

MOLAS

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Mola illustration: From *Panama's Position: From the Threshold to the Present*.
Panama: Asociación Panameña de Relaciones Internacionales, 1973.

The Cuna Indians of the San Blas Islands off the coast of Panama have contributed a unique art form to the rest of the world—the mola. A mola was originally a suit or a dress, but today is primarily manifested in women's blouses or wall hangings. In essence, a mola is a beautiful and intricate reverse appliqué featuring an inlay technique that can vary in thickness from two to four layers of material. Bright colors such as red, yellow, and orange are the predominant favorites for molas. The background is usually a darker color, such as dark blue, green, or black. The most common stitches are the hem, or blind stitch, used for joining layers of material, and the running and chain stitches, used to illustrate details such as eyes and mouths.

Woman's Day (May 1966) in "A Fascinating Craft from Panama: Reverse Appliqué," describes the mola technique:

Conventional appliqué is usually done by cutting under the raw edges to the shapes and then sewing them to another, larger piece of fabric to form a complete design. But the Cuna women work in reverse. They take several pieces of cotton fabric of different colors and baste them together along the outer edges; then working from the top layer down they cut through the various layers to create fanciful designs. As the shapes are cut out, the

edges of the openings created are turned under and sewn to the fabric underneath. The color that shows through the openings depends on the number of layers which are cut through a particular place.

It is ironic to note that in the 1920s local government leaders sought to abolish the mola. They felt it more progressive to have the women of the islands adopt plain dresses. While there was no organized resistance, many women chose to ignore the rule. The mola endured.

All grade levels can participate in making molas. Younger children can make molas using colored construction paper, burlap, or felt by pasting the different layers of materials used. Designs can also be kept simple. Fish, worms, butterflies, flowers, birds, etc., are suitable for elementary students.

Junior and senior high school students may be challenged by using more intricate designs and sewing, instead of pasting, their mola. Jorge Enciso's *Design Motifs of Ancient Mexico* offers a wide variety of prints that can be used as designs. The students may even wish to use a more personal design. Modern Cuna women use motifs taken from day-to-day living. Molas featuring everything from religious ceremonies to a can of sardines, complete with wording and illustrations, are reflective of Cuna daily life.

Materials

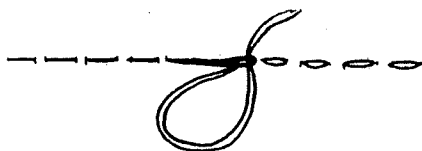
- Several colors of construction paper or fabric
- Needle and thread
- Scissors
- Glue

Instructions

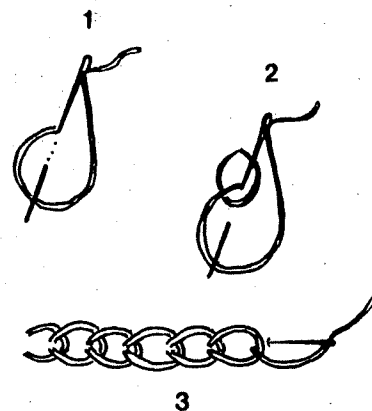
1. Students choose their design and draw it on scratch paper.
2. Have the students decide on the size of their mola. The traditional size measures 16" by 24". It would be wise not to make them any larger. Younger children will work best with small molas.
3. Four colors to work with is the most desirable number. Two should be the full length of the mola. Younger children may insert pieces of the other two colors into the molas.
4. "Draw the central motif on the top layer of paper or fabric. Draw around it again, leaving 1/4 inch between the lines. When cut, this will reveal the second layer. Cut other designs in the top layer. Insert third and fourth colors between top and bottom layers."¹
5. If the mola is to be sewn, turn back the edges and sew them down using a hem or blind stitch. When illustrating details such as eyes or mouth, use a chain or running stitch.

(a) The hem or blind stitch—a regular sewing stitch. Bring the needle up through the back-ground cloth, catching only the edge of the cloth to be appliquéd. Reinsert the needle close to the same point in order to keep the surface thread as invisible as possible. Continue in the same manner.

(b) The running stitch



(c) The chain stitch



Sources

Periodicals

- National Geographic*, August 1974
- Américas*, April 1973
- Smithsonian*, November 1975
- Woman's Day*, May 1966

Books

- Chaves, Enrique. *About Molas*. Florida State University Isthmian Anthropology Society, Panama Canal Press, 1969.
- Comins, Jeremy. *Latin American Crafts and Their Cultural Background*. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard, 1974.

Note

- ¹ Mary Beth Trece, Lawrence High School, Lawrence, Kansas, *Learning about Latin America*, quarter course teaching unit for secondary school classes, "Activity—Mola Making."

LEVEL: HIGH SCHOOL

Source: Contreras, Gloria, *Latin American Cultural Studies: Information and Materials For Teaching Latin America*, 2nd Revised Edition, Institute of Latin American Studies, The University of Texas at Austin.