

KUNA MOLA BLOUSES: AN EXAMPLE OF THE PERPETUATION OF AN
ART/CRAFT FORM IN A SMALL SCALE SOCIETY

DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This research used a collection of Kuna mola blouses that are housed at Denison University in Granville, Ohio; to gain an understanding of what it is within a community that maintains an art and craft form. The Kuna are an indigenous people that live in the San Blas region of Panama. The women sew and wear a mola blouse that includes decorative panels sewn in a technique referred to as “reverse appliqué.” Through documentation and analysis of the design, subject matter, color selection and method of manufacture, these blouses were categorized. The relative importance of the various categories was explored. Although mola-making came about through European contact, the blouses reflect a Kuna aesthetic and the art and craft practices already established within the community.

Generally speaking, regardless of how strong the cultural imperative may be, if the artists/crafters are not happy with the results, the art/craft form will not be maintained. Through the documentation and analysis of this collection, it was uncovered that there are different categories of mola blouses that reward the Kuna women for having different skills and abilities. By developing these, they receive the recognition that they require to propel them into more mola blouse making. Also, there was no category that was more prestigious than another; again assuring that everyone is rewarded. There were, however,

good panels and even better panels within each category, giving everyone the incentive to continue to strive for better results. It was shown that the different categories are based on different art/craft traditions previously established within the community.

The different categories of mola blouses also support the presence of an art/craft interplay. Art stresses innovation, whereas craft stresses virtuosity of technical skill. This study demonstrated the possibility of an art/craft interplay existing, which implies that the community implicitly rewards the stitcher according to the needs of the community in keeping the art/craft vital. Evidence for this interplay was suggested by the presence of different categories that permit different types of emphasis. Research stretching over a longer time period is required to establish how and when the switches in emphasis occur.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Mola blouses are an outstanding example of a creative technique that has been fully embraced by a culture. They are made by Kuna women to be worn by them and the female children of the community. They use bright and saturated colors to create a vivid display in a technique called reverse appliqué. The effort required to make a mola blouse is monumental, however the visual display is even more impressive and certainly warrants the amount of work required.

The Kuna people live on the San Blas Islands off of the coast of Panama and the adjoining coastal lands. They are an indigenous group first noticed by the early explorers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, who used their lands as a spring-off point for subsequent journeys inland. The location of their lands has meant that they have seen much strife since European contact. Many governments have struggled to claim the land as their own; the Spanish government, the Panamanian government, the Columbian government and even the American government when plans were being established for the Panama Canal. Throughout, the Kuna have remained cohesive, to the point that they have retained sovereignty over their lands, one of the few indigenous groups to do so.¹

Despite the independent nature of the Kuna, they adopted mola-making, which was an activity that relied totally on the introduction of western influences and materials.

¹ Karin Tice, *Kuna Crafts, Gender and the Global Economy*. (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1995), 34-55.

They required the importation of fabrics, needles, sewing thread and scissors as well as instruction on how to use them. It seems that early missionaries or early Huguenots, who arrived in this area during the time of the Reformation, taught the basic sewing techniques and the basic blouse format. Elements of this blouse pattern were combined with traditional dress to create a product that was unique to the Kuna. The Kuna readily adopted ideas that appealed to them, such as the stitching of a blouse, but then quickly made them into something that fit into their own aesthetic. The result of this integration is that it is very difficult to establish the origin of mola-making.²

Most Kuna women still make and wear mola blouses as part of their costume. The *Nele*, or religious leader, encourages them to do so as part of their daily routine, indicating as he does so, that the mola blouses tell the world of their Kuna identity. The village chiefs take up the chant during *congresso*, or village meeting, telling the women to continue their stitching. During the making of the mola blouses, there is time for socializing and caring for the children. The men within the community support the activity, and thus take on some of the agricultural duties, particularly those that must be done on another island or on the mainland.³

This study focuses on the mola collection housed in the Burke Gallery of Art at Denison University in Granville, Ohio. Many of the pieces in this collection were gathered and donated by Dr. Clyde Keeler, a geneticist and faculty member of Denison University during the mid 1900's. Many geneticists were interested in the Kuna population because of a high incidence of albino births. Keeler undertook frequent

² Mari Lyn Salvadore, "The Clothing Arts of the Cuna of San Blas, Panama," in *Ethnic and Tourist Arts: Cultural Expressions from the Fourth World*, ed. N. Graburn (Berkeley: University of California, 1976), 169.

³ Tice, *Kuna Crafts, Gender, and the Global Economy*, 1995, 81-82.

research trips to the San Blas Islands, and thus became familiar with the culture and very knowledgeable of their mola-making. The collection is comprehensive enough to have been noticed by other mola blouse experts. Herta Puls, in the book *Textiles of the Kuna Indians of Panama* (1988), lists the Denison collection as one of four collections in the United States worthy of visiting. Other museums are the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, The National Museum of Natural History and the Textile Museum in Washington, DC.⁴

Intact blouses, such as those in the Denison Collection, include the yoke, sleeves, joining bands and front and back mola panels. Many books have been written about mola panels, however few have looked at the entire blouse. By examining intact mola blouses, discussions are possible regarding the relationship between front and back panels as well as the aesthetic contributions made by the decorative bands surrounding the panels and on the sleeves. The Denison Collection is comprehensive and noteworthy, yet has never been documented completely or correctly. The individual accessioning the items was clearly not familiar with the technique and thus errors and omissions were made.

One of the justifications for doing this study, therefore, is to document the collection by correcting and completing the information available. This information will serve as a way to understand that the mola blouse collection that is housed at Denison University reflects decorative processes that women have carried out in the San Blas region for generations; the objects are their culture. When complete, the documentation will be available to not only complete the categorization for this study, but also for subsequent research carried out on mola blouses.

⁴ Herta Puls, *Textiles of the Kuna Indians of Panama*, (Buckinghamshire, UK: Shire Publications, Ltd., 1988). 69.

The Kuna also provide a special opportunity for studying the underlying mechanism that operates for creative expression at a community level. The designs on the mola blouses come out of traditions present before European contact, however the mola-making itself uses fabrics, tools and the reverse appliqué method that were novel to the Kuna. Furthermore, the style developed into something so idiosyncratic as to clearly become the embodiment of all that is Kuna. The creative energy for mola-making still exists today. By studying a collection like this, the underlying mechanism for the perpetuation of an art/craft form can be better understood.

People, around the world and across all time periods, have used their creative energies to decorate their surroundings. Always, the style has become distinctive within a group of people, so much so, that it often becomes a cultural identifier. Studies have shown that “arts” and “crafts” are part of an interplay and that the artifacts themselves are a testament to the stages within this interplay. The flow from the art to the craft and back again is, in fact, the driving force that keeps the creation of a particular art/craft an ongoing endeavor.⁵ The supposition is that all crafts can be learned with the technique itself being explored, exploited and taken to great levels of achievement. However, only some members of the community can create as if possessed with a special gift. Their work inspires others and thus is subsequently emulated by the crafters. This then sets up a vital exchange within the community and validates everyone. Within a balanced

⁵ Carol Link, *Japanese Cabinetmaking: A Dynamic System of Decisions and Interactions in a Technical Context*, (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, 1975), 263; Roe, “Style, Society, Myth and Structure,” in *Style, Society and Person: Archaeological and Ethnological Perspectives*, eds. Christopher Carr and Jill Neitzel (New York: Plenum Press, 1995) 31; Harry Silver, “Calculating Risks: The Socioeconomic Foundations of Aesthetic Innovation in an Ashanti Carving Community,” *Ethnology* 20(1981): 101-114.

community of artists/crafters this interplay develops over time to serve the individual and ensure everyone's success, while at the same time providing the community with a visual identifier. Furthermore, this interplay changes over time.⁶

In an article, entitled "Archaism, Form and Decoration: An Ethnographic and Archaeological Case Study from the Peruvian Montana," Peter Roe first discusses the notion of an art/craft interplay which comes out of an examination of material culture, in this case ceramics, by breaking down the artifact into the steps required to achieve the final format. He describes this perspective as one that comes about while mentally undoing the artifact along its method of fabrication. To do so, one must have an in-depth knowledge of steps used in the process of production.⁷ Carol Link, in doing her research on Japanese cabinetmaking, described these steps as "decision pathways." The type of decision pathway can vary and Roe explains that this variation demonstrates how a particular community negotiates and establishes the art/craft interplay. One community's solution may vary from another community's. It may also vary over time. The community retains the balance between the artist and the crafter by veto and accolades depending on the needs of the community. The balance is a fluid one and it is this balance that sustains the creative energy.⁸

The second justification for this study, therefore, is that it allows us to gain a broader understanding of the existence of an art/craft interplay at any given time within a community. This interplay is also evidence of an underlying exchange among the

⁶ Franz Boas, *Primitive Art*, (New York: Dover, 1955) 12; Roe, "Style, Society, Myth and Structure," 1995, 28.

⁷ Peter Roe, "Archaism, Form and Decoration: An Ethnographic and Archaeological Case Study from the Peruvian Montana," *Nawpa Pacha* 14, 73-94, 1976, 80.

⁸ Link, *Japanese Cabinetmaking: A Dynamic System of Decisions and Interactions in a Technical Context*, 1975, 8.

citizens of a community, although the exchange may be of an unconscious or implicit nature. Understanding the evidence for an art/craft interplay may help in understanding the internal balance that may exist and may become increasingly relevant as societies are exposed to the effects of globalization. Non-governmental organizations from other countries are becoming increasingly involved in the management of indigenous arts and crafts, providing a method for these communities to acquire monetary return for their arts and crafts. Without understanding the community's role in maintaining balance in the art/craft interplay, the creative energy may lose its potency and relevancy. This creative energy exists not only for the creators but also for those within the community who value the connections established through their arts and crafts.

Statement of the Problem

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to document, analyze and categorize the ethnographic collection of mola blouses, housed in the Burke Gallery of Art at Denison University in Granville, OH, to determine if an art/craft interplay exists within Kuna society. This study may serve as an example to help understand the complex nature of the art/craft interplay.

Objectives

1. Document the collection of mola blouses housed at Denison University in Granville, OH by measuring and understanding the physical details of the mola blouses.
2. Analyze the techniques, the levels of workmanship, and the types of designs.

3. Establish a system of categorization based on the documentation and analysis of the mola blouses within the collection.
4. Examine the evidence of other Kuna artifacts, both pre- and post-contact to typify the stylistic and decorative elements
5. Interpret the results of the categorization of the mola blouses in conjunction with the evidence for varying decorative techniques. Establish the presence of an art/craft interplay within the mola-making traditions of the Kuna.

Method

Ethnographic studies draw on the theory and methods of material culture. The major source of information for this ethnographic study was the collection of mola blouses housed within Denison University in Granville, OH. This collection is but one of the many ethnographic collections housed within the museum systems worldwide that retain information that has largely been ignored. Yet, pertinent questions that continue to be asked can be systematically explored using these collections. Unfortunately, because of increasing costs and decreasing resources, these collections are not being promoted by experts as well as they should be, resulting in less exposure that students, professionals and the public are being given to these collections.

In many cases, these collections were established at the time of colonization when European and American explorers collected artifacts that seemed exotic. The public at home was very interested in these curiosities, representing to them peculiar and untamed societies. These societies, today, are being forced to operate in a world where globalization is a reality and, with it, a greater reliance on western capitalistic systems.

This reality is changing life patterns that have been essentially managed from within, at least until now. Ethnographic collections help these societies document the physical testament of their past.

Ethnographic collections are comprised of the “stuff” that people make to embellish their surroundings, to create meaning for life patterns, and to use as tools to simplify their daily tasks. These items are the arts and crafts of their society and, when linked together as an ethnographic collection, begin to provide a broad selection of material culture that tells a story. In 1973, William Sturtevant, a noted anthropologist, brought to the museum community’s attention the deplorable lack of research that was being carried out within the museum walls. He was particularly concerned with the lack of material culture research taking place, especially when one reflected on the financial costs undertaken to store, protect and conserve artifacts that had been collected worldwide. Sturtevant continued by saying that valuable information was being overlooked in favor of field research and that it was naïve to think that nothing worth noting could be derived from the collections. He felt that material culture housed in museums represented processes and that by studying the artifacts, a researcher would be able to uncover these underlying cognitive processes.⁹ Miles Richardson states unequivocally that it is with the material culture that an ethnographer must begin the research. It is the material culture that is the mirror for a society’s existence. It is the “stuff” that orders behavior and serves as a communication vehicle.¹⁰

⁹ William Sturtevant, “Does Anthropology Need Museums?” *Proceedings of the Biological Society of Washington* 82: 1969, 632.

¹⁰ Miles Richardson, “Images, Objects and the Human Story,” in *Human Mirror: Material and Spatial Images of Man*, ed. Miles Richardson (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), 5.

A community's material culture is first conceived in the mind of individuals within the community and then, with the available technology, is made into reality. The results give us an insight into not only what the thinking was prior to the manufacture but also what was possible from a technological standpoint. Additionally, material culture serves as the intermediary in all that the community does – whether as a tool, as an item of enjoyment, or as a part in ritual celebrations. It is as much a part of the society as language and belief and is often a ramification of these as well. William Fenton in 1974, too, bemoaned the fact that there seemed to be a decline in the interest of ethnological investigations within a museum context.¹¹ Fenton further expanded on his disillusionment by reflecting on the lack of engagement with museums. The decline in requests for curatorial expertise has resulted in reductions in curatorial staff. Museum administrators have turned to the intellectual support of interested university professors who have not followed up by using the collections for their own research nor have they used the collections for instructional purposes, thus breaking the link in collections promotion and resulting in collections becoming less and less relevant.¹² Sturtevant sums up the situation this way,

“Most modern ethnologists have never studied museum specimens, have never collected for a museum, have never been in a museum storage area. Yet, I suppose that at least 90 percent of museum ethnological specimens have never been studied.”¹³

¹¹ William Fenton, “The Advancement of Material Culture Study,” in *The Human Mirror: Material and Spatial Images of Man*, ed. Miles Richardson (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), 15.

¹² Fenton, “The Advancement of Material Culture Study,” 1974, 21.

¹³ Sturtevant, “Does Anthropology Need Museums?” 1969, 632

Together with field research, the realities of today can be linked with the past through these ethnographic collections. They serve to reveal valuable artifacts and their cultural significance, while at the same time justifying the effort and resources used to maintain these collections. Societies experiencing change due to globalization can not only use the artifacts as a record of their past, they may also be able to derive information as to the dynamic forces operating within an art/craft form.

Theory and methodology in material culture research has become well established through the work of scholars like Thomas Schlereth. Although Schlereth applies his work to the study of American culture, it is still useful to explain that research in material culture has shifted from being simply the act of collecting material culture, to describing in detail the material culture collected, and finally to analyzing the artifacts. This evolution has been a natural one. It became clear that the process was not complete until the analysis was done, as it was only then that questions regarding human behavior arose. However, as Schlereth himself states, the delineation into categories of collecting, describing and analyzing is not that clear cut. They overlap and out of necessity, studies of material culture still involve to some extent the initial stages of collecting and describing. Therefore, when doing studies in material culture, it remains relevant to collect and to arrange typologically.¹⁴

When analyzing artifacts for specific interpretative purposes, it is imperative that the researcher also states his/her perspective. Using the structural analysis of the mola blouse as a basis for this study, and subsequently understanding the artifacts well enough

¹⁴ Thomas Schlereth, "Material Culture Studies in America, 1876-1976," in *Material Culture Studies in America*, ed Thomas Schlereth (Nashville, TN: The American Association for State and Local History, 1982), 6-9.

to comprehend how the community functions to perpetuate mola-making, is a socio-structuralist's approach. Although the individual Kuna mola-maker is determining her mola blouse design and is creatively in control, she is operating within the confines of her community.

E. McClung Fleming has developed a model through which one can logically approach studies in material culture, specifically when dealing with the artifacts. His approach has been used for designing the method for this study. His steps include identification through factual description, evaluation by comparison, cultural analysis through understanding the relationship of the object to the culture and by extension to other artifacts, and finally interpretation through a description of the significance of both the artifacts and the study.¹⁵ Categorization is a method used in evaluating by comparison.

Artifacts can also be studied to gain an understanding of the motivation behind the creative force. Roe states that style can be analyzed as being the result of "rule replication behavior" or "rule creation behavior," craft being symbolic of the former descriptor and art of the latter. Different techniques of manufacture also facilitate one approach or the other. Art and craft are not mutually exclusive; rather they collude, with fluctuations possible. Roe has proposed a method for studying style. First the researcher must decompose the artifact into its component parts. Using the knowledge that one gains when disassembling the artifact, specifically with regard to the initial intent of the design, and the stages and standards of workmanship, one gets an idea of the craft

¹⁵ E. McClung Fleming, "Artifact Study: A Proposed Model," in *Material Culture Studies in America, 1876-1976*, ed. Thomas Schlereth (Nashville, TN: The American Association for State and Local History, 1982), 166-173.

extreme or art extreme. Roe creates “clusters” or “modes” along any stylistic dimension in which he is specifically interested. These clusters or modes are analogous to the categories that are the logical outcome of the mola blouse analysis. In this way, one can study the art/craft interplay. Having a comprehensive understanding of the full repertoire of design possibilities is necessary to establish categories successfully.¹⁶

The steps used in carrying out this study were:

1. Identifying and documenting the collection of mola blouses. The procedure for identifying and documenting included examining each mola blouse and measuring the dimensions, noting the number of layers used to create the design, noting the techniques used to create the design, and noting the style of the filling-in motif. In addition, each sleeve was measured, the type of bands used at the neckline, sleeve, top and bottom of the mola panels was noted and measured. The relationship of the front and back of each mola panel was determined. Each mola blouse in the collection was photographed. The color of each panel layer was identified using *The Pantone Book of Color* by Leatrice Eiseman and Lawrence Herbert.¹⁷
2. Each mola blouse was analyzed for evidence of technical virtuosity and innovation in design. Previous research has shown that there are specific techniques that are highly regarded by the Kuna, such as compact and parallel lines and serrated edges. Frequent color alterations and full use of the area allocated to the panel are the signs of a mola panel that was well designed.

¹⁶ Roe, “Style, Society, Myth and Structure,” 1995, 31.

¹⁷ Leatrice Eiseman and Lawrence Herbert, *The Pantone Book of Color*, (New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1990).

Detailed and intricate work on the bands is a sign of technical virtuosity in the making of the mola blouse itself, whereas added details and added color changes on the yoke and sleeves indicates good design. Through the use of a check list, a means of quantifying all of the details that constitute a good panel and a good blouse was devised with the intention of uncovering the category most highly regarded should there be one.

3. The mola blouses were categorized according to style, technique, design and coloration. By looking at the numbers of layers used to create the design, the type of design, the additional types of embellishment used, the technique used to create the design, and the repetition of a design, the categorization of mola blouses was established.
4. Publications related to artifacts made by the Kuna prior to and directly after European contact was studied to gain an understanding of the Kuna style during this time period. These traditions were examined to establish possible connections with mola-making and the categories that were found to exist.
5. Evidence for an art/craft interplay was established within the mola-making traditions. This interplay permits both artists and crafters to be validated within the community. One can say that an art/craft interplay exists if the following questions are true. Do the different categories of mola blouses come out of different traditions that also support different parts of the art/craft interplay? Do the mola-making techniques reveal that, on the one hand, there is the possibility for the artist to be creative and inspirational and, on the other hand, the potential for another to display technological perfection?

The Relevance of Material Culture Study

Analysis of material culture enables one to study artifacts, and in so doing, better understand the culture from which they come. By its very nature, therefore, material culture is a discipline providing a framework or method of approach. Because the types of material culture available for study are so diverse, the discipline is very flexible. Material culture remains relevant despite its fluidity for at stake is the understanding of the culture from which these man-made objects come. The underlying premise is that objects wrought or altered by human endeavor demonstrate, whether conscious or unconscious, the decision-making and abilities of the society from which they come. The ability to glean information about a certain group of people through the objects that they make or alter is one thing, but the question that begs to be asked is why one should bother.

Jules Prown, in his discussion on material culture theory and method, lists some reasons for carrying out material culture studies. The one aspect that he discusses is the inherent value that an object embodies within the culture. This value may depend on the value of the raw materials, the quality of the design, the rarity of the object, but more importantly from a material culture point of view, it depends on the value of the object as value systems and beliefs.¹⁸

Studies using the material culture approach involve understanding the materials used, the techniques used, the assembling processes and the relevance of the artifact to the society of origin. Also, understanding that there are differences in any one of the aspects listed above and exploring reasons for these differences is an important aspect of

¹⁸ Jules Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," *Winterthur Portfolio* 17: 1982, 3.

material culture research. Daniel Miller found this type of analysis to be important when studying ceramic artifacts from central India.¹⁹ During the analysis of the art/craft form and establishing the many variations, one soon realizes that the forms are inseparable from the society that created them. There are many reasons for variability. They include individual stylistic choices and/or abilities; variation in spatial distribution and/or temporal distribution; and differences in communicated value, either for the maker and/or the item itself.

Categorization is a valuable method, ensuring a successful analysis and was first formalized by David Clarke, in 1968, while analyzing pottery of Great Britain and Ireland.²⁰ Clarke observed that through careful micro-analysis, which subsequently permitted categorization, followed by a holistic examination of the society that created the artifacts, a better understanding of the society itself may be achieved.

Petr Bogatyrev, in his important study of the functions of folk costumes in Moravian Slovakia, found that typology was essential to uncovering relationships between regional separations and celebratory clothing customs.²¹ Elizabeth Chilton concurs that creating a typology is a natural way of categorizing artifacts and allows us to attribute tendencies that help in explaining variations. An added feature when

¹⁹Daniel Miller, *Artifacts as Categories: A Study of Ceramic Variability in Central India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 1.

²⁰ David Clarke, *Analytical Archaeology* (London: Methuen, 1968), 38.

²¹ Petr Bogatyrev, *The Function of Folk Costumes in Moravian Slovakia* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), 13.

categorizing is the ability to add empirical value to what we are seeing. She did want to caution us however, that by choosing the wrong attributes, our results might in fact be misleading.²²

Maureen Mackenzie, in her seminal work on the string bags of New Guinea, found that although she knew of their existence and felt that they must be an important part of the people's material culture based on the social interaction surrounding the bags, it was not until she created a typology based on their method of construction that she fully understood their relevance.²³ She established her method of material culture research by first studying the artifacts and their contexts and then analyzing the structure; the ways that the artifacts are used; and the possible interrelated value systems and meanings that the artifacts have for the people themselves.²⁴

As Chilton says, people create their own world by making items that are useful and meaningful, and then adding their style of decoration, based on what they know from this world that they have created. It is our job to understand this process because their making and their doing becomes the social practice. Thus we ask about the making of their "stuff" and the circumstances of the items with respect to the rest of the material world and ultimately the society from which they come. We do this by looking at the technical details inherent in the artifacts and examining differing contexts and inspirations. The method is always muddy due to the variations in meaning possible and

²² Elizabeth Chilton, "Material Meanings and Meaningful Materials: An Introduction," in *Material Meanings: Critical Approaches to the Interpretation of Material Culture*, ed. Elizabeth Chilton (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 1999), 44.

²³ Maureen MacKenzie, *Androgynous Objects: String Bags and Gender in Central new Guinea*, (Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1991), 23.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 1991, 1.

the variations in cultural perspectives possible, therefore the formulaic approach for uncovering the information is not only inappropriate, it is inadequate. Regardless, much can be yielded from material culture methodology.²⁵

Assumptions

A number of assumptions were necessary to enable the study to proceed. They are as follows:

1. That categories in mola-making are distinguishable based on their method of manufacture, their design, their color choice and the type of workmanship.
2. That there exists a relationship between the arts and crafts created by the pre-contact Kuna and subsequent mola-making.
3. That, once established, mola-making continued unimpeded and that there were no external devices operating within the Kuna population to change the designs and techniques, particularly during the time that Dr. Clyde Keeler was collecting.
4. That Dr. Clyde Keeler collected across the entire spectrum of possibilities.
5. That all of the mola blouses that Dr. Keeler collected were donated to Denison University and that none of them were deaccessioned.

Limitations

Only the mola blouses within the collection at Denison University in Granville, OH, were used for the study. The complete mola blouse permitted the documentation and analysis of the adjoining bands and the comparison of front and back panels. On

²⁵ Chilton, "Material meanings and Meaningful Materials: An Introduction," 1999, 4.

three occasions, one of the panels had been removed, yet the artifact was included because of the information available. Mola panels within the collection were used only to support observations and were not documented or analyzed on an individual basis.

Definitions

For the purposes of this discussion, the following definitions were used:

Aesthetic(s) – a particular conception of art or beauty.²⁶

Art – the conscious use of creative imagination in the production of aesthetic objects.²⁷

Artist – one who professes and practices an imaginative art.²⁸

Craft – skill in planning, making and executing²⁹.

Crafter – a workman who practices a trade or handicraft; one who creates or performs with skill or dexterity, especially in the manual arts.³⁰

²⁶ Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, (Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1980), 19.

²⁷ Ibid, 63.

²⁸ Ibid, 64.

²⁹ Ibid, 262.

³⁰ Ibid, 262.

Art/craft interplay – demonstrates that the style that comes to represent a culture comes from the blending of choices from either the aesthetic side or the side of technical virtuosity.³¹ Ray Crozier extends this definition by saying that there are different reasons or needs fulfilled by creating material culture and that the various styles selected from the repertoire may reflect which extreme of the interplay is being chosen, either consciously or unconsciously.³²

Mola Blouse – mola means blouse in the Kuna language and yet, due to the importance of the panels, the word “mola” often refers to each of the front and back panels. Therefore for the purposes of this study the following applied: mola blouse was used when referring to the entire blouse, including the two mola panels, the yoke and the sleeves, as made and worn by the Kuna women of the San Blas archipelago off of the east coast of Panama.³³

Mola Panel – is the rectangular piece executed in reverse appliqué and forms the front or back of the mola blouse.³⁴

³¹ Roe, “Style, Society, Myth and Structure,” 1999, 31.

³² Ray Crozier, *Manufactured Pleasures: Psychological Responses to Design*, (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1994), 105 and 114.

³³ Mari Lyn Salvadore, *Molas of the Cuna Indians: A Case Study of Artistic Criticism and Ethno-Aesthetics*, (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1971), 26.

³⁴ Ibid, 26.

Small Scale Society – as defined by Richard Anderson to mean a society where the necessities of life are satisfied locally and by simple technologies. Also, there is little job specification and by comparison to worldwide living patterns, the population density is low.³⁵

Virtuosity – great technical skill.³⁶

³⁵Richard Anderson, *Art in Small Scale Societies*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1989), 7.

³⁶Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, 1980, 1298.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

After a brief discussion identifying the Kuna people and placing them geographically, this chapter includes a description of the mola blouse and some of the attempts made at classifying mola panels based on type. The context of mola-making is an important part of the discussion, as not only is the activity not indigenous, its time-consuming nature implies sanctioning by the entire community. Therefore, it is relevant to discuss briefly their history, their foreign influences and how these forces interacted to support mola-making.

The Kuna from the San Blas Archipelago of Panama

The first written account of the Kuna dates to the early seventeenth century. They were a peaceable group and, rather than fight against the incoming Spaniards, they relocated. From the beginning their tactic for survival was one that involved evasion. As people of other origins moved into the isthmus of Panama, including the descendents of African slaves, they forbade intermarriage of any kind. This policy has, over time, ensured a strong cohesiveness amongst the Kuna.³⁷

³⁷ Puls, *Textiles of the Kuna Indians of Panama*, 1988, 8.

The Kuna lived a simple life but embellishment of their bodies and their homes was an important part of their day. Evidence seems to point to their being cotton cultivators and that women had the technology and ability to weave. The men also wove, but they concentrated on weaving baskets. The items that the women wove were used as hammocks and sarong-like wrappings that they wore below their waists. Further, their bodies were decorated with various colors of pigments.³⁸ Other types of arts and crafts were carried out for use as tools and ceremonial objects. Those that have remained extant have been studied and documented carefully and thus serve as insightful examples of the creative forces existing within pre-Columbian societies.

The Spanish withdrew from the region in 1611. From 1625 until 1725, the French Huguenots lived among the Kuna. For reasons that are unclear, the Kuna permitted the men to marry Kuna women, resulting in children of mixed heritage. In 1726, due to heightened suspicions of treachery against them, the native population rose against all those of foreign and mixed blood. The region remained destabilized until 1790, when all foreign interests were retracted and the Kuna regained their independence. The Kuna did not return to the coastal areas until the mid nineteenth century.³⁹

In 1903, Panama became a republic. In 1904, the United States government began building the Panama Canal. The Kuna did not appreciate the disruption of their lifestyle. An uprising was threatened and, as a result, a peace treaty was signed that gave the Kuna rights to their own lands. A Panamanian-appointed governor was installed

³⁸ Lionel Wafer, *A New Voyage and Description of the Isthmus of America*, (Cleveland: The Burrows Brothers Co., 1903, Reprint from original edition of 1699), 136-139.

³⁹ Puls, *Textiles of the Kuna Indians of Panama*, 1988, 13.

under orders to keep a low profile.⁴⁰ By 1970, an estimated 20,000 Kuna lived offshore and an additional 2,000 lived on the mainland, and although the number seems considerable, it is a drop of about 30,000 from original estimates.⁴¹

Today, they inhabit the islands off of the eastern Panama mainland, an area referred to as the San Blas Islands. They also make use of the adjoining lands, where some Kuna live and some farm. Until recently, it was necessary for the women to procure fresh water and do their laundry on the mainland. However now some of the bigger islands have water piped to them. The Kuna build their grass houses very tightly situated with their neighbors. The closely packed houses cover entire islands. Pathways wind between the houses in a labyrinth-like fashion throughout.

The Kuna often leave their islands, using carved dug-outs as their means of transport. Being farmers, the men must go to uninhabited islands or nearby coastal areas to manage their crops. Economically, their most important crop is coconuts, which Columbian shipping firms pick up and ship internationally. Maize is the staple of their diet and is also fermented for use as their alcoholic drink *chichi*.⁴²

Tension remains between the Kuna and the Panamanian government, which serves to strengthen the bonds within the Kuna community. Panama, in fact, has tried to modernize the Kuna by prohibiting them from wearing traditional dress. Their independence is continually demonstrated by their resistance to this type of control and by maintaining this tradition.

⁴⁰ Puls, *Textiles of the Kuna Indians of Panama*, 1988, 15.

⁴¹ Ibid, 14.

⁴² Jorge Ventocilla, "Baba's Creation: Flora and Fauna of Kuna Yala," in *The Art of Being Kuna: Layers of Meaning Among the Kuna of Panama*, ed. Mari Lyn Salvador, (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1997), 60.

The Mola Blouse

The mola blouse is made and worn by the Kuna women of the San Blas archipelago and the associated coastal lands of eastern Panama. It seems fairly clear that Kuna women did not always wear blouses of this kind, a fact substantiated by early accounts written by explorers. Lionel Wafer, who wrote of his experiences in 1699, describes that the women wore no clothes but for a cloth that was wrapped around their waist and tied with a “thread.” It reached their knees or ankles.⁴³ The women spent much of their time painting their bodies. “...even of the sucking children sometimes. They make figures of birds, beasts, men, trees, or the like, up and down in every part of the body, more especially of the face.”⁴⁴ They used natural pigments and kept them malleable by mixing with oil. These pigments were very bright and highly saturated colors of red, yellow and blue. They used sticks with softened points to apply the color to the body and once a design was in place, it was left for weeks at a time with touchups to the design as needed. Finer designs were sometimes tattooed permanently by using a sharp thorn to encourage bleeding and then, with the color applied to the hands, the pigment was rubbed in.⁴⁵

Out of this tradition, and through the encouragement of western influences, the mola blouse was born. However, this could not have happened without the importation of the raw materials and the tools needed – fabrics of brilliant colors, sewing thread, needles, and scissors. Also, the Kuna women had to learn to use the tools and learn the basic premise behind the component parts to a blouse. It seems, however, that by the

⁴³ Wafer, *A New Voyage and Description of the Isthmus of America*, 1903, 137.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 1903, 136.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 1903, 136.

nineteenth century the skill had not only been achieved, but the mola blouse had been accepted as the style of dress. Lucien De Puydt, writing of his observations while in Panama from 1861 to 1865, said that the women wore blouses down to their knees.⁴⁶ By 1888, Armand Reclus writes that the women were wearing an “ungraceful blue blouse which falls scarcely to the knee and which is edged with yellow or red design.”⁴⁷ By 1927, when Erland Nordenskiöld was collecting artifacts for the Gotenburg museum in Sweden, the style had evolved to one that closely resembles today’s mola blouse.⁴⁸

Today’s blouse includes a yoke, in which both front and back are made of one piece eliminating the need for shoulder seams. The neckline is created by simply cutting a straight line along the midline of the yoke, in the direction from one shoulder to the other shoulder, and large enough to fit someone’s head. Decorative applied bands strengthen the corner of the cut neck edge. A roll over band is applied to the neck edge to bind the raw edge and is often coordinated with the color of the shoulder bands. Early mola blouses collected by Nordenskiöld have sleeves that were cut to fit at the armhole with no gathering,⁴⁹ but later molas blouses have gathered sleeves which are clearly roomier and hence more comfortable. Attached to the yoke, both front and back, are the mola panels. All of the seams, including the seams joining the panels to the yoke, are enclosed seams, thus hiding the raw edges. Furthermore, the seams that attach the panels to the yoke are embellished with a decorative band. Bands are often placed along the

⁴⁶Lucien De Puydt, “Account of Scientific Explorations in the Isthmus of Dorien in the Years 1861 and 1865,” *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society* 38:1868, 97.

⁴⁷ Armand Reclus, *Panama et Darien: Voyages D’exploration*, (Paris: Hachette, 1888), 206.

⁴⁸ Erland Nordenskiöld, *An Historical and Ethnological Survey of the Cuna Indians*, (Goteborg, Sweden: Gotebrg Sweden Etnografiska Avdelningen, 1979, Reprinted from 1925),; Michel Perron, *Magnificent Molas: The Art of the Kuna Indians*, (Paris: Flammarion, 1999), 26 and 27.

