

## Making a Mola

To make a mola, a Cuna seamstress layers rectangles of brightly colored cotton cloth of good quality (see Figure 5). The average size of the large molas in my personal collection is  $18\frac{7}{8}$ " x  $16\frac{7}{8}$ ", with the very largest measuring  $20\frac{1}{4}$ " x 18". The layers of fabric are basted together. When all the fabric is securely joined, the seamstress prepares her design.

On the top layer—usually a piece of very bright red, hot orange, or, for contrast, black fabric—a design is drawn in pencil. Once the design is established on the top layer, it and the layers of fabric underneath are cut through with small pointed scissors. The overall design emerges as the process of cutting continues. (Among more experienced mola-makers, the fabric is often cut freehand, without a guiding penciled outline of the design.) With each cut, pieces of cloth are removed and the colors of lower layers show through. The cut edges of the cloth are then carefully folded under and finished with hidden stitches. The procedure of cutting away fabric is called *reverse appliqué*, and is unique to the mola craft. In addition to this specialized needlework, conventional appliqué and embroidery are also employed in almost every mola design.

When a color other than those of the fabric layers is to be introduced, the design element through which the color will show is cut out, a patch of the desired color is inserted under the opening and between the layers, and then the design is sewed down. In such cases the seamstress often will use conventional appliqué to apply yet another color on top of the patch.

Using only hand needlework, a Cuna seamstress ordinarily requires about two months to complete a single panel, during which time she also performs her regular home chores. At the same time she also works on the first panel's mate and several others that will become part of other blouses at a later time. The completed original panel and its mate will be used on the front and back of the mola-maker's own blouse. Although each pair of molas is intended for use on the same blouse, the two panels are seldom identical. Indeed the manner in which they are made almost precludes anything beyond close similarity.

Girls in every Cuna family begin to learn the art of needlework and mola design when they are six or seven years old. Several examples of the small practice mola designs made by young girls are included in this volume. By the time she has reached marriageable age, every young woman will have assembled a score or more blouses that she considers to be the very finest she has ever made. These are highly treasured and given the very greatest care. This special attention is essential in a tropical climate where the elements will normally cause almost any fabric to deteriorate. Early examples of the



Figure 5. Sewing together the layers of fabric for a mola. By permission of the Panama Government Tourist Bureau.

craft are difficult to find except in museums and private collections, where they have been cared for under favorable conditions.

## Mola Designs

Designs used in making molas fall within loosely defined categories. Traditional subjects include religion, mythology, superstitions, and Cuna home life. There is extensive use of natural and abstract bird and animal designs. Common among the latter group are snakes, lizards, insects, fish, and other marine life. Many designs also include flowers, geometric figures, and mazes. Some molas display political slogans, advertising layouts, and trademarks of well-known products that have been freely lifted from magazines. Sports such as soccer, basketball, and baseball also find their way into the mola patterns of the present day, as do rockets and space capsules. The current molas possess the general appearance and colors of the traditional ones, but they also demonstrate the extent of the influences of the modern world upon the Cuna way of life.

## A Color Guide

The following colors are those most frequently used

in molas. The first group is used almost exclusively for the topmost layer:

Scarlet (or Cadmium Red Light)  
Carmine (or Alizarine Crimson)  
Orange  
Black

The colors used to form the second, third, and other layers of the packet of cloth, as well as other parts of the finished mola, are:

Lemon Yellow	Violet
Cadmium Yellow Medium	Hooker's Green
Yellow Ochre	Emerald Green
Orange	Olive Green
Cadmium Red Light	Prussian Blue
Alizarine Crimson	Black
Cerise	White
Purple	

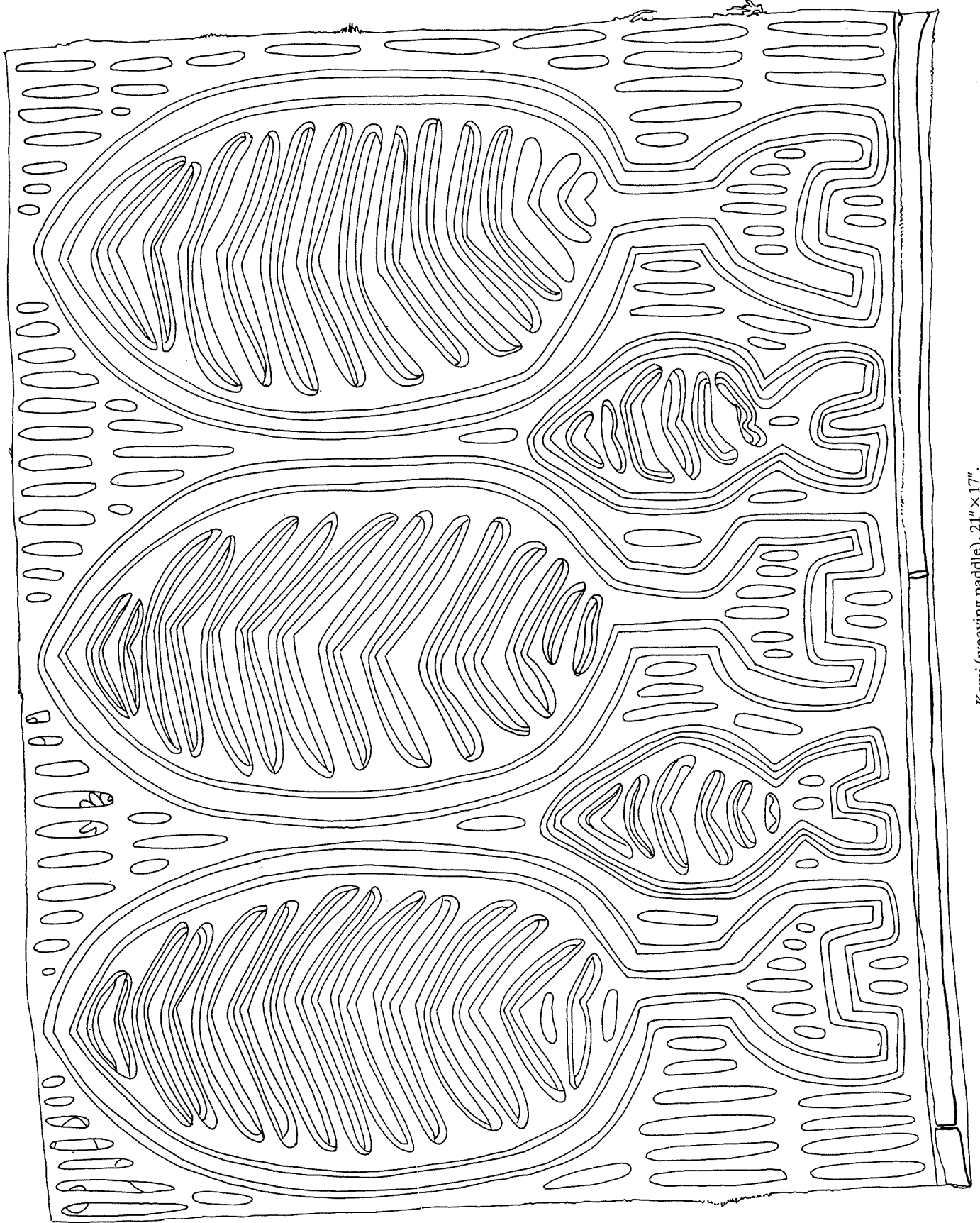
These colors can be used in any pleasing combination. The colors selected by the Cuna seamstresses are

