line down the center of her nose because a long nose was considered beautiful. This is a practice that seems to be dying out, but, when there was an effort to outlaw the wearing of molas, the women flatly refused. Although the women do not hold governing positions, the Cunas have a matriarchal society. A man may not sell property without his wife's permission and when a daughter marries, her husband is obligated to live with her family and contribute to its support.

The Cuna women have developed the fine needlework of molas into a distinctive art found nowhere else in the world. The technique has been called reverse applique and is created from three or more layers of cloth. The cloth is basted together and the design drawn on the top layer. Using small scissors, the woman cuts through the top layer and with tiny, even stitches she catches the narrowly turned edge to the cloth beneath. She then cuts through to the next layer and sews the raw edges under to leave a narrow line of that color showing. This process is continued until the bottom layer appears and the shapes are outlined by a series of colored lines. Any space between the main shapes is filled by an all-over pattern of short cuts often revealing strips of color as a result of small pieces of various colored cloth underlaid in these areas. Regularly appliqued shapes may be superimposed on the mola and bits of embroidery in colored threads may be added details.

Cuna girls begin making their wardrobes of molas when they are seven or eight years old, but the finest ones are done by women between the ages of seventeen and thirty-five, after which their sight, and consequently their workmanship, begins to falter. When a girl marries she has already made herself a dozen or so mola blouses. It may take from two to five weeks to make each panel, depending on how much time the woman must spend caring for her family, cooking and canoeing to the mainland for the fresh water the Islands lack. She may be working on three or four molas at a time and she hangs the finished garments inside out and neatly folded over the rafters of her home.

The soft-hued molas from the 1920's are extremely rare because steady wear and the salt air are hard on cloth. However, the more recent ones show a finer quality of cloth and stitchery and their beauty has been discovered by visitors to the Islands. The coming of tourists has resulted in the production of molas for this trade and these usually are not of as high quality as the ones created for their own use. All the molas in this exhibition were once garments.

The Cuna women find inspiration for mola design in everyday activities like pounding rice (No. 15) or bell ringing (No. 2) and in literally everything else that touches their lives. However, because of their close observation of nature and their belief that everything has a spirit, animals and plants are used more than any other subjects. The themes include animals (No. 8), reptiles (No. 10) or birds (No. 3) and plant forms may become all over designs as in the paisley-like *Leaves* (No. 9). Naturally, the sea provides motifs of crabs (No. 13) and fish (No. 4) and the unusually beautiful blouse in this exhibition (No. 5) has pairs of fish on both front and back panels. Sometimes fearful monsters are drawn from old tribal legends (No. 12) and sometimes fairy tales and toys (No. 6) appear from more recent times. When we cannot read the ancient tribal symbols used, the shapes become simply an abstract design (No. 1). Modern motifs come from politics as in the *Political Rooster* (No. 11) with the man in power, symbolized by the sunglasses, teeth and gaudy plumage, trampling a fallen enemy. *The Rubber Man* (No. 7) may have come from a comic book with the characteristic zig zag lines indicating the cracking of heads on the wrestler's knees. Regardless of the subject matter, molas can always be enjoyed for their decorative qualities.

The best molas have certain attributes that mark their superiority.

1. The design should be pleasing to the eye with no large empty areas.
2. The colors should be well balanced and the thread should match the cloth.
3. Raw edges should be turned under with hidden stitches, without lumps at corners and curves should have no flattened places.
4. The edges of color should be narrow and of uniform width.

5. The wrong side of the mola should be a pattern of fine and even stitches like a quilt.
6. The thickness of the mola is significant because more than three complete layers of cloth usually indicates above average workmanship.
7. Embroidered touches should fit the design and not be excessive. Use of "rickrack" or other commercial tapes is a short cut that lessens the quality of the workmanship.
8. Basting stitches holding the layers of cloth together are not always pulled out, but do not reduce the quality. A favorite mola, faded from repeated wearings and washings, may be well-worn because it is a particularly beautiful one.