⁴⁹ Mari Lyn Salvador and James Howe, “Artful Lives: The Kuna of Panama,” in *The Art of Being Kuna: Layers of Meaning Among the Kuna of Panama*, ed. Mari Lyn Salvador, (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1997), 45.

bottom of the panel, front and back. If the sleeves are gathered at the shoulder, typically the sleeve also needs to be gathered in at the bottom edge for a better fit. The gathered lower sleeve edge is set into a band and this band is also often decorated. A decorative band is sometimes stitched on the yoke proximal to the set in sleeve. These decorative bands including the one at the top of the mola panel, at the bottom of the sleeve and the band included along the seam line setting in the sleeve, are often related in design and color. Sometimes the band along the bottom of the panel is also related to the other bands.

The mola panel is constructed in a technique referred to as reverse appliqué. Layers of fabric are laid on top of each other. The design is cut through from the top revealing the colors underneath. Small stitches, while rolling the raw edges under, serve to hold the cut edges down. Intricate designs can be created in this fashion. The Kuna aesthetic involves color and design that encompasses all of the available space. Increased use of color can be incorporated by using small insertions of colored fabrics, in colors other than the colors of the layers. These colors are exposed through small lateral slits that are beyond those needed to execute the body of the design. Other design elements can be directly appliquéd. Embroidery is also used to embellish the design. The Kuna use stem stitch, chain stitch and running stitch when embroidering.

There are two separate panels, one on the front of the mola blouse and one on the back. Although the designs are not identical, the theme is usually the same and a similar palette of colors is used.

The overriding effect of the mola blouse is one of dazzling color. Kuna women understand the potential of color and how to optimize its effect by using bright, saturated colors and how to juxtapose the colors to create the most vibrant visual treat possible. To create this final effect, however, takes many hours of careful planning and stitching.

Mari Lyn Salvador has discussed the various categories that exist in mola-making, basing the categories on the number of layers used and the number of colors incorporated. She used the terms as used by the Kuna women themselves, and although the descriptions must be adequate for them personally; clearly they do not begin to address the technological variations possible. The categories, as identified by the Kuna women and transcribed by Salvador are as follows:

Morguinagwat – a two-layered mola panel, one being the base and remains uncut, the other cut to expose the base.

Mormamaralet – refers to a mola panel of few colors, typically one of three layers, but can be more.

Obogalet – pictorial mola panels, using two layers sewn onto a base.

Morgonikat – uses many colors, some of the colors not being entire layers.⁵⁰

Michel Perrin has also attempted to categorize the mola blouses and the thrust of his entire publication, *Magnificent Molas: The Art of the Kuna Indians*, is based on the categories as he sees them. He has accomplished this by dividing according to repetition pattern and subject matter. Therefore, he has found it useful to discuss mola panels in terms of central motif, labyrinthine design, paired symmetry and mirror image. He also

⁵⁰ Salvador, *Molas of the Cuna Indians: A Case Study of Artistic Criticism and Ethno-Aesthetics*, 1971, 52.

has separated the mola panels by subject into ancestral, those depicting animals, those depicting myths and rites, those depicting tools that are used in daily life and those that show modern images.⁵¹ By discussing the mola blouses in this fashion, he focuses on their visual aspects; however, this method of categorization is not very useful, particularly when commonalities exist across these categories.

The Social Context of Mola Blouse Making

This study requires an understanding that the Kuna did not always stitch mola blouses. Although they used the aesthetic qualities that appealed to them to make something very special, the Kuna nevertheless relied on European know-how and European trade goods to initiate mola blouse making. By extension, therefore, it becomes possible to state that exposure to Europeans was a prerequisite for the onset of this tradition. Furthermore, with an activity as labor intensive and time consuming as mola blouse making, it had to fit into their daily routine. It is the intention of this chapter to highlight various events that coincided to make this activity not only attractive to the Kuna, but also possible. They are the arrival of various European influences, the change in survival tactics and subsequent relocation of the Kuna, the role of Kuna identifiers, their spiritual beliefs, and familial structure.

European Contact.

James Howe, in his book entitled *A People Who Would Not Kneel: Panama, the United States, and the San Blas Kuna*, explains that the Kuna people were very deliberate in their decision-making. Even before colonization, they had a democratic system in

⁵¹ Perrin, *Magnificent Molas: The Art of the Kuna Indians*, 1999.

place that allowed individuals to vote for their leaders. Also, the leaders that were chosen during the time of the European movement into the Americas were able to evaluate the foreign influences as those that were good for the Kuna and those that were not so good. They sought to protect their people from exploitation and cultural melding with the newcomers.⁵² The key to their autonomy in fact resulted from a curious trait that was repeated time and again and first documented by Leonardo Gasso, a Spanish Roman Catholic priest who resided with the Kuna from 1906 to 1913. He writes, “They wish to ally themselves with anyone at all in exchange for throwing out the one who comes closest to them.”⁵³ Their real concern was not only that they retain autonomy, but an independence that assured them control of their lands and its products. Also, within this autonomy, they wanted to maintain their dignity and identity. A ramification of their identity was, and still is, their outward appearance. Therefore great stock was placed on external accoutrements that made recognition of their Kuna identity easy.⁵⁴

According to Kuna legends, they once lived inland in the mountains. However, due to corrupt behavior, God sent a flood, which forced them to live along the rivers in the regions around the Gulf of Uraba.⁵⁵ Ethnographically, it appears that there might be some truth to these narratives as their technology and material culture relates strongly with the tropical forest area. They also exhibit some of the characteristics evident in Mexican and Andean centers, such as the ability to earn higher standing within the

⁵² James Howe, *A People Who Would Not Kneel: Panama, the United States, and the San Blas Kuna* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998), 70.

⁵³ Ibid, 28 (as translated from Leonardo Gasso, *La Mision de San Jose de Nargana entre los Karibe* (Barcelona: Las Misiones Catolicas (Intermittent Serial Publication, 1911-1914, 85), 28

⁵⁴ James Howe, *A People Who Would Not Kneel: Panama, the United States, and the San Blas Kuna*, 1998, 8 and 125.

⁵⁵ Erland Nordenskiöld, *An Historical and Ethnological Survey of the Cuna Indians* (Goteborg, Sweden: Goteborgs Museum, Etnografiska Avdelningen, 1938), 169.

community, including chiefdom and public ceremonies based on a ritual calendar and shaman activities. The suggestion seems to be that the Kuna societal activities are a fragmented form of an earlier and more widespread Andean or Mexican culture.⁵⁶

By the time the first Spaniards arrived in 1510, the Kuna were firmly established on the land surrounding the Gulf of Uraba, an area known as Darien. Exploration expeditions under the leadership of Vasco Nunez de Balboa departed from Darien, renamed by the Spanish to be Santa Maria la Antigua del Darien. Balboa treated the coastal inhabitants well, as he realized that he relied on their support and information to carry out his travels. After the murder of Balboa in 1519, subsequent Spanish attempts at conquering the isthmus of Panama and looting it of gold and silver meant that the Kuna were not only not needed, they were relegated to the status of barbarians that required killing if not controlling. To help the Spanish in their attempts at conquest, missionaries were welcomed to subvert the indigenous population. One Dominican priest, Father Adrian de Santo Tomas, successfully established four missions that represented fourteen hundred Kuna. The Kuna listened to the message, however on the whole they remained unconverted. At Father Adrian's retirement after twenty years of service, civil authorities thought it prudent to maintain order in the Kuna region by positioning troops. Angered, the Kuna revolted and eliminated all non-Kuna inhabitants. Thus began the pattern of establishing alliances and, upon the perceived overstepping of the visitors' bounds, quickly realigning themselves. Despite frequent attempts, the Kuna resisted conquest

⁵⁶ D.B.Stout, *San Blas Cuna Acculturation: An Introduction* (New York, NY: The Viking Fund, 1947), 16.

throughout the second half of the seventeenth century. The Kuna on the whole positively received pirates and some made regular stops at Darien for restocking their ships. In fact, some Kuna began to cultivate crops to supply the ships for their return voyages.⁵⁷

One of these pirates, Lionel Wafer, due to a prolonged stay in Darien, wrote long accounts of the people and their land. He wrote of their living situations and their style of dress, indicating that the women wore short skirts and the men wore penis shields on a daily basis and long cotton robes for ceremonial occasions. Both wore many ornamentations of gold around their necks, in their ears and nose. Europeans loved these reports of exotic and dangerous places, particularly the Dutch, who in 1700 were reading travel books edited by William Dampier, containing diary accounts from adventurers such as Wafer.⁵⁸

Wafer's accounts encouraged Europeans to consider relocating to these new lands, especially under the circumstances of religious persecution that was ongoing in Europe at the time. A large colony of Huguenots established successful ties with the Kuna and for the first time the Kuna permitted intermarriage. Trade became more solidified with the Huguenots living amongst them and it is no doubt that at this point the Kuna began to receive commercial cloth and sewing tools, and to learn how to use them.⁵⁹ By the 1740's, however, the French began to extend their cultivation of cacao and needed the Kuna for cheap labor. The exploitation angered the Kuna, resulting in the killing of the newcomers and many of their crossbred offspring. They successfully took

⁵⁷ Howe, 1998, 11-13.

⁵⁸ Dampier, William, *Tweede Deel van William Dampiers Reystogt: Midsgaders een Naauwkeurige Beshrijving van Darien of de Land-engte van Ameika: Beschreeven door Lionel Wafer*, (Translation: "Part Two of William Dampier's Travelogue: A Collection of Detailed Descriptions from Darien at the Edge of America: Written by Lionel Wafer."), ('s Gravenhage: Abraham de Hond, 1700).

⁵⁹ Stout, *San Blas Cuna Acculturation: An Introduction*, 1947, 54.

over the cacao production that meant that they had goods to trade and that trading ships would stop routinely.⁶⁰ Shortages were rarely experienced thereafter, and goods from other places were permanently absorbed into their life patterns.

A Change in the Life Pattern of the Kuna

The Kuna remained in the Darien region well into the 1800's. Land was plentiful and, other than their extended cultivation of cacao, they farmed at a subsistence level, which was largely managed by the women. The men subsidized their agriculturally based diet with the meat and fish that they hunted. By the 1850's, it became apparent that the demand for coconuts exceeded the amount yielded from the wild coconut trees. With the decline in demand for items that had traditionally been supplied by the Kuna, such as ipecac and cacao, they realized that if they were to retain a crop of commercial value and if they were to remain the source for coconuts they would need to do something proactive.⁶¹ Interestingly, it is at this time that Kuna families were beginning to move to the sandy islands and the river deltas located north of Darien, the archipelago now known as the San Blas Islands and the adjoining coastline. Some sources say that this move was due to epidemics, likely not made any better by the malaria-carrying mosquitoes. Others say it was made strictly to service the coconut trade. By 1900, the Kuna had planted coconut palm trees on many of the outlying areas and on some of the islands. Positioning themselves along this coastline also encouraged trading ships to stop and pick up excess coconuts.⁶²

⁶⁰ Carl Langebaek, "Cuna long distance journeys: the result of colonial interaction", *Ethnology* 30(1991): 373.

⁶¹ Stout, *San Blas Cuna Acculturation: An Introduction*, 1947, 74.

⁶² Howe, James, *The Kuna Gathering: Contemporary Village Politics in Panama*, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986), 14.

Karin Tice maintains that with this geographical shift, the men increasingly took on the role as agriculturalists of the subsistence plots. Both the men and the women were responsible for the maintenance and harvesting of the coconuts, but interestingly, the women were responsible for the physical trading of the coconuts. As the population on the islands increased, agricultural land relocated to the mainland. Often the coconut groves also were positioned at increasing distances from the domicile and, as the distance increased, the responsibility for tasks related to agriculture shifted entirely from the women to the men. The men would stay away for days tending their plants, while the women stayed at home caring for the family and preparing the food. Tice is very careful to point out, however, that the shift was not complete and was left to some degree to the discretion of the individual woman depending on her own interests. They continued to own their own land and control the produce from not only their own plot, but also their husband's plot.⁶³ On the other hand, this discretion meant that each woman had control over her time allocation and she had a source of income that could be used for the purchase of commercial cloth. Thus, although the nose ring and wrap-around skirt that Wafer mentions in his account remained, the women began to create more elaborate dress.⁶⁴ They now used a large trade handkerchief to wear over their heads and they began to create beautifully sewn decorative blouses and in this way began to display themselves as being Kuna, a culture apart from the rest of the world as they knew it.⁶⁵

⁶³ Tice, *Kuna Crafts, Gender, and the Global Economy*, 1995, 38

⁶⁴ Wafer, *A New Voyage and Description of the Isthmus of America*, 1903 (Reprint of original 1699 edition), 141 and 153.

⁶⁵ Howe, *A People Who Would Not Kneel*, 1998, 17.

The Increased Need for Something Recognizably Kuna

Panama became an independent nation in 1906. With no resources it was very difficult to force the Kuna to assimilate, therefore the Panamanian government encouraged missionaries to come with the hope that some of their work in controlling the Kuna would be done for them. This attempt was not successful and in 1915 the Panamanian government created a new branch, called the Circumscripcion de San Blas. A governor was installed in the region and with him came many new rules for the Kuna to follow, including the prohibition of wearing traditional dress. In February of 1925, the Kuna revolted, killing all those in power who did not escape.⁶⁶ The results of this rebellion are evident today. The Kuna retain autonomy of their region and have control over their own government. They are in constant dialogue with the Panamanian government ensuring that they are represented in all decisions that affect them. At the heart of the rebellion was the right to wear the mola costume, which came to embody their identity. Pride of dress became as important as being Kuna.⁶⁷ Four artifacts housed in the Denison University collection (Artifact # DU1972. 1071a and b and DU1972.1072a and b) (see Figures 1 and 2) demonstrate that this artform embodies all that is Kuna. Clyde Keeler, in documenting these items, states that they were worn as armbands by young boys in 1963 when they were brought to the U.S. to go to school. The males of the Kuna culture never wear items like these, but clearly the women felt that they should wear these as an indication of their nationality.

⁶⁶ Howe, James, "Native rebellion and U.S. intervention in Central America: The implications of the Kuna case for the Miskito", *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 10(1): 1986, 63.

⁶⁷ Tice, *Kuna Crafts, Gender and the Global Economy*, 1995, 40.



Figure 1: Armband DU1972.1071a. One of a pair used by a Kuna boy in 1963 when he was sent to the U.S. go to school.

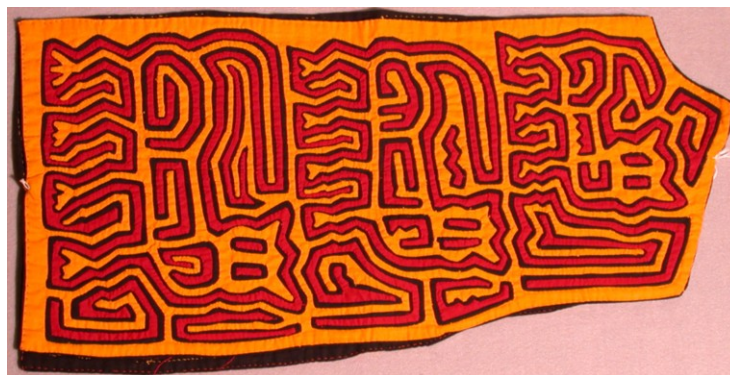


Figure 2: Armband DU1972.1072a. One of a pair worn by a Kuna boy when sent to the U.S. in 1963.

The Presence of the Missionaries

During the Spanish conquest of the New World, it became customary for the Catholic Church to establish missions, as was done on several occasions around the Gulf of Uraba in the early eighteenth century. Missionaries never stayed long, however, as they were subject to native uprisings. In 1907, Father Gasso arrived, and was the first to

be situated amongst the Kuna. He stayed until 1913, when his ministry became more complicated by the presence of Anna Coope, a Protestant missionary. She established a school, and the Kuna were quick to recognize that there was value in permitting their children to learn, including the learning of another language that in this case was English. In 1915, Panamanian lay teachers were sent in to set up a Spanish school, which again the Kuna took full advantage of. Anna Coope stayed until the Kuna revolution in 1925. In 1928, a permanent Catholic mission was established that remains to this day.⁶⁸ In 1932, one of Anna Coope's students and an important convert, Alcibiades Iglesias, returned from the United States with his American wife to establish a nondenominational school and mission among the Kuna. Now for the first time, the Kuna were listening to the message. Additionally, an increased number of Kuna people began to be actively involved in teaching both from an academic standpoint and from a proselytizing perspective. By the 1950's, Southern Baptists moved into the San Blas region in an aggressive manner.⁶⁹

The Kuna were very reluctant to absorb the new religious teachings, however they realized that there was much to gain from any information available to them through their association with the Christian missionaries. Some of the men began working on the trade

⁶⁸ Stout, *San Blas Acculturation: An Introduction*, 1947, 54-55.

⁶⁹ James Howe, "The Kuna and the World: Five Centuries of Struggle", in *The Art of Being Kuna: Layers of Meaning Among the Kuna of Panama*, ed. Mari Lyn Salvador (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1997), 99.

¹⁴⁵ Stout, *San Blas Acculturation: An Introduction*, 1947, 40; Nordenskiöld, *An Historical and Ethnological Survey of the Cuna Indians*, 1938, 434.

ships that docked on the islands and therefore other languages were of particular interest. They were curious about the world around them and valued any and all education that was available to them.⁷⁰

Spiritual Beliefs

Their belief system centers on a single creator as well as on the notion of a heaven and hell. Thus, the message that the missionaries delivered corresponded in some way with what the Kuna already understood to be valid. They believe in God, *Dios* or *Papa*, all names that he is referred to by, and his wife, *Nana*. Furthermore, they believed that he created all and as such is in control of all, sees all and punishes accordingly. Due to the misbehavior of his people, he had destroyed the world three times, by fire, darkness and flood. After the flood, which happened eight hundred years ago, God sent *Ibeorkun* (also spelled *Ibeorgun*). He observed what the people knew and based on this, he taught the people how to behave and how to live.⁷¹ Due to the skills that women have, he charged them with the making of clothing for themselves, for their daughters and for their mothers, should they be unable to cut and stitch.⁷² *Ibeorkun* sent disciples to spread his teachings and ensure that these dictates were followed. Beneath the disciples were the village *neles*, who were men within the community born into this rank. They, typically, had powers and would recount myths to illustrate special messages. These myths were subtly altered to fit the social climate of the day. Therefore, although *Ibeorkun* was pleased with the cotton growing, spinning and weaving skills of the Kuna women and ordered them to continue weaving the hammocks and cotton fabric to be used as body

⁷¹ Stout, *San Blas Acculturation: An Introduction*, 1947, 41.

⁷² Nordenskiöld, *An Historical and Ethnological Survey of the Cuna Indians*, 1938, 135.

wraps, this charge continued to be applied to the making of clothing when the style had changed to the mola blouse. The men, therefore, also sanctioned the time for mola blouse making.

Mola making has taken on these mythical proportions. The Kuna believe that they were first made when life began. They were hidden in the underworld, or *kalu*, called Tuipis and remained unseen until Nakekiriai, a god-like woman, entered into Tuipis and discovered the mola blouses. The true origin of mola blouses, therefore, is obscured by myth, hiding also the connection with European immigration. Myth reinforces the Kuna identifier that the mola blouse and technique has become.⁷³

Matrilocal and Extended Families

When Kuna marry, the husband usually moves into his wife's mother's home, with all of the female relatives and their families. With younger women and girls available to look after the children, the older women can do the heavy work, leaving time in their day to sew molas. The younger girls, nearby, are able to learn mola making within the home on a fairly informal basis, making the transfer of technical and design knowledge a natural extension of their day.

Through increased trade of coconuts and the reallocation of agricultural tasks, the women had the money and time for mola blouse making. Through contact with Europeans, quite possibly the Huguenots, they were familiar with the blouse shape and format. They also learned how to use the sewing needle and scissors. Through traditional spiritual dictates that women should make their clothing, this was extended to apply to mola making. Thus all women were, and still are, compelled to make their own

⁷³ Perrin, *Magnificent Molas: The Art of the Kuna Indians*, 1999, 21-22.

mola blouses, as well as the blouses worn by their daughters and their mothers if they are unable to make their own. Finally, by not sewing in isolation but rather in a conclave of women both young and old, the techniques and designs are passed on from generation to generation. Also passed down is the ability to aesthetically critique everyone's work which serves to further add to the relevance of the activity.

The Arts and Crafts of a Society

When examining the material culture of any society, one is in fact looking at the arts and crafts of that society. There are certain aspects of arts and crafts that warrant attention. It is relevant to examine why a culture would be interested in creating art/craft and why a culture creates a style that is recognizably its own. It is also important to examine the workmanship of a product and the degree of technology available to the creators. Finally, change plays an important role in establishing the society's position within the art/craft interplay as well as playing a role in communication and relationships.

No society has ever been content to merely satisfy the primal needs of food and shelter. Typically, humans have embellished their surroundings. This is truly an interesting phenomenon and defies the notions of inherent idleness or inherent capitalism.⁷⁴ Aesthetic enrichment can be found in many forms – sculpture, dance, song, story telling, textile manufacturing, basketry, and ceramics, just to mention a few. Efforts to add design are often incorporated into utilitarian objects, yet clearly, these design elements are unnecessary to their function and provide only aesthetic pleasure or social

⁷⁴ Boas, *Primitive Art*, 1955, 9; Crozier, *Manufactured Pleasures: Psychological Responses to Design*, 1994, 15.

relevance. Energy expended for this pleasure must create sufficient reward in and of itself; otherwise the activity would cease. The universality of the creative process and the embellishment of one's surroundings warrant a closer look.

Daniel Berlyne has proposed a theory of aesthetics related to the creative process. He, too, has observed that arts and crafts are evident in all cultures and has been quick to add that, not only is that fact remarkable, the sheer diversity is astounding. His theory states that the level of creativity within a community serves very important biological functions – natural selection and learning. Further, his theory emphasizes the possibility that aesthetic reactions may be adaptive responses based on environmental situations.⁷⁵ Obviously, with the broad array of material creations, the response is not solely to the natural environment. Berlyne agrees that many objects are created in response to cultural pressures. Relevancy may be promoted by the opportunities for aesthetic communication that arise both during and after manufacture.⁷⁶ The act of creating may establish one's place and provide an active method of controlling social interaction by monitoring and selecting one's social circle.⁷⁷ Irwin Altman and Mary Gauvain have taken this discussion one step further by stating that not only does this type of activity regulate and control one's openness, it also serves to support a person's identity and feelings of self-worth.⁷⁸ It may also establish one's connection with nature by recreating the surrounding landscapes, including the flora and fauna.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Daniel Berlyne, *Aesthetics and Psychobiology*, (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1974), 15.

⁷⁶ Berlyne, *Aesthetics and Psychobiology*, 1974, 20.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 1974, 33.

⁷⁸ Irwin Altman and Mary Gauvain, "A Cross-cultural and Dialectic Analysis of Homes", in *Spatial Representation and Behavior Across the Life Span*, eds. L. Liben, A. Patterson and N. Newcombe, (New York: Academic Press, 1981), 289.

⁷⁹ Jay Appleton, *The Experience of Landscape*, (London: John Wiley, 1975), 43.

Our restricted view of what constitutes art/craft and how we use it is peculiar to the Western world. In many cultures, beautiful things are made to use, often with the unspoken sentiment that the decoration makes menial tasks more pleasurable. Often, too, items of special beauty are created to form the focal point of ritual activities, symbolizing the specialness of the occasion. The notion of using the art/craft form sets up a contradiction within our frame of reference, specifically that we in the Western world prefer to view our artwork. Once we examine the broader context we find that it is much more difficult to define “art” or “craft.” In the global sense, art/craft does not have a single, unifying function. We must therefore examine what it does for the individual using the item and we find that this too, varies. Art/craft may provide a pleasurable sensation; provide a sense of rootedness and that all is right in the world; it may provide an uplifting feeling or a feeling of religious piety. It may also provide a reminder of an omnipresence of deities, thus guiding one’s behavior. Regardless, it provides sensory experiences; however the experiences vary a great deal and thus do not help in our attempts of defining art/craft.⁸⁰ Morris Weitz states unequivocally that art/craft simply cannot be defined. There is no single attribute or set of attributes that are present in all art/craft forms and absent from everything else. Also, to further complicate our analysis, art/craft is constantly changing, thus we may have a suitable definition one day and it no longer applies the next.⁸¹

To help in the definition of art/craft as it will ultimately apply to the Kuna population, it seems crucial to separate out this type of society from others and call it a

⁸⁰ Berlyne, *Aesthetics and Psychobiology*, 1971, 24.

⁸¹ Morris Weitz, “The Role of Theory in Aesthetics”, in *Aesthetic Inquiry*, eds. M. Beardsley and H.M. Schueller, (Belmont, CA: Dickenson Publishers, 1967), 3.

“small scale society.” Richard Anderson finds this distinction to be an appropriate one and has described a small scale society as one in which the necessities of life are satisfied by simple technologies. Also, the population and density can be described as low when comparing the distribution to settlement patterns worldwide. Within this society, job description is unnecessary with little specialization at the social, economic or political levels.⁸²

Anderson examines the role of art/craft within these small scale societies and finds that it satisfies needs on an economic, social, political or symbolic front for the people who created them.⁸³ Thus the art/craft work is multifaceted. There is a central focus, an inward looking behavior if you will, with no member attempting to understand outside forces or lifeways or even what role the art/craft form specifically plays for them. If something works, it is used to the common good in a coordinated fashion, enabling the society to work as a whole while at the same time serving the individual.⁸⁴ The art/craft form is thus culturally significant. Not only does it satisfy the various needs within the community, it often crosses several lines, as the disciplines within a small scale society are not clearly delineated but are so thoroughly integrated as to make separation difficult. The art/craft form is likely of a particular style that is easily recognizable. A message of a specific nature may be encoded within the piece or the piece may be of a general style, both relying on shared traditions in order to make its significance implicit. In some manner, the medium stirs the senses, by simply stimulating them, by affecting the emotions or by recognizing the sheer talent in executing the work. Finally, for something

⁸² Anderson, *Art in Small Scale Societies*, 1989, 7.

⁸³ Ibid, 1989 xiv.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 1989, 6.

to be art/craft, someone who has special talents that sets him/her apart from the rest of the community must make it. The kind of skill and the medium used is culturally determined. Typically in small scale societies, everyone in the community can execute the art/craft form, but few become masters.⁸⁵ If all or most of the above criteria are satisfied, we can say that we have art and/or craft.

Unfortunately, nothing is ever that straightforward, and one would not expect that to be the case with something so embedded within a community. Alfred Radcliffe-Brown stated long ago that “the function of any recurrent activity is the part it plays in the social life as a whole and therefore the contribution it makes to the maintenance of the social continuity.”⁸⁶ Anderson extends this notion of the functionalism of art and craft by saying that it is not enough to know that a specific type of art or craft is created by a specific group of people. It is imperative to examine the function of the art/craft form if one is to fully appreciate the society from which such specific creativity flows.⁸⁷

Art and craft, in many cases, form the underpinnings of society. Radcliffe-Brown states that because there is a uniformity of beliefs and action, and because the art and craft comes out of this solidarity, a sameness is created. This sameness further extends to ensuring balance and solidarity and therein lies the functionalism of the art and craft. Differences, should they be created within their art and craft, can only be tolerated in so far as it supports the whole.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Anderson, *Art in Small Scale Societies*, 1989, 11.

⁸⁶ Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, “On the Concept of Function in Social Science,” *American Anthropologist* 37: 1935, 396.

⁸⁷ Anderson, *Art in Small Scale Societies*, 1989, 30.

⁸⁸ Radcliffe-Brown, “On the Concept of Function in Social Science”, 1935, 398.

This discussion seems to be leading to the conclusion that art is a necessary part of society and without it, it would fracture. That may be so, but more importantly, underlying all of this is the mere fact that art and craft, in and of itself, must be a pleasurable and fulfilling practice. In short, there must be an inherent need to create. Forgetting for the moment what it does for the viewer/participant, it must first of all be a satisfying thing to do from an artistic perspective; otherwise, finding subsequent artists may become an impossible task. Berlyne has wondered whether, since we are all using the same nervous system, the ability to construct creatively serves an adaptive function by perhaps improving acuity or enhancing communication skills.⁸⁹ Regardless, the artist must to some degree be working for him/herself. As the artist is working, not only is there knowledge of who he/she is and the community from which he/she comes, there is also love and knowledge of the medium, enjoyment of the creation of line, rhythm, balance and the exuberance of color. Underlying all of this, therefore, there is, in return, a reinforcement of self concept placing him/her back into the context of the society from which he/she comes.

The act of creating is only one step of the process. Decisions are made prior to the making, decisions that include what materials to use and the acquisition of these materials, what colors to select, which techniques to use to create the visual effect and finally how to acquire the tools appropriate for the job. The decision of who does the making and who does the using of the finished article is also important.

⁸⁹ Berlyne, *Aesthetics and Psychobiology*, 1971, 27.

The creation of arts/crafts implies that there is community support for the activity, sometimes begrudgingly, but support nonetheless. The community lifestyle must support the time commitment. The art/craft form must be one that the community identifies with and one that the community thus in turn validates.⁹⁰

Style is another very important aspect of arts and crafts. The premise behind Franz Boas' work *Primitive Art*, in 1955, was that each culture had its own "look," that one could identify the origin of a piece by its similarity to other works within the same society. Also, Boas studied the properties of various media and how the medium affected the look of each artifact. He concluded that the style of a community not only reflected the physical environment in which the community was situated, it also reflected the media in which they worked.⁹¹ Claude Levi-Strauss agreed with Boas that each society had a specific "look," however he attributed the differences to differences in cognitive processes and different perceptions.⁹² Roe says that you cannot separate the cognitive elements from the physical elements. Both affect the individual and allow the individual to make choices. These elements also ensure that the individual does not make choices in isolation, but relies on the approval of the society as a whole.⁹³

The interactions between the individual and the society in which he/she resides are meaningful. Each individual does his/her own thinking. However, through the desire to communicate, individuals have unconsciously developed a system of interaction. With positive reinforcement, these meaningful exchanges build on each other to the point that a

⁹⁰ Vytautas Kavolis, *Artistic Expression – a Sociological Analysis*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1968). 275.

⁹¹ Boas, *Primitive Art*, 1955.

⁹² Claude Levi-Strauss, "Split-representation in the Art of Asia and America," in *Structural Anthropology* translated by C. Jacobson and B. Schoepf, (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday/Anchor Books, 1967), .206-263.

⁹³ Roe, "Style, Society, Myth and Structure," 1995, 28.

system evolves within the community that is similar among all participants ensuring that it is both understandable and meaningful. Although the system is flexible enough to permit some variations, all products fit into a recognizable practice.⁹⁴ Style is one component of what makes the product understandable. It distinctively belongs to a specific group of people and, further, its features are identifiable and meaningful to those in this group. Thomas Munro states, “not all traits of a work of art are stylistic traits, only those which serve to identify it as an example of a style.”⁹⁵ Stylistic traits stand out.

Style is a characteristic that may be difficult to achieve, but regardless of the effort required to create the desired effect, it is expended in order to make it recognizable to the community. This effort may go far beyond what is needed to make the item useful, indicating that this effort is being used to create style.⁹⁶

The medium used plays a big part in the ultimate style, therefore it can be said that style is medium dependent. The medium determines the techniques required and ultimately becomes recognizable as style. The medium may change over time, however, then new methods are learned to use the new medium to create the same style that is meaningful to the community.⁹⁷

Style is relevant to a particular people in a particular time and place. With a common set of experiences, the style is relevant and understandable to this fixed group of people. Variability is a result of altering decision-making during the process of manufacture due to some form of negotiation, which may have come about subtly or

⁹⁴ Roe, “Style, Society, Myth and Structure,” 1995, 29.

⁹⁵ Thomas Munro, *Evolution in the Arts and Other Theories of Culture History*, (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1963), 256.

⁹⁶ Roe, “Style, Society, Myth and Structure,” 1995, 30.

⁹⁷ Robert Layton, *Australian Rock Art: A New Synthesis*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 183.

overtly. Change is permissible, as long as the change does not alter its acceptance or understandability within the community. Therefore, over the course of time, stylistic changes may occur, but not without the acceptance of the group.⁹⁸

Technology, medium and style are inextricably linked. Materials possess inherent qualities that require the evolution of special techniques and technologies. How the material is transferred to reflect the style of the people depends on what is learned about the material and the technology required to modify it. The demands of the material may ultimately adjust the style, however, there is a synergistic play with the three elements that, over time, balances to translate into something meaningful.⁹⁹ A noticeable change in style could reflect a change in the balance between the individual and society or a change in the role of the artifact.¹⁰⁰

Workmanship also plays an important role in the creation of arts and crafts. Pye has divided human's desire for making useful objects attractive into two activities – designing and making. The design of an object is delimited by the function of the object to some degree. It is also delimited by the stylistic mores of the societal group for which it is intended, which has already been discussed. The making or manufacturing of an object is surprisingly also ephemeral in that the amount of work it takes to make a useful item usually bears no relationship to the amount of work actually carried out. Usually more work is carried out in attempts to make the item more attractive, to the point that the

⁹⁸ Miller, *Artifact as Categories: A Study of Ceramic Variability in Central India*, 1985, 35.

⁹⁹ Heather Lechtman, "Style in Technology – Some Early Thoughts", in *Material Culture: Styles, Organization and Dynamics of Technology, Proceedings of the American Ethnological Society*, eds. H. Lechtman and R. Merrill, (St. Paul, MN: West Publishing, 1977), 30; Roe, "Style, Society, Myth and Structure," 1995, 28.

¹⁰⁰ Polly Weissner, "Style and Changing Traditions Between the Individual and Society," in *The Meaning of Things: Material Culture and Symbolic Expression*, ed. Ian Hodder, (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 59.

workmanship becomes part of the design. As David Pye states, “social life itself rests on the idea that the manner of doing things is often as important as the result.”¹⁰¹

Workmanship creates an aesthetic value that is important.

Designs can be rendered using a medium other than the medium of the finished product, for example the design of a wooden sculpture can be drawn on paper first.

Workmanship can only become evident on the finished product and one cannot know one’s abilities until the job is complete.¹⁰² This indicates a certain level of risk. The designer must rely on the abilities of the workman, with the workman making decisions continually throughout the operation.