crisply bright, but they are always kept in careful balance. Authentically colored versions of the mola designs on pages 8, 9, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 25, 32, 34, 35, and 45 appear on the inside and outside covers of this book.

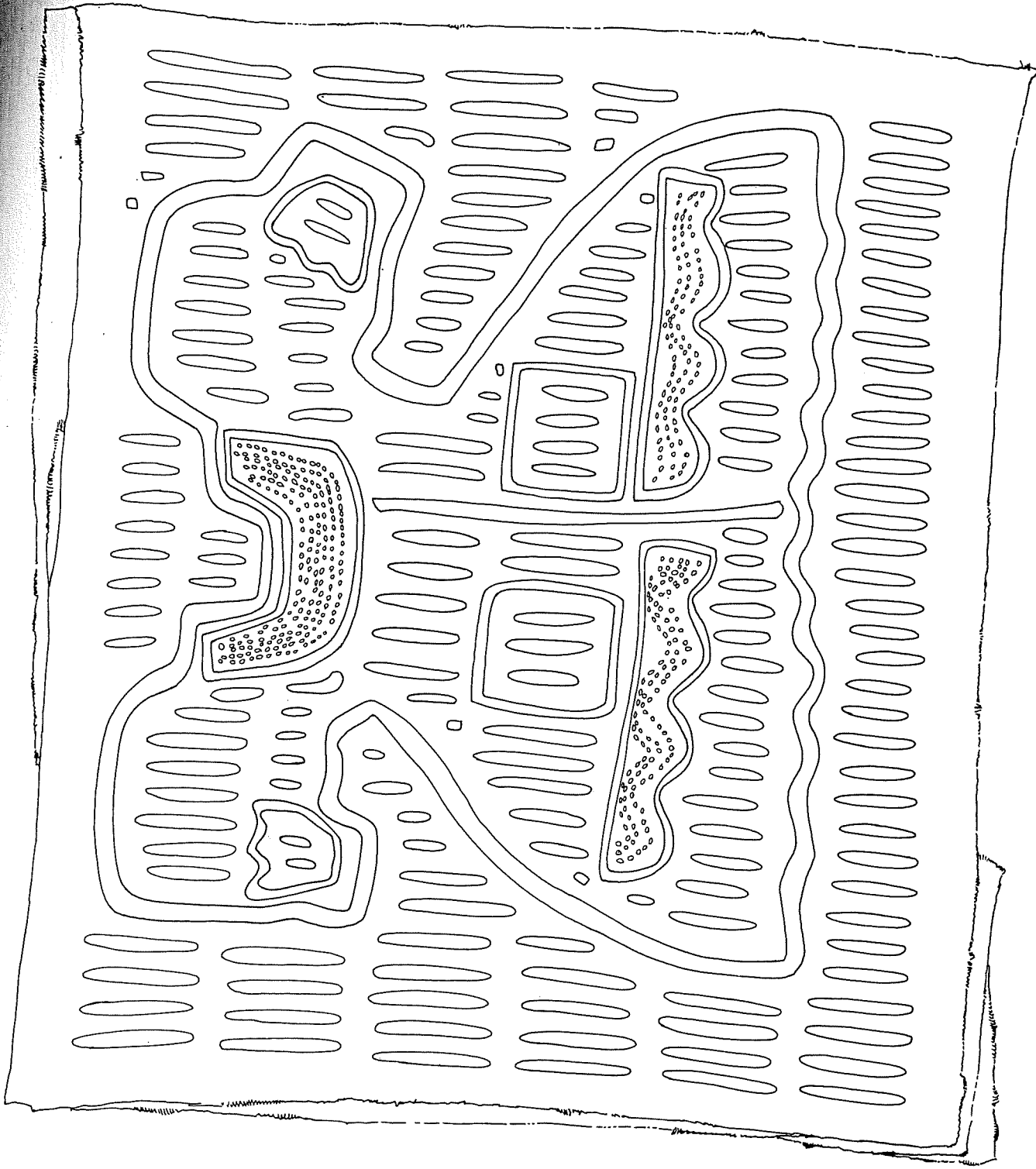
### Sequence of Plates and Captions

The full-page plates appearing on pages 7-45 are organized by theme: home (pages 7-11), religion and superstition (pages 12-15), animal life (pages 16-29), trees and flowers (pages 30-31), and miscellaneous (pages 32-45). The smaller illustrations on pages 46-48 are examples of molas made by young Cuna girls who are learning the craft. The girls' "practice" molas are not used for blouse panels but rather to satisfy the tourist trade.