Jane T. Anderson

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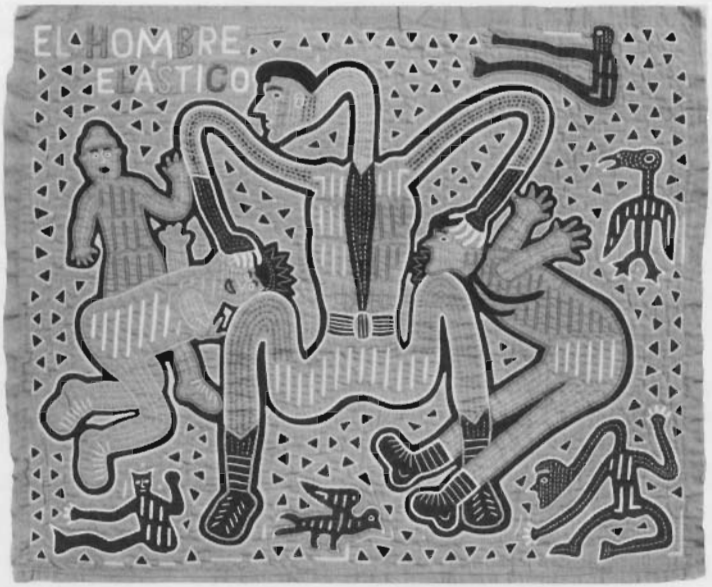
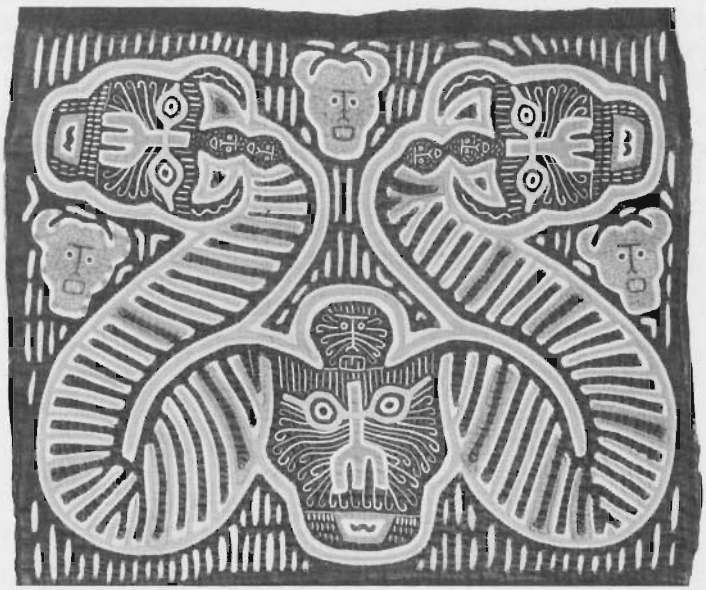


No. 7

No. 10

No. 11



No. 12

NOTES FROM A TRAVEL LOG—Written by Mrs. John Baldwin during a visit to the San Blas Islands in 1974

People—small in stature, dignified and proud. Women almost shy-looking, children and men appear more gregarious. I wonder if this isn't the result of increasing tourism. Since Cunas are racially pure, there is a sameness to their appearance. The women are clothed in colorful, well-worn molas in blouse form, often having sleeve and neck portion in uncoordinated prints. They are usually heavily-laden with gold jewelry, including nose-rings and several rows of coins and other paraphernalia hang around their necks; they often wear scarves on their heads. Young girls are dressed much like their mothers. Men are dressed in half Panamanian, half Cuna fashion, with loose-fitting shirts (if any) baggy pants and sometimes hats. Young boys wear shorts or nothing. By tradition women were supposed to sew the girls' clothing and men, the boys', consequently, while most of the Cuna girls are fully clothed, the boys are often nude.

Villages—communal living, very clean despite population density. Single huts house several generations who sleep in hammocks which are raised to ceiling during day. Thatched roof huts abut one another with narrow dirt walkways between. There is a central square where a meeting house is located and where molas, dolls, balsa wood and other hand-crafted items are sold. Selling is not restricted to this area but takes place at every doorway where women and female children are seated, sewing and selling simultaneously. I recall seeing girls of six and seven stitching rapidly on molas, much simpler in design than those executed by older women.

Tribe members live on small islands but work on nearby mainland, usually in copra farms and factories or on plantations, returning to their homes in the evening by dugout canoe. These canoes seem to descend upon and encircle arriving cruise ships, eagerly and noisily selling hand-made items. Prevailing feeling is friendly reserve on the part of older Cunas and just plain friendly on the part of youth. A visit to San Blas is a thoroughly enjoyable experience.

THE UNIQUE ART OF MOLAS

1. *Abstract Design with Serrated Edges*
   Collection of David L. Smith
2. *Bell Ringers*
   Collection of David L. Smith
3. *Bird as an Emblem*
   Collection of David L. Smith
4. *Bird Catching a Fish*
   Collection of David L. Smith

* 5. *Blouse, Pescado Enamorado*
   University Collection, Gift of Mary Riepma Ross

6. *Dragon Toy*
   Collection of David L. Smith

* 7. *El Hombre Elastico*
   University Collection, Gift of Mary Riepma Ross

8. *Four Rabbits*
   Collection of David L. Smith
9. *Leaves*
   Collection of David L. Smith

*10. *Lizard*
   University Collection, Gift of Mary Riepma Ross

*11. *Political Rooster*
   University Collection, Gift of Mary Riepma Ross

*12. *Three-Headed Monster*
   Collection of David L. Smith

13. *Two Crabs*
   Collection of David L. Smith
14. *Winged Donkeys*
   Collection of David L. Smith
15. *Women Pounding Rice*
   Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Jon Nelson

* Illustrated in catalog

EXHIBITION SCHEDULE

1976

January 17-February 12	First National Bank Aurora, Nebraska
July 1-July 29	Kearney Public Library Kearney, Nebraska
August 2-August 26	Kimball Public Library Kimball, Nebraska
August 28-September 24	Scottsbluff Public Library Scottsbluff, Nebraska
October 2-October 28	Keene Memorial Library Fremont, Nebraska
October 30-December 3	Ralston Public Library Ralston, Nebraska

1977

January 15-February 11	First National Lincoln Lincoln, Nebraska
February 14-March 11	Link Library, Concordia College Seward, Nebraska
April 25-May 20	Valentine Public Library Valentine, Nebraska
May 28-June 23	Bellevue Public Library Bellevue, Nebraska

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