Some tasks have more inherent risk than others. The risk increases with the increased likelihood that at any point the item could be ruined. The value of the finished product increases as the risk increases. The level of experience that the workman has improves the likelihood of success, but the attributed value remains high.¹⁰³

Workmanship is related to the kinds of technology available to the participants. Also, technique and technology may form part of the differentiation of arts and crafts. The absorption of techniques and technological innovations is a choice made by the community.¹⁰⁴ By analyzing construction, MacKenzie was able to derive much of her information regarding the social meaning of string bags within the culture of central New Guinea. In fact, she was surprised to see bags constructed in wonderfully original and expressive ways as well as bags that were skilled reproductions of other bags that seemed

¹⁰¹ David Pye, *The Nature and Aesthetics of Design*, (Bethel, CT: Cambian Press, 1978), 90.

¹⁰² David Pye, *The Nature and Art of Workmanship*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 17.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 9.

¹⁰⁴ MacKenzie, *Androgynous Objects: String Bags and Gender in Central New Guinea*, 1991, 25.

to reappear regularly over time and place.¹⁰⁵ Dolores Newton, in her study of Timbira hammocks, was able to relate technique to social and geographical boundaries.¹⁰⁶ Peter Ucko summarized the relevancy of studying technique by stating that, in this way, researchers can unite social and technological information.¹⁰⁷ Material culture, when studied in relation to the structure and processes through which they are created, can provide information of how the item fits back into the culture that has made the item.

Technology is related to social behavior as well. Bryan Pfaffenberger states that technology is a set of “operationally replicable social behaviors; no technology can be said to exist unless the people who use it can use it over and over again.”¹⁰⁸ It becomes apparent therefore that technology relies on communication and by extension then becomes a social activity.

An object may be produced within a society, however, it is only by examining the consumption patterns, or how it is used that one can get the true societal value. Consumption complements and completes the production.¹⁰⁹ Only in the consumption patterns can we discern, for example, if the finished objects serve as a means of separating the genders.

Helga Dittmar, in her discussion of consumption, states that human beings use symbols when they relate to each other and the rest of the world, with specific relevance

¹⁰⁵ MacKenzie, *Androgynous Objects: String Bags and Gender in Central New Guinea*, 1991, xiii.

¹⁰⁶ Dolores Newton, “The Timbira Hammock as a Cultural Indicator of Social Boundaries,” in *The Human Mirror*, ed. Miles Richardson, (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), 250- 251.

¹⁰⁷ Peter Ucko, “Penis Sheaths: A Comparative Study,” *Proceedings of the Royal Anthropological Institute for 1969*, 1970, 67.

¹⁰⁸ Bryan Pfaffenberger, “Fetishized Objects and Humanized Nature: Towards an Anthropology of Technology,” *Man* 23(2): 1988, 241.

¹⁰⁹ MacKenzie, *Androgynous Objects: String Bags and Gender in Central New Guinea*, 1991, 25.

felt by the people who share the same value system.¹¹⁰ Display is needed to create and maintain visible, stable categories within the culture.¹¹¹ Whereas material goods serve to create one's space and identity, the actual creation of art/crafts and their subsequent display serve to demonstrate the categories even more forcefully. Not only have the goods been acquired, they have been made by the individual.

The Art/Craft Interplay

The art/craft interplay exists as a backdrop to this discussion. Joyce Johnson found, when examining reasons for needleworking among contemporary women in the United States, that creativity is not always essential, that one does not always need to design an original piece to gain full satisfaction. She found that some women enjoyed the act of stitching in and of itself and that following directions and patterns empowers them.¹¹² This supports Dittmar, when she says, "we are not only *homo sapiens*, or sentimental beings, we are also *homo faber*, the makers and users of material objects".¹¹³

Interestingly, being a maker of things requires breaking down the process into a succession of events and doing so successfully. First of all, the maker needs to develop a notion of intent to make something and formulate what materials will be needed and how much. Secondly, the maker needs to collect the raw materials and therefore must know the source of these materials. Thirdly, the maker must prepare the place where the making will occur, ensuring that the needed tools and supports are also present. And,

¹¹⁰ Helga Dittmar, *The Social Psychology of Material Possessions*, (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester-Wheatsheat, 1992), 6.

¹¹¹ Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption*, (London: Allen Lane, 1979), 59.

¹¹² Joyce Johnson, *Motivational Factors Among Contemporary Female Needlework Producers*, (Ph.D. diss., University of Missouri-Columbia, 2000), 71-73.

¹¹³ Dittmar, *The Social Psychology of Material Possessions*, 1992, 65.

lastly, the maker must set a standard for the workmanship. Link defined these stages as the decision pathways.¹¹⁴ Miller has proposed that these are the stages where variability can occur.¹¹⁵ If prescribed rules and elements are simply followed by using a format that has always been successful with no modification necessary, the result is the promotion of a craft. Johnson has found that each of these stages, in fact, provides elements of satisfaction to the maker and that the level of the workmanship of the item, too, derives pleasure.¹¹⁶ Roe has labeled craft production as “rule replication behavior,” stressing that the manufacture of these items involves a formulaic approach and the dogmatic repetition of a solution that has always been successful from the point of view of the society in which the manufacture takes place. Repetition implies that the maker strives to complete the task with impeccable workmanship and becomes known for the manner in which the craft is completed.¹¹⁷

Art also relies on the maker’s ability to break down the process into the same succession of events; however, the maker in this case is much more innovative. Any one of the steps listed above can incur change, and the maker of art will evoke change for change’s sake, not relying on a formulaic approach. Roe calls this “rule creation behavior.” Although change can be incurred at any point, most frequently the ramifications of the change can be seen in the style of the final product.¹¹⁸

Changes in style are gradual. Martindale, in examining contemporary poetry found that there is a constant drive to produce something original. He worked on a

¹¹⁴ Link, *Japanese Cabinetmaking*, 1975, 6.

¹¹⁵ Miller, *Artifacts as Categories: A Study of Ceramic Variability in Central India*, 1985, 37-39.

¹¹⁶ Johnson, *Motivational Factors Among Contemporary Female Needlework Producers*, 2000, 109.

¹¹⁷ Roe, “Style, Society, Myth and Structure,” 1995, 31.

¹¹⁸ Roe, “Style, Society, Myth and Structure,” 1995, 31.

theory of stylistic progression, which he applied to poetry, but which certainly has applications in all art/craft forms. In the demand for novelty, new avenues are explored and either accepted or rejected by the community.¹¹⁹ Too much change is generally regarded as inappropriate. Thus, we see fashion changes approached in an exploratory manner. Increased exposure improves the likelihood of acceptance.¹²⁰

Items of historical significance or traditional significance change little if at all. The driving force for items of this nature is an improvement of the workmanship. Repetition fits into the realm of the crafter, thus offering opportunities to both the artist and the crafter.¹²¹

Arts and crafts are not distinct categories, but rather, a society's art/craft forms move back and forth over time, creating an interplay. Invariably, societies find a format that works and produce craft for a period of time, but one member will begin to manipulate the format in an attempt to reduce boredom or to be rewarded for creating something new. Alternatively, if the community is solely creating art, too many decisions are required on a daily basis, resulting in fatigue. This fatigue encourages a formulaic format. Balance is achieved, depending on the social needs of the community and the abilities and initiative of the individuals.

Mary Douglas has stated that society is built on social relationships. To retain relationships one must have communication and communication relies on the presence of meaning. Meaning implies that there are rules to follow within the community, often so implicit as to be unrecognizable as such by those within the community. These rules

¹¹⁹ Martindale, *The Psychology of Literary Change*, (Ph.D diss., Harvard University, 1969), 76.

¹²⁰ Crozier, *Manufactured Pleasures: Psychological Responses to Design*, 1994, 69.

¹²¹ Ibid., 1994, 69.

govern interactions and are a component of all that is seen, heard and experienced within the community. By extension, therefore, this includes the art/craft activities and the subsequent display of the products.¹²²

All societies participate in some aesthetic behavior, although there does not seem to be one single, unifying function. Crozier has established different needs that are fulfilled through the completion of art/craft.

1. The art/craft is a social identifier, giving those within and without the community a sense of place and belonging. By extension, therefore, art/craft can also be what separates by establishing boundaries and controlling social interaction. This is typically accomplished through the use of a style that is recognizable.¹²³

2. The art/craft operates on an individual level as well. It can establish self worth and individuality. This can be accomplished through innovation or virtuosity.¹²⁴ The art/craft activities are used as a means of validating the abilities of all participants in the community by championing both innovation and virtuosity.

3. The art and craft is sensitive to the traditions, history and mythology of the community. By supporting the traditional art/craft, the community is validating the elders as well.¹²⁵

¹²² Mary Douglas, "Introduction," in *Rules and Meanings: The Anthropology of Everyday Knowledge*, ed. Mary Douglas, (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Education, 1973), 9.

¹²³ Crozier, *Manufactured Pleasures: Psychological Responses to Design*, 1994, 33 and 85.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 1994, 105.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 1994, 114.

4. By incorporating images of the landscape, including familiar flora and fauna, one establishes a sense of place. These images often provide inspiration for subsequent innovation, permitting the observer to participate through efforts of recognition, providing again a sense of engagement and belonging.

These various categories offer different potentials in developing innovation and virtuosity, that is to say, the art/craft interplay, and in turn providing the impetus to continue the process.

Textiles provide a special medium in which to work. They permit a vast array of manipulations, taking them out of the planar motif and into a three-dimensional mode with various ways of permanently affixing the new configuration. Design can also be applied to the surface of the cloth or can be permanently imbedded within the fiber structure of the cloth. Alternatively, the cloth can be used as a design medium itself on cloth or some other material. Designing with textiles, and its precursors of fiber and yarn, has been done throughout the ages and knows no geographical boundaries, indicating both the endless potential for design but also the satisfaction gained from working in this medium.

The added benefit of working with textiles is the ability to wear the final products, satisfying protective and privacy issues in comfort as well as creating the intended visual effect. Clothing is a special art/craft form. While wearing the garment, one displays with intent and with portability. One carries the information regarding status, sex, social group, interests, abilities, preferences and/or many other vital pieces of information in a rather automatic and implicit fashion. This display may aid in establishing one's position in the community.

Textiles, and by extension, clothing, offer a special medium for arts/crafts and permit the potential for innovation as well as virtuosity. One can then wear the output, a very visible form of display, which ensures that communication and interaction ensue. If the purpose of the display is for symbolic interaction, demonstrating either the society that the wearer belongs to or does not belong to, this is readily achieved. If it is used to demonstrate creativity or talents, this information, too, is readily available. All of the different needs described by Crozier, as listed above, are also easily established using clothing as the conveyance.

Summary

The Kuna women use a novel decorative technique that they developed through contact with Europeans. The community supported this activity, so much so that the women were compelled to sew blouses for themselves, their daughters and their mothers should they be unable to stitch their own. Mola blouses easily fall into the realm of art and craft, fulfilling many of the conditions established by researchers. Art and craft, by definition, differ in the amount of innovation and technical skill invested. Through the use of both, an active interplay can be established. The potential for interplay is evident when demonstrating the possibility for achieving innovation or skill within the same art/craft form. Categories often develop as a consequence of this separation. Using documentation and analysis of the Denison University mola blouse collection; categories were readily identified.

CHAPTER 3

DOCUMENTATION OF THE MOLA BLOUSES IN THE DENISON UNIVERSITY COLLECTION

Documentation of artifacts is an important part of collection management. It is while documenting that it becomes possible to meld the provenance of a piece with its physical attributes. Thus taking measurements, recording color information and stating its condition, overall and in localized spots, as well as its need for conservation procedures, are steps that museum personnel must be prepared to take. Finally, recording specific characteristics through the use of photography provides the ultimate method of information gathering. These steps are not only ethical, but will reduce subsequent handling when curators are seeking appropriate items for research or display. This information may also aid in identification later should information be separated from the actual piece. Steps in the documentation process may help in categorization, another important activity when discussing artifacts.¹²⁶

The Denison Collection has maintained some of the information that arrived with the mola blouses when donated, information such as where and when obtained. None of the physical measurements were taken. The registrar did however attempt to identify the number of layers used for many of the pieces. The Kuna, in their attempt to use as many colors as possible when making their molas, fill the entire area with dazzling color

¹²⁶ Rebecca A. Buck and Jean Allman Gilmore (eds.), *The New Registration Methods*, (Washington, DC: The American Association of Museums, 1998), 49.

changes. They are adept at using different methods of incorporating color without requiring additional layers of cloth. As it is very difficult to discriminate between the use of an additional layer versus localized color change without an intimate knowledge of the techniques, the information provided by the registrar in this regard is often incorrect. Photographs of the pieces were not taken when the pieces were accessioned, and with the impetus for web-site availability, there is ample justification for recording them in this manner.

Mola blouses are formulaic in their construction, allowing for consistent measurements to be taken (see Figure 3). There are five pieces to the blouse – the front and back panels, the two sleeves and the yoke. The seams joining the main pieces are all enclosed, thus hiding all of the raw edges. Bands, often embellished, are sewn around the neckline, at the top of the mola panel, at the sleeve end to create a sleeveband, if in fact it is a gathered sleeve, and at the bottom of the panel. The neckline band is underlined by another band that traces the shoulder to the sleeve. Occasionally, a decorative band will be sewn along the sleeve seam as it meets the yoke front and back. The band along the bottom of the mola blouse encloses all of the fabric layers making up the mola panel. All of these bands vary in their complexity. Documenting the various methods of handling the bands and their level of complexity provides an important aspect in categorizing the mola blouses.

An important embellishment technique that is used in the making of the blouse is referred to as a “narrow exposed foldline” in this particular discussion. It is usually seen with the various bands and refers to the narrow piece of folded cloth set in behind the band and serves as an outline. It is folded in such a way that the raw edges are both

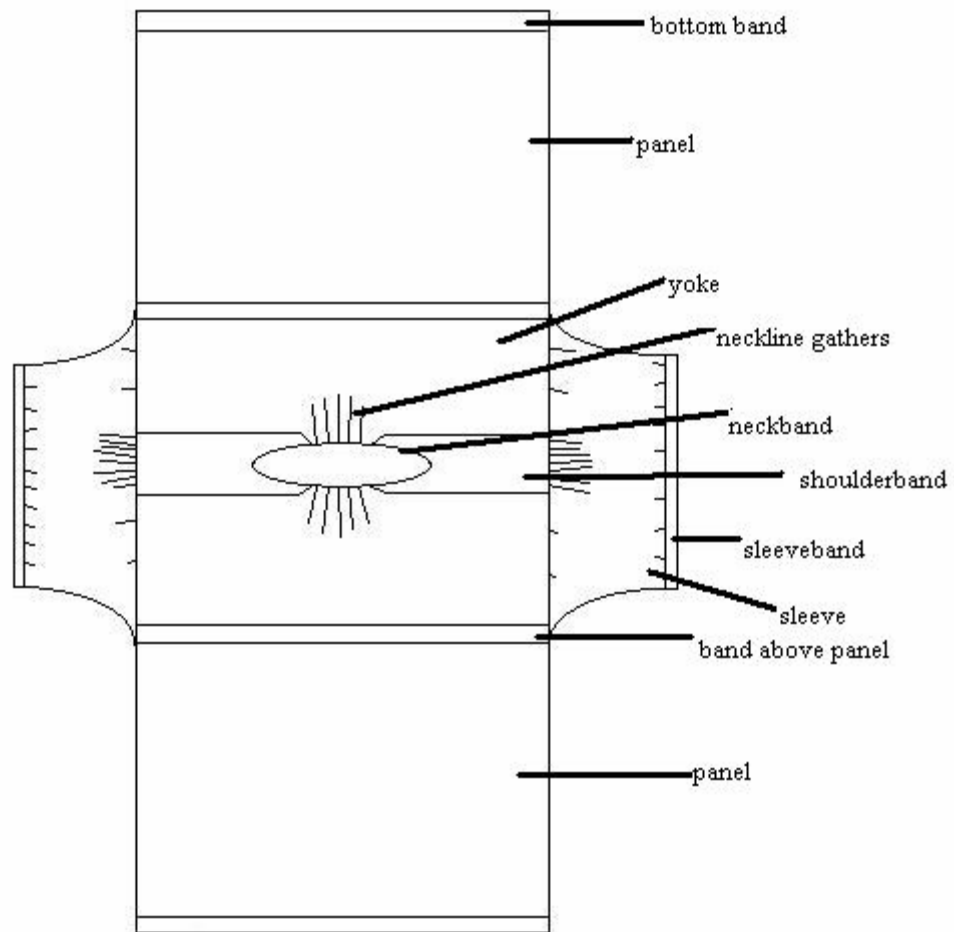


Figure 3: Diagram Illustrating the Parts of a Mola Blouse. The blouse has been opened up to lie flat, thus providing an image of all parts. To reassemble the blouse, the foldline, which is centered under the shoulderband, must be reestablished and the sideseams rejoined. Each sideseam is an enclosed seam that joins front and back and the underarm of the sleeve. It is continuous from the bottom of the hem to end of the sleeveband.

inserted behind the band, leaving a small edge of a different color. It can be used singly or sometimes with added layers, infusing more color play. The technique does rely on precision, as it requires foldlines of consistent widths to get the visual effect desired. The more narrow the foldline, the more difficult it is to achieve.

Many different kinds of appliqué are done, some on the blouse and some on the panels. Often sleevebands, bands above the panels and shoulderbands have added detailing carried out through appliqué. Regardless of where the appliqué occurs, all of the raw edges are turned under and the appliqué is stitched all the way around. Never is a raw edge left exposed. This is worthy of remembering while examining the various blouses, as some of the appliqué does indeed become very complex.

In documenting each artifact, the following measurements were taken.

1. The length of the mola panel.
2. The width of the mola panel.
3. The length of the mola blouse.
4. The sleeve dimensions.
5. The width of the shoulderband.
6. The dimension of the band across the top of the mola panel.
7. The dimension of the bottom band.
8. The number of color changes across the diagonal of the mola panel.
9. The number of layers for the panels.
10. The color identification for the fabrics chosen as layers for the mola panel.

The above information is relevant when analyzing the pieces and often relates to the complexity of the mola blouse design as well as the level of intricacy of the panel itself. The measurements are included in Appendix A (Tables 9-16).

A discussion of each piece will involve a description of the type of design used for the mola panel, the size and number of stitches used to create the panel, the selection of the sewing thread used, specifically, whether it matches the fabric being stitched, and the type of background filler used to decorate the entire space available. Mari Lyn Salvador found, when doing her research on the internal aesthetic criticism, that these issues are important in deciding the caliber of a panel.¹²⁷ Other descriptions are included when necessary.

Photographs taken of the mola blouses, an important aspect of the documentation process, are included. To relate the actual color of the mola to the color in the photograph, the color of each layer has been identified using *The Pantone Book of Color*, which number codes each color.¹²⁸ Color-coding was carried out under museum standards for light exposure, thus the incandescent light levels never exceeded fifty lux. This is not an ideal condition for color matching, however, the standards are specific, thus providing the information should duplication of color be necessary. Identifying each color with a number also enables easy comparisons to be made among molas, thus permitting another level of analysis.

The mola blouses are grouped into categories that will be substantiated in the following chapter (see Chapter 4, in the section entitled “The Categories Used to

¹²⁷ Mari Lyn Salvador, *Molas of the Cuna Indians: A Case Study of Artistic Criticism and Ethno-Aesthetics*, (Ph.D. diss., University of California, 1971), 175.

¹²⁸ Leatrice Eiseman and Lawrence Herbert, *The Pantone Book of Color*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1990).

Distinguish the Mola Blouses”, page 184). By categorizing them now, tedious repetition can be avoided and the discussion can proceed in an organized fashion. The categories, for the purposes of documentation, and subsequent analysis, are as follows:

1. Labyrinthine, which is further subdivided into a naturalistic style and a geometric style;
2. Central motif;
3. Historic;
4. Narrative, which is further subdivided into village life and myth style, a Christian style, and a style that contains both the village narrative and the Christian narrative style;
5. Outstanding, a category that takes elements from the above categories and combines them to make a panel, and ultimately a blouse, that rises above the others in both design and technique.

In the museum setting, documentation of each artifact specifies the type of object, the technique used to create of the object, and the nationality or ethnicity of the group creating the object. As this discussion involves only mola blouses, the following information applies to each artifact: the object is a mola blouse, the technique is reverse appliqué and appliqué, and the ethnic group creating the work is the Kuna people of the San Blas Islands and associated lands on the mainland of Panama, the entire area also known as Kuna Yala.

The headings used for documentation are the following: the accession number, the donor, date received, date object was made, place made and/or acquired, the condition

of the artifact, the photograph, the general description and description of noteworthy issues, description of the sewing thread and the stitches used, and a description of the background filler of the mola panel design.

Labyrinthine Category: Naturalistic Style

Artifact #1

Accession Number – DU1972.294 (see Figure 4)

Donor – Dr. Clyde E. Keeler

Date Received – 1/21/72

Date Made – before 1968

Place Made and/or Acquired – Concepcion, Panama

Condition of the Artifact – Good

Description:

General – This is a complete mola blouse. It includes a full sleeve that has been inserted smoothly into the bodice and has been gathered into a sleeve band. Also, fabric other than the fabric used for the rest of the mola yoke and sleeves has been used to augment the underarm area, in a piecemeal fashion. The mola panel is two-layered, with a different design on each side, although both relate to the natural world. The one side has an image of two donkeys eating. In the design, a flying bird is incorporated below. On the other side, crested birds sit in trees above squirrels. The design is intricately cut out of the top layer fabric, in such a manner that all of the lines are continuous. The cutting requires great skill. The pattern is comprehensive, leaving no blocks of fabric uncut. Even the bodies of the animals have been cut into. The foliage

has been incised repeatedly. The lines of the top layer fabric that remain vary in their width somewhat. Some corners are not sharply executed while curves are not smooth. The cutting ensures maximum coverage of the design and maximum potential for changing color and line.

The sleeve band is comprised of fabric that has been fully enclosed by a strip of black fabric, which has been further embellished with a strip of serrated orange fabric.

The band above the mola panel involves two serrated strips of fabric that are intersected with the higher strip further embellished with an orange strip of serrated fabric.

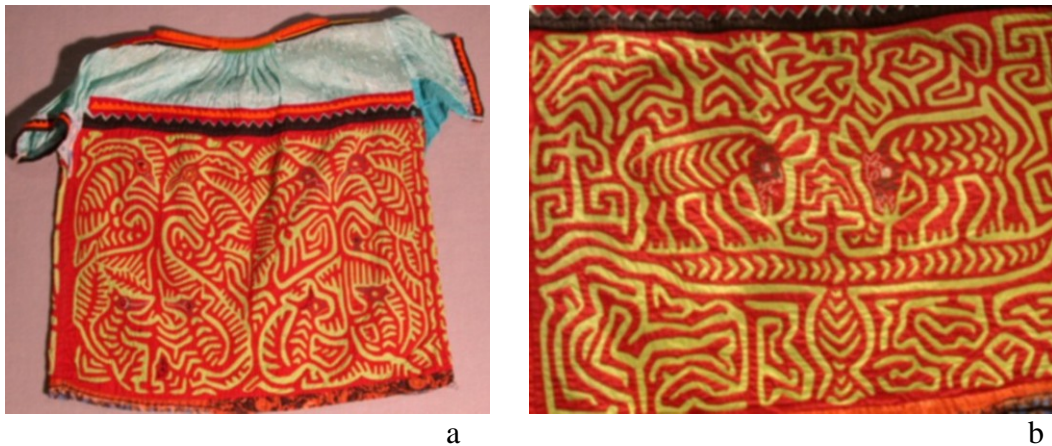


Figure 4: Mola Blouse DU1972.294. a) one side of blouse; b) panel on reverse side.

The neckline has been bound with orange fabric. At the center front and back, green fabric has been pintucked in with the gathers of the neckline, for about 8 cm. The shoulderbands are black, underlined with a foldline of yellow and then another foldline of black. The shoulderband extends beyond the sleeve seam.

Noteworthy – The mola yoke and sleeves are made of a thin and slippery fabric, likely rayon, that is unable to support the weight of the panel or the stitching used to border the neckline and the band above the mola panel.

The bottom band has been pieced and, because a printed fabric has been used for the band, the piecing is very evident. Clearly, this distraction was not an issue for the maker of the mola blouse.

There is a minimal amount of embroidery, consisting of chain stitches on the faces of the animals.

Stitches – The entire blouse is hand stitched. The stitches used for the panel are frequent and medium in size.

Sewing Thread – The sewing thread for the panel is the same color as the top layer.

Background Filler – The design is intricate and requires no additional filler.

Artifact #2

Accession Number – DU1972.314 (see Figure 5)

Donor – Dr. Clyde E. Keeler

Date Received – 1/21/72

Date Made – before 1966

Place Made and/or Acquired – Mulutuppu, Panama

Condition of the Artifact – Good

Description:

General – This is a complete mola. The sleeves are smoothly inserted into the bodice and each is gathered into a sleeveband. The two-layered panel is decorated throughout by designing at the point of cutting. The labyrinthine pattern maximizes color changes and alterations in the directional aspects of the lines. The pattern is again cut in such a manner as to leave the top layer intact. Only the small square in the upper left on both sides is separate from the entire top layer, clearly a monumental task when considering the complexity and intermingling pattern of the lines. The design incorporates a linear pattern that suggests two pelicans resting in a tree top with three birds with fanning tails below. The pattern is very similar on both sides of the blouse, again a testament to the skill of the cutter. The lines show some variation in their width, although on the whole, the spacing of the lines of the top layer compared to the bottom layer gives the effect of being the same.

The sleeve band is simply a black band with an exposed foldline of orange behind. The gathers into the sleeveband are equally distributed around the entire sleeveband.

The band above the mola is a narrow black band with wonderful appliqués of oblong strips of fabric that are serrated along the upper edge. Narrow strips of fabric of various colors are applied on top. This appliqué pattern is repeated seven times on each face of the mola.



a



b



c

Figure 5: Mola Blouse DU1972.314. a) one side; b) panel on the reverse side; c) shoulderband.

The neckline is bound in a band of black fabric. Pinch pleat gathering, with an insertion of orange folded fabric, has been done at centerfront and centerback. The shoulderband is red with a small orange appliqué strip stitched on top. It is reminiscent of the strips on the mola band, but in this case both sides are serrated. A small strip of red fabric has been applied on top.

There is no embroidery on the mola panel.

Noteworthy – The fabric used for the bottom layer of the mola panel is the same fabric as is used for the yoke and sleeves. The use of the same fabric gives the mola blouse a wonderful sense of unity. The bottom band is a different fabric.

Stitches – The stitches are frequent yet large.

Sewing Thread – The sewing thread matches the color of the top layer very closely.

Background Filler – No filler is used. The pattern takes in the entire top layer, with no additional designs needed to fill the space.

Artifact # 3

Accession Number – DU1972.352 (see Figure 6)

Donor – Dr. Clyde E. Keeler

Date Received – 1/21/72

Date Made – before 1967

Place Made and/or Acquired – Corti, Panama

Condition of the Artifact – Good

Description:

General – This is a complete mola blouse with the same fabric that is used for the bottom layer of both panels also making up the yoke and sleeves. The sleeves are smoothly inserted into the bodice and gathered into sleeve bands. The mola panels have similar design elements, consisting of a bird in a mangrove swamp. The design is executed in a curvilinear fashion, with all but three foliar elements separable from the top layer, an indication of the complexity of the design. The design encompasses the entire panel area.

The band above the mola panel is very simple, with green ric-rac machine-stitched on top. The sleeve band is also very simple, a red band machine stitched in place with a yellow exposed foldline and green ric-rac on top. The red shoulderband also has a yellow exposed foldline. The neckline band is a bright blue and is machine-stitched in place.

The eye of the bird has been embroidered on both sides of the panel. No other embroidery has been carried out.

Noteworthy – This mola combines both hand and machine-stitching, with the machine-stitching used on top and thus clearly visible. Also, commercial ric-rac has been used, with obvious display purposes.

There is a feeling of unity with this piece, brought about by the use of the same fabric for the bottom layer of the panel as for the sleeves, yoke and bottom band.

Stitches – Small stitches used with great frequency.

Sewing Thread – The sewing thread used is the same color as the top layer of the panel.

Background Filler – None, as the design fills the entire space.



a



b

Figure 6: Mola Blouse DU1972.352. a) one side; b) panel on reverse side.

Artifact # 4

Accession Number – XX.109 (see Figure 7)

Donor – Dr, Clyde E. Keeler (?)

Date Received – 4/3/86

Date Made – unknown

Place Made and/or Acquired – unknown

Condition of the Artifact – Stained, particularly in the sleeve area. This is noticeable due to the off-white color of the fabric.

Description:

General – This is a complete mola, with its panel made up of two layers. The sleeves are smoothly inserted, locating gathers at the shoulder top. The sleeves are evenly gathered into the sleeveband. The red sleeveband is embellished by a narrow exposed orange foldline and light blue ric-rac that has been carefully handstitched on top. The black band above the mola panel is bordered by a narrow foldline of red, the same red as the top layer of the panel. White ric-rac has been applied by hand.

The design of the panel is a very intricate pattern of lines that enclose a pair of geese facing each other. The design is clever and the execution is impeccable. A similar design is used on both sides of the mola blouse, demonstrating the cutter's virtuosity. A black circle has been appliquéd where the eye would be. The lines are continuous and evenly spaced, creating a very successful visual effect. There is no embroidery.

The bottom band of the mola panel is a 10 cm band of red fabric that has been pleated into the panel.



a



b

Figure 7: Mola Blouse XX.109. a) one side of blouse; b) the reverse side of blouse.

Noteworthy – The fabric that is used for the bottom layer of the mola panel, is also used for the sleeves and yoke.

It appears as if the pattern of the mola panel was designated for a narrower panel initially. Rather than alter the pattern, the one side of both front and back has a section of repeated rows of vertical slash lines, a typical background filler used for other styles of mola panels.

The linear pattern surrounding the birds is almost geometric. It is very straight and angular, leaving no room for error in cutting as the error would have been very noticeable.

Stitches – The stitches are medium to large in size, but stitched close together.

Sewing Thread – The sewing thread matches the color of the top layer of the mola panel.

Background Filler – Vertical filler along the left hand side of each panel.

Artifact # 5

Accession Number – XX.115 (see Figure 8)

Donor – Dr. Clyde E. Keeler

Date Received – ?

Date Made – ?

Place Made and/or Acquired – ?

Condition of the Artifact – Excellent

Description:

General – This is a complete mola. The sleeves are smoothly set into the yoke with some of the surplus fabric pinch pleated at the shoulder area of the sleeve. The sleeve is gathered with pleats equidistant apart around the entire sleeveband. The sleeves and the yoke are made of the same fabric as the bottom layer of the mola panel.

The panel is an intricate design of flamingoes on one side and some other stylized fowl on the other side. The top layer is black with a bright pink bottom layer. The flamingoes are facing each other, one with its head down and the other up. The cut lines are somewhat continuous, although some appliqué has had to be done to complete the panel. The horizontal filler lines between the birds are somewhat distracting to the design. The fowl have been incorporated within the maze in a more sophisticated fashion. The lines are more intricate and continuous. The designs on both sides are enjoyable, particularly due to the startling contrast presented by the colors chosen.

The sleeveband is black with a narrow exposed foldline of yellow behind it. Orange ric-rac has been handstitched on top of the band. The assemblage has been neatly done.

A red band of fabric encases the neckline. At centerfront and back, the bodice has been gathered in with very tight little pinch pleats. The black shoulderband extends to the point that the gathering has been done, with an exposed narrow foldline of green beneath. The shoulderband has been included in the sleeve seam.

A wide bottom band was attached before the sideseam was stitched. It is 7.5 cm wide, in a lighter weight fabric than the body of the mola blouse, although still hot pink. The band is evenly pleated every 6 cm all the way around.



a



b

Figure 8: Mola Blouse XX.115. a) one side of blouse; b) panel on reverse side.

The pupils and whites of the eyes have been appliquéd in place. Stem stitch embroidery has been used to delineate the upper and lower beaks of the flamingoes.

Noteworthy – The background patterning sometimes looks awkward and somewhat contrived in places.

Stitches – small and close

Sewing Thread – black to match top layer of mola panel

Background Filler – Some little dots are used to break up solid areas. Horizontal filler lines between the flamingoes are also incorporated in the design, which is an unusual feature for this style of mola panel.

Labyrinthine Category: Geometric Style

Artifact #6

Accession Number – DU1972.375 (see Figure 9)

Donor – Dr. Clyde E. Keeler

Date Received – Jan. 21, 1972

Date Made – before 1950

Place Made and/or Acquired – Ailigandi, Panama

Condition of the Artifact – good condition, although clearly the blouse was worn often. The blouse is stained in the underarms. The neckline has been stitched together, however, it is unclear why this has been done as it appears that the neckline is still in good condition.

Description:

General – This mola blouse is complete, although unusable in its current condition because of the stitching across the neckline. The sleeves are smoothly inserted into the yoke edge, with a gusset in the underarm. The sleeves are short sleeves, with the narrow sleeveband smoothly attached by stitching together on the right side, folding over and handstitching on the wrong side. The sleeves are minimally gathered at the top of the sleeve with little pintucks. The yoke and sleeve fabric is unrelated to any of the fabrics used on the panel or bottom band. The yoke is unevenly gathered at centerfront and centerback across 5 cm at the neckline before the red neckband was attached.

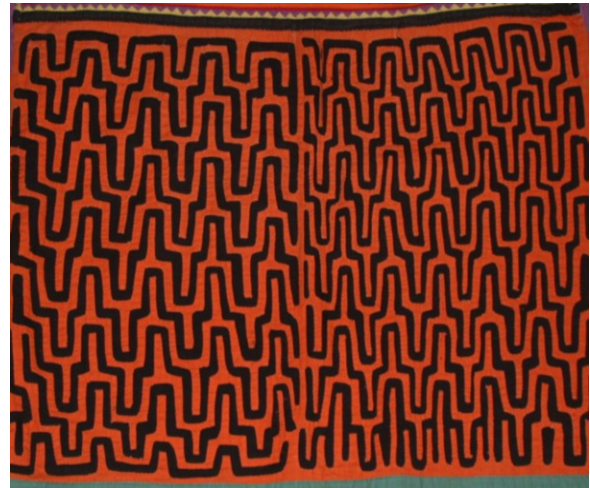
The geometric design of the panels, both front and back, is a stepped design that was obviously begun at the underarm sides and worked into the center of each of the panels. Having begun from the outside and working in required innovative solutions at the centerfront and back, where the lines meet. The bottom layer is black and the cut layer is orange. The design was effectively carried out, as it is much more complicated than it seems. However, the execution was not perfect. The lines are not of a consistent width and the corners are not sharp. The optical effect of the design therefore is compromised by this lack of precision.