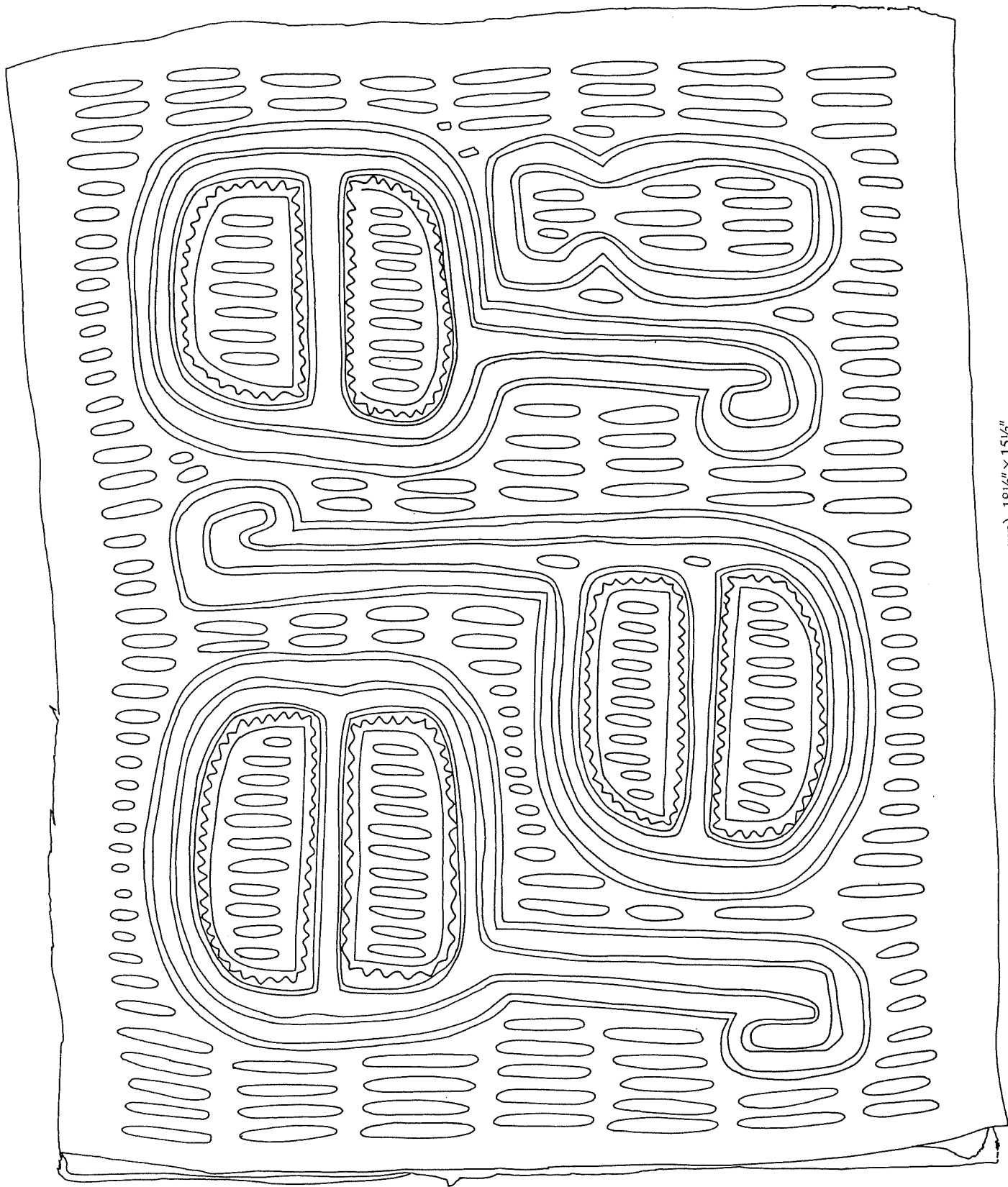
The captions provide the Cuna name of the mola subject, when known, and its English equivalent. Also provided are the dimensions of the original molas from which the designs have been abstracted.



Karni (weaving paddle), 21" x 17".

