

## MATERIALS & RESOURCES

- Scissors, pencils, erasers, glue sticks or white glue, white construction paper 12" x 18" for creating principal mola shape, colored construction paper 12" x 18" for background, assorted colored strips of paper.
- <http://www.slideshare.net/nwalkup/molasa-cloth-tradition-pdf>
- <http://www.molasfrompanama.com/index.html>
- <http://sanblas-islands.com/kuna-indians/art/>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R6zqvl-zE3g>
- Heffron, Prudence and Dana L. Musick. *The Mola Coloring Book*. Santa Fe/Dallas: The Mola Collection, 1994.
- Presilla, Maricel E. *Mola, Cuna Life Stories and Art*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996.
- Shaffer, Frederick W. *Mola Design Coloring Book: 45 Authentic Designs from Panama*. New York: Dover Publications, 1982.

## VOCABULARY (definitions on page 4)

- Appliqué
- Cloth
- Design
- Fabric
- Fauna
- Flora
- Inspiration
- Mola
- Panel
- Traditions

## NATIONAL VISUAL ART STANDARDS

- **Creating:** Conceiving and developing new artistic ideas and work.
- **Presenting:** Interpreting and sharing artistic work.
- **Responding:** Understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning.
- **Connecting:** Relating artistic ideas and work with personal meaning and external context.

# CUNA MOLA DESIGNS

## INTRODUCTION

A mola is an appliqued fabric panel created by Cuna women, an indigenous people from the San Blas Islands of Panama. The term "mola" refers to a traditional blouse made by women to serve as front and back panels of the blouses they wear everyday. Now molas are also sold to collectors and framed and exhibited. The market for the unique molas has provided an economic benefit for the Cuna Indians.

## LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will learn about how molas are part of Cuna women's dress and culture in Panama. (Responding: Understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning.)
- Students will create a mola using paper construction techniques. (Creating: Conceiving and developing new artistic ideas and work.)
- Students will use their own design elements to create a mola. (Connecting: Relating artistic ideas and work with personal meaning and external context.)
- Students will prepare their work for display. (Presenting: Interpreting and sharing artistic work.)



Cuna woman holding a mola in San Blas, Panama. commons.wikimedia.org

## CUNA MOLA DESIGNS



A.1980.1.788 Blouse, Central America, Panama, Comarca de San Blas. Girard Foundation Collection, Museum of International Folk Art

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Cuna have a population of around 47,000 members. They migrated from the mainland of Panama to the San Blas Islands on the Atlantic Coast in the mid-nineteenth century as a result of the Spanish invasion. In 1938, after a long struggle, the Comarca (district) of San Blas or Guna Yala, an indigenous province in northeast Panama and a semi-autonomous territory, was recognized by the Panamanian Government.

Molas are an important part of the everyday costume of the Cuna women, who also wear wraparound sarongs, beaded arm and leg bands, gold nose rings, and paint vertical stripes down the middle of their noses. Cuna men wear traditional western dress. The Cuna have been making molas since the mid to late nineteenth century.

Cuna women make molas using machine-made cloth that is sewn by hand. The fabric is layered with two to seven stacked layers of fabric, sewn together, cut, and then re-sewn to create an intricate, multi-colored design. Children learning how to sew molas make two-layer molas, using their mother's scraps.

Some mola designs are handed down within families. Others come from inspirations that are shared among artists. Anything a Cuna woman sees or imagines can inspire a design. Mola designs are often symmetrical, incorporate linear and abstract patterns, flora and fauna, alphabets, legends and traditions, objects from other cultures, as well as images from magazines and advertisements.



A.1979.67.678 Blouse fragment. Central America, Panama, Comarca de San Blas. Girard Foundation Collection, Museum of International Folk Art



A.1979.67.774 Blouse fragment. Central America, Panama, Comarca de San Blas. Girard Foundation Collection, Museum of International Folk Art

## CUNA MOLA DESIGNS



Student work

### MOTIVATION

Begin a discussion with the students about molas. What are molas? Where do they come from? Have students look at samples or photographs of molas and see if they can determine how the mola was made. Introduce the concept of appliqué both by layering on top of a surface or cutting away sections so you can see the different layers below. Explain that students will be making their own paper molas. Encourage them to think of different types of shapes or designs to use as a central image. They may want to draw animals, flowers, or something of interest to them that has an identifiable shape.

### PROCEDURES

1. Use colored construction paper to make a mola, starting with a 9" x 12" piece of colored construction paper.
2. Fold the paper in half and draw a recognizable shape, such as an animal, that fills as much of the paper as possible. Cut it out and separate the two parts.
3. Glue both parts to a piece of a different colored paper and then cut out the shapes, leaving  $\frac{1}{4}$  -  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch of the underlying paper showing.
4. Repeat this process one or two more times with a different color of paper.
5. Next, glue the two shapes in a symmetrical arrangement on a piece of 12" x 18" black construction paper.
6. Use the scraps from all the shapes to fill the space in and around the main shapes.

### EVALUATION/ASSESSMENT

Have students write an artist statement about their work and then arrange a display of the molas. Have students discuss the subject, colors, and patterns that their classmates used. Have students imagine that their molas are made of fabric. How could they be used as part of an article of clothing? Have the students sketch a design for a garment using their molas.

### EXTENSIONS/CONNECTIONS

- The process of making a mola involves working with layers of fabric. Using instead layers of poster board, tag board, or recycled file folders, have students work on a smaller scale to make a collograph printing plate, starting the same process with a simple central shape and gluing the finished shape on a 5"x7" rectangle. The finished plate can be used for printmaking.
- The mathematic and science concept of mirror symmetry found in many molas provides a meaningful connection with symmetry found in the natural world. Such subject matter could be used for motivation. For example, teachers could assign subject matter such as New Mexico native animals or endangered animals. Most living creatures possess either mirror (birds, mammals) or radial symmetry (sand dollar, octopus, jellyfish).

## CUNA MOLA DESIGNS



Student work



### VOCABULARY DEFINITIONS

- **Appliqué:** a method of decoration in which a motif is cut from one piece of material and attached, or applied to another.
- **Cloth:** a material made by weaving, felting or knitting natural or synthetic fibers.
- **Design:** to prepare the preliminary sketch or the plans for a work to be executed.
- **Fabric:** synonym for cloth.
- **Fauna:** the animals of a given region or period considered as a whole.
- **Flora:** plants, as distinguished from fauna.
- **Inspiration:** an act or quality that influences or arouses the mind, creative imagination, or emotions. Inspiration is something that motivates you towards your goal.
- **Mola:** In Panama, a colorful reverse applique fabric panel, originally made for the front and back of blouses.
- **Panel:** a distinct portion or section, enclosed by a frame or border.
- **Traditions:** the handing down of statements, beliefs, legends, customs, information, etc., from generation to generation, especially by word of mouth or by practice: a story that has come down to us by popular tradition.