The band above the mola panel seems simple, yet it not only requires skill in appliquéing, it was done with exceptional detailing. A black band of fabric was applied after a serrated edge of pale yellow was perfectly attached. An edge of purple base fabric was left as part of the design and then a wide band of red fabric was applied with the

upper edge again serrated. A narrow orange strip of fabric was applied on top of the red leaving only the points of red exposed above the orange. Mimicking the serrated pale yellow edge is a pale yellow ric-rac, applied by hand to the sleeve seam.



a



b

Figure 9: Mola Blouse DU1972.375. a)one side; b)panel on reverse side.

The royal blue shoulder band with a narrow exposed foldline of pale yellow has been nicely tapered to meet the neckline.

The bottom band is a simple rolled band in an aqua green color, seemingly unrelated to the colors used elsewhere.

No embroidery has been used in the design.

Noteworthy – The fabric of the yoke and sleeves is not very substantial. It feels limp with an open weave structure.

Stitches – large

Sewing Thread – matches the top layer fairly closely

Background Filler – none needed as the design takes in the entire area

Artifact #7

Accession Number – DU1972.376 (see Figure 10)

Donor – Dr. Clyde E. Keeler

Date Received – Jan. 21, 1972

Date Made – 1950

Place Made and/or Acquired – Ailigandi, Panama

Condition of the Artifact – In good condition although shows signs of being worn and has a dark brown stain on the yoke.

Description:

General – This is a complete mola. The sleeves are narrow and straight, with no gathers. A gusset is inserted in the underarm, to give added room for movement which is necessary with such a tight sleeve. The bottom of the sleeve is treated with a narrow band.

The yoke is gathered at centerfront and centerback. A narrow exposed foldline of orange sits beneath a shoulder band of blue, the same fabric that binds the bottom edge of the sleeves. The neckline band is made of printed fabric that appears again on the band at the top of the mola panel. A wide strip of navy blue fabric is first applied and serrated

along the top edge, using large and awkward stitching. Then a strip of the printed fabric is appliquéd on top. The repetition of colors, at the sleeve end and shoulder and again at the neckline and top band, gives the mola blouse a sense of unity throughout that is not often displayed.

Noteworthy – This mola does not have a bottom band, rather, the mola panel has been rolled and stitched along the bottom edge, which is a very unusual treatment. The geometric design represents a concrete object, in this case boats, which is also unusual. One of the panels includes an image of a body, seemingly floating in the area surrounding the boats. This shape has been embroidered with chain stitches, an embellishment also not normally included with labyrinthine designs.

Stitches – The stitches throughout the mola panel are small, close and consistent.

Sewing Thread – Good color choice to match the red of the top layer.

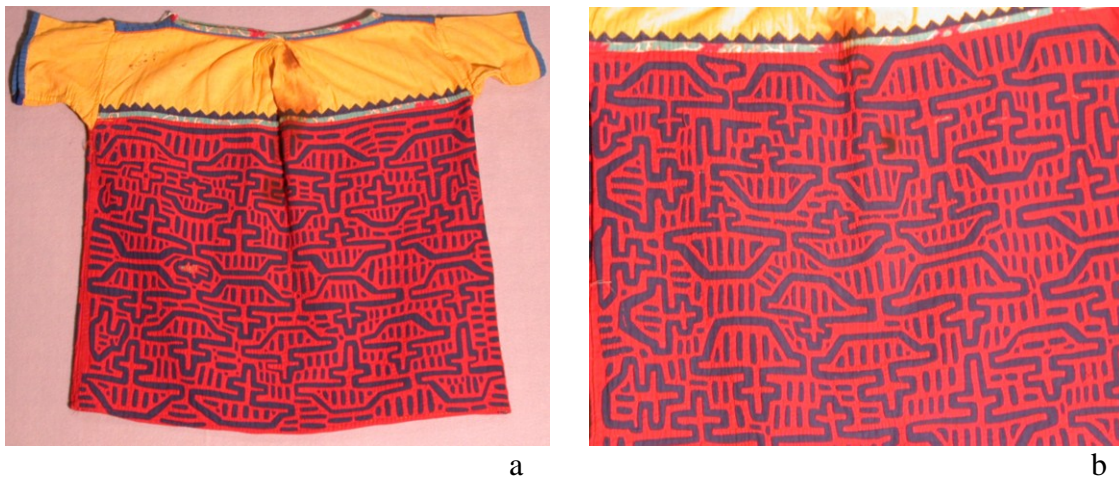


Figure 10: Mola Blouse DU1972.376. a) one side; b) panel on the reverse side.

Background Filler – Typically a labyrinthine design does not incorporate fillers, however, in this case, both the inside of the boats and the surrounding area has horizontal and vertical slashes. Also, the geometric pattern is not continuous. The boats are separate from the surrounding area, which also diminishes the labyrinthine effect.

Artifact #8

Accession Number – XX.116 (Figure 11)

Donor – Dr. Clyde E. Keeler (?)

Date Received – unknown

Date Made – unknown

Place Made and/or Acquired – unknown

Condition of the Artifact – excellent condition

Description:

General – This is a complete mola blouse. The sleeves are of a somewhat longer format than is typical and gathered into the sleeveband in wide, equal increments. At the sleeve top, the sleeve is pinch pleated into the yoke, with the remainder of the sleeve smoothly inserted. There is no gusset present in the underarms.

The cutting design of the panel consists of pairs of fret-like lines coming from a central line. The pattern requires an odd column of fret lines without a partner to complete the area needed for the panels. This accomplishment shows the innovative nature of the person cutting out the design. This design is extremely difficult to cut out accurately, despite its deceptively simple outcome, and yet has been done admirably well. The sewing and attention to corners has also been executed well.

The sleeveband is made of the same fabric as the blouse, with a foldline of black inserted. Red ric-rac is handstitched on top of the band.

The band across the top of the mola also uses ric-rac which is handstitched in place, in this case orange.

The neckline is pintucked for 4.5 cm at centerfront and back, very evenly. Pink chain stitches are embroidered across the top of the pintucks. Similar chain stitches are embroidered at the ends of the shoulderbands at the sleeve seams on top of the pintucks that gather in the sleeves. The shoulderbands are red with an exposed foldline of royal blue.

The bottom band is pleated, with the pleats having been basted in place before inserting between the two layers and stitching by machine to the bottom of the mola panel. The rolled hem of the bottom band was also machine stitched. The side seams were done last.

Noteworthy – The yoke and sleeves are made of the same fabric as the bottom layer of the panel, the wide and gathered bottom band and the sleeveband. By using the same fabric throughout, there is a sense of unity within this piece.

Only the bottom band has had any stitching done by machine.

Stitches – Although the stitches are frequent, they are large.

Sewing Thread – Matches the top layer well.

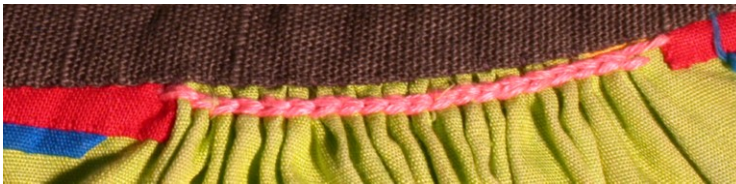
Background Filler – None, as none is needed. The design incorporates the entire area.



a



b



c



d

Figure 11: Mola Blouse XX.116. a) one side; b) reverse side; c) chain stitches holding down the pintuck gathers at the neckline; d) basting stitches in place to create the pleats of the bottom band.

Central Motif Category

Artifact #9

Accession Number – DU1972.3 (see Figure 12)

Donor – Mr. and Mrs. Edward Kelley

Date Received – Jan. 10, 1972

Date Made – unknown

Place Made and/or Acquired – unknown

Condition of the Artifact – one of the panels has been removed, leaving many raw edges which are unstable.

Description:

General – This is an incomplete mola blouse, with one of the panels removed. Unfortunately, this does not permit a comparison of front and back, however, there are enough molas in this category that an understanding of their likely relationship is possible. It is a three layer mola panel, with the top layer being black and the bottom red. The middle layer of the central motif is yellow, whereas the middle layer of the surrounding area is pink. The smaller motifs in the corners are constructed similarly, with each of their middle layer being yellow. The isolated positioning of the different motifs has compromised the frequent changing of colors. To accomplish this, there are many horizontal cuts into the top layer, exposing variously colored fabrics which have been inserted between the top layer and the middle layer. The slashes are not carefully stitched and seem awkwardly placed.



a



b



c

Figure 12: Mola Blouse DU1972.3. a) one side of blouse, panel is removed on the other side; b) the sleeveband treatment; c) the treatment at the neckline gathers.

The sleeve is a puffed style, with the gathering concentrated at the top of the shoulder and at the upper portion of the sleeveband, ensuring that the underarm is smooth. The sleeveband construction is very detailed. A wide orange band of fabric was stitched to cover the raw edge of the sleeve. Beneath this orange band, a gathered exposed foldline of black fabric was inserted. On top of the orange band, a red narrow band has been stitched on which is supporting a pleated exposed foldline of green fabric.

The yoke has been gathered into the neckband at the centerfront and centerback. As an embellishment for the pleated area at the neckline, a ruffled edge of red, then blue fabric has been inserted into the neckband.

The band above the mola panel encloses the raw edges of the panel and then incorporates the yoke fabric with interlocking fret lines in orange and black. This is a very elaborate treatment of this area of the mola blouse.

The shoulderband is pink, with a ruffled exposed foldline of red beneath it.

Embroidery chain and stem stitches have been used to delineate the plumage of the birds. Some small details have also been embroidered in the center, but overall, there is very little embroidery used.

Bottom edge is simply bound with a strip of green fabric.

Noteworthy – The fabric of the blouse portion is a pinwale corduroy. Also, highly anomalous, is the fact that there are two layers of red fabric for the bottom layer. However, the bottom layer is never cut down to, and therefore is never exposed. The last layer does obscure most of the stitching.

Stitches – Stitches are difficult to see as they do not go through all layers. Those that can be seen are large. Stitches used for the blouse are not carefully done.

Sewing Thread – Sewing thread matches the fabric that it is stitching through.

Background Filler – It consists of many short horizontal cuts with large areas devoted to one color change, therefore the background seems to overtake the design. The background has not been as carefully executed as might have been. The cuts do however encompass all of the surface area.

Artifact #10

Accession Number – DU1972.5 (see Figure 13)

Donor – Mr. and Mrs. Edward Kelley

Date Received – Jan. 10, 1972

Date Made – unknown

Place Made and/or Acquired – unknown

Condition of the Artifact – This mola blouse has been worn and has areas that are frayed and faded.

Description:

General – This is a complete mola blouse. The puffy sleeves have been inserted with all of the gathering at the upper shoulder. These sleeves have considerable fullness and are gathered around the entire circumference of the sleeveband. There is no underarm gusset.

The yoke is gathered at the neckline, at centerfront and centerback.

The panel design has a central motif of what appears to be an anteater-like creature. In the surrounding field other creatures have been appliquéd on, with their top and middle layer not related to the layering of the mola blouse, that is to say, they are

simply added to the top. These figures seem awkwardly designed and cut. The panel is composed of 3 layers; pink as the bottom layer and red the top layer. Because this mola blouse is intact, a comparison can be made between the two layers. The middle layer of one face, outside of the central motif, is purple. The middle layer of this face inside of the central motif is orange. Turning the mola blouse over, the reverse is true. Outside of the motif, the middle layer is orange, whereas inside the motif the middle layer is purple. Horizontal slits, with differing inserted fabric colors, fill the entire space. The odd vertical cut is also made. The dark navy line encircling the central motif is applied later, and is not an additional layer as would initially seem to be the case. Serrated lines adorn the design, which is a highly praised talent among the Kuna women.

Much detailing has been done to decorate the sleeveband, the shoulderband and the band above the mola panel. Figurative “W”-like forms are handstitched to decorate all of these bands. Behind each of these bands, a serrated edge has been included, resulting in a very special visual effect.

A band of red ric-rac has been handstitched in place over the seam that joins the yoke to the sleeve.

Running stitches have been used to embroider around the mouths and eyes.

Noteworthy – The fabric for the yoke and sleeves is a pinwale corduroy.

Stitches – Some basting stitches are still evident. The other stitches are very fine and regularly spaced.

Sewing Thread – The stitches are very beautiful and match the face fabric exactly.

Background Filler – Horizontal cut lines fill the surrounding space. Inserted fabrics of different colors are used, but they are smaller and irregularly shaped, thus avoiding the big blocks of color that can be seen in the previous example. The odd vertical cut is made when the space requires another color and yet not enough space in the horizontal direction.



a



b



c

Figure 13: Mola Blouse: DU1972.5. a) one side of blouse; b) panel on the reverse side; c) shoulderband, sleeveband and band above the panel.

Artifact #11

Accession Number – DU1972.6 (see Figure 14)

Donor – Mr. and Mrs. Edward Kelley

Date Received – Jan. 10, 1972

Date Made – unknown

Place Made and/or Acquired – unknown

Condition of the Artifact – very worn, faded and frayed

Description:

General – This is a complete mola. The puffy sleeves are not as full as seen in some of the mola blouses. Tight gathers in the sleeve top at the shoulder manage the gathers at the junction of the yoke and sleeve. The sleeve is pleated all the way around the circumference to manage the fullness at the sleeveband. Gussets are used in the underarm.

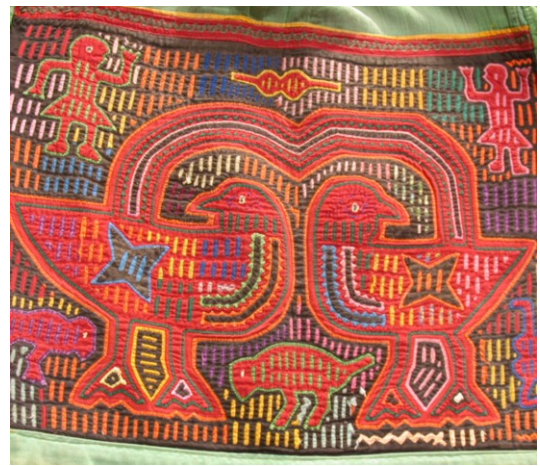
The yoke is gathered in tightly at the neckline, both centerfront and centerback for 5 cm. Chainstitches stitched adjacent to the neckband embellish the tops of the pleats.

Two birds, their bodies facing each other with their heads pointed in the other direction, form the central motif. An arc forms out of their bodies to enclose their heads. The arc is modified with bands of color, both due to the middle and bottom layers, but also due to appliqués of serrated lines and smooth lines. Smaller appliqué figures, with a back layer, are sewn on top of the top layer.

The sleeveband is a narrow band of red fabric with a narrow exposed foldline of yellow behind the red. Black ric-rac has been machine-stitched on top.



a



b

Figure 14: Mola Blouse DU1972.6. a) one side of the blouse; b) panel on reverse side.

The band above the mola panel has been treated in a similar fashion to the sleeveband, with the red and yellow arrangement and the black ric-rac on top. It, too, has been machine-stitched.

The shoulderband has been stitched by hand, including the serrated yellow edge beneath the red band. The shoulderband has been inserted into the sleeve seam.

Bottom band width varies front to back. It has been machine-stitched on.

Running embroidery stitches adorn the faces of the birds and some of the other figures around the outside of the panel. It has been done in a very carefree fashion.

Noteworthy – Top layer as well as the middle layer is reversed. One panel's top layer is black with the central motif red, while the other side has the top layer in red and the central motif black. Also, an interesting detail is found under the feet of the birds, where zigzag insertions fill the space.

Stitches – The stitches are very tiny and frequent.

Sewing Thread – The sewing thread matches the fabric being stitched.

Background Filler – Vertical cuts fill the entire background of the design. Also, the bodies of the birds and the figures in the surrounding area are filled in with vertical cuts. The cuts expose different colors using inserts. The inserts are small and irregular, reducing the blocky effect sometimes created with bigger inserts.

Artifact #12

Accession Number –DU1972.8 (see Figure 15)

Donor – Mr. and Mrs. Edward Kelley

Date Received – Jan. 10, 1972

Date Made – Unknown

Place Made and/or Acquired – Unknown

Condition of the Artifact – good, although has been worn often

Description:

General – This is a complete mola blouse. The somewhat full sleeves are smoothly inserted into the bodice with all of the gathers concentrated at the top shoulder area. The insertion into the sleeveband is also smooth except at the top of the sleeve. There are not gussets in the underarms.

The yoke is gathered into the neckband for the central 7 cm. The neckband has been poorly machine-stitched in place.

The central motif appears to be a bull's head, with two smaller bulls' heads below. The word "Venado" is included over the head of the central motif.

The sleevebands are narrow bands of black fabric with two exposed foldlines beneath in orange and green. Red ric-rac is machine-stitched on top. This same treatment has been used for the band on top of the mola panel. On one side the black fabric is applied over a wider width of orange fabric. The orange is folded back in to hide the raw edge, but in this way, exposed foldlines appear above and below the black band. Another foldline of green appears above the orange. On the other side, no orange appears beneath the black band. Red ric-rac is again machine-stitched on top. The band's ends are inserted into the seam that joins the sleeves to the bodice.

The shoulderband has two colors of foldlines showing beneath the black, orange and green. These are the same colors that are used to surround the black bands at the

sleeve ends and the top of the mola panel. This repetition creates unity for the piece. Little hand tacks along the center line of the shoulder band give the finishing touches.



a



b

Figure 15: Mola Blouse DU1972.8. a) one side of blouse; b) panel on reverse side.

A wide band is machine-stitched onto the bottom. The front and back are poorly matched at the sideseams.

Repetitive lines of running stitches are used to embroider the main figure as well as the two smaller heads.

Noteworthy – A printed, dobby woven fabric is used for the bodice and sleeves. The sleeves are set in by hand, but all other stitching is done by machine. The top layers of the panel are reversed, as are the middle layers, that is to say, the bull's head is red on one side and surrounded by black whereas on the other side, the bull's head is black surrounded by red. The same thing is true of the middle layer.

Stitches – Large, uniform stitches are used throughout.

Sewing Thread – The sewing thread matches the face fabric being stitched.

Background Filler – The background area is incised with horizontal cuts. The effect is blocky due to the large inserts exposed through the cuts. The large bull's horns are also cut, using smaller inserts of color behind. The cuts are vertical, horizontal and diagonal, giving many opportunities for color change.

Artifact #13

Accession Number – DU1972.10 (see Figure 16)

Donor – Mr. and Mrs. Edward Kelley

Date Received – Jan. 10, 1972

Date Made – Unknown

Place Made and/or Acquired – Unknown

Condition of the Artifact – Excellent

Description:

General – This is a complete mola blouse. The sleeves are grandly puffed with large gathering pleats at the shoulder. Gathers are equally spaced around the sleeve as it narrows into the sleeveband. No gusset is present.

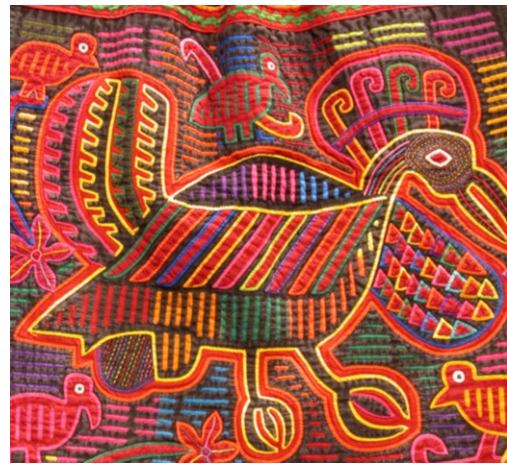
The yoke is gathered evenly for the central 5 cm.

The panel is composed of a centrally located bird laying an egg. The middle layer on one side is orange and yellow on the other. The central motif middle layer is opposite to the middle layer of the outside portion of the design. The central motif middle layer is exposed immediately at the head of the bird, with the headdress being added. Yet the middle layer of the surrounding area ends at the top of the headdress, demonstrating an interesting design aspect. This is a very fine mola panel, with many decorative aspects. The inserts are small enough that they do not give a blocky aspect to the design. The filler motif in the background is horizontal, and the central motif has been slashed vertically, establishing separate planes. The tail and wing feathers are superbly decorated. The breast of the bird is also wonderfully decorated with filled-in and overlapping triangles.

The black sleeveband is narrow with a yellow-green exposed foldline. Red ric-rac is machine stitched on top of the black band.



a



b

Figure 16: Mola Blouse DU1972.10. a) one side of mola blouse; b) panel on reverse side.

The red band above the mola has two narrow foldlines tucked in behind, the first one green and the last one black. Green ric-rac has been machine-stitched in place.

The red neckline is supported by a black shoulderband that has an orange foldline behind.

Embroidery stitches embellish the face, egg and leaves, with very fine running stitches, visually affecting the design minimally, as is preferred by the Kuna.

Noteworthy – The blouse fabric is a patterned cotton with colors of bright pinks and blues. The color chosen for the bottom band is a blue very similar to one of the blues in the blouse. This kind of matching is unusual and gives the blouse a unity not typically seen.

The blouse is made of three layers with an additional layer of insertions. The basting stitches holding the insertions in place are still intact. The only stitches that go through to the bottom layer are the ones that stitch the central motif to the background. Also, the bottom red layer is only visible around the central motif.

Stitches – The stitches are almost invisible. They are tiny and regularly spaced.

Sewing Thread – The sewing thread matches its adjacent color throughout.

Background Filler – The background filler is both horizontal and vertical, although in rare cases they are diagonal when required to fill the space. They are all narrow, straight and well cornered.

Artifact #14

Accession Number – DU1972.280 (see Figure 17)

Donor – Dr. Clyde E. Keeler

Date Received – Jan. 28, 1972

Date Made – before 1969

Place Made and/or Acquired – Unknown

Condition of the Artifact – Good

Description:

General – This is a complete mola. The fabric of the blouse is patterned with broad stripes of yellow, orange and green. The sleeves are very full, with most of the fullness pleated in tightly at the shoulder. The sleeves are regularly gathered around the circumference of the sleeve, before insertion into the sleevebands. There are no gussets in the underarm of the sleeves.

The yoke is gathered into the neckline with tight pleats across the 11 cm at the centerfront and centerback.

The panel is a design of three different skates, set up in a central motif fashion. They fill the space bilaterally, with a small skate situated between the tails of the larger two. The two larger skates differ substantially, establishing that although bilaterally placed, there is no precise symmetry. They are handled in the same way that other central motifs are, that is to say that the middle layer on the front outside portion becomes the middle layer of the motifs and vice versa. There are small figures in the outlying area that have been applied on top, figures of birds, turtles and fish. The background filler is

comprised of vertical cuts, neatly and compactly done, with inserts that are small enough to reduce blocky effects. The major figures are filled with long lines that have been applied to the top layer as well as some carefully applied circle motifs.

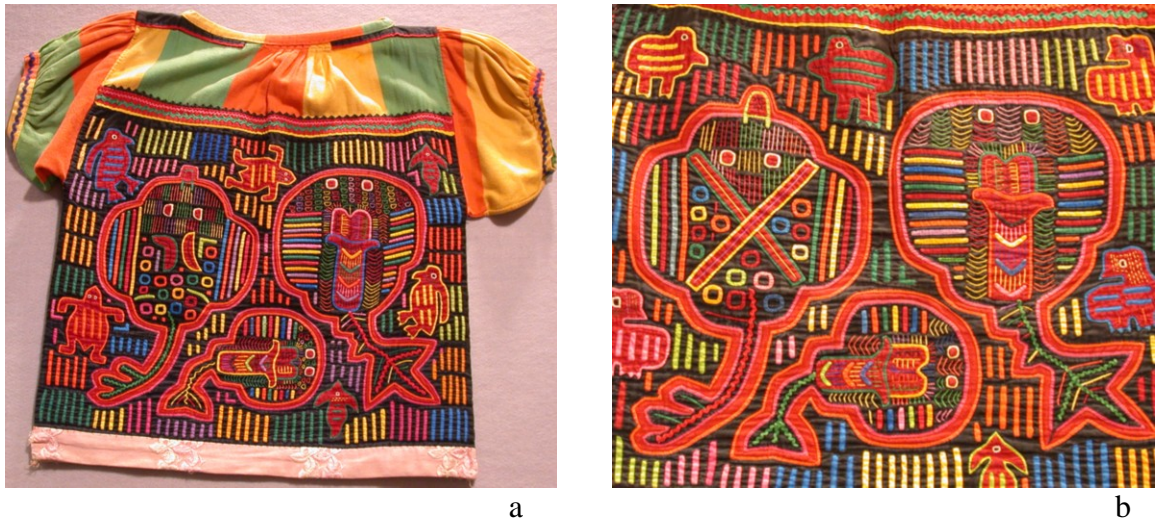


Figure 17: Mola Blouse DU1972.280. a) one side of blouse; b) panel on other side.

Blue ric-rac is applied with handstitching to a sleeveband made of the same fabric as the rest of the blouse, a rather unusual occurrence.

The red band above the mola panel has a yellow foldline below the band and an edge of black ric-rac inserted beneath the band in such a way that only the points are visible. A strip of narrow pink ric-rac and a wider green ric-rac are handstitched on top of the band.

The neckline band is also made of the same fabric as the body of the blouse. The black shoulderband, underlined with red, forms the support for the neckline.

The embroidery is finely done to accentuate the facial characteristics of the skates and the surrounding figures. Running stitches and chain stitches are used.

Noteworthy – The fabric used for the blouse is a thick dobby woven, therefore textured fabric. The bottom band is made of a jacquard woven slippery fabric, likely polyester, with isolated floral motifs. The two fabrics do not relate in any fashion. Also, narrow ric-rac appears on the tail of the skates as an effective decorative element..

Stitches – Many stitches but the stitches are of medium size.

Sewing Thread – The sewing thread matches well.

Background Filler – The background filler is made up of vertical lines that are narrow and carefully done. On rare occasions, to be sure that empty spaces were filled, a right angled corner would be cut into the top layer.

Artifact #15

Accession Number – DU1972.283 (see Figure 18)

Donor – Dr. Clyde E. Keeler

Date Received – Jan. 21, 1972

Date Made – 1967

Place Made and/or Acquired – Mulatuppu, Panama

Condition of the Artifact – Excellent

Description:

General – This is a complete mola blouse. The sleeves are large and are inserted into the sideseam much lower than is typical. There are no gathers when inserting the sleeve into the bodice, with the fullness of the sleeve being controlled by the low insertion and some peculiar handstitching that holds the gathers into the underarm. There are gathers into the sleeveband. The sleeveband is made up of red base fabric, a narrow exposed foldline of blue and black, machine-stitched ric-rac.

The yoke has four precisely spaced pleats at centerfront and centerback. Pleated on top of the yoke pleats is an insert of green fabric. The red shoulderband is accentuated by a narrow foldline of black. Both of these bands round when meeting the green pleated fabric. The neckline is bound in purple fabric. The entire shoulder and neckline is treated with precision and careful stitching. The shoulderband is inserted into the sleeve seam.

The panel design is composed of three layers with the middle layer reversed from front to back, similar to others in the central motif category. However, it lacks spontaneity and seems to be conforming to a predetermined design. The designs of the shapes seem formulaic. The surrounding motifs, also, take on a seemingly prescribed format. The pattern is carefully and precisely executed. The lines are straight and corners are perfect. The surrounding shapes are all supported by a middle layer of a different color, thus increasing the color selection of the entire piece.

The band above the panel is simple in construction. A band of black fabric is supported by a green exposed foldline and embellished by machine-stitched red ric-rac.

A bottom band of the same red fabric as the top layer of the mola panel is machine-stitched onto the bottom.

There is no embroidery on the mola panel.

Stitches – The stitches seem relatively large compared to other panels, however, they are uniform, equally spaced and very neat.

Sewing Thread – The sewing thread color corresponds in every case with the layer being stitched.

Background Filler – No background filler is used, rather a complex and angular design fills the voids.



Figure 18: Mola Blouse DU1972.283. a) one side of blouse; b) panel on reverse side; c) neckline treatment and shoulderband.

Artifact #16

Accession Number – DU1972.367 (see Figure 19)

Donor – Dr. Clyde E. Keeler

Date Received – Jan. 21, 1972

Date Made – before 1965

Place Made and/or Acquired – Bought in Corti, Panama

Condition of the Artifact – Good

Description:

General – This is a complete mola. The bodice of hot pink includes sleeves that are generously puffed with all of the gathers at the shoulder concentrated within a very small space. The sleeves then are loosely gathered all the way around and into the narrow sleeveband. The sleeveband is of the same fabric as the sleeves and yoke. At the junction with the sleeve, a pleated, narrow and exposed foldline is inserted. A narrow strip of green fabric is machine stitched on top of the band, in a very careless manner. There are no gussets in the underarm.

The yoke is drawn into the neckline with five large and uneven pleats.

The mola panel has a central motif of a lion-like animal, judging by the tail, either with the head of a man or eating a man. The lion has a bird with a fanciful tail on its back. The body of the bird is embellished with long horizontal lines, narrow and evenly spaced. The body of the lion-like creature has shapes cut down to the bottom layer, exposing the middle layer and appliquéd shapes of two layers inside. This mola panel has many more incisions than most central motif-based mola panels.

The black band with the yellow exposed foldline above the panel has a machine-stitched row of orange ric-rac on it.

The yellow-orange neckband is broad and is surrounded by a black shoulderband. The shoulderband is broader than most and has very wide exposed foldline, red then yellow on both sides. The shoulderband does not angle in towards the neckband as is usually the case, rather it stops abruptly with a wider edge.

Embroidery stitches delineate the head of the bird, the face of the man and perhaps the head area of the lion. Chain stitches decorate the legs of the lion as well.



Figure 19: Mola Blouse DU1972.367. a) one side of blouse; b) panel on reverse side.

Noteworthy – A row of blue embroidery stemstitches adorn the midline of the shoulderband on one side, two rows of the same stitches adorn the midline on the other side.

The bottom band uses a leopard-like flannel fabric and is wider than is seen on most mola blouses at 4.5 cm.

The man's head has been separated from the lion's body by changing the color of the middle layer and creating the serrated edge.

Stitches – Many medium-sized stitches are used.

Sewing Thread – The appropriate colors of sewing thread are used at all times.

Background Filler – The background filler is intricately designed. Four sided shapes are cut out of the top layer and with edges turned, expose the middle layer. This is unusual as fillers typically do not involve the middle layer of a three layered panel. Once the area has been exposed, shapes that resemble two-layered Maltese crosses are applied on and triangular shapes of varying colors are added on top. Where space is limited, other shapes are cut out of the top two layers. Centers of most shapes are embellished with an appliquéd circle.

Artifact #17

Accession Number – DU1972.370 (see Figure 20)

Donor – Dr. Clyde E. Keeler

Date Received – Jan. 21, 1972

Date Made – before 1967

Place Made and/or Acquired – Corti, Panama

Condition of the Artifact – Excellent

Description:

General – This is a complete mola. The bodice fabric is a bright pink and orange pattern, adding much color to the overall effect. The sleeves are grandly puffed with all of the gathers into the bodice being tightly placed at shoulder top. The gathers into the sleeveband occur around the entire circumference. The sleeveband is a broad piece of black fabric that has an appliquéd fretwork of different colors. This is a very complicated and colorful treatment of the sleeveband. There are added pieces inserted in both underarms but they seem to be due to a shortage of fabric and not intended to be gussets.

The yoke is pleated evenly across 12 cm of the centerfront and centerback.

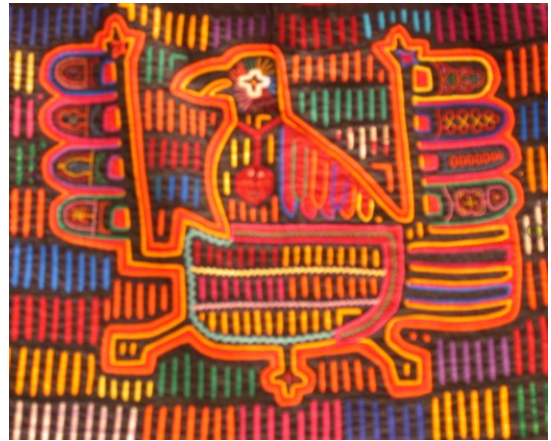
The panel displays a bird, apparently a raptor, seemingly flying downwards with its wings pointed up. The wings display what appear to be flag standards, done in fine embroidery lines in running stitch and chain stitch. This mola panel is wonderfully done, displaying fine delineation of space with carefully cut and stitched lines. The feathers across the back are also spectacular. The exposed middle layer around the wings is in fact made up of colors other than the actual middle layer. Each wing has had a different color inserted in position.

The band above the mola panel is a broad piece of red fabric that has had the top edge serrated. Lines of green and orange have been applied on top.

The shoulderband also has some unusual adaptations. The broad band of black is surrounded on one side of the front with a foldline of yellow and on the other side, green. The reverse is true of the back, where yellow is on the same side as the green in front.



a



b



c

Figure 20: Mola Blouse DU1972.370. a) one side; b) panel on reverse side; c) detail on wing.

Green is on the other side of the back, where yellow is in front. Fine red lines are appliquéd on the black from one corner to the other, crossing near the sleeve edge where they are inserted in the sleeve seam.

The bottom band has a strip of red fabric with a serrated edge facing downwards applied onto pleated bright blue flannel fabric.

Not only are the flag standards finely embroidered, the faces of the birds are also detailed with stitches.

Noteworthy – The central motif was stitched onto the mola panel after completion. The only stitches that can be seen through to the back from the central motif are the stitches surrounding the shape. Also, the birds' heads rest on top of each other, that is to say, they are mirror images of each other. This is unusual as typically, when examining central motifs, they both face in the same direction.

Narrow ric-rac surrounds the breast of the bird.

Stitches – large stitches

Sewing Thread – The stitches match the layers being stitched.

Background Filler – The background filler is vertical throughout, including the bird. Inserts have been used in a fairly tight format, giving small blocks of concentrated color. The lines are narrow and cleanly cut and stitched. They form a very regular backdrop for the central motif.