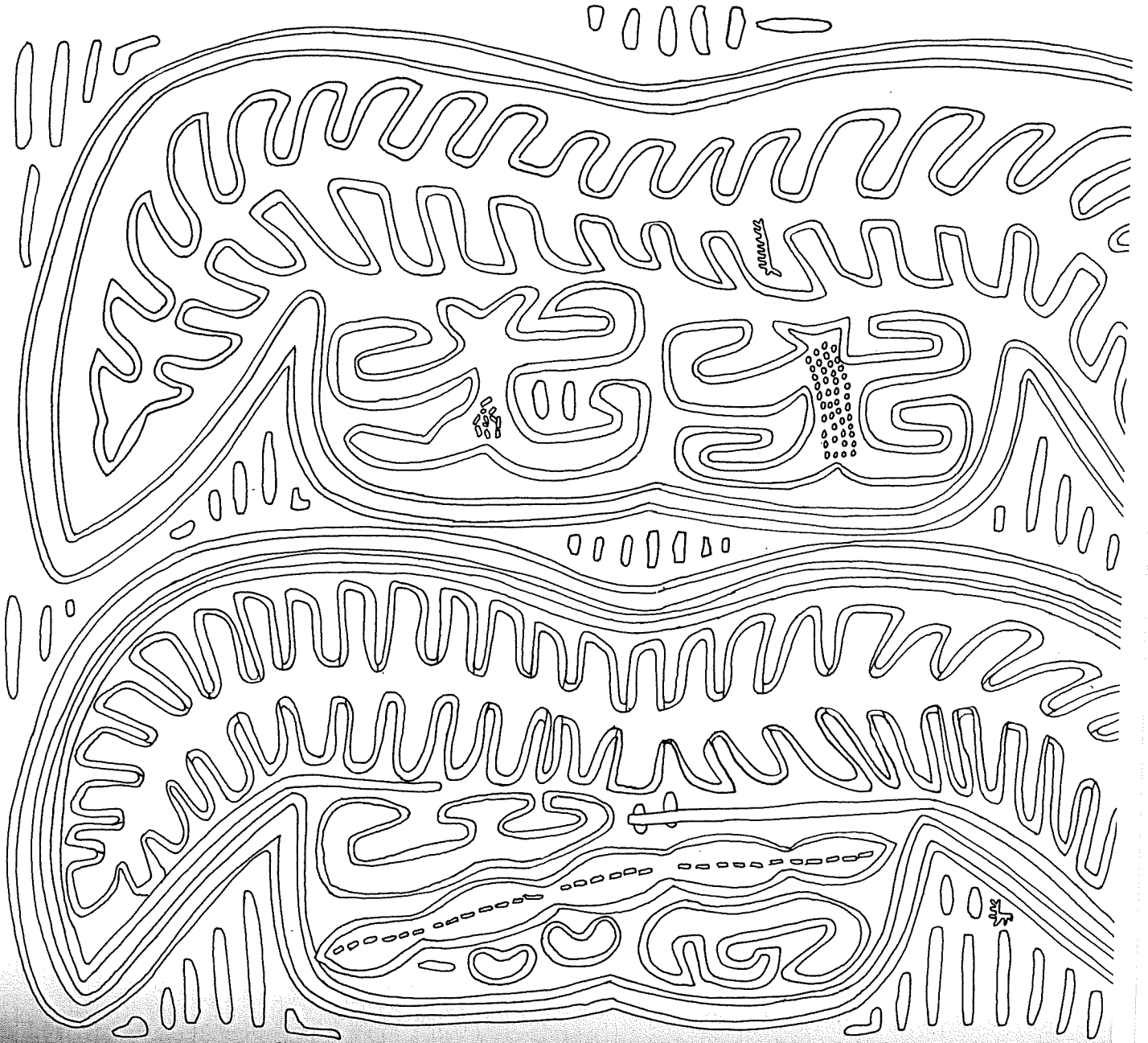


Child's dress, 17½" × 16".

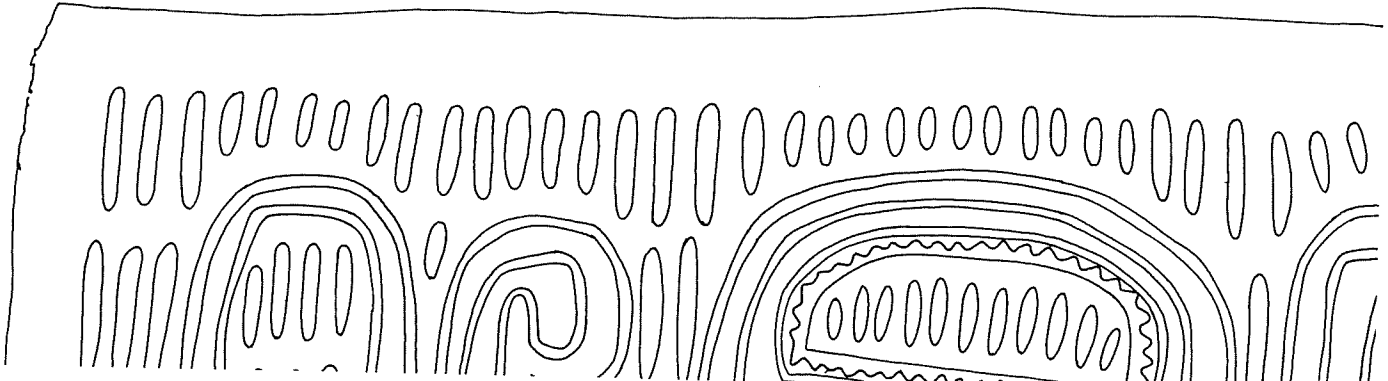


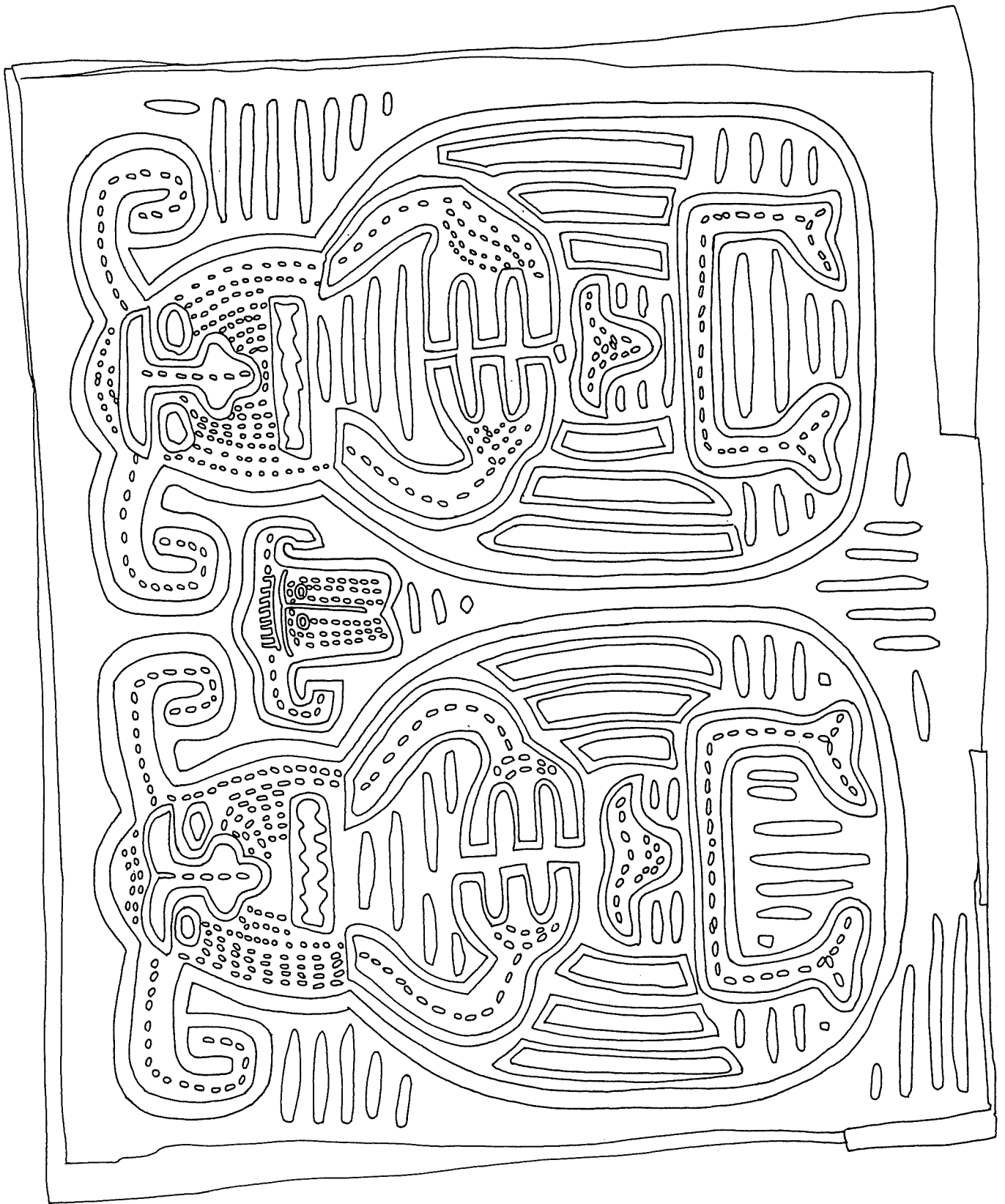
*Tibur* (calabash water scoop or cup), 18½" x 15½".

Kurgin (hat), 19" x 14 1/2"

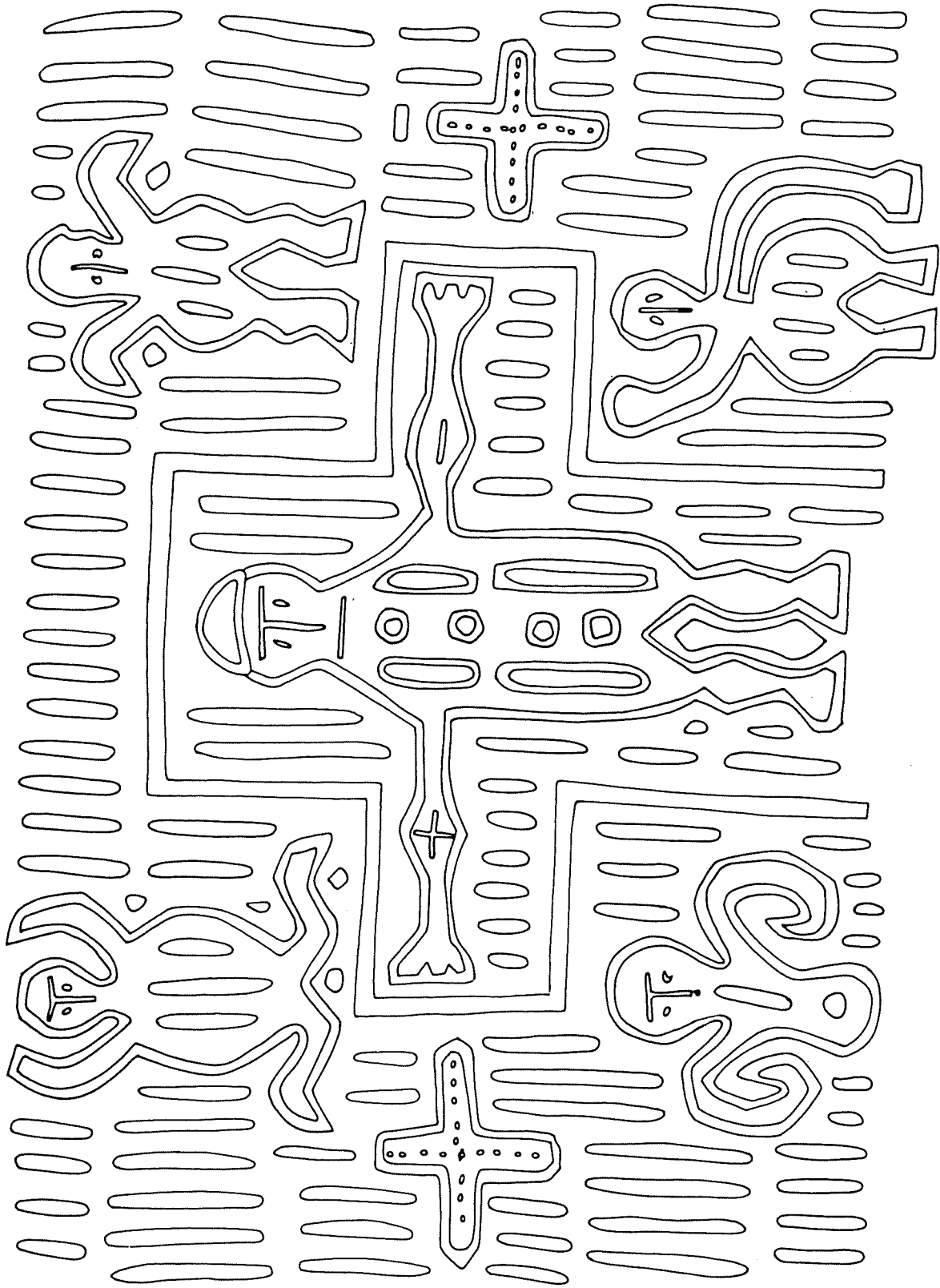


Tibur (calabash water scoop or cup), 18 1/2" x 15 1/2"