Artifact #18

Accession Number – DU1972.372 (see Figure 21)

Donor – Dr. Clyde E. Keeler

Date Received – Jan. 21, 1972

Date Made – Unknown

Place Made and/or Acquired – Unknown

Condition of the Artifact – Good

Description:

General – This is a complete mola blouse. The yoke and sleeve are made of a bright blue flannelette fabric, as is the sleeveband. The sleeves are puffed, with all of the gathering at the shoulder top as it is joined with the bodice. A narrow strip of red cotton is appliquéd on top of the gathers and along the front and back of the sleeve, adding to the embellishment of the blouse. The sleeve is pleated into the sleeveband with regularly spaced pleats around the entire circumference of the sleeve. The blue flannelette band is supported by a narrow exposed foldline of orange. Black ric-rac tops the sleeveband. The yoke is pleated across 11.5 cm at the neckline center with regularly spaced pleats.

The orange band of the neckline is supported by red shoulderbands which in turn are supported by orange narrow exposed foldlines. Black ric-rac is handstitched down the center of the shoulderbands.

The band above the mola panel consists of a black strip of cotton fabric, an orange narrow exposed foldline along the bottom edge and handstitched black ric-rac on top.

An 8 cm wide piece of yellow fabric is applied by hand after the side seams have been sewn. A narrow black band covers the join between the panel and the bottom band, thus enclosing the raw edges. A strip of black fabric encases the raw edge along the bottom, creating a very nice finish.



Figure 21: Mola Blouse DU1972.372. a) one side of blouse; b) panel on reverse side; c) detail of band on sleeve seam and shoulderband.

Embroidery stitches decorate the sky dragon's body, limbs and face as well as the moon itself. Different kinds of stitches were used – chainstitch, running stitch and the buttonhole stitch.

Noteworthy – It is unlike most Central Motif Category molas in that the design on one side is the reverse of the other, although otherwise the panels are the same. Even the lettering has been placed as a mirror image when comparing one side with the other. This mola is also special because it depicts an important traditional story relating to the sky dragon's swallowing of the moon during an eclipse. Typically, the Kuna are telling this tale from the point of view of 'saving the day' (see Figure 49). They send out an albino from within the community, who has powers against this sky dragon. Mola panels often depict this story, and when they do, are created in the tradition of the Narrative Category.

Stitches – Stitches are frequent and very fine. The stitches in the central portion were applied before attaching it to the bottom layer.

Sewing Thread – Appropriate colors were chosen.

Background Filler – Vertical cuts are used for the background filler. Small blocks of inserts were used creating small localized areas of color. The body of the sky dragon is filled in with two layered oblongs, creating a wonderful color play. The oblongs on the leg are smaller than on the body, adding to the decorative touch. Some vertical cuts can be seen in the throat area.

Historic Category

Artifact #19

Accession Number – DU1972.9 (see Figure 22)

Donor – Mr. and Mrs. Edward Kelley

Date Received – Jan. 10, 1972

Date Made – Unknown

Place Made and/or Acquired – Unknown

Condition of the Artifact – The mola blouse is in good condition, except for the bottom edge, which is torn.

Description:

General – This is a complete mola blouse. The mola blouse is made of a boldly printed rayon fabric that seems unable to support the weight of the panel, which in turn negatively affects the aesthetic qualities of this blouse. The puffed sleeves are gathered at the shoulder top in tight pleats. The sleeve fits into the sleeveband with regular pleats around the entire circumference of the sleeve end. Another printed fabric supports the sleeve band, this time with a glazed cotton that is substantially thicker than the other fabric used. A serrated edge fits underneath the band and a strip of red cotton is applied on top.

The yoke is gathered into the neckband at centerfront and centerback. The neckband is made of the same printed fabric that forms the base of the sleeveband. A single layer of fabric forms the shoulderband. It is a bright orange color and is immaculately stitched around the outside edges. A row of stitches, placed across the shoulder, form a decorative finish to the shoulderband.

The band across the top of the mola panel consists of a wide band of red fabric which supports a serrated purple strip of appliqué as well as hand-applied ric-rac. A lighter colored print fabric serves as the foldline on top of the band.



a



b



c

Figure 22: Mola Blouse DU1972.9. a) one side of the blouse; b) panel on the reverse side; c) detail of panel showing the *dientes*.

Although a portion of the bottom band has been torn off, what remains still demonstrates the most intricate bottom band seen in the collection. Supported by a strip of print fabric, unlike any of the print fabrics mentioned above, appliquéd bands of orange and purple, each with a serrated edge along the bottom edge, are further embellished with a strip of black and bright yellow respectively.

There is no embroidery on the panel.

Noteworthy – The design of the mola panel immediately suggests the snip and sew technique seen in the labyrinthine designs. However, with careful examination, the deliberate four layered design emerges. The space is carefully organized and the stitcher demonstrates her virtuosity by using the serrated edge, immaculately executed in two layers, throughout.

Stitches – Medium sized stitches, but very close together, are used throughout, but especially for the serrated edges.

Sewing Thread – Appropriate choice of color for the thread.

Background Filler – No background filler is needed for this design.

Artifact #20

Accession Number – DU1972.284 (see Figure 23)

Donor – Dr. Clyde E. Keeler

Date Received – Jan. 21, 1972

Date Made – 1952

Place Made and/or Acquired – Ailigandi, Panama

Condition of the Artifact – Excellent

Description:

General – This is a complete mola blouse. The sleeves are narrow and straight. Some gathers are established at the shoulder and these gathers are followed through all the way into the sleeveband. The sleeves are pieced and gusseted. The navy blue sleeveband is narrow with a pink exposed foldline behind. The red ric-rac is applied by machine on top.

The yoke is tightly gathered into the orange-banded neckline. The shoulderbands continue to the centerfront and centerback until the gathered area. The navy blue shoulderband is supported by a narrow foldline of red. The entire unit is machine-stitched in place and inserted into the sleeve seam.

The panel is a formalized arrangement of continuously stacked triangles. The serrated shapes applied to the interior of the shapes demonstrate the prowess of the stitcher.

The band above the mola is machine-stitched and is included in the sleeve seam. It, too, is navy blue, therefore tying it in with the shoulderband and sleeveband. Two rows of ric-rac, one red and the other orange, are machine-stitched in place.

The bottom is not treated the same way on both sides. On one, the top red layer is rolled in and stitched. On the other, the bottom edge is enclosed in a royal blue band.

There is no embroidery on the mola panel.

Noteworthy – On one side, it appears as though the panel width was reconsidered and a piece was added on by machine. Vertical cuts, typically used for background filler, were used to fill the space of the addition.



a



b

Figure 23: Mola Blouse DU1972.284. a) one side; b) panel on the reverse side.

Stitches – The stitches are small and very neat. Some of the stitches do not go through all of the layers.

Sewing Thread – The sewing thread color corresponds in every case with the layer being stitched.

Background Filler – No background filler is used, unless including the addition.

Artifact #21

Accession Number – DU1972.336 (see Figure 24)

Donor – Dr. Clyde E. Keeler

Date Received – Jan. 21, 1972

Date Made – before 1968

Place Made and/or Acquired – Corti, Panama

Condition of the Artifact – Excellent

Description:

General – This is a complete mola. The sleeves are full and puffed. The sleeves insert smoothly into the bodice, with all of the fullness dealt with at the shoulder top. The sleeves are put in by machine. Small, regularly spaced gathers distribute the fullness evenly around the circumference of the sleeve as it sets into the sleeveband. Black ric-rac is handstitched on red fabric, with a narrow exposed foldline of orange to make up the sleeveband. There are no gussets in the underarms.

The yoke and sleeves are made of a heavy cotton, printed with a navy design on a white background, resulting in a display of high contrast. The yoke is neatly pleated across the centerfront and centerback for 6 cm. The neckline is enclosed in a band of



a



b



c



d

Figure 24: Mola Blouse DU1972.336. a) entire blouse; b) panel with turtles; c) panel with salamanders; d) band above the mola panel.

bright yellow-orange, with a shoulderband of red. The red is backed by double exposed foldlines of black and orange, with the bottom orange layer staggered in the direction of the sleeves to create a small step. The shoulderbands end abruptly before the area of the yoke gathers, which accentuates the step-like fashion at the corner.

The panels differ subtly, one creating a pattern of dancing turtles, the other dancing salamanders. There are six rows of each, with their body forms abstracted into these shapes that have their forefeet connected at the top and their hind feet below. The turtles are identifiable by their roundness, whereas the salamanders are more oblong. The centers of the bodies are decorated with appliqué of serrated circles, and a second layer that is further embellished with round filler. It is a complicated display of color and stitching.

The band above the mola panel, in keeping with the complexity of the appliqué of the design of the panel, is also difficult. A wide band of orange fabric is supported by a serrated red insertion above. Small appliqué strips of various colors are added on top of the orange strip. Uniting all of the small pieces is a narrow strip of red fabric.

The bottom band is a wide strip of navy and white printed cloth, different from and lighter in color compared to the fabric used for the bodice. It is 5.5 cm wide and pleated into the bottom of the mola panel.

Each of the turtle and salamander faces has a few embroidery stitches applied to establish the eyes and nose.

Noteworthy to mention – The lines of the design are very narrow, and are maintained throughout. Great pains are taken with keeping the lines consistent. The middle layer echoes the top layer, again keeping a consistent width throughout.

Stitches – The stitches are fine and close together, demonstrating virtuosity of technique.

Sewing Thread – The appropriate colors of thread are used throughout.

Background Filler – There is no background filler. However, the bellies of the turtles and salamanders present some space to be filled. Small round circles are cut into each and stitched around, again demonstrating remarkable skills.

Artifact #22

Accession Number – XX.114 (see Figure 25)

Donor – Dr. Clyde E. Keeler

Date Received – Unknown

Date Made – Unknown

Place Made and/or Acquired – Unknown

Condition of the Artifact – Excellent

Description:

General – This is a complete mola blouse. The bodice is simply constructed belying the effort that the panel took to complete. Due to the fact that this panel is three-layered and does not have the rigor that the labyrinthine patterns do, it fits into the historic category. The lines are rambling and entail considerable effort to get them to remain of equal width, as well as to tuck under the middle layer while ensuring a constant width. Also, the added detail of the random insertions of color in corners and nooks is not only attractive, but is difficult to achieve.

The sleeves are smoothly inserted and are finished with a rolled hem. Gussets add room for movement. The shoulderbands are not only wide and unadorned, they are not of the same color. One is a light blue and the other is navy.

The bright purple-pink yoke is gathered with considerable attention to the evenness and fineness of the pleats.

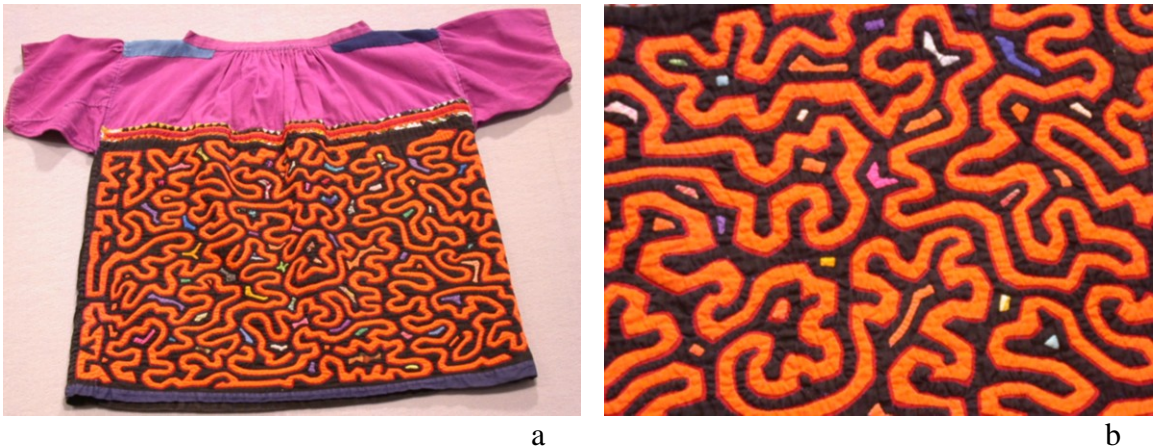


Figure 25: Mola Blouse XX.114. a) entire blouse; b) close-up of panel on the other side.

The sleeves are smoothly inserted and are finished with a rolled hem. Gussets add room for movement. The shoulderbands are not only wide and unadorned, they are not of the same color. One is a light blue and the other is navy.

The bright purple-pink yoke is gathered with considerable attention to the evenness and fineness of the pleats.

The band above the mola panel is comprised of a wide band of printed fabric. On it is appliquéd an orange band of serrated fabric, with an insert beneath it of serrated black fabric. A fine line of red fabric is appliquéd on top of all of this, centering it on the strip of orange.

The bottom band is a rolled band of navy cotton. There is no embroidery.

Noteworthy to mention – Although this pattern does not possess the rigor that seems evident in other historic pieces, the design does seem more contrived and rigorous than is displayed in the labyrinthine mola panels.

Stitches – The stitches are frequent and fine as the stitches needed to be sure to catch all of the angles, twists and turns.

Sewing Thread – Appropriate color selection.

Background Filler – There is none.

Narrative Category: Village Style

Artifact #26

Accession Number – DU1972.4 (see Figure 23)

Donor – Mr. and Mrs. Edward Kelley

Date Received – Jan. 10, 1972

Date Made – Unknown

Place Made and/or Acquired – Unknown

Condition of the Artifact – This is only part of a mola blouse, exposing many raw, unstable areas. Also, the panel shows wear.

Description:

General – This is only part of a mola blouse. The bodice has been left intact, removing one of the panels. The bodice is made of printed twill fabric, likely rayon. The sleeves are puffed and pinch pleated at the shoulder top. The sleeves are gathered all the way around for insertion into the sleeveband. The sleeveband is a narrow band of red cotton with a narrow, exposed foldline of yellow.

The yoke is pleated, evenly spaced across 14 cm at centerfront and centerback. The shoulderband is orange with a narrow, exposed foldline of red. The neckband is a vibrant blue, made even more vibrant by the juxtaposition with the orange shoulderband.

The panel shows people sitting on two inverted number 5's, evoking perhaps some sporting relevance, although that is clearly supposition.

The band above the mola panel is broad and intricate. A wide piece of printed fabric supports a band of red that has the top edge serrated. A narrow strip of yellow fabric is appliquéd on top. Below, a wide band of orange fabric is applied, again with the top edge serrated. A narrow strip of black fabric is applied on top. bottom The bottom band is simply a white strip of fabric that has been applied to enclose the edge of the mola panels.

The faces and bodies of the people have been entirely covered in embroidery.



Figure 26: Mola Blouse DU1972.4

Noteworthy to mention – The bottom layer is only seen beneath the middle layer as it goes around the “5”. With it being red, the visual effect of the bottom layer is minimal. The design is made more complex through the use of the blue as if it was another layer. This is a typical treatment for creating apparent layers, especially in the narrative category.

Stitches – The stitches are not visible from the right side. Also, due to the reduced impact that the bottom layer has on the design, it was not stitched all the way through. Therefore, other than to say that everything is secure, and that the stitches cannot be seen, little else can be said. These characteristics are indicative of fine workmanship, however.

Sewing Thread – Color choices are appropriate.

Background Filler – Vertical cuts throughout, both in the background and within the figures.

Artifact #24

Accession Number – DU1972.7 (see Figure 27)

Donor – Mr. and Mrs. Edward Kelley

Date Received – Jan. 10, 1972

Date Made – Unknown

Place Made and/or Acquired – Unknown

Condition of the Artifact – One has been removed from this mola blouse, leaving many unfinished and unstable edges. Also, there are signs of wear that include fading and worn areas of fabric.

Description:

General – This is a partial mola blouse. One of the panels has been removed, leaving the yoke intact. The bodice is made of pinwale corduroy. The sleeves are full and the fullness has been controlled both around the armseye and the sleeve end, by small regularly spaced pleats. A gusset has been included in each underarm. A broad band of red cotton, with a narrow exposed foldline of green, serves as the sleeveband. Decorative “M’s” and “W’s” adorn the sleeveband, presenting many corners and bends to manage while appliquéing.

The yoke is pleated into the neckline and then topped with an edge of serrated orange fabric. The neckline band is blue with a narrow exposed foldline of yellow beneath it, an unusual extra. The red shoulderband meets this insertion of orange. Under the shoulderband, a serrated edge of the same green as in the sleeveband makes an impeccable addition. “M’s” in different colors decorate the shoulderband, with decorative stitching between.

The panel seems to be describing an election of some kind, likely for the Panamanian premier. Four figures seated beneath flags, each with their names below, seem to suggest the slate of candidates.

The band above the mola panel is again extremely complex. It consists of a wide black band of cotton fabric, with a serrated edge of the same yellow fabric around the neckline. “M’s” and one “W” are appliquéd in various colors.

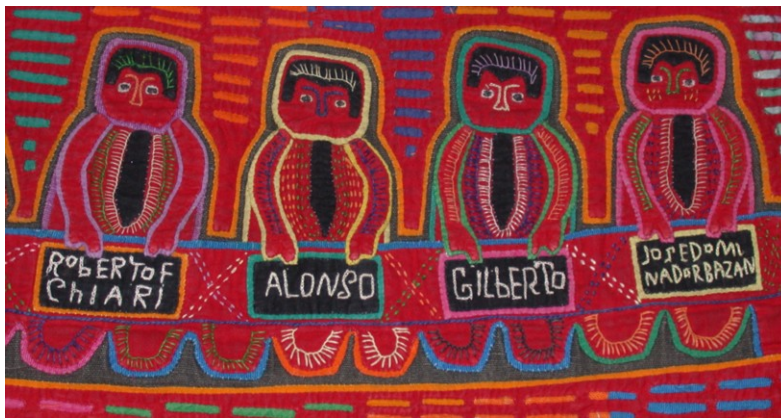
The bottom band is an enclosing green strip of fabric.



a



b



c

Figure 27: Mola Blouse DU1972.7. a) blouse; b) detail of shoulderband, band around the sleeve; c) detail of the political candidates.

The figures, party emblem, the table and flags contain a considerable amount of embroidery, using fine stitches of different types, including the running stitch, chainstitch and buttonhole stitch.

Noteworthy to mention – The bottom layer is again minimally exposed and serves mainly as a support for the other detailing.

Stitches – The workmanship is outstanding, with many close and tiny stitches.

Sewing Thread – Colors chosen are appropriate.

Background Filler – Horizontal cut lines are found throughout the design.

Artifact #25

Accession Number – DU1972.290 (see Figure 28)

Donor – Dr. Clyde E. Keeler

Date Received – Jan. 21, 1972

Date Made – 1965

Place Made and/or Acquired – Corti, Panama

Condition of the Artifact – Good

Description:

General – This is a complete mola blouse. The yoke and sleeves are made of a rayon-like fabric in a large floral print. The sleeves are full, with gathers at the shoulder top for insertion into the bodice. The sleeves are pleated all the way around in equally spaced pleats before attaching the sleeveband. The black sleeveband has orange ric-rac applied by hand on top.

The neckline is gathered at centerfront and centerback. A bright blue neckband matches the bottom band. The black shoulderband is supported by exposed foldlines of yellow and then red, although the foldlines are much more exposed than is usual.

The panel seems to involve the personnel in the local church and does seem to involve someone's spirit rising. The crosses outside the church seem to indicate a death, however although unclear, apparently the happening seems to be relevant to the community. There are two images of the church, one much larger than the other. People within the church seem to be waving goodbye.

The band above the mola panel uses the same colors as the shoulderband. A strip of yellow fabric is applied on top of a serrated red strip, with the entire unit embellished by a narrow black strip.

The bottom band is made up of a wide strip of bright blue fabric that has a hand rolled and stitched hem, using a long running stitch with part of the stitch showing on the right side in a very regular and decorative manner. A different colored thread was used to accentuate this stitching line. The band is then pleated with pleats equally spaced. The mola panels on either side of the band are rolled under and stitched to the band, thus placing the band inside the mola panel. A narrow band of yellow fabric is stitched on top of the junction of the panel and the band.

The faces and bodies of the people are embroidered using different kinds of stitches.

Noteworthy to mention – This is a three layer panel, but it is important to note that the entire central portion has had the top layer removed. Then a serrated edge of yellow fabric is inserted all the way around the outer ring. Only rarely does the bottom



Figure 28: Mola Blouse DU1972.290. a) one side of the blouse; b) panel on the other side.

pink layer become part of the design. The insertion of a complete edge, as is seen with the yellow, to simulate another layer is frequently done with narrative mola panels. Also, the rare appearance of the bottom layer is also characteristic of this type of panel. The central portion is simply appliquéd in place.

Despite the fact that the story line involves the church building, this mola is not included in the Religious Style category. This category includes mola panels with the traditional bible stories about religious figures. The mola in question depicts the Kuna people and their relationship with their church within their village. For these reasons, it seems more appropriate to place this mola blouse in Village Style category

Stitches – In some places the stitches are large, but overall the stitching is meticulous.

Sewing Thread – Appropriate color choice.

Background Filler – Triangles are used as the filler.

Artifact #26

Accession Number – DU1972.327 (see Figure 29)

Donor – Dr. Clyde E. Keeler

Date Received – Jan. 21, 1972

Date Made – Bought in 1951

Place Made and/or Acquired – Mulatuppu, Panama

Condition of the Artifact – Excellent

Description:

General – This is a complete mola blouse. On both sides, the panels depict the council meetings. We see the village chiefs sitting in their hammocks surrounded by the people. The meetings usually go through the night. On one side, people are sitting up, whereas on the other, a child is sleeping and one of the chiefs is lying down in the hammock. On the sleepy side, few eyes are embroidered on the faces.

The sleeves are smoothly inserted with a gusset in place in the underarms. No gathering is needed at the shoulder or at the insertion into the sleeveband. The sleeveband, of the same fabric as the yoke and sleeves, is pleated all the way around, to create a something that looks like a frill. An orange strip of fabric is appliquéd on top, with a serrated edge on top. A narrow strip of red fabric is appliquéd on top of the orange fabric, creating a very splendid sleeveband. At the shoulder, further embellishments are carried out, mimicking the sleeveband. Pleats of bright yellow are held in place by a narrow band of red. This treatment is highly unusual and certainly creates a very special effect.

The neckline is a bright orange. The gathered section at the centerfront and centerback is covered by a little section of pleated and printed fabric. The shoulderband is orange/red with the same printed fabric as seen at centerfront and centerback used as the narrow exposed foldline beneath the shoulderband. Appliqued fretwork in a light orange decorates the shoulderband very effectively, with great care and virtuosity in the corners.

The band above the panel is also very effectively done. A broad band of black fabric is decorated with fretwork of different colors. A serrated edge of red is inserted behind the black band.

The bottom band is of an entirely different kind of fabric, and reduces the unity portrayed by the color and fabric selection of the rest of the blouse.



a



b



c



d

Figure 29: Mola Blouse DU1972.327. a) one side of blouse; b) panel on the reverse side; c) detail of sleeve edge treatment and band above the panel; d) detail of the shoulderband and the treatment on the sleeve seam.

Embroidery is used in these panels as an integral part of the story. It gives the people personalities and also their state of mind. Embroidery is used to complete the hammocks as well.

Noteworthy to mention – These panels are two layered, with many imitations for middle layers. The telltale indicator is the changing of the color of the middle layer. Many times the top layer is cut and a piece of fabric inserted to surround the piece, demonstrating the adhoc nature of the narrative category. Also, lines are very important and set the stage.

Stitches – The stitching is sometimes crude and large, yet this panel presents some formidable tasks. Telling the story seems to be more important than stitching well.

Sewing Thread – The sewing thread does not always match the fabric being stitched.

Background Filler – A few horizontal and vertical cuts in the tables and some random shapes when needed.

Artifact #27

Accession Number – DU1972.343 (see Figure 30)

Donor – Dr. Clyde E. Keeler

Date Received – Jan. 21, 1972

Date Made – Before 1967

Place Made and/or Acquired – Corti, Panama

Condition of the Artifact – excellent

Description:

General – This is a complete mola blouse. The bodice fabric is a soft rayon print, making it seem flimsy when compared to the mola panel that it is supporting. The sleeves are full and puffed, but again, with the lightweight rayon fabric, easily gathered into the bodice and sleeveband. The gathers are loose and surround both ends of the sleeves. No gussets are sewn into the underarm. The sleeveband is a narrow strip of the same fabric as the bodice and is not further embellished.

The yoke is fitted into the neckband by four regularly spaced pleats. A red neckband is bordered by a black shoulderband on both sides, with the bands stopping where the pleats begin. Very narrow strips of colored cloth are sewn onto the phalanges of the shoulderbands, with blue on one side and orange/yellow on the other. On the other side of the blouse the colors are reversed. Further down the shoulderband, another decorative element using narrow strips of colored cloth can be seen. A criss-cross pattern of red, yellow and orange/yellow is created. This decorative technique is highly unusual and demonstrates the specialness of this blouse.

The panel is composed of circles of snakes, starting with four snakes circling in the center, then around the center a ring of ten snakes. These snakes are all curled up, facing different directions. Around the outside of the circle, snakes are straight as if moving, except in the corners where they are once again curled up. The detailing is very specific and formalized. The snakes are carefully measured to take up their allotted space. The technical difficulty of the mola panel is a testament to the skills of the

stitcher. Serrated underlayers to all of the snakes point to this virtuosity. Fine appliquéd lines echo the lines of the snakes, curling up into the ring of the snake, again a technical feat of excellence.



Figure 30: Mola Blouse DU1972.343. a) one side of blouse; b) panel on the reverse side; c) detail of neckline treatment.

The band above the mola panel is simply a black strip of fabric, with an orange exposed foldline behind and green ric-rac handstitched on top.

The bottom band is composed of a variety of printed fabrics that have been pieced. More important is the serrated appliqué inserted above, again much more effort than is typically expended for the bottom band.

Every face and body has some embroidery stitches applied. This added feature again demonstrates the specialness of this historic mola.

Noteworthy to mention – The shoulderband treatment is highly unusual, indicating added effort and expertise.

Stitches – Difficult to evaluate the stitches as few go all the way through. Those that can be seen are small and frequent.

Sewing Thread – The sewing thread matches so well, that evaluating the stitches from the right side is impossible.

Background Filler – Every little space has been filled by random triangles.

Artifact #28

Accession Number – DU1972.353 (see Figure 31)

Donor – Dr. Clyde E. Keeler

Date Received – Jan. 21, 1972

Date Made – Before 1964

Place Made and/or Acquired – Corti, Panama

Condition of the Artifact – Fair, it shows signs of wear and is faded in spots.

Description:

General – This is a complete mola blouse. The bodice fabric is unusual in that it is a twill printed wool or wool blend. The motif is a small floral, with burgundy as the background color. The sleeves are straight and are smoothly inserted, with some

gathers at the shoulder top. Gussets have been included in the underarm, to give added mobility. There is no sleeveband, with the raw edges of the sleeves simply rolled and handstitched. The sleeves have been pieced together.

The neck edge is pleated across 12.5 cm in centerfront and centerback. A band of plain burgundy cotton is used as the neckband. The shoulderbands are black, with an orange narrow exposed foldline behind. Handstitched running stitches embellish the shoulderbands along the folded edge.

The band above the mola panel is very interesting. A narrow strip of black fabric overlaps a serrated orange band. This ensemble is further embellished with a narrow red appliqué which is subsequently embroidered with a chain stitch across the entire width of the panel.

The panel is interesting in its format. It has a creature surrounded by concave semicircles. The corners are taken up with further concave semicircles. The entire image repeatedly involves serrated middle layers, typically the black, which is very time consuming and difficult. The circles are also filled with lines that are supported by serrated underlayers, again a testament to the skills of the stitcher.

The bottom band is a pleated band, 5.5 cm wide. Its hem is rolled and handstitched. A narrow band of purple fabric is superimposed on the join between the bottom of the mola panels and the bottom band. It is the same color as one of the layers, which provides a very impressive final detail.

The creature's face has a few embroidery stitches included, as well as a few running lines in the field surrounding the creature.

Stitches – Some of the stitches are large, but an inordinate amount of effort has been attached to the serrated edges which are used everywhere effectively throughout the design.

Sewing Thread – Appropriate use of color.

Background Filler – A few triangles have been included in the central section.

The creature has some diagonal cut lines as well as some circles.



a



b

Figure 31: Mola Blouse DU1972.353. a) one side of the blouse; b) panel on the reverse side.

Narrative Category: Religious Style

Artifact #29

Accession Number – DU1972.287 (see Figure 32)

Donor – Dr. Clyde E. Keeler

Date Received – Jan. 21, 1972

Date Made – Before 1966

Place Made and/or Acquired – Tikantiki, Panama

Condition of the Artifact – Good

Description:

General – This is a complete mola blouse. The panel design is similar on both sides of the blouse and includes images of the crucifixion, the nativity scene, and the ascension. Also the cross sits on an open page of the Bible. This is a three-layered design, but the fact that it is remains secondary, as the different layers are hardly optimized. A simple cut around the outside, giving a somewhat stable-like appearance to the surroundings is one of the places that the bottom orange layer is visible. Another location is around the cross, but here the middle layer is not optimized as other middle layers are inserted, no doubt to increase the number of colors visible. One last location that the bottom layer is visible is around the Bible.

The yoke and sleeves are made of a heavy dobby weave fabric, with a very busy print in navy, green and white. The sleeves are puffed and gathered at both the shoulder top and the sleeve top. The underarm is free of gathers. The sleeveband is a broad strip of black fabric with a narrow exposed foldline of orange behind it. On top of the black band are two narrow stripes of green and red that go all the way around the sleeveband. A narrow strip of yellow cut in a zigzag fashion is stitched on top. This sleeveband treatment is very elaborate.

The yoke is pleated into the neckline, using pleats of equidistance apart and equal depth. The black shoulderband, with its orange exposed foldline below, curves at the ends where it meets the pleats.

The band above the panel uses a narrow baseline in orange to cover the join between the yoke and the panel. It extends into the yoke area with an intricate cut pattern. A similarly cut red line interlinks with the orange, using the patterned yoke fabric as a backdrop, creating a very interesting touch to this area of the blouse.

The bottom band is wide and is pleated regularly all the way around. The join is finished on both sides to enclose all of the raw edges.

The embroidery is outstanding, with stitches included everywhere that help to tell the stories. Figures are included in the images that are embroidered only. It adds to the color as well.

Noteworthy – Because the front and back panels are similar, the maker was able to use the same technique that is seen in the central motif category, that is to say, the middle layer in the central portion is cut away and used on the other side. This is usually of secondary importance for the Narrative Category because the lines are typically very easily established and/or the image on the reverse panel is very different from the first. Also, the need for added color is reduced in this category because of all the embroidery that is used, infusing the image with color.

Stitches – The stitches are not always delicate, for example, the orange band that tops the panel is coarsely handled and the stitches show readily. However, due to the complexity of the panels, there are many, many stitches.

Sewing Thread – The sewing thread is not always invisible.

Background Filler – There is background filler throughout. Vertical cut lines take in the background and circles fill the cross area. All of the figures have “V’s” appliquéd on top. The Bible pages are also filled with extra appliqué beyond just the letters.



a



b



c



d

Figure 32: Mola Blouse DU1972.287. a) one side of the blouse; b) panel on reverse side; c) detail showing the insertion of different colors mimicking an additional layer; d) detail of band at the base of the sleeve and above the panel.

Artifact #30

Accession Number – DU1972.308 (see Figure 33)

Donor – Dr. Clyde E. Keeler

Date Received – Jan. 21, 1972

Date Made – before 1965

Place Made and/or Acquired – Titantiki, Panama

Condition of the Artifact – Good

Description:

General – This is a complete mola blouse. The panels depict the crucifixion of Christ, the one prior to death, the other after death.

The yoke and sleeves are made of a medium weight dobby woven fabric. The sleeves are full, with some piecing to meet the size needs, and with the gathers concentrated at the shoulder top. The sleeve is pleated all the way around before the sleeveband is attached. The sleeveband is made of the same fabric as the blouse and has red ric-rac applied on top.

The yoke is pleated into the dark green neckband. The black shoulderband is accentuated by a narrow exposed foldline of red.

The band above the panel is black, with a narrow exposed foldline below the black. Red ric-rac is attached on top by hand.

The bottom band has been pieced to meet the needs lengthwise. The sideseams were attached after the bottom band was affixed to the panel, with poor matching of the two bottom bands.

The embroidery, although used sparingly, tells the story. The change in the thorn of crowns, and the tear in the eye of one of the guards, tells in which panel Christ has died.

Noteworthy – The bottom layer is purple and is only visible around the cross, thus this design does not fully utilize the presence of the added layer. The middle layer is orange. Not only is it only visible around the cross, added inserts of serrated edges would have ensured that this design would have been successful even if fewer layers were used. This characteristic is repeatedly seen when examining the Narrative Category.



a



b

Figure 33: Mola Blouse DU1972.308. a) one side of blouse; b) the reverse side.

Stitches – The stitches have not been done with care. They are large and awkward in many cases.

Sewing Thread – The thread does not always match the fabric.

Background Filler – Vertical cuts have been used throughout, even in the area that represents the cross. Appliqued crosses are used in the background and the vertical slashes work around the crosses. They are forced into corners and sometimes need to take on odd angles.

Artifact #31

Accession Number – DU1972. 326 (see Figure 34)

Donor – Dr. Clyde E. Keeler

Date Received – Jan. 21, 1972

Date Made – Before 1966

Place Made and/or Acquired – Tikantiki, Panama

Condition of the Artifact – Good

Description:

General – This is a complete mola blouse. The panels depict the crucifixion, with the images changing from side to side demonstrating in which panel Christ is still living and in which one he has died.

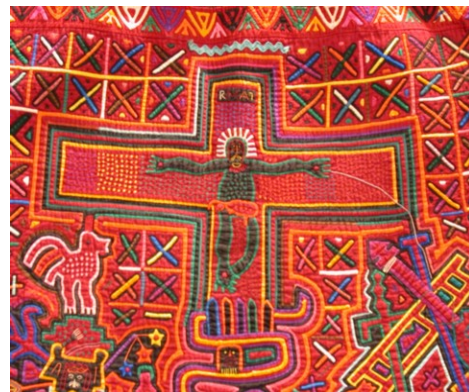
The yoke and blouse are made of a printed striped fabric, with the stripes running diagonally. The sleeves are puffed, with all of the gathers concentrated at the shoulder top. The sleeves are pleated at the top before insertion into the sleeveband. The sleeveband is a wide band of black fabric bordered by two wide exposed foldlines of

orange and red. A decorative appliqué is used on top of the band, making this a very special sleeve treatment. Gussets of an unrelated fabric are used in the underarms.