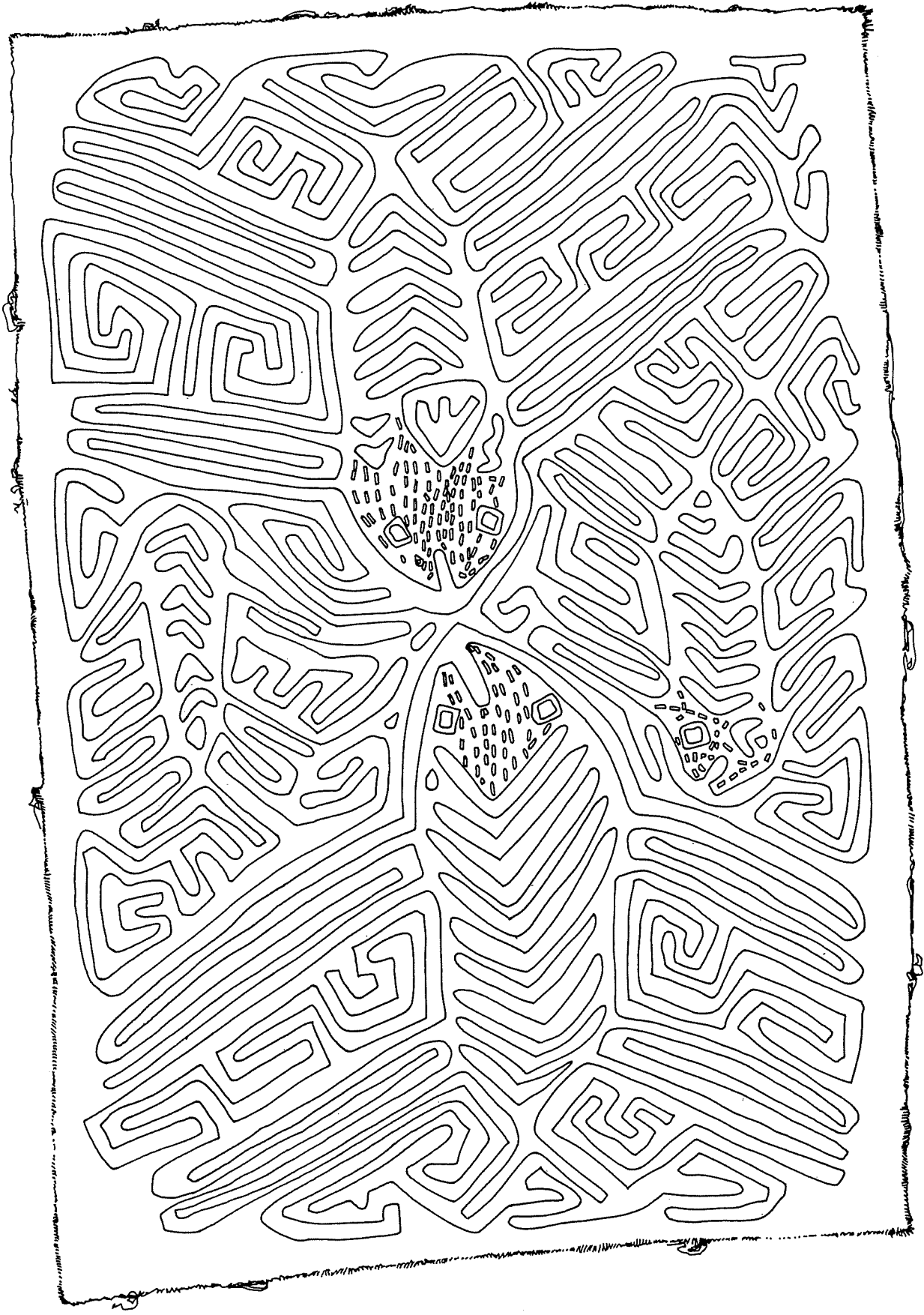


Ritual figures, 16" x 13½".



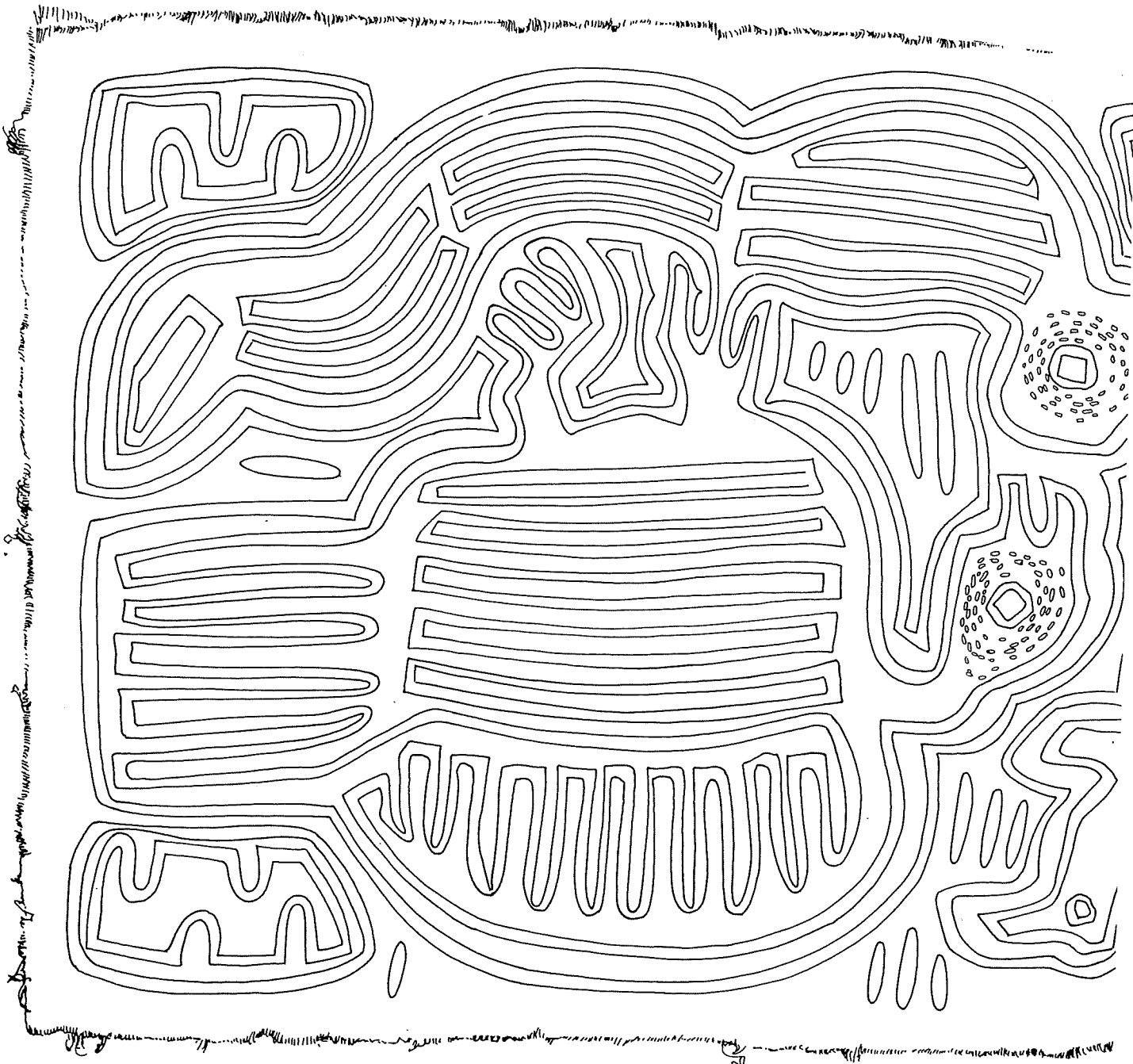
*Cristo rojo (red Christ), 20" x 15".*



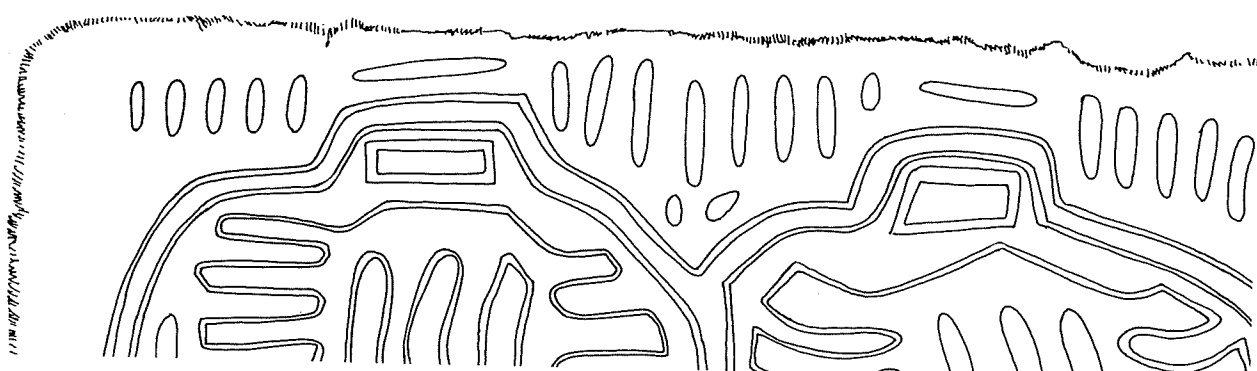


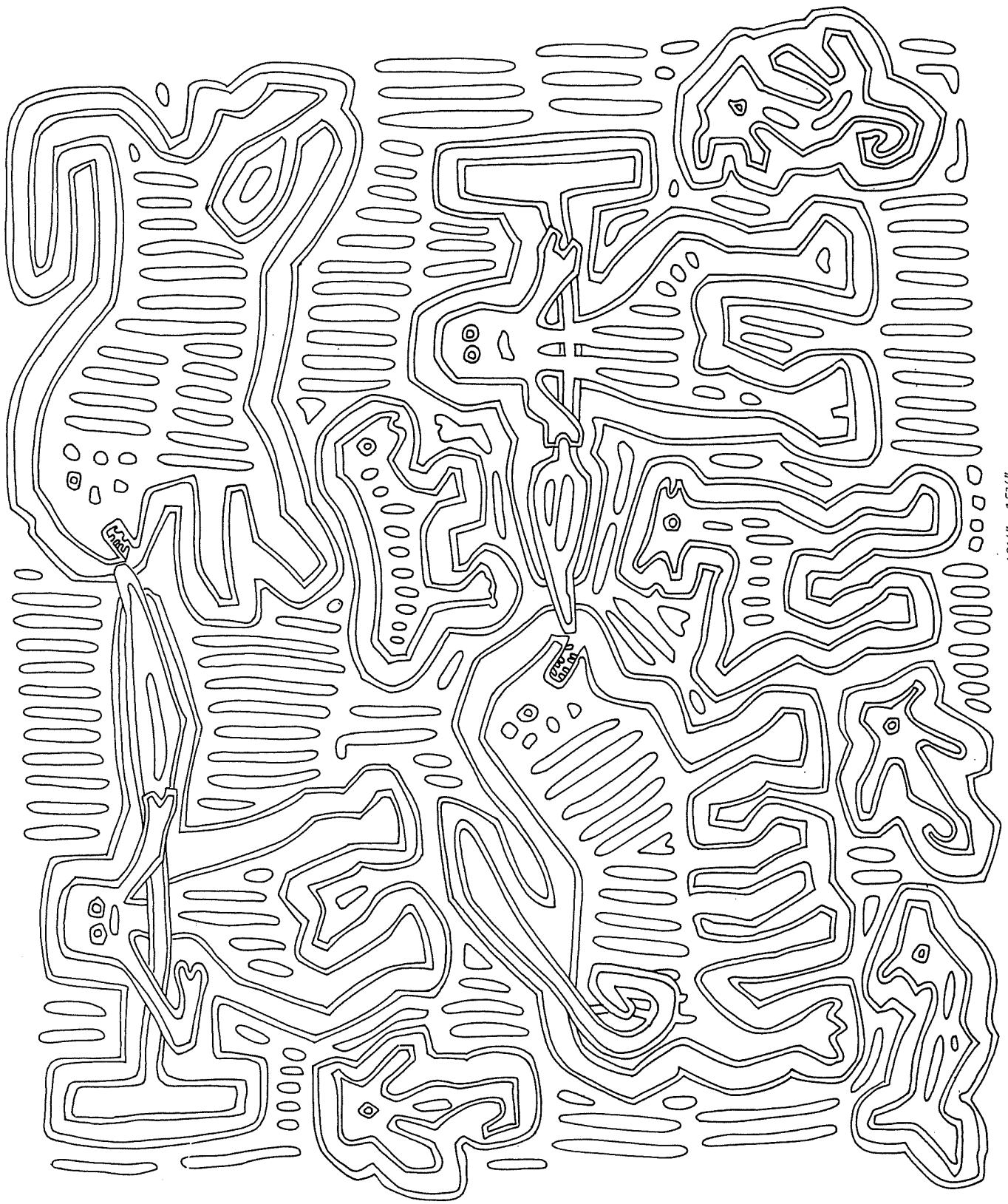
Uakala (fish skeletons), 21" x 15".