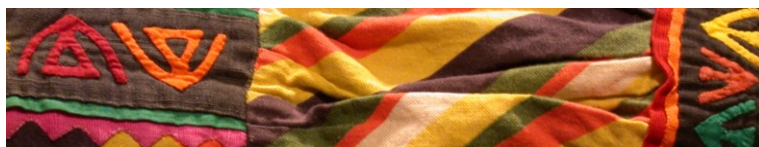
The band above the panel uses the same motif as the sleevebands, this time supported by red cotton. The appliqué was done first and then machine-stitched onto the top of the panel.



a



b



c

Figure 34: Mola Blouse DU1972.326. a) complete mola blouse; b) panel on the other side; c) detail of the shoulderband and the sleeveband.

The shoulderbands surround the yellow neckband. They are of black cotton, with a narrow exposed foldline of green and beneath that, a serrated edge of pink. To complete the shoulderbands, the same motif seen on the sleeveband and band above the panel is applied on top.

A pleated bottom addition is machine-stitched on.

The embroidery is integral to the story. The impeccable chainstitched hair for the woman at the bottom suggests that she is Mary Magdalene. The faces are embroidered, as is the blood of Christ.

Noteworthy – The green bottom layer is visible only around the cross. Also, this is the only area where the black middle layer is visible. The other colors around the cross and figures are merely inserted, with colors changing at any one of these levels. This treatment effectively makes the panel appear as though it is multilayered. The cross is not treated as a central motif as it remains attached along the bottom. It has been lifted so that the other colors can slide in behind. Also, different figures are surrounded with different colors to change their space or level.

Stitches – Few stitches go all the way through the third layer, making it difficult to evaluate the stitching. The amount of stitching needed in these panels is phenomenal and very few stand out from the right side.

Sewing Thread – The color choice is appropriate.

Background Filler – The cross and figures are completely filled with small circles that have been stitched to secure the raw edges. Changes in the colors behind these filler circles heighten the impressiveness of this mola panel. The background filler for the remaining panel are cut out “X’s” to the middle layer, then appliquéd “X’s” of different

colors to fill in the space. Appliqued triangles fit in between the arms of the “X’s”. Fine applied lines delineate the squares taken up by each “X”. This background treatment is extremely complex.

Artifact #32

Accession Number – DU1972.335 (see Figure 35)

Donor – Dr. Clyde E. Keeler

Date Received – Jan. 21, 1972

Date Made – Unknown

Place Made and/or Acquired – Unknown

Condition of the Artifact – Good

Description:

General – This is a complete mola blouse. The panels reflect different Biblical stories. On one side St. Francis of Assisi holds the crucifix and is surrounded by animals. On the other side, two angels bow in the empty tomb of Christ.

The yoke, sleeves, sleevebands and neckbands are all made of the same orange-yellow fabric. The sleeves are full and puffy, with gathers at the shoulder top and regularly spaced pleats all around the sleeve edge before insertion into the band. Black ric-rac is handstitched onto the sleevebands and over the sleeve cap.

The band above the panel is very striking in its construction. A broad band of red fabric, with serrations along the top edge is embellished along the bottom with wider than usual foldlines of yellow and black. On top of the red band, “X’s” are appliquéd in a variety of bright colors.

The “X” theme crops up again on the shoulderbands. Red shoulderbands support the neckline to the point that the gathers of the yoke appear. Under the red fabric is a wide exposed foldline of black. Two “X’s” criss-cross the shoulderband in various bright colors.

The bottom band is a wide strip of green fabric with an appliquéd line of yellow midway.

The embroidery is outstanding, delineating wing feathers, fur and facial characteristics. The embroidery sets the tone, especially of the angels in the tomb. Embroidery is done in chainstitch, running stitch and stem stitch.

Noteworthy – These are both three layered panels. The bottom and middle layers form the frame for the garden in the first depiction and form the frame of the tomb in the second. The fact that there are layers at all is secondary to the structure of the panel. Interestingly, the inside of the panel is incised again to show the bottom and middle layers in a heart shape, encircling St. Francis on the one hand and the angels on the other. The middle layer is reversed, as occurs with the Central Motif Category. The difference in handling is important. The cutting into the middle layer of the Central Motif Category becomes the outline of the central character. That is not the case in any of the mola panels in the Narrative Category. In fact, the central figure becomes isolated due to the color change around the body form.

Stitches – None of the stitches go through all layers, so quality is difficult to judge. From the right side, the stitches are small and almost invisible.

Sewing Thread – Colors selected are appropriate.

Background Filler – Vertical cuts are everywhere, including in each of the three planes as well as within the bodies of all of the animals and people.



Figure 35: Mola Blouse 1972.335. a) one side of blouse; b) panel on the other side; c) detail of shoulderband and sleeve seam treatment; d) band above the mola panel.

Artifact #33

Accession Number – DU1972.355 (see Figure 36)

Donor – Dr. Clyde E. Keeler

Date Received – Jan. 21, 1972

Date Made – Before 1967

Place Made and/or Acquired – Tikantiki, Panama

Condition of the Artifact – Good

Description:

General – This is a complete mola blouse. Both sides of the blouse depict the image of the crucifixion of Christ. There is no noticeable difference between the two. There are four figures at the foot of the cross, and the sadness and lamentation can quickly be discerned from their shape and bearing.

The yoke, sleeves and neckband are made from an off-white fabric with a small floral print aligned in a linear fashion. The sleeves are full and gathered at the shoulder top. Evenly spaced pleats, around the entire sleeve bottom control the fullness before insertion into sleeveband. The red sleeveband is supported by narrow exposed foldlines in three colors – purple, yellow and green.

The shoulderband in navy is embellished with narrow exposed foldlines in yellow and red. The navy band above the panel is bordered by narrow exposed foldlines of red on top and yellow and green below. The body of this band contains letters that spell “Mision Bautista Ticantiki”. On one side the letters are reversed.

The bottom band is a simple strip of printed fabric that encloses the raw edges of the panels. The print bears no relation to the bodice fabric. It is machine-stitched.

The embroidery, although well done, is minimal, detailing Christ's face and halo and some of the faces of the mourners.

Noteworthy – The panels have pink as their bottom layer, yet it is only visible around the cross, where it is also topped by a narrow strip of red. The navy middle layer is also exposed here. To complicate the visual experience edges of green and orange are inserted, which you can see to be the case in the bottom corners near the cross. Technically, the cross was lifted from the bottom, without being cut free from the top layer, and the insertions made. This insertion creates the image of another layer or two being part of the panel.

The top layer is cut away from around the outline of the people sitting beneath the cross, placing them metaphorically in another plane from the cross, a very effective technique in telling the story.

Stitches – This mola blouse is well stitched, but does not demonstrate the sophistication that other blouses do. The stitches are awkward, and some of the edges created have an angularity about them.

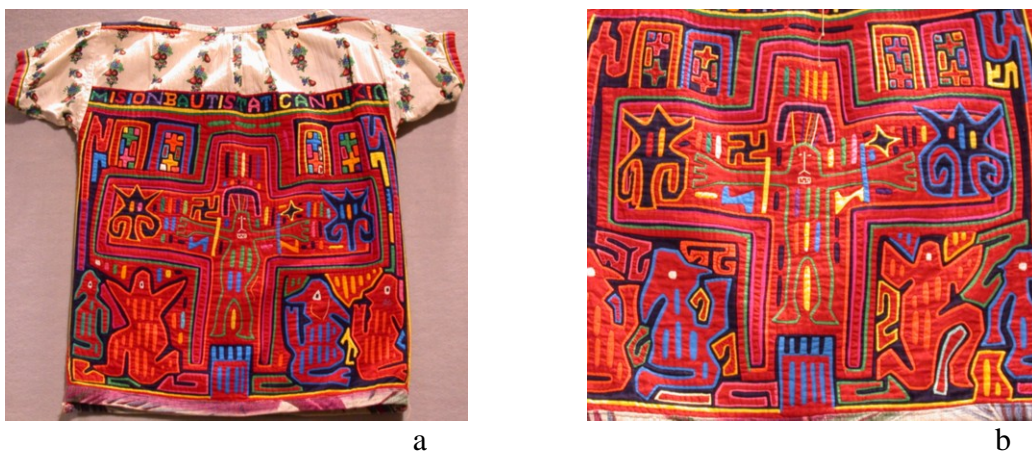


Figure 36: Mola Blouse DU1972.355. a) one side of blouse; b) panel on the other side.

Sewing Thread – The thread colors are appropriate.

Background Filler – There are some vertical cut lines in the bodies of the people and within the cross. The cut lines are not very refined. Above the cross, the filler is more detailed and looks like stained glass windows.

Artifact #34

Accession Number – DU1972.358 (see Figure 37)

Donor – Dr. Clyde E. Keeler

Date Received – Jan. 21, 1972

Date Made – Before 1968

Place Made and/or Acquired – Unknown

Condition of the Artifact – Excellent

Description:

General – This is a complete mola blouse. The panels are not the same, yet both are telling the story of Adam and Eve's ejection from the Garden of Eden. On one side, Eve is taking a bite from the apple, which looks somewhat like a pomegranate, with the supportive arm of Adam under her elbow. On the other side, they are ceremoniously being ushered out of the garden, each now dressed in a loin cloth. This is a panel that evokes serenity and beauty on the one side and loud, shameful ejection on the other. Even the plants take on a more angry and prickly presence when they are leaving. The serpent on the other hand, is strong and forceful with the eating of the apple, yet is much more submissive when the job is done.

The yoke and sleeves are made of yellow poplin. The sleeves are full with the gathers at the shoulder top. Most of the gathers into the sleeveband are also at the top of the sleeve, however some gentle gathers continue into the underarm. The sleeveband is black cotton with a wide insert of green cotton behind it. In between the two, a piece of red cotton fabric is pleated in continuous pleats, around the entire sleeve. The sleeve cap is also decorated, this time with a narrow strip of green fabric covering the raw edges of a pleated burgundy fabric. The yoke is gathered into the neckline band at centerfront and centerback. The neckline band is made of a printed rayon satin weave fabric, quite the opposite of all the other firmly woven fabrics that are both crisp and bright. The shoulderbands are made of black cotton, with the corners supported by an extra application of pink fabric. On top of the shoulderband, fine strips of bright orange and blue form an appliquéd “X”.

The band above the mola panel consists of a black strip of fabric, covered by a band of green and inserted behind the black is a serrated edge of red. White ric-rac is handstitched on top.

The bottom band is a pleated extension of printed rayon satin weave, 5 cm wide, that has been pleated, and then hand rolled and stitched along the bottom. A narrow band covers the raw edges of the panels and the bottom band.

The embroidery is outstanding and serves to support the story. Eve’s long hair, created through impeccable chainstitches, hangs in submission as they leave the Garden of Eden. The serpent is entirely embellished through the use of embroidery. The garden plants attest to the glory of the place through the stitchery applied to them. The plants attest to the glory of the place through the stitchery applied to them. The fine



a



b



c



d

Figure 37: Mola Blouse DU1972.358. a) one side of blouse; b) panel on the other side; c) detail of embroidery on Adam and Eve; d) detail of shoulderband and sleeve seam treatment.

stitchwork on the hats of the angels as they play their music to steps of Adam and Eve leaving is worth noticing. Notable also, is the appliqué work, on the loincloths of both Adam and Eve.

Noteworthy – Technically, the important aspect to notice is the use of the middle layer. Orange is the color of the middle layer and black is the color of the bottom layer. Another layer of printed fabric sits beneath the black layer, however it never becomes part of the design. The orange middle layer is cut out around the entire collection of people, plants and creatures, with one cut. Around this cut, the orange fabric is stitched, and the top fabric is cut and stitched outside of the orange. All of the figures have their own middle layer, situating them in their own space. Also middle layers are inserted and removed at will, much as can be seen in other mola panels in the Narrative Category. The black bottom layer plays a very small role in the design. The orange middle layer's biggest function is through the exposure of the vertical background cuts.

Stitches – The stitchwork is immaculate. Not all of the stitches go through all of the layers, so some are difficult to see from the wrong side.

Sewing Thread – The colors are appropriately matched to the layer being stitched.

Background Filler – The background to the scene is covered in vertical cuts.

They are very finely accomplished; in fact they are hardly noticed with all of the marvelous work done on each panel. The figures of the people have been completely filled with circles, each having been stitched around to secure the raw edges, constituting a major accomplishment.

Artifact #35

Accession Number – DU1972.365 (see Figure 38)

Donor – Dr. Clyde E. Keeler

Date Received – Jan. 21, 1972

Date Made – Before 1967

Place Made and/or Acquired – Tigre (?), Panama

Condition of the Artifact – Fair, the mola blouse shows considerable wear and is torn on one side.

Description:

General – This is a complete mola blouse. The theme on both panels is the crucifixion, on one before death and the other as Christ joins the Trinity. Symbols related to Roman Catholic iconography are spread out in the foreground of both panels.

The yoke and sleeves are made of a lightweight plain weave fabric in an odd mustardy-yellow color. The sleeves are full and are gathered in the shoulder top and top of the sleeve, leaving the underarm area free of gathers. The sleeveband is made of the same fabric as the yoke and sleeves with a length of black ric-rac applied by hand on top.

The yoke is gathered at centerfront and centerback with pleats, the raw edges then turned to the wrong side and topstitched in place at the neckband. The neckband is made of a faded red fabric and is surrounded by shoulderbands of blue, stopping short of the pleated area in the neckline. A narrow exposed foldline of orange and then red is tucked in under the shoulderband.

The panels, depicting the crucifixion, use the same technique that is used in most of the narrative panels. The cross shape is cut out of the top layer, exposing the middle



a



b



c

Figure 38: Mola Blouse DU1972.365. a) one side of blouse; b) other side of blouse; c) detail of serpent and devil showing the embroidery and application of ric-rac.

layer of black. Then edges are inserted, making it appear as though there are more layers, but it can be seen that this is not the case, as the color changes around the edge. The bottom layer of light blue is only minimally seen, as a line of red is applied on top. The cross has not been completely cut away, as we would see if it was being handled as a central motif. The base of the cross remains affixed to the top layer.

The band above the mola panel consists of a strip of green fabric abutting a strip of black that has been ornately cut along the top edge. Then a strip of orange fabric covers the raw edges of both the green and the black.

A double band of first navy and then pink serves as the bottom band. It has been machine stitched in place.

Noteworthy – The embroidery is again impeccable. Notable is the embroidery chainstitching on the serpent. The tail of the serpent is decorated with a narrow strip of ric-rac, whereas the other end has embroidery that is so precise and compact that it resembles the ric-rac. The embroidery again tells the story. We know, for example that the black appliqué coming out of the snake is the devil by the decoration of stitches.

Stitches – The stitches do not all go through all layers, however, they are difficult to see from the right side.

Sewing Thread – The colors match very well.

Background Filler – The interior of the bodies, images and cross are all filled with circular filler, very delicately and intricately stitched. Around the items in the foreground, triangles fill the spaces.

Artifact #36

Accession Number – DU1972.369 (see Figure 39)

Donor – Dr. Clyde E. Keeler

Date Received – Jan. 21, 1972

Date Made – Before 1967

Place Made and/or Acquired – Mulatuppu, Panama

Description:

General – This is a complete mola blouse depicting the offering of the apple by the serpent to Adam and Eve. The Garden of Eden is depicted as a wonderfully lush and colorful place. There are interesting differences between the two sides, however that are worthy of pointing out. On one side Adam and Eve are bareheaded, whereas on the other side they are wearing hats that look similar to the hats worn by Kuna men. The vegetation on the Kuna-hat side represents plants similar to those from their area including the Sapter tree of the Kuna tree of life. Across the top of each panel, the band includes a row of “swastika-like” shapes, which the Kuna use to represent the tree of life turning in the water.¹²⁹ Therefore, these two mola panels display a criss-crossing of two traditions.

The yoke and sleeves are made of yellow poplin. The sleeves are full and are gathered tightly with pintucks at the shoulder top. The sleeve is joined by hand to the

¹²⁹ Keeler, C. *Cuna Indian Art*, 37.



a



b



c



d

Figure 39: Mola Blouse DU1972.369. a) one side of blouse; b) panel on the other side; c) detail of band above the panel; d) shoulderband treatment including the pleating.

bodice and then is topstitched by machine. The sleeves are inserted into the sleeveband using equally spaced pleats to control the fullness. Orange fabric is used for the sleeveband with three insertions of narrow exposed foldlines beneath it in the following order – navy, green and pink.

The yoke is evenly gathered into the neckline, which is covered by a neckband of the same fabric as the yoke and sleeves. The gathers are covered by a strip of black cotton followed by a strip of red cotton. The shoulderbands are black and stop abruptly where the gathers begin in the neckline. The shoulderband is supported by an exposed foldline of orange, then a pleated foldline of red and finally a narrow foldline of green. The entire shoulderband unit was basted together and then machine-stitched in place.

The band above the panel consists of a wide strip of black, supported by wide foldlines of orange and green. “Swastika-like” shapes in various colors are appliquéd on top of the black band.

The bottom band is a 4 cm strip of the same fabric that the yoke and sleeves are made of. The bottom bands were sewn to front and back panels first before the side seams were sewn and then poorly matched.

The embroidery is outstanding, consisting of chainstitches, running stitches, and stem stitches

Noteworthy – These mola panels are made of two layers only. All of the apparent middle layers are inserted after the top red layer was cut. Also, it is interesting to note that the top layer is cut away around each side of the tree, and around the top, sides and bottom. The figures inside of this arc are appliquéd, including Adam and Eve.

This method works very well and allows the designer to incorporate much detail, using a different supporting color to separate the space. This is a device used in all of the mola panels in the Narrative Category.

The embroidery is noteworthy. Types of leaves and fruits are delineated by the stitchwork. The embroidery not only identifies which is man and which is woman but also identifies which is Kuna and which is not. Also, it is clear by the crucifix around Adam's neck that the religious affiliation is with the Roman Catholic Church. The embroidery clearly supports the story in these panels.

Stitches – The stitches are very fine and closely spaced. It seems clear that many of the single figures were appliquéd on and embroidered before stitching to the bottom layer.

Sewing Thread – The color choice is appropriate for all sewing threads used.

Background Filler – The background is entirely filled with foliage and flowers. The bodies of Adam and Eve, the tree and any other item of size are filled in with circles.

Artifact #37

Accession Number – DU1972.378 (see Figure 40)

Donor – Dr. Clyde E. Keeler

Date Received – Jan. 21, 1972

Date Made – Before 1967

Place Made and/or Acquired – Tigre, Panama

Condition of the Artifact – Good

Description:

General – This is a complete mola blouse. The panels relate the Bible story of Noah's ark, the one side depicting the animals coming on board and the other with the animals and people on board arriving to the new land. The dove with the olive branch is flying above in the upper right hand corner.

The yoke and sleeves are made of a glazed cotton sateen. The sleeves are full and are gathered in such a way that most of the gathers and pleats are at the sleeve top and shoulder. The sleevebands are narrow strips of black cotton with a row of sequins attached in a zig-zag manner to take in the entire width of the band. The bands are stitched on by machine, as is the assemblage of the sleeves which includes some piecing.

The yoke is gathered into the neckline at centerfront and centerback, with a handstitched row of widely spaced running stitches to prolong the length of the gathers. The shoulderbands meet the gathered area as they bracket the neckline. The neckline is a red band of cotton. The shoulderbands have the least amount of treatment seen in the entire collection. They are simply made of black fabric, cut straight across at the gathers, with no exposed foldlines beneath them. The bands across the tops of the panels consist simply of black strips of fabric, machine stitched in place, with two rows of ric-rac applied on top.

The bottom band is composed of a pieced strip of fabric, the pieces of various colors crudely sewn together by machine. The strip was then pleated and sewn by machine to the bottom of the panels.

The embroidery is very detailed and well executed. It is used to identify the animals, even male from female in some cases. It helps to evoke the emotion felt by the



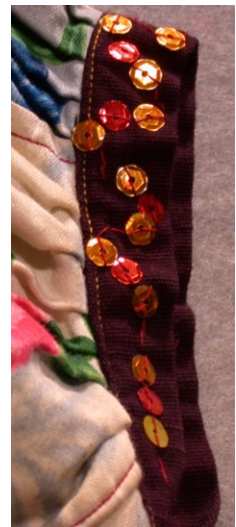
a



b



c



d

Figure 40: Mola Blouse DU1972.378. a) one side of blouse showing the animals getting into the ark; b) panel on the other side showing the animals in the ark; c) embroidery delineating the animal pens on the ark; d) detail of sleeve band showing the sequins.

people. The chainstitching within the ark delineates space by creating the animals' pens.

The embroidery also serves to add color to the point that it is used as background filler within the animals and the ark.

Noteworthy – The sleevebands demonstrate the ability of the Kuna to take on outside materials and use them effectively within the confines of their personal art/craft. Here the artist has used threaded sequins as a decorative element, applied on top of the sleeveband. No other manipulation of the sleeveband is carried out.

This is a two-layered mola. The top layer is cut around the ark, on both front and back. The remainder of the design is applied on the bottom layer, using a base of red for the ark. The intimation of added middle layers is created with appliquéd lines, which are subsequently embellished with more narrow lines. The animals and people are appliquéd on top, using a different color for the supporting middle layer that adds personal space to the story.

Stitches – Although many stitches are used, the stitches are large. The design relies as much on the embroidery stitches for stability as the other stitches.

Sewing Thread – The sewing thread colors match the top layer fabrics into which each is stitched.

Background Filler – Very little of the typical types of background fillers used in other mola panels is used here. Around the outside of the ark, a few vertical cuts can be seen. They are narrow and very well executed.

Narrative Category: Religious and Village Style

Artifact #38

Accession Number – DU1972.312 (see Figure 41)

Donor – Dr. Clyde E. Keeler

Date Received – Jan. 21, 1972

Date Made – Before 1965

Place Made and/or Acquired – Payon Chico, Panama

Condition of the Artifact – Good, although one of the side seams has ripped. It seems that pieces have been added to the mola panel to increase the size of the blouse. These additions have torn, leaving raw edges exposed. The yoke and sleeves are made of a thin rayon fabric, which shows signs of wear.

Description:

General – This is a complete mola blouse. The sleeves are full and are pleated all the way around the circumference of the bottom edge before insertion into a narrow sleeveband of black cotton. At the shoulder the sleeves are pleated, rolled over and handstitched in place.

The yoke is pleated evenly across 5 cm at centerback and centerfront for insertion into the blue neckband. The shoulderbands are of red cotton and are cut to angle into the neckline just prior to the pleated area. They have beneath them a narrow exposed foldline of black cotton, which is also cut and angled into the neckline.

The band above the panel is handstitched on top of the panel only and does not make the transition to the yoke fabric. Therefore, the red fabric that is exposed behind the top treatment, is the panel's top layer. A strip of black cotton is applied by hand, with a serrated edge along the top. On top of the black, a narrow strip of orange fabric is handstitched in place. Leaving a space for the red to show, below the black and orange ensemble, is a narrow green strip.



a



b



c

Figure 41: Mola Blouse DU1972.312. a) one side of blouse; b) other side of blouse; c) detail of boat showing Kuna arriving after the flood.

The front and back bottom bands have been handled differently. They each are made of a different print cloth, which is pleated with pleats that are equidistant apart. A band, pieced of different colors, covers the raw edge along the bottom. A band covers the join with the panels, again pieced and of different colors. The bottom band is also pieced together, as if using scraps to finish the blouse.

The embroidery is minimal, used only to give expression to the faces of the people and animals.

Noteworthy – This mola blouse has panels that depict on the one side the story of Noah and his ark and on the other, the story of the Kuna flood. This blouse illustrates the blurring of the lines between the Christian stories and the Kuna traditional stories. Also, by being on the same blouse, it is clear that a common method of dealing with the subject matter is appropriate. The narrative style therefore applies to both types of stories.

The panels are two-layered, with minimal optimization of the layers. This characteristic is common among the panels in the narrative category. The story is developed in a piecemeal fashion, adding layers behind individual sections as if the mola panel is multi-layered.

Stitches – Stitches are small and regularly spaced.

Sewing Thread – The color does not always match, but overall the choices are good.

Background Filler – Some of the figures have vertical cuts, including Noah's ark. The surrounding area is covered in triangles, used as filler. They all have an additional color appliquéd on top.

Outstanding Category

Two mola blouses within the Denison collection display characteristics that belong to more than one category. The panels are examples of outstanding design, creative innovation and superb workmanship. Not only is the outcome in a category all its own, clearly the Kuna value a collaboration of this kind. The value placed on the panels is echoed by the design, innovation and workmanship in the blouses that are made to support the panels.

Artifact #39

Accession Number – DU1972.316 (see Figure 42)

Donor – Dr. Clyde E. Keeler

Date Received – Jan. 21, 1972

Date Made – Before 1968

Place Made and/or Acquired – Mulatuppu, Panama

Condition of the Artifact – Good

Description:

General – This is a complete mola blouse. The design on the front panel mimics the design on the back panel. The central portion of the panel relates more closely with panels in the Historic Category, however, with only two layers, this look has been very difficult to achieve. The top layer, the navy, has been cut away completely except for the outer rim. The design has been entirely appliquéd on top. The first design is the curly-queues that relate to the Labyrinthine Category. It is cut freestyle and applied to the panel. Then the next ring of intricate lines is applied, again using freestyle



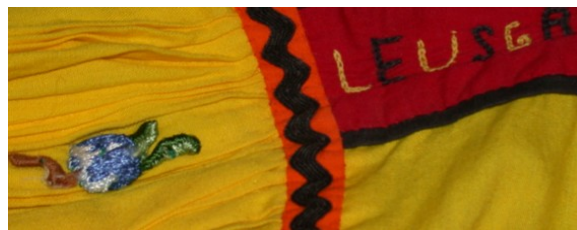
a



b



c



d

Figure 42: Mola Blouse DU1972.316. a) one side of blouse; b) panel on the other side; c) detail showing the zipper in the back, the embroidered letters and the letters appliquéd to the band above the panel; d) detail showing the tightly gathered sleeve, the sleeve seam treatment and the rosebud appliquéd to the top of the sleeve.

designing. Finally, the central portion is approached, using the bottom layer, red, to create the framework. By adding the central navy ring inside the frame of red, it appears as though many layers are at work. The central ring of four petals then has the separate colors applied. An eyelash of a different color is applied with a ridge of the navy, again making it appear as though many layers are operating. The outcome is a superlative design.

The sleeves are very full, with the gathering concentrated at shoulder top and sleeve top. The same fabric used for the sleeves and yoke is used for the sleevebands. A red serrated insert is attached after the gathering but before the sleeveband is attached. Black ric-rac is applied by hand to the band. A little purchased decal is sewn to the upper sleeve.

The yoke is pleated into the neckline. Orange strips are applied first, before the pleats are made, causing the yoke and the orange fabric to pleat together. Due to presence of a zipper, the neckband is not continuous. The shoulderbands meet the orange inserts of pleated fabric. They are made of red cotton, with narrow exposed foldlines of black beneath. The word “LEUSGA” is embroidered in chainstitch on one shoulder, in mirror image on the other shoulder. A narrow band of orange fabric covers the sleeve-to-shoulder seam. Black ric-rac is stitched on top.

The yoke contains words, presumably the name of the wearer. There are variations to the spelling, including “LEUSGARO VALESGELIA” and “LEUSGARO.GOME VALESTELIAGOME”, these being stem-stitched in place.

The band on top of the panel is 4.5 cm wide, red cotton bordered by a broad insert of orange underneath and a narrow foldline of bright blue above. The band includes the letters “LEUSGORO GOMESGOL”, alternating in black and white.

The bottom band is full, yet not gathered, indicating that it was cut in a circular fashion. It is of a yellowish orange cotton. The edge has been covered in black cotton and at the join with the panel, a strip of pink cotton covers the edge.

The only embroidery used is for the lettering, again in common with both the labyrinthine and historic traditions.

Noteworthy – This mola blouse is designed and executed in such a way as to maximize the opportunities offered by both the labyrinthine and historic traditions.

Stitches – The stitches are fairly large, but tidily tuck in close together.

Sewing Thread – The colors chosen are appropriate.

Background Filler – Small bits of colors are inserted in the panel design, in “V’s” or “X’s” or straightlines, whenever required to fill the space. This does not happen frequently.

Artifact #40

Accession Number – DU1972.337 (see Figure 43)

Donor – Dr. Clyde E. Keeler

Date Received – Jan. 21, 1972

Date Made – Before 1969

Place Made and/or Acquired – Mammituppu, Panama

Condition of the Artifact – Good

Description:

General – This is a complete mola. The panels are notable due to the unusual style categories that have been combined. In the documentation that came with this mola blouse, Keeler's description apparently allocated the identification of the person in the hold of the boat as being Kit Kapp, a cartographer who spent more than ten years sailing in the Caribbean Sea. He led ten official expeditions under the auspices of the Explorers Club of New York during the 1950's.¹³⁰ He became very familiar with the Kuna and their art, and was well regarded by them. The other person in the depiction, Keeler identifies as Kit Kapp's wife, waving. This identification may or may not be true. Typically, narratives are not carried out in this style, this style being reserved for the labyrinthine motifs. Labyrinthine motifs, however, typically take in the entire panel, rather than repeated in the four quadrants, as we see in this case. Balance and repetition are both strategies used by the Kuna when working in different styles, and when they do so, of utmost importance is that the pattern not be duplicated precisely.¹³¹ Subtle variations amongst the quadrants are important and this we find to be the case with these panels. The last unusual detail that is found in this panel is the method of creating background filler, again in the style of the labyrinthine category. Areas are differentiated through the use of insertions, that is to say, bits of differently colored cloth are placed in localized areas, thus creating structure to the design. For example, using the different colors differentiates the sails. Also, it becomes easy to identify the woman's skirt.

¹³⁰ Kapp, Kit, *Mola Art*, (North Bend, OH: K.S.Kapp Publications, 1972), 48.

¹³¹ Salvadore, *Molas of the Cuna Indians: A Case Study of Artistic Criticism and Ethno-Aesthetics*, 62.



a



b



c

Figure 43: Mola Blouse DU1972.337. a) one side of the blouse; b) the panel on the other side; c) detail of the braid applied to the shoulderband and the *dientes* beneath. Note, too the ric-rac applied to the sleeve seam and the precise gathers into the seam.

The labyrinthine type of design works very well for the fish in the bottom of the boat. This delightful play of the different categories within this one mola blouse results in a remarkable work of art.

These are two-layered panels, with the cutting design obviously well laid out. Again, the virtuosity exists in the cutting of the top layer. The bottom layer is off-white, which creates a unit with the fabric chosen for the yoke and sleeves as well as the bottom band.

The yoke and sleeve are made of a heavy, dobby woven cloth, that is off-white in color and printed with a fresh floral print. The sleeves are full and are pleated into the sleeveband all the way around except in the underarm. Four deep pleats take care of all of the fullness at the shoulder top. The sleeveband fabric is a hot pink color, the same color that is used for many of the insertions. Black ric-rac is handstitched on top. A narrower purple ric-rac is used across the shoulder and down the sleeve-to-yoke seam.

The yoke is gathered into the neckline using very tiny and tight pinch pleats. They are secured across the top with beautifully executed chainstitches. The neckline is blue, and is supported by a narrow pair of shoulderbands. The shoulderbands are red and have a narrow exposed foldline of orange beneath them. Under the red and orange is a green serrated edge that is again immaculately cut and sewn. The entire assemblage, the red, orange and green, angles towards the gathers in such a way that the gathering lines fall parallel. A blue, red and white commercial braid is applied on top of the shoulderbands.

The band above the mola panels consists of two interlocking fretlines, black at the bottom and red above. The black row covers the join of the panel to the yoke. Space is left between the interlocking frets to expose the printed fabric from the yoke. A row of serrated purple fabric is inserted behind the red.

The bottom panel is a finely pleated piece of plain off-white fabric that has been cut in a circular fashion, giving more length to the circumference around the bottom edge than the top. The bottom edge is then finished with a hand rolled hem, with the hem rolled to the right side and stitched. A red braid is applied adjacent to the thickness of the rolled hem. A black strip of cotton tops the join of the bottom band with the panel. On one side the black has been substituted with green.

The faces, including those of the fish, are embroidered with running stitches, to give more of a sense of amusement and laughter to the characters on the boats.

Noteworthy – This mola blouse defies categorization. It is clear from the special handling that the blouse received that it was felt to be worth the added effort.

Stitches – The stitches are very fine and close together. The cut lines are narrow and long, so to retain the straight positioning, stitching had to be carefully and securely done.

Sewing Thread – The colors chosen are appropriate.

Background Filler – The background filler consists of angled lines that mirror the shape that encloses them. For example, the area around the sails is incised, repeatedly, with each line parallel to the sides of the sail. Similarly the woman's skirt is filled with parallel lines that mirror the outline of the skirt. The lines are narrow and equidistant apart. This is an excellent example of the use of background filler.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS OF THE MOLA BLOUSES

Through the documentation of the previous chapter, it becomes apparent that there are concrete differences among the various categories; differences such as the color choice and the number of layers used in the panels (see Appendix). The blouses as a whole can present different construction details. By continuing with an analysis, different technical approaches and methods serve to further differentiate the categories. Also, to quantify the complexity and success of a design and technique used, a method was devised to help identify a hierarchy amongst the categories should one exist. Included in this chapter, therefore, is a discussion of the criteria that are important to the Kuna when considering the technical and design virtues of mola blouses in general; the evaluation system developed to analyze the mola blouses in the Denison University collection; and the categories established to cover the various stylistic and technical methods used when making mola blouses.

Studies in the past that include discussions of the mola blouse, typically examine them as an outcome of Kuna pride or as an odd response to foreign influence. As mentioned earlier, mola blouses have rarely been examined from the perspective of the techniques used to create the various styles and how these techniques may differ to offer

various levels of satisfaction. This study hopes to address this shortcoming and, in so doing, also apply aspects known to be true in other art/craft traditions and see if they apply to mola-making.

Important Criteria for Analyzing the Worth of a Mola Blouse

A systematic approach to analyzing the data is important, particularly when one is hoping to uncover trends. This study relies heavily on the conclusions drawn by Mari Lyn Salvador in her study regarding Kuna women and their personal evaluations and criticisms of the mola blouses that they, themselves have made. She focused on the artists themselves, hoping to uncover their common aesthetic and in this way go beyond the product per se.¹³² She used mola blouses as the cue, and interviewed women who were considered by the community to be good mola makers. She prefaced this by talking to each woman about her own work, hoping to gain an understanding of the maker's perspective prior to hearing the evaluations of the mola blouses that she presented to them.¹³³ Salvador concluded that clearly mola-making is at the heart of being Kuna. Despite its unifying role, however, mola-making also serves to distinguish the individual as being creative and/or skillful.¹³⁴

When she was studying the responses that the Kuna women made upon seeing the mola blouses, Salvador found that self-criticism among the group not only happened but was an important part of the process. She was able to identify certain criteria that they used when evaluating each other's work. These criteria can be divided into two general

¹³² Salvador, *Molas of the Cuna Indians: A Case Study of Artistic Criticism and Ethno-Aesthetics*, 1971.

¹³³ Ibid., 1971, 10.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 1971, 176.

areas of concern – the panel and the blouse as a whole. The choices made in each area contributed to the overall worth and involved on the one hand their design and color, and on the other hand the demonstration of good technique and workmanship.

Criticism of the blouses fell into general patterns. To be considered a good mola panel, basic rules of cutting and sewing had to be met. The cutting line had to be smooth and clean, ensuring furthermore that the pattern remains distinct. If parallel lines were part of the pattern, and, while they were laudable and to be encouraged, they needed to be spaced evenly throughout the pattern. Top layer lines needed to be fine, however the middle layer lines should they exist, needed to be even finer. Again the width relationship was required to remain constant. Lines that changed direction, especially if the direction changed at an angle rather than a curved line, were difficult to make and to affix smoothly. Keeping the layers smooth was awkward and therefore, if it worked, indicated a successful mola blouse. Large wide areas of cloth were indications of a poorly designed panel. The filler that was used was a testament to skill level. Geometric filler rated the highest, followed by squares or triangles with added colors applied on top, circles with raw edges turned under and, lastly, *tas-tas*, which refers to incised parallel lines that are vertical, horizontal or diagonal. Symmetry was good. Bilateral symmetry was better and quartered symmetry was even better. However, each section needed to demonstrate subtle differences, as perfect symmetry would reduce the level of complexity. The design was required to stand out. Visibility needed to be high, this being achieved through the use of saturated colors and/or colors of high contrast. The design was heightened through the use of sharp lines and even more so through the use of a succession of parallel lines. Regular spacing also emphasized a design. The entire space

needed to be filled and, should the design not fill the corners, added figures filled these spaces. The greater the number of colors used, the better the design was considered to be. Also, the appearance of added layers, whether true or not, was important. *Dientes*, or the serrated edges that were cut and sewn, were very difficult to achieve and were highly prized if done well. Finally, embroidery remained an accessory only and therefore used sparingly.. Embroidery is faster and easier to create after the fact than the appliqué, and so the women were very sensitive to its inclusion. However, embroidery was entirely appropriate when needed to complete a story. The women were interested when they saw a new design, however, they were equally appreciative of a Kuna subject, a traditional pattern or patterns that depicted the natural life around them.¹³⁵

To be considered a good mola blouse, the color of the yoke and sleeves were chosen to further dazzle the viewer. Additional design detailing on any of the bands was highly prized. They understood the workmanship that different details entailed and the Kuna responded accordingly.¹³⁶

The System Used to Evaluate the Mola Blouses

With the previous aesthetic and technical judgments as a guide, a system was developed for the analysis of each mola blouse (See Tables 1-8). This system entailed a comprehensively itemized list, which in turn ensured that attention was paid to all levels – the design and workmanship of the blouse based on the responses that Mari Lyn Salvador uncovered as well as the design and workmanship of the panel itself. A five-

¹³⁵ Salvador, *Molas of the Cuna Indians: A Case Study of Artistic Criticism and Ethno-Aesthetics*, 1971, 137.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 1971, 138.

point scale was used, separating the design and technical evaluations. Design was rated from 0-5, with 0 indicating that the characteristic is not present in the artifact; 1 indicates rarely; 2 indicates some of the time; 3 indicates that the characteristic is present for about one-half of the panel or blouse; 4 indicates that it is done often; 5 indicates that the design aspect is an important part of the design. A different five point scale was used to evaluate the technical acuity of the mola-maker, indicated as “workmanship” in the table, with 0 indicating that the characteristic is not present; 1 indicates that the aspect was done poorly; 2 indicates that it was done somewhat poorly; 3 indicates that the technical skill was average; 4 indicates that the skill level was good; and 5 indicates that the level of expertise is high.

The five-point scale offered enough distinction between levels to be useful. A scale with a higher range would have made the distinction between the levels more arbitrary by increasing the level of subjectivity. Also, the five-point scale offered enough variability to be useful. The scores on the five-point scale were then tallied to give a rating for the worthiness of the design and the technical skill displayed by the panel, the blouse and, finally, an overall total for both. These numbers provided a ready tool with which to compare the mola blouses within a category and furthermore to compare across categories. With the high level of familiarity to these mola blouses, and mola blouses in other collections, the researcher had adequate experience in evaluating both the technical and design aspects and making reliable judgments.

Some of the measures required increased specificity when using this five-point scale, ensuring that the scale remained meaningful. These measures included assessing the number of color changes across the diagonal bisection of the mola panel; background

filler type; embroidery; number of layers; and the addition of lines. Number of color changes were rated as follows: 0-60 changes across the diagonal bisection of the panel was a 0; 60-70- was a 1; 70-80- was a 2; 80-90 was a 3; 90-100 was a 4; and anything above 100 was a 5.

For background filler type: 0 indicated no background filler; 1 indicated that the filler is *tas-tas*, whether horizontal, vertical or diagonal with large blocks of color created with large insertions; 2 indicated *tas-tas* with smaller and narrower insertions; 3 indicated circles with raw edges tucked in; 4 indicated squares or triangles with added appliqués on each; 5 indicated geometric filler.

Embroidery was evaluated as follows: 0 none; 1 awkward use of embroidery that interfered with the design of the mola panel; 2 large areas of embroidery used to fill in the space without adding to the design of the mola panel; 3 embroidery that neither enhanced nor detracted from the design of the mola panel; 4 attractive stitching used to enhance the mola panel; 5 outstanding embroidery, often minimal, with fine delicate stitching typically used to delineate facial features. Sometimes the level 5 was given for embroidery that simply rose above that presented on other panels.

For the number of layers: 0 indicated 2 layers; 1 indicated 2 layers with the addition of small localized areas of color other than the colors of the 2 layers; 2 indicated 2 layers with the addition of localized middle layers and lines; 3 indicated 3 layers; 4 indicated 3 layers with the addition of insertions throughout; 5 indicated 4 layers.

Lines are an important way to include more color: 0 indicated no lines applied to the design; 1 indicated small straight lines that are applied to the top of the motif; 2 indicated lines that are added in areas that also show middle and bottom layers, making it

seem as though there are four layers; 3 indicated long applied lines; 4 indicated very long straight line; 5 indicated a frequent combination of the above and/or indicated lines that include a bend in them which is very difficult to keep flat and smooth.

Mari Lyn Salvador delineated categories based on the Kuna women's information, as was mentioned in the introductory chapter. She established the categories while carrying out her research in Ailigandi. By repeating the process of categorizing a large number of mola blouses in four more villages, she felt confident in her results.¹³⁷ The categories, although useful, do not discuss the technical differences that exist from one category to another. Ultimately these differences affect the manner in which the mola panels are made, the design possibilities, the level of difficulty and the skills required to make them.

The Categories Used To Distinguish the Mola Blouses

Based on the documentation of the mola blouses housed at Denison University, it becomes apparent that they fall into distinct categories. These categories can be delineated based on subject matter, technique, style, and color choice. For the purposes of this study, the categories are established with the following headings: the labyrinthine category which subdivides into the naturalistic style and the geometric style; the central motif category; the historic category; and the narrative category which can be subdivided into the village style, the religious style and the combination of village and religious style. In the analysis of each category, the methods for creating or developing the

¹³⁷ Salvador, *Molas of the Cuna Indians: A Case Study of Artistic Criticism and Ethno-Aesthetics*, 1971, 52.

designs will be discussed as well as the skills required to execute the design well. The subject matter and color choice will also be discussed, as will any other trends that became apparent during documentation.

Labyrinthine Category: Naturalistic Style

All of the mola panels created in this style contain a central image of typically two animals, usually birds, facing each other. They are fancifully created amidst vegetation typically recognizable as belonging to the San Blas Islands. The design is maze-like, using a series of closely cut parallel lines which also move the figures into the background. These mola panels are always two-layered and use colors that are equally saturated, often of colors on opposite sides of the color wheel. Black or white are also often used as the dramatic opposition to a vibrant color. The effect is dazzling. The Kuna color sense is very sensitive to the effects that they are trying to create with this type of panel and they are very successful. Colors typically used with other styles of mola panels, such as yellow, orange, and red, are not likely to be used in this category, rather we are as likely to see a hot pink or a shocking blue. If a typical color is used, it is juxtaposed with a color of equal intensity thus creating the illusion of vibration and overall motion. Often, the bottom layer of the panel is the same fabric as is used for the yoke and sleeves, creating a blouse that feels unified. Clearly for many of the labyrinthine blouses, the entire unit was planned ahead of time.

When examining Table 1, an interesting observation can be made. Five mola blouses fit into this category. They present a range of scores, yet those at the high end for panel detail are also at the high end for blouse detail.

Accession #		1972 294	1972 314	1972 352	XX 109	XX 115	
Mola Panel							
Design	Level of difficulty	3	4	4	4	5	
	Level of visibility:						
	- saturated colors	3	5	4	3	5	
	- sharp edges	3	4	3	4	5	
	- parallel repeats	2	5	5	5	5	
	Use of entire panel space	4	5	5	4	5	
	Centrally situated	0	0	0	0	0	
	Subtle variation in symmetry	4	5	5	5	5	
	Number of color changes*	1	1	2	1	0	
	Background filler type**	0	5	2	5	5	
	Embroidery***	3	0	0	0	1	
Workmanship	Number of layers****	0	0	0	0	0	
	Cutting:						
	- clean edges	3	4	3	4	5	
	- top layer thin lines	3	3	3	4	5	
	- middle layer finest	0	0	0	0	0	
	- width of lines constant	1	3	2	4	5	
	Sewing:						
	- small stitches	3	4	3	4	5	
	- good color of thread	4	4	4	5	5	
	- corners sharp	3	4	2	4	5	
	Addition of lines*****	0	0	0	0	0	
	Quality of background filler	0	4	3	4	5	
	Quality of embroidery	2	0	0	0	2	
	Quality of dientes	0	0	0	0	0	
Total for panel		42	60	50	60	73	
Mola Blouse							
Design	Colorful	2	4	3	3	5	
	Added design in shoulderband	0	4	0	0	0	
	Added design in sleeveband	4	2	2	2	2	
	Added design in band above panel	3	4	3	3	3	
	Added design in bottom band	1	1	1	3	3	
	Above designs are related	4	4	4	5	2	
	Other (e.g. decoration on seams)	0	0	0	0	0	
Workmanship	Quality of cutting	1	4	2	4	5	
	Quality of stitchwork	2	4	3	4	5	
	Quality of band embellishments	3	4	4	3	3	
	Quality of dientes, if present	2	4	0	0	0	
Total for blouse		22	35	22	27	28	
Total		64	95	72	87	101	
* 0 for 0-60 changes, 1 for 60-70, 2 for 70-80, 3 for 80-90, 4 for 90-100, 5 for >100. **0 for none, 1 for tas-tas, 2 for finer tas-tas, 3 for circles, 4 for triangles or squares, 5 for geometric labyrinths. ***0 for none, 1 for awkward stitching, 2 for larges stitches that do not add to the design, 3 for neutral embroidery, 4 for embroidery that enhances the design, 5 for outstanding embroidery. ****0 for 2 layers, 1 for 2 layers plus inserts, 2 for 2 layers plus localized middle layers and lines, 3 for 3 layers, 4 for 3 layers plus inserts, 5 for 4 layers. *****0 for no lines, 1 for small straight lines on top of motif, 2 for added lines in layering section, 3 for long applied lines, 4 for very long straight lines, 5 for many of the above and/or includes lines with angles.							

Table 1: Analysis of Labyrinthine Category: Naturalistic Style

The Denison University collection has two mola panels, no longer linked with the blouse for which they were intended, that typify their success. It is clear that these two panels were intended for the same blouse. They demonstrate the carefully incised lines in a parallel format, the white as a foil for the black. Also, the embroidery is appropriately minimal, yet adds character and is immaculate in its execution (see Figures 44 and 45).

Cutting a design that remains continuous throughout the top layer creates an even greater tour de force. In the both Figure 44 and 45, the figures are separate from the background. Figure 46 illustrates a panel that achieves that level of success and is a stellar example of lines that remain intact yet form a wonderfully orchestrated panel.

These patterns require ingenuity and vision. The top layer must be cut free style, and yet, when complete, it must technically be able to lie flat and be stitchable. Michel Perrin writes that the women who can cut designs like these are described by their Kuna peers as having “good hands,” or who are able to cut freely with their scissors while maintaining a vision in their heads. They do not use a pencil beforehand. They are highly regarded and are considered to have *kurgin*, which means that they have the gift. When Kuna women are asked if there are famous cutters amongst them, they are reluctant at first to center anyone out as all skills are equally valid. Yet, given time, they will reveal the best cutter as they do recognize this skill as being special and unique.¹³⁸

Once the cutting is complete, the top layer must be made to lie flat on the bottom layer. The stitching can then begin, first rolling under the raw edge of the fabric and running a fingernail across the top to set the foldline. A further skill is then revealed. Not only are the lines cut in a maze-like fashion, but the lines of the top layer are the

¹³⁸ Michel Perrin, *Magnificent Molas: The Art of the Kuna Indians*, 1999, 61.

same width as the spaces left between the lines that expose the bottom layer, this being done while allowing for the amount of fabric that will be turned under while stitching.



Figure 44: Mola Panel DU1972.350. This panel demonstrates an outstanding example of the Labyrinthine Category, Naturalistic style. The figures submerge into the background.



Figure 45: Mola Panel DU1972.1052. This panel is undoubtedly the match for Figure 41. It too demonstrates the accurate spacing and the emphasis on parallel lines.



Figure 46: Mola Panel DU1972.1064. This panel demonstrates the epitome in the Labyrinthine Category, Naturalistic Style. The top layer is continuous, requiring care in both conceptualization of the design and cutting.

The stitching is generally well done. However, because of the design, the stitching is simplified. Only one color forms the top layer, therefore the stitcher does not need to change the color of her sewing thread, an enormous time saver when comparing to the other styles of mola panels. This technique also points to the confusion that arises from the descriptive term, “reverse appliqué,” used when talking about mola panels. Clearly, this method is simply appliqué when applying the top layer to the bottom layer.

From the documentation table (see Appendix, Table 9), we see that this style of blouse is typically shorter than other styles, except the central motif category. This makes sense, as both have a central figure that would be best if seen higher up on the chest and not be tucked into the bottom wrap. The color changes across the diagonal of the panel are much lower with this type of panel, this number not being increased due to layering, which quickly multiplies the number of colors exposed. The background filler is somewhat different in this case as it supports the labyrinthine structure as well as submerges the central design ensuring that it is not prominent. From the analysis chart, it is clear that the effort is attached to the cutting and stitching arena of panel making. *Dientes* are not included in the panel and only sometimes in the blouse. Embroidery is minimally used and when used, serves as the indicator of facial details. Typically, little effort is expended on the sleevebands, shoulderbands, or bottom bands of the blouse.

The blouses in this category first emphasize innovation of design, giving the mola-maker full range in the selection and depiction of the subject matter. Secondly, the maker has a special gift in conceptualization that she uses when wielding her scissors.

Labyrinthine Category: Geometric Style

These mola panels are constructed of two brightly colored layers of cloth in much the same flavor as the category above. This category employs the same maze-like structures, however the design is simply a repeat of a geometric shape. The style belies its complexity, seeming deceptively easy in its conceptualization and execution. In fact, this style is more difficult to carry out successfully than the naturalistic format. An inconsistent width of cut line could result in the failure of the design. However, with the concept in mind, the mola-maker has a clear understanding of the pattern layout. The top layer can therefore be basted in place along lines where the top layer would remain continuously intact. Basting is an important step in controlling the top layer. In this way it becomes possible to cut the geometric shape with clean lines and sharp corners. Also, subsequent basting can be used as the cutting progresses. For example in Figure 47, further stability with the top layer would help in maintaining the fine patterning. Figure 48 is another example of the geometric style.¹³⁹

¹³⁹Salvador, *Molas of the Cuna Indians: A Case Study of Artistic Criticism and Ethno-Aesthetics*, 1971, 53.

Accession #		1972.375	1972.376	XX.116	
Mola Panel					
Design	Level of difficulty	3	4	5	
	Level of visibility:				
	- saturated colors	4	4	5	
	- sharp edges	4	3	5	
	- parallel repeats	5	2	5	
	Use of entire panel space	5	4	5	
	Centrally situated	0	0	0	
	Subtle variation in symmetry	0	0	0	
	Number of color changes*	2	2	3	
	Background filler type**	0	1	0	
	Embroidery***	0	0	0	
Workmanship	Number of layers****	0	0	0	
	Cutting:				
	- clean edges	4	3	5	
	- top layer thin lines	4	3	5	
	- middle layer finest	0	0	0	
	- width of lines constant	4	3	5	
	Sewing:				
	- small stitches	4	3	5	
	- good color of thread	5	5	5	
	- corners sharp	3	3	5	
	Addition of lines*****	0	0	0	
	Quality of background filler	0	1	0	
	Quality of embroidery	0	0	0	
	Quality of dientes	0	0	0	
Total for panel		47	43	60	
Mola Blouse					
Design	Colorful	4	5	5	
	Added design in shoulderband	0	0	1	
	Added design in sleeveband	2	2	2	
	Added design in band above panel	3	2	2	
	Added design in bottom band	1	0	2	
	Above designs are related	4	4	4	
	Other (e.g. decoration on seams)	0	0	0	
Workmanship	Quality of cutting	3	2	5	
	Quality of stitchwork	4	3	5	
	Quality of band embellishments	2	2	3	
	Quality of dientes, if present	5	5	0	
Total for blouse		28	25	29	
Total		75	68	89	
* 0 for 0-60 changes, 1 for 60-70, 2 for 70-80, 3 for 80-90, 4 for 90-100, 5 for >100. **0 for none, 1 for tas-tas, 2 for finer tas-tas, 3 for circles, 4 for triangles or squares, 5 for geometric labyrinths. ***0 for none, 1 for awkward stitching, 2 for larges stitches that do not add to the design, 3 for neutral embroidery, 4 for embroidery that enhances the design, 5 for outstanding embroidery. ****0 for 2 layers, 1 for 2 layers plus inserts, 2 for 2 layers plus localized middle layers and lines, 3 for 3 layers, 4 for 3 layers plus inserts, 5 for 4 layers. *****0 for no lines, 1 for small straight lines on top of motif, 2 for added lines in layering section, 3 for long applied lines, 4 for very long straight lines, 5 for many of the above and/or includes lines with angles.					

Table 2: Analysis of Labryinthine Category: Geometric Style



Figure 47: Mola Panel XX. 130. This geometric style of this panel shows logical areas of basting to secure the top layer while cutting the design.

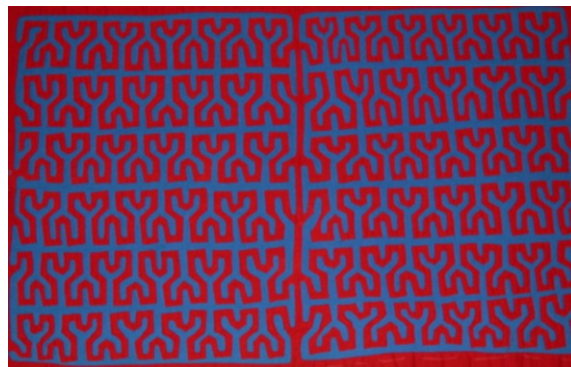


Figure 48: Mola Panel DU1972. 302. Another panel in the Denison collection illustrating a geometric configuration. The red fabric is the top layer.

The three examples of mola blouses in this category illustrate some interesting points. Again, typically, the blouses seem shorter than other categories and in this case the reasons seem less clear. Consistency is difficult to maintain with these designs and there is a certain level of tedium, which may cause the mola-maker to decide in favor of the shorter blouse. Two of the blouses include *dientes*, which in both cases are very well executed. The effort in these blouses however is mainly placed on the cutting and stitching of the geometric pattern.

With the small sampling of mola blouses in this category, generalizations are difficult to make. Also, Artifact DU1972.376 (see Figure 10) was included in this category and yet demonstrates some anomalies. The geometric shape is a recognizable form, in this case a boat with the Christian cross on top. It is use upright and upside down, while not interlinking to unite the entire design as is seen in the other geometric examples. Background *tas-tas* has been used to complete the design. On one side, a body seems to be floating in the sea adding a narrative to the panel. However, as this mola panel design fits less well in any of the other categories, it has been included in this category, perhaps muddying the information available.

Artifact XX.116 (see Figure 11) is a wonderful example of this category and style. The lines are repetitively executed and yet if one looks closely at the subtle variations, it is clear that each motif was cut individually. The bottom layer fabric is used as the bodice fabric as well, again creating a blouse of exceptional unity.

All of the panels in this category emphasize the cutting detail from a technical perspective. Innovation plays a reduced role, certainly not reaching the level of the previous category. Stitching has been carried out meticulously. Embroidery is typically not used at all.

The values yielded from using the evaluation tool, although they indicate that some panels and blouses are better than others, are likely problematic due to the small sample size.

Central Motif Category

The identifying feature of this category is typically a single figure or a related group of figures prominently situated in the middle ground of the panel. Also, with the central image in place, spaces remain in the corners. Therefore, this category is often also recognizable by little, often-unrelated figures appliquéd in these corners.

These mola panels are almost always made of three layers, however, infrequently a mola-maker will take on the added complication of including a fourth layer. The mola panels also present an overall visual effect of bright and deep redness, although the other colors frequently used are black, and brightly colored, fully saturated orange, yellow and green. Pink is used on occasion. Black and red are the more likely choices for the top layer and are sometimes reversed, with the top layer red on one side and black on the other.

Accession #		1972 3	1972 5	1972 6	1972 8	1972 10	1972 280	1972 283	1972 367	1972 370	1972 372		
Mola Panel	Design	Level of difficulty	2	5	3	1	1	1	3	1	4	4	
		Level of visibility:											
		- saturated colors	3	3	2	3	5	2	5	4	5	5	
		- sharp edges	2	3	3	1	4	2	5	1	3	4	
		- parallel repeats	2	5	3	1	4	2	3	2	3	4	
		Use of entire panel space	3	5	4	1	4	3	5	3	4	3	
		Centrally situated	3	5	4	3	4	3	5	3	5	4	
		Subtle variation in symmetry	4	5	3	3	4	4	5	3	5	0	
		Number of color changes*	4	4	5	2	3	1	2	4	2	3	
		Background filler type**	2	2	2	1	2	2	0	5	2	2	
		Embroidery***	3	3	1	1	3	3	0	3	4	4	
	Workmanship	Number of layers****	4	4	4	4	4	4	3	3	4	4	
		Cutting:											
			- clean edges	2	2	2	1	3	3	5	2	4	4
			- top layer thin lines	3	4	3	1	3	2	4	1	3	4
			- middle layer finest	3	5	3	1	3	2	5	2	4	4
			- width of lines constant	2	2	3	1	3	3	5	3	4	5
		Sewing:											
			- small stitches	1	5	5	1	5	2	2	1	1	5
			- good color of thread	4	5	5	5	5	4	5	4	5	5
			- corners sharp	2	4	2	1	3	3	5	2	3	5
			Addition of lines*****	0	5	5	0	0	3	0	1	3	0
			Quality of background filler	2	4	3	1	3	2	0	4	3	4
			Quality of embroidery	3	3	1	1	3	3	0	3	4	3
		Quality of dientes	0	4	3	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	
Total for panel		54	87	69	34	69	54	67	56	75	76		
Mola Blouse	Design	Colorful	3	5	2	3	3	2	5	4	5	4	
		Added design in shoulderband	3	5	2	1	1	1	1	1	3	3	
		Added design in sleeveband	3	5	1	1	1	1	2	1	4	2	
		Added design in band above panel	4	5	1	1	1	1	2	1	3	2	
		Added design in bottom band	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	3	
		Above designs are related	0	5	3	3	1	0	2	2	0	3	
		Other (e.g. decoration on seams)	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	
	Workmanship	Quality of cutting	3	5	1	1	2	1	4	1	4	3	
		Quality of stitchwork	3	5	1	1	2	1	4	1	4	3	
		Quality of band embellishments	3	5	2	1	1	1	3	1	4	2	
		Quality of dientes, if present	0	5	4	0	0	3	0	0	3	0	
		Total for blouse	22	47	17	12	12	11	23	12	33	27	
		Total	76	134	86	46	71	65	90	68	108	103	
* 0 for 0-60 changes, 1 for 60-70, 2 for 70-80, 3 for 80-90, 4 for 90-100, 5 for >100.													
**0 for none, 1 for tas-tas, 2 for finer tas-tas, 3 for circles, 4 for triangles or squares, 5 for geometric labyrinths.													
***0 for none, 1 for awkward stitching, 2 for larges stitches that do not add to the design, 3 for neutral embroidery, 4 for embroidery that enhances the design, 5 for outstanding embroidery.													
****0 for 2 layers, 1 for 2 layers plus inserts, 2 for 2 layers plus localized middle layers and lines, 3 for 3 layers, 4 for 3 layers plus inserts, 5 for 4 layers.													
*****0 for no lines, 1 for small straight lines on top of motif, 2 for added lines in layering section, 3 for long applied Lines, 4 for very long straight lines, 5 for many of the above and/or includes lines with angles.													

Table 3: Analysis of Central Motif Category

The construction method for this type of mola panel permits the development of a central character and its subsequent fanciful embellishment. Restricting this discussion for the more typical three-layered design, the colors of the layers are chosen, choosing in fact four different colors likely within the selection mentioned above. Typically, a different color is used for the middle layer of each panel that makes up a single blouse. The outline of the character is cut from one of the colors chosen for the middle layer. Another color is also chosen for a middle layer. The character's outline, which had been previously cut, is placed on top as a template and is cut from the other middle layer color. The top layer is cut, using the middle layer as the pattern and making it just noticeably smaller so that the amount required for turning under is not greater than about one-sixteenth of an inch. The top layer of the area outside of the central motif on one panel can be the same color as the top layer of the central motif on the other panel, permitting the mola-maker to increase the visibility of colors without using additional fabric. In this way, nothing is wasted and yet optimal color arrangements are possible. At this point, therefore, the seamstress has four central shapes, two minimally larger than the other two. At this point also, the characters are usually of three different colors; two colors of the larger shape, typically green, orange or yellow; and one of the smaller size that is typically red or black. Sometimes, there will be two smaller sized characters of different colors, usually red and black when the top front and top back of the finished product are not the same.

If *tas-tas* of different colors is to be used within the central motif, differently colored squares of fabrics are basted to the middle layer. If the middle layer is expected to be visible at any point as *tas-tas*, no fabric is placed in that specific area. The top

layer of the central motif is stitched onto the middle layer, turning under one-sixteenth of an inch along the raw edge by running the sewing needle along the edge and then fingernail-pressing it in place. Stiff cotton poplin can be managed very effectively like this. Many of the fanciful embellishments in the form of appliqué and embroidery can be done at this point making it easier to handle because of the reduced amount of fabric being crushed in the hands. Lastly, the *tas-tas* lines are cut, again turning the raw edges under and then stitching in place. These background filler lines are most likely to be in the direction of the *tas-tas* used outside of the central motif, but this is not necessarily always the case. Also, typically, the lines are either vertical or horizontal, rarely diagonal and never chaotic.

The middle layer is then turned under along the raw edges, making sure that the middle edge is very narrow and consistent, and stitched to the bottom layer. Also, the middle layer of the surrounding area is the one color chosen to be the middle layer, whereas the middle layer of the central motif is the other color. This juxtaposition ensures the introduction of another color, hence complicating the visual effect.

If surrounding characters or shapes are incised through to the bottom layer, as is the case with DU1972.3 (see Figure 12), these are cut before the surrounding top and middle layers are stitched in place. Then the surrounding *tas-tas* is cut and stitched. Finally the surrounding figures are either stitched in or appliquéd on.

Further embellishment can be carried out on the central motif. We know that this happens, as some of the stitches are through all of the layers, including the bottom layer, however, in most cases most of the stitching has occurred before joining onto the bottom layer.

By making this template on which to base the designs of both front and back, a streamlined method for developing novel images has been facilitated. Once the motif has been cut out, the fanciful decorating can begin, often stacking and overlapping shapes and colors (see the bird of DU1972.10 in Figure 16). Embroidery is effectively yet minimally used and used only as decoration.

From the documentation (see Appendix, Table 11), it is apparent that these blouses also are typically shorter than blouses from other categories except those in the Labyrinthine Category: Naturalistic Style. Again, the motif must be higher up on the chest to be visible. Not wanting much of the design to be hidden behind the skirt, the length is shortened.

Sources for the designs that are used for this category are eclectic. They come from the imagination of the maker, from their natural environment, from within the Kuna communities and from printed materials that come from all parts of the world. They are often used in the spirit of humor or irony. Design sources are readily copied; yet remain idiosyncratic because of the many opportunities for embellishment and alterations of the embellishment. When we read of the negative effects that outside contact with non-Kuna people have had on mola blouse production due to the influx of non-Kuna motifs, it is this category of mola blouses that is being singled out, unbeknownst to the reporter. Ann Parker and Avon Neal show a number of these images, demonstrating the innovation and irony that is used within this category. In the late 1960's, the Peace Corps first became involved with the Kuna population and with them came many modern notions.¹⁴⁰ In this

¹⁴⁰ Tice, *Kuna Crafts, Gender, and the Global Economy*, 1995, 101.

central motif manner therefore we see images of brassieres¹⁴¹, electric fans¹⁴², *Tony the Tiger*, from cereal boxes¹⁴³, the Lion's Club emblem¹⁴⁴, and even the RCA Victor dog and victrola.¹⁴⁵ The list is endless and points to their use of this technique as a means of introducing novel images.

Artifact DU1972.283 (see Figure 18) is included in this category as it is built up using the same template method that the other mola panels use in this category. It is, however, highly structured and formulaic, approaching the style used in the Historic Category. No random background filler is used, nor are there small appliqués used to fill the corners. This panel highlights the fact that these two categories are closely linked, creating the historic motifs through repeated abstraction of the central motif. In carrying out the abstraction, frequently the motifs become highly stylized, repetitively used and physically connected.

Artifact DU1972.372 (see Figure 18) is included in this category as it uses the same manner of execution seen in the other mola panels. It is however a mythological creature in the Kuna tradition, which would typically relegate it to the Narrative category. It involves the dragon that eats the sun during the eclipse, and in this case shows an image of the dragon with the moon in its mouth. This story is often told in a narrative format, however, when it is it includes the slaying of the dragon by the village albino. Thus when told in the narrative manner the image is quite different as shown in Figure 49, a panel that is part of the Denison collection.

¹⁴¹ Ann Parker and Avon Neal, *Molas: Folk Art of the Cuna Indians*, (Barre, MA: Barre Publishing, 1977) 186.

¹⁴² Ibid, 1977, 187.

¹⁴³ Ibid, 1977, 236.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 1977, 236.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 1977, 240.

The ten mola blouses that belong in this category display a positive relationship when comparing the value of the panel and the blouse (see Table 3). Again, therefore, there are panels of higher design and technical value sewn into blouses of higher value. This relationship points out that this category warrants the added work and design detailing on the one hand, yet also indicates that high value is not implied or necessary, thus establishing that this category is used by stitchers of all abilities.



Figure 49: Mola Panel XX.128. The narrative format of the albino boy slaying the dragon as it is eating the moon during the eclipse.

Historic Category

This category of mola panels relies on patterns that have been derived generations ago and are faithfully repeated, both in their layout and color choice. The patterns are typically highly abstracted and formalized, and often repeated in such a manner that their identities are obscure. They usually represent items or animals familiar and of significance to the Kuna. Their repetition takes on a routine and traditional way of management, to the point that even the colors remain the same. The cutting and color choice are less revered because of this apparent duplication. There is no room for innovation, yet despite the duplication, this category of mola panel is highly regarded. Instead, these mola panels permit the display of stitching virtuosity, as typically they are intricate and complex. Michel Perrin talks about this type of mola panel and explains that the women regard them as depicting all that is Kuna and their collective heritage. They are called *sergan*, or grandmother molas, and demonstrate to them something that is more than “what is made up in the head.”¹⁴⁶

Several features make this style of mola panel easily identifiable. First of all, in many cases there are published images of other molas that illustrate the duplication of the design. Artifact DU1972.336 (see Figure 21) not only has exact replicas in panel form of both front and back (see Figures 47 and 48), different examples are included in Michel Perrin’s work, again showing the replication.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ Perrin, *Magnificent Molas: The Art of the Kuna Indians*, 1999, 97-100.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 1999, 104.

Accession #		1972.9	1972.284	1972.336	XX.114
Mola Panel					
Design	Level of difficulty	4	3	5	3
	Level of visibility:				
	- saturated colors	3	4	5	5
	- sharp edges	3	2	5	4
	- parallel repeats	5	4	5	4
	Use of entire panel space	5	3	4	4
	Centrally situated	5	5	0	0
	Subtle variation in symmetry	5	5	5	5
	Number of color changes*	5	2	5	3
	Background filler type**	0	0	0	0
	Embroidery***	0	0	0	0
Workmanship	Number of layers****	0	3	3	3
	Cutting:				
	- clean edges	4	3	5	4
	- top layer thin lines	5	3	5	3
	- middle layer finest	5	4	5	5
	- width of lines constant	5	4	5	4
	Sewing:				
	- small stitches	3	5	5	5
	- good color of thread	5	5	5	5
	- corners sharp	3	4	5	4
	Addition of lines*****	5	0	0	0
	Quality of background filler	0	0	3	0
	Quality of embroidery	0	0	0	0
	Quality of dientes	5	3	5	0
Total for panel		75	57	80	61
Mola Blouse					
Design	Colorful	3	2	5	5
	Added design in shoulderband	0	0	3	0
	Added design in sleeveband	3	1	2	0
	Added design in band above panel	3	2	5	5
	Added design in bottom band	3	0	4	0
	Above designs are related	4	1	3	0
	Other (e.g. decoration on seams)	0	0	0	0
Workmanship	Quality of cutting	4	2	5	2
	Quality of stitchwork	4	3	5	2
	Quality of band embellishments	4	2	5	2
	Quality of dientes, if present	5	0	5	3
Total for blouse		33	13	42	19
Total		108	90	122	79
* 0 for 0-60 changes, 1 for 60-70, 2 for 70-80, 3 for 80-90, 4 for 90-100, 5 for >100. **0 for none, 1 for tas-tas, 2 for finer tas-tas, 3 for circles, 4 for triangles or squares, 5 for geometric labyrinths. ***0 for none, 1 for awkward stitching, 2 for larges stitches that do not add to the design, 3 for neutral embroidery, 4 for embroidery that enhances the design, 5 for outstanding embroidery. ****0 for 2 layers, 1 for 2 layers plus inserts, 2 for 2 layers plus localized middle layers and lines, 3 for 3 layers, 4 for 3 layers plus inserts, 5 for 4 layers. *****0 for no lines, 1 for small straight lines on top of motif, 2 for added lines in layering section, 3 for long applied lines, 4 for very long straight lines, 5 for many of the above and/or includes lines with angles.					

Table 4: Analysis of Historic Category



Figure 50: Mola Panel DU1972.368. The panel demonstrates the repetitive nature of Mola Blouse DU1972.336 (see Figure 24).

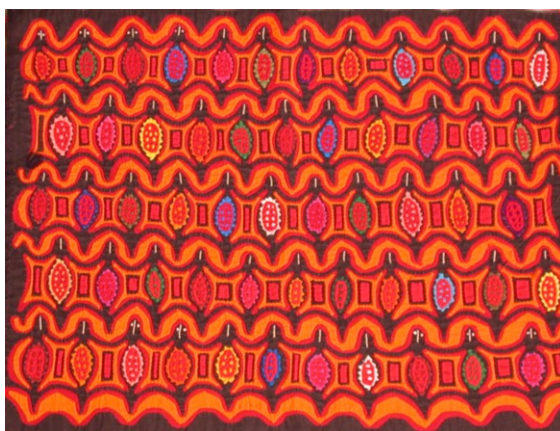


Figure 51: Mola Panel DU1972.1065. This panel again demonstrates the duplication seen on the other side of Artifact DU1972.336 (see Figure 24).

Artifact DU1972.9 (see Figure 22) is ostensibly a depiction of the sun and is repeated in Michel Perrin's book, including the placement of the serrated edges.¹⁴⁸

The remaining three have been included in this category due to their formalized arrangement and full use of the panel space without resorting to background fillers and appliquéd figures as is used in other categories. It is useful to look at some of the mola panels in the Denison collection, which epitomize the structure found in this category (see Figures 52, 53 and 54). The design covers the panel entirely in rhythmic repeats. However, when looking closely, it becomes evident that each component part has been carved out and appliquéd individually. Therefore, they each have their own little



Figure 52: Mola panel DU1972.299. It epitomizes the abstraction of form and the use of colors unlike those in other categories. Note as well the repetition of form and yet the subtle changes that exist within each pattern thus adding to the level of complexity. DU1972.299

¹⁴⁸ Perrin, *Magnificent Molas: The Art of the Kuna Indians*, 1999, 83.



Figure 53: Mola Panel DU 1972.321. An abstraction of a frog, this panel again exhibits the repetition of form and the unusual choices of colors not seen in other mola panels.



Figure 54: Mola Panel DU1972.356. This is an example of a *sergan* mola panel, that shows the abstracted form that is repetitively presented across the panel, unusual color choice and lack of background filler, all typical indications that this is an historic panel.

nuances. The colors in this category are quite different from the other categories, displaying muted colors, sometimes a range of shades, while creating a stunning final product. To be able to create visual treats of such variation indicates that the Kuna women have a sound knowledge of the way that color operates. The shapes are abstract interpretations of items of relevance to Kuna life. Figure 50, for example, depicts the abstracted version of a frog.

Ancestral mola panels are more likely to be constructed in a reverse appliqué fashion, that is to say, the layers of fabric, typically three, are stacked on top of each other and basted together along lines least likely to be disrupted during cutting. The top layer is cut and stitched, followed by the middle layer. To add complexity, one or more top layers of finer detailing are applied later. The cutting and sewing are precise and the final effect is wonderful. Typically, no embroidery is needed to complete the image. The complexity is sometimes deceiving. Figures 52, 53 and 54 are all of panels that have been constructed using only two layers. The other colors and shapes have been meticulously applied on top.

Curiously, examining the documentation data, mola blouses from the Historic Category are likely to be larger than the average mola blouse (see Appendix, Table 12). It is unclear whether this means that a different segment of the population is making these mola blouses or if they are typically worn longer in the waist.

Table 4 demonstrates somewhat of a positive relationship, although muddled at the lower end of the value scale. The small sample size leaves this issue somewhat irresolvable.

Narrative Category

The narrative category has been subdivided into images that relate to Kuna village life and the mythology that surrounds them, the Christian motif that became familiar to them with the arrival of the missionaries, and the style that has a village image on the one side and a Biblical scene on the other. The last style indicates that there is no separation in the minds of the Kuna between Christian stories and Kuna stories. In fact, the narrative style is used whenever a story of any kind is being relayed. Ann Parker and Avon Neal include images of the stories of *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* and *Puss –in-Boots*, all clearly done in the narrative style¹⁴⁹

The narrative style is often done in two layers, however, if a third layer is used, it is of little more significance than if only two were used. The top layer is typically red, whereas the bottom layer is usually black or navy blue. There are two ways of managing the space available for the storytelling. The top layer, and if there is a middle layer, can be cut away in a circular fashion or around the periphery, thus exposing the bottom layer on which to build the characters and set the stage for the story. Body shapes, foliage and furniture are added on top as dictated by the storyline, each object acquiring its own supporting middle layer as if existing in its own space. A sense of layering begins to take over the image. The middle layer, if there is one, is usually turned under showing a fine edge of color along the cut edge of the top layer. Often, other pieces of folded fabrics are also included giving the perception of many layers. These pieces are often not continuous; showing breaks and even changes of color, providing the clue that there is

¹⁴⁹ Parker and Neal, *Molas: Folk Art of the Cuna Indians*, 1977, 160 and 164.

Accession #		1972 4	1972 7	1972 290	1972 327	1972 343	1972 353
Mola Panel							
Design	Level of difficulty	2	4	4	5	5	4
	Level of visibility:						
	- saturated colors	3	3	5	4	5	3
	- sharp edges	2	3	2	3	4	2
	- parallel repeats	5	1	4	4	4	4
	Use of entire panel space	5	5	5	5	5	5
	Centrally situated	5	5	5	5	5	5
	Subtle variation in symmetry	3	4	5	5	5	5
	Number of color changes*	3	4	4	3	3	5
	Background filler type**	1	2	4	4	4	4
Workmanship	Embroidery***	2	3	3	1	5	2
	Number of layers****	3	3	3	2	3	3
	Cutting:						
	- clean edges	2	3	2	2	3	2
	- top layer thin lines	4	4	2	2	0	3
	- middle layer finest	3	5	4	3	5	3
	- width of lines constant	2	5	3	2	4	2
	Sewing:						
	- small stitches	3	5	4	1	3	2
	- good color of thread	5	5	5	3	5	3
	- corners sharp	1	2	2	2	3	4
	Addition of lines*****	4	2	4	4	4	5
	Quality of background filler	2	4	4	4	3	2
	Quality of embroidery	3	4	3	1	5	1
	Quality of dientes	0	0	3	0	3	5
Total for panel		66	76	70	65	86	74
Mola Blouse							
Design	Colorful	3	4	3	5	4	1
	Added design in shoulderband	2	5	1	5	5	1
	Added design in sleeveband	2	5	1	5	0	0
	Added design in band above panel	4	5	4	5	1	3
	Added design in bottom band	1	1	4	1	3	3
	Above designs are related	0	5	0	5	0	0
	Other (e.g. decoration on seams)	0	0	0	5	0	0
Workmanship	Quality of cutting	1	4	3	2	3	1
	Quality of stitchwork	1	4	3	2	3	1
	Quality of band embellishments	1	4	3	4	3	2
	Quality of dientes, if present	3	5	2	4	3	2
Total for blouse		18	42	24	43	25	14
Total		84	118	94	108	111	88
* 0 for 0-60 changes, 1 for 60-70, 2 for 70-80, 3 for 80-90, 4 for 90-100, 5 for >100. **0 for none, 1 for tas-tas, 2 for finer tas-tas, 3 for circles, 4 for triangles or squares, 5 for geometric labyrinths. ***0 for none, 1 for awkward stitching, 2 for larges stitches that do not add to the design, 3 for neutral embroidery, 4 for embroidery that enhances the design, 5 for outstanding embroidery. ****0 for 2 layers, 1 for 2 layers plus inserts, 2 for 2 layers plus localized middle layers and lines, 3 for 3 layers, 4 for 3 layers plus inserts, 5 for 4 layers. *****0 for no lines, 1 for small straight lines on top of motif, 2 for added lines in layering section, 3 for long applied Lines, 4 for very long straight lines, 5 for many of the above and/or includes lines with angles.							

Table 5: Analysis of Narrative Category: Village Style

Accession #		1972 287	1972 308	1972 326	1972 335	1972 355	1972 358	1972 365	1972 369	1972 378
Mola Panel	Design									
	Level of difficulty	4	1	3	4	2	5	5	5	5
Workmanship	Level of visibility:									
	- saturated colors	4	3	5	4	5	5	5	5	5
	- sharp edges	2	1	3	4	2	5	5	5	3
	- parallel repeats	3	3	4	0	3	0	4	4	4
	Use of entire panel space	5	2	4	5	5	5	5	5	5
	Centrally situated	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
	Subtle variation in symmetry	4	4	5	5	4	5	5	5	5
	Number of color changes*	5	4	4	4	3	5	3	5	4
	Background filler type**	2	1	3	2	1	2	3	3	1
	Embroidery***	1	1	1	3	1	5	3	3	3
	Number of layers****	4	3	3	4	3	3	3	2	2
	Cutting:									
	- clean edges	2	2	4	3	2	5	5	4	3
	- top layer thin lines	2	4	2	3	2	5	5	4	2
	- middle layer finest	2	3	3	2	2	5	5	4	2
	- width of lines constant	2	2	3	3	1	5	5	5	3
	Sewing:									
	- small stitches	1	0	4	4	2	5	4	5	1
	- good color of thread	4	2	4	4	4	5	4	4	4
	- corners sharp	3	2	2	3	2	5	5	4	2
	Addition of lines*****	5	5	5	0	5	0	5	5	4
	Quality of background filler	3	1	4	3	0	4	5	4	1
	Quality of embroidery	1	1	1	3	1	5	3	4	3
	Quality of dientes	3	4	0	0	0	5	5	5	2
Total for panel		67	53	72	68	53	94	97	95	69
Mola Blouse	Design									
	Colorful	4	2	5	4	2	5	2	4	4
Workmanship	Added design in shoulderband	1	1	5	4	1	5	1	1	0
	Added design in sleeveband	4	1	5	1	1	3	1	1	0
	Added design in band above panel	4	1	5	4	5	3	4	5	1
	Added design in bottom band	3	0	3	2	0	3	1	0	4
	Above designs are related	0	0	5	3	2	3	2	0	0
	Other (e.g. decoration on seams)	0	0	0	1	0	5	0	0	0
	Quality of cutting	3	3	4	3	3	5	3	3	2
	Quality of stitchwork	3	3	4	3	3	5	3	3	2
	Quality of band embellishments	3	2	4	3	5	4	3	3	1
	Quality of dientes, if present	0	0	4	3	0	5	4	0	0
Total for blouse		25	13	44	31	22	46	24	20	16
Total		92	66	116	99	75	140	121	115	85
* 0 for 0-60 changes, 1 for 60-70, 2 for 70-80, 3 for 80-90, 4 for 90-100, 5 for >100. **0 for none, 1 for tas-tas, 2 for finer tas-tas, 3 for circles, 4 for triangles or squares, 5 for geometric labyrinths. ***0 for none, 1 for awkward stitching, 2 for larges stitches that do not add to the design, 3 for neutral embroidery, 4 for embroidery that enhances the design, 5 for outstanding embroidery. ****0 for 2 layers, 1 for 2 layers plus inserts, 2 for 2 layers plus localized middle layers and lines, 3 for 3 layers, 4 for 3 layers plus inserts, 5 for 4 layers. *****0 for no lines, 1 for small straight lines on top of motif, 2 for added lines in layering section, 3 for long applied Lines, 4 for very long straight lines, 5 for many of the above and/or includes lines with angles.										

Table 6: Analysis of Narrative Category: Religious Style

Accession #		1972 312	
Mola Panel			
Design	Level of difficulty	4	
	Level of visibility:		
	- saturated colors	4	
	- sharp edges	4	
	- parallel repeats	4	
	Use of entire panel space	4	
	Centrally situated	4	
	Subtle variation in symmetry	4	
	Number of color changes*	4	
	Background filler type**	4	
	Embroidery***	0	
Workmanship	Number of layers****	0	
	Cutting:		
	- clean edges	3	
	- top layer thin lines	3	
	- middle layer finest	3	
	- width of lines constant	3	
	Sewing:		
	- small stitches	4	
	- good color of thread	3	
	- corners sharp	3	
	Addition of lines*****	4	
	Quality of background filler	4	
	Quality of embroidery	0	
	Quality of dientes	0	
Total for panel		66	
Mola Blouse			
Design	Colorful	2	
	Added design in shoulderband	1	
	Added design in sleeveband	0	
	Added design in band above panel	1	
	Added design in bottom band	2	
	Above designs are related	0	
	Other (e.g. decoration on seams)	0	
Workmanship	Quality of cutting	3	
	Quality of stitchwork	3	
	Quality of band embellishments	3	
	Quality of dientes, if present	0	
Total for blouse		15	
Total for panel		81	
<p>* 0 for 0-60 changes, 1 for 60-70, 2 for 70-80, 3 for 80-90, 4 for 90-100, 5 for >100.</p> <p>**0 for none, 1 for tas-tas, 2 for finer tas-tas, 3 for circles, 4 for triangles or squares, 5 for geometric labyrinths.</p> <p>***0 for none, 1 for awkward stitching, 2 for larges stitches that do not add to the design, 3 for neutral embroidery, 4 for embroidery that enhances the design, 5 for outstanding embroidery.</p> <p>****0 for 2 layers, 1 for 2 layers plus inserts, 2 for 2 layers plus localized middle layers and lines, 3 for 3 layers, 4 for 3 layers plus inserts, 5 for 4 layers.</p> <p>*****0 for no lines, 1 for small straight lines on top of motif, 2 for added lines in layering section, 3 for long applied Lines, 4 for very long straight lines, 5 for many of the above and/or includes lines with angles.</p>			

Table 7: Analysis of Narrative Category: Religious and Village Style

not a complete layer. Also, the raw edge impression can be seen inside the insertion, typically under the top layer. This technique of inserting other bits and pieces adds to the complexity of the piece and is somewhat confounding for the observer.

The other way of managing the layers for storytelling is by cutting a narrow frame, through the top and middle layers. The frame is narrow and does not excise out the central figures. Also, typically the central figures are not removed from the top layer, as is experienced with the Central Motif Category. Examining the Crucifixion in Artifacts DU1972.287, DU1972.326, DU1972.355 and DU1972.365 as well as the tree in Artifact DU1972.369 (see Figures 32, 34, 36, 38 and 39) it is clear that in none of the cases is the base of the cross or the base of the tree cut out of the top layer. The shapes have been cut around the sides and top of the cross and the tree, but the layers have been left intact. Around the shape, the bottom layer, and if there is a middle layer, has been exposed. Subsequent stacking of additional layers adds complexity. Also, two layers of parallel lines, the top layer narrower than the bottom layer, are appliquéd in place. This detail minimizes the visual effect of the bottom layer, yet adds a level of complexity, particularly if the parallel lines have angles and curves in them. It is here that the dexterity and expertise of the stitcher comes into play. Other figures are again appliquéd on top, typically with their own middle layer, demonstrating that they, too, are in a different space.

Artifact DU1972.308 (see Figure 33), depicting the Crucifixion, does cut around the cross, but certainly does not take advantage of the fact that there are additional layers

in place to use creatively. Instead, as is the case with all Narrative mola panels, additional lines are inserted, this time serrated edges of black and green and a smooth edge of yellow, to create the appearance of complicated layering.

The Narrative Category organizes space linearly and through the use of differing middle layers, typically using the entire space provided by the mola panel. Also, the story may continue from one panel to the other. For example, the Denison collection has a joined front and back mola panel with the sleeves and bodice missing, DU1972.366 (see Figures 55 and 56). Clearly, it could not be analyzed as if a complete mola blouse and yet the relationship is firmly established. This is an example of a death mola, with the body on one side and the transfer of the spirit, through the church, on the other. It is done in the narrative style and shows the relationship that front and back can have.



Figure 55: Part of a Mola Blouse DU1972.366. The death mola in the Narrative Category, this side showing the body.



Figure 56: Part of a Mola Blouse DU1972.366. This is the other side of Figure 55 showing the body in the church, with the spirits leaving the body.

Because mola panels in this category depict stories of relevance to the Kuna, the storyline from one mola blouse to another is often the same. Therefore, there are many that tell of the council meetings, celebration rituals, Bible stories, political elections, traditional myths and so on. However, although the storyline remains the same, there is room for experimentation and creativity. An example from within the Denison collection typifies the level of flexibility. The lunar creature is often depicted and one is as different as the next. Figure 57 is a mola panel from the collection and it can be compared to DU1972.353 (see Figure 31). Clearly, this design is not dogmatically replicated.



Figure 57: Mola Panel DU1972.289. The agouti in the center of the moon depicts the changing phases of the lunar cycle.

Background filler is an important aspect of panels in this category and seem to be perfected to a higher degree than is found amongst the panels in the Central Motif Category. Not only is *tas-tas* prevalent, but small circles with the raw edges turned in and squares and triangles with subsequent appliqué on top are also frequently seen. Few panels exist with no background filler, although occasionally it appears to be an ad hoc addition as is the case with Artifact DU1972.327 (see Figure 29).

The last outstanding feature of this category is the reliance on embroidery to complete the story. The stitches range from merely adding facial detailing and expression to the creative explosion provided in DU1972.358 (see Figure 37). It seems clear that the stitcher feels no restraint when embellishing mola panels in this category. Also, the technical abilities are outstanding, allowing the stitcher to fully exploit her

talents. The Denison collection also houses a set of joined panels, depicting music and dancing within the village context, which again points to the wonderful abilities and the different effects that she is able to create within the confines of this category (see Figure 58).



Figure 58: Mola Panel DU1972.354. Two mola panels, that are stitched together, illustrate the wonderful embroidery and ric-rac appliqué used to distinguish the different musicians and dancers.

Therefore, this category encourages playfulness and innovation in cutting and stacking of particularly the characters within the scene. Also, the maker is able to expose her innovation and technical skills through her embroidery. There is reduced creativity in the subject matter per se, but some creativity in the delivery.

From Tables 5, 6, and 7, it seems that the likelihood of a well designed and executed panel to be linked with a well designed and executed blouse is not as easily predicted. There appears to be more flexibility in this relationship, which seems curious as this is also the panel category that requires less preplanning and relies more on ad hoc cutting and placing of figures and pseudo-layering.

Other Results from the Analysis

During the documentation and analysis steps two mola blouses transcended the technical and creative boundaries established by the other mola blouses within the different categories. In fact, these two blouses seem to straddle two or more categories very effectively and for this reason have been placed in the Outstanding Category.

Artifact DU1972.316 (see Figure 42) has a two-layered panel that has been incised using the free-style labyrinthine method most closely aligned with the geometric style. Note the curly-esque shapes around the perimeter. In the center, parallel lines have been appliquéd in the manner of the Narrative Category. The figure feels spirited and certainly does not take on the formalized aspect that we saw in the Historic Category (see DU1972.283, Figure 18). Background filler is created with spots of color that we experienced in XX.114 in the Historic Category (see XX.114 Figure 25). The conscious borrowing from different categories must be very deliberate because the blouse that has been made to join these panels has been spared no effort. Embellishments at every juncture possible, and of the highest technical standard, make this blouse an outstanding example of art and craft. Also, interesting innovations have been added to this blouse, again pointing to its specialness. A short zipper has been included in the centerback and a purchased machine-embroidered appliqué, in the shape of a small blue rosebud, has been added to the fullness of one of the sleeves.

The other blouse of note is Artifact DU1972.337 (see Figure 43), which has been completed in the tradition of the Labyrinthine Category. However, it has been infused with a narrative story and yet divided into quadrants more typical of the Central Motif

Category. The effect is stunning and the color play is very sophisticated. The blouse and band treatments are also superb, creating again one of the standouts in the Denison collection.

The check list established for the purposes of understanding the different categories (see Tables 1-8) demonstrates that these two blouses are exemplary examples of the mola blouses created by the Kuna women.

This analytical tool was also established with the idea that a hierarchy might be uncovered within the categories, pointing out that one category might be more highly regarded than another. Mari Lyn Salvador, when asking the women to rank order the mola blouses that she was presenting to them, found that they were familiar with the idea of one mola blouse being better than another. She found that the women make blouses of different qualities for themselves depending on the occasion that they are making them for.¹⁵⁰ In the analysis of the mola panels and their blouses, we find that the more highly evaluated panel is also more likely to be sewn into a blouse of a higher caliber. Therefore, the women evaluated the panels and blouses in much the same fashion as this check list did. This corroboration is important, as we are hopefully analyzing the mola blouses from their perspective.

¹⁵⁰ Salvador, *Molas of the Cuna Indians: A Case Study of Artistic Criticism and Ethno-Aesthetics*, 1971, 141.

Accession #		1972.316	1972.337	
Mola Panel				
Design	Level of difficulty	5	5	
	Level of visibility:			
	- saturated colors	5	5	
	- sharp edges	4	5	
	- parallel repeats	5	5	
	Use of entire panel space	4	4	
	Centrally situated	5	5	
	Subtle variation in symmetry	5	5	
	Number of color changes*	2	3	
	Background filler type**	4	5	
	Embroidery***	0	3	
Workmanship	Number of layers****	0	1	
	Cutting:			
	- clean edges	5	5	
	- top layer thin lines	3	5	
	- middle layer finest	0	0	
	- width of lines constant	5	5	
	Sewing:			
	- small stitches	3	5	
	- good color of thread	5	5	
	- corners sharp	5	5	
	Addition of lines*****	5	0	
	Quality of background filler	3	5	
	Quality of embroidery	0	3	
	Quality of dientes	0	0	
Total for panel		73	84	
Mola Blouse				
Design	Colorful	5	5	
	Added design in shoulderband	5	5	
	Added design in sleeveband	3	3	
	Added design in band above panel	5	5	
	Added design in bottom band	4	5	
	Above designs are related	4	3	
	Other (e.g. decoration on seams)	3	2	
Workmanship	Quality of cutting	5	5	
	Quality of stitchwork	5	5	
	Quality of band embellishments	5	5	
	Quality of dientes, if present	5	5	
Total for blouse		49	48	
Total		122	132	
<p>* 0 for 0-60 changes, 1 for 60-70, 2 for 70-80, 3 for 80-90, 4 for 90-100, 5 for >100.</p> <p>**0 for none, 1 for tas-tas, 2 for finer tas-tas, 3 for circles, 4 for triangles or squares, 5 for geometric labyrinths.</p> <p>***0 for none, 1 for awkward stitching, 2 for larges stitches that do not add to the design, 3 for neutral embroidery, 4 for embroidery that enhances the design, 5 for outstanding embroidery.</p> <p>****0 for 2 layers, 1 for 2 layers plus inserts, 2 for 2 layers plus localized middle layers and lines, 3 for 3 layers, 4 for 3 layers plus inserts, 5 for 4 layers.</p> <p>*****0 for no lines, 1 for small straight lines on top of motif, 2 for added lines in layering section, 3 for long applied lines, 4 for very long straight lines, 5 for many of the above and/or includes lines with angles.</p>				

Table 8: Analysis of Outstanding Category

The other important fact that emerges through the use of this analytical tool, is that no one category is favored above another. There are good mola blouses and mola blouses that are not as successful within each category. It also becomes apparent during the analytic process that the more successful mola panels subsequently are sewn into a blouse of higher aesthetic value and better construction than a panel of reduced success. Thus, within each category, better panels receive a better blouse. Additionally, within each category, there are outstanding examples. This result is somewhat surprising, as it was expected that by using their own method of evaluation a ranking amongst the different categories would be uncovered. This is clearly not the case. The Kuna therefore know when they are planning or making an outstanding example and make the blouse accordingly, with no regard to the category of the mola panel. The only category where this relationship is not as definitive is the Narrative Category (see Table 5, 6, and 7), for reasons that are unclear, although, as suggested earlier, it does support its ad hoc characteristics.

CHAPTER 5

CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION OF MOLA PANEL DESIGNS

Through the documentation in Chapter 3 of the mola blouse collection housed at Denison University, we know that the blouses can be characterized to fit into specific categories based on the subject matter, the color choice and the number of layers. The categories were more clearly delineated by carrying out a careful analysis, in Chapter 4, that examined the design and how the design was managed, the subject matter and the method of creating the supporting design elements. Four categories were established, two that contain distinct sub-styles, due to the differences that could be distinguished within the categories. The methods used to establish the design differences were often extremely complex and yet fit into a predictable format.

At this point in the discussion, it becomes relevant to examine the use of layering in mola panel construction as well as in other areas of the Kuna experience. Also, looking at these categories from the perspective of their design is important if one is to understand the source of these designs and their relevancy for the Kuna people.

Mola panels provide some interesting issues for study, particularly as they are constructed by employing a unique method of decoration that is not only conceptually difficult but is also complicated to execute. No other cultural group uses reverse appliqué in its entirety, although some of the aspects have been developed by other ethnic

groups, notably that done by the Lahu of Myanmar.¹⁵¹ Additionally, the technique came about through European contact, yet evolved enough to become quintessentially Kuna. This phenomenon of altering borrowed technology has created an interesting juxtaposition of different cultural traditions and is worthy of documenting. William Sturtevant, for example, studied the shirts of Seminole men post European contact and found that their traditions were bound in the shirts worn by frontier men. However, frontier men entered the new world at different times and from different places, thus exposing the Seminole to shirts of different fashions. The cut of the Seminole shirts relied on the style of the European shirt as it was introduced, creating shirts of different typologies. Once adopted by the Seminoles, the shirts began to evolve independently, receiving embellishments based on their own aesthetic.¹⁵²

Lila O’Neale undertook a comprehensive study of the baskets made by the Yurok and Karok women of northwestern California. She characterized these baskets using different criteria, including the method of construction, their function and the type design embellishing the sides. Duplicating the form of a basket was often found to be of more value than introducing a new design because conventions made life easier for the weaver. This study involved an indigenous art/craft form that was minimally affected by European contact. She did find, however, that on occasion decisions were made regarding the addition of design elements, particularly when these additions would knowingly be more appreciated by whites and would then fetch a better price. These

¹⁵¹ Teena Jennings-Rentenaar, “Lahu textiles in the Denison Collection”, *Catalog of Myanmar Artifacts in the Denison Collection*, (Singapore: Singapore Press, in press).

¹⁵² William Sturtevant, “Seminole men’s clothing”, in *Essays on the Verbal and Visual Arts: Proceedings of the 1966 Annual Spring Meeting of the American Ethnological Society*, ed. June Helm, (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1967), 160-175.

decisions would be left to the discretion of the weaver and if she wanted to incorporate new designs, there were choices readily available within a range of traditionally established possibilities.¹⁵³ It is not difficult to extend this to an art/craft form that is newly introduced, as is the case with mola panel making. Inspiration and adoption of designs still comes from within and is determined in large part by what the maker already knows.

The Use of Layers

It is not difficult to imagine that the Kuna would choose to accomplish their decorative work through the layering of fabric colors. Layering, or rather, working down into the base, is the method used for much of their decorating, even before European contact, whether etching into their ceramics, gold plates or the outside of the gourds, or even creating designs into the skin. Wafer described how the women would paint bodies, making connecting images of birds, animals, people and plants all up and down the body. The images were fanciful representations of the flora and fauna around them. If the image was particularly successful, they would prick around the shape with a thorn until the area bled. Then, with their fingers dipped in pigment, they would rub the color into the design and render the design permanent.¹⁵⁴

Wini are beaded arm and leg bands, also a post-European contact invention similar to mola blouses. The beads are strung on a single strand, ordering the color of the beads in such a way that when they are wrapped around the legs or arms, a distinctive

¹⁵³ Lila O'Neale, "Yurok-Karok basket weavers", *American Archaeology and Ethnology* 32: 1932, 161-165.

¹⁵⁴ Wafer, *A New Voyage and Description of the Isthmus of America*, 1970, 137.

pattern much like the geometric labyrinthine pattern is created. The ordering of the beads requires careful calculations, bearing in mind that the circumference of the arm and leg change as one moves up, therefore affecting the placement of the beads. Layering of the pattern is therefore, conceptually, an important part of creating successful *wini*.¹⁵⁵

Sandra Smith, in describing the musical arts of the Kuna, found that they construct their panpipes in sets of two, three or six parts to be split among two or more players. They combine their sounds, supplying tones in different pitches. Paired panpipes use bamboo tubes of fourteen different lengths, one incrementally shorter than the next. Each panpipe is made up of seven tubes, alternating the selection back and forth, so that the entire range has been subdivided equally and one set is entirely one step longer in each of the pipes. The slightly different pitch is further separated by having the one player entering first and the other one following. Add to this, differences in intensity and corresponding dance motifs, the final result is a very vital and exciting performance. Smith likens the layering of the sound, the swirling motion and changes in intensity to the layers and concentric shapes in mola panel making.¹⁵⁶

The supernatural realm is also depicted as existing in layers. The Kuna believe that both heaven and earth are composed of eight layers. When a person dies, they travel through the layers of earth, starting from the bottom, revisiting all of their transgressions over the span of their lifetime. If all goes well they will move into the eight heavenly layers. Nordenskiöld drew a diagram based on the instructions of a Kuna, demonstrating

¹⁵⁵ Salvador, "Looking back: Contemporary Kuna women's arts." *The Art of Being Kuna: Layers of Meaning Among the Kuna of Panama*, 1997, 163.

¹⁵⁶ Sandra Smith, "The musical arts of the Kuna." *The Art of Being Kuna: Layers of Meaning Among the Kuna of Panama*, 1997, 299, 300 and 307.

the eight earthly levels, the eight invisible heavenly levels, and the arc above the heavens where the sun and moon travel (see Figure 59). As well, a hole is left in the heavenly arc where a *nele* once crawled out.¹⁵⁷

Clearly, the Kuna were comfortable with the notion of layers. Their worldview takes on this perspective as well as some of their art/craft forms. Thinking in layers while making their mola panels and anticipating the final visual effect that they are attempting to create, although conceptually difficult, makes more sense when we realize that this is the way they think on a number of fronts. This helps to explain their choice of layering cloth, but mola making evidently requires making more decisions. From the analysis, we know that there are separate mola categories based on style, color choice, technique and subject matter. If what Lila O’Neal found to be true amongst the Yurok

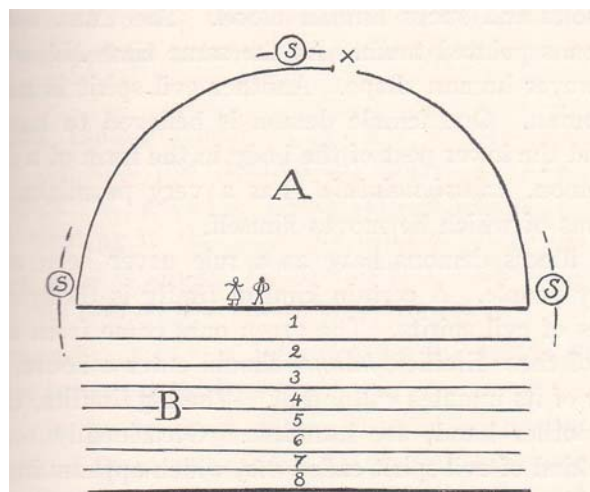


Figure 59: The Kuna’s layered world. Reprinted from Erland Nordenskiöld, *An Historical and Ethnological Survey of the Cuna Indians*, (Goteborg, Sweden: Goteborgs Museum, Etnografiska Avdelningen, 1938), 357.

¹⁵⁷ Nordenkiöld, *An Historical and Ethnological Survey of the Cuna Indians*, 1938, 356-357.

and Karok also applies to the Kuna, namely that one makes design decisions based on what one knows, then examining creative techniques in other media may help in uncovering what separates the categories. Creative traditions before European contact are particularly relevant in this discussion.

Evidence for Labyrinthine Designs

Clyde Keeler points to the descriptions by Lionel Wafer in 1699, where he writes, “They make figures of Birds, Beasts, Men, Trees, or the like, up and down in every part of the Body, more especially the Face: But the Figures are not extraordinary like what they represent, and are of differing Dimensions, as their Fancies lead them.” From this, Keeler supposes that the original inspiration for the naturalistic labyrinthine style comes from the Kuna body painting traditions.¹⁵⁸

Wafer also describes that the women often wore very little, but sometimes wore lengths of cotton fabric that they wrapped around the waists (see Figure 60).¹⁵⁹ At that time they grew, spun and wove their own cotton cloth as described by Wafer.¹⁶⁰ The cotton cloth was typically left undyed; however Nordenskiöld does write of the teaching of Ibeorgun, when he talks of the various plant dyes available and also the presence of different colored clays to be used for pots of different colors. Cotton threads could be placed in these different clays and thus take on different colors.¹⁶¹ Clearly, therefore, color was of significance to the Kuna.

¹⁵