Weko (bird pouncing on reptile), 19" x 14 1/2".

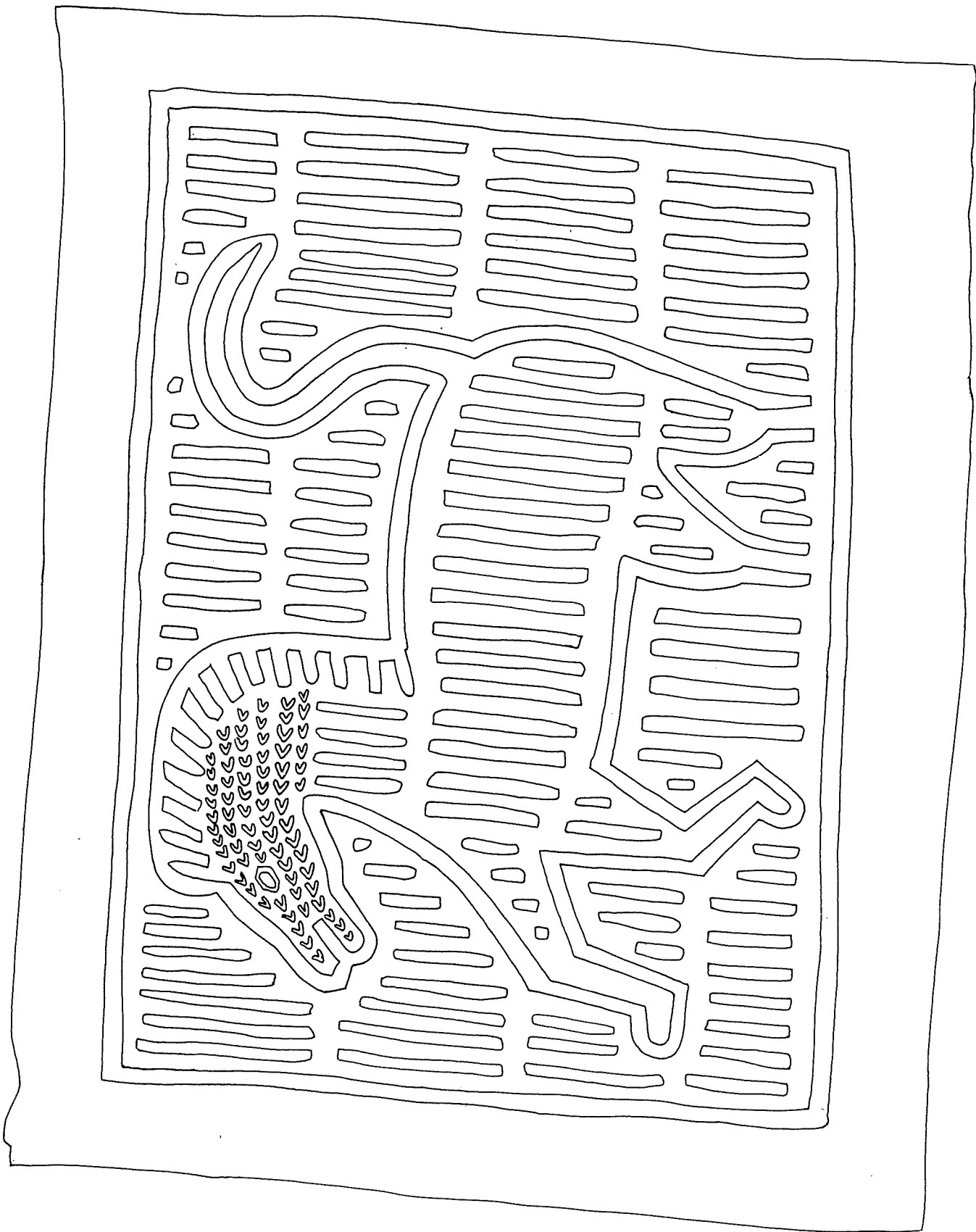


Sug (crab, sikwi (bird), and karpa (basket), 18 1/2" x 16 1/4".





Animal hunt, 18½" x 15¼".



Moli (horse), 17 3/4" x 14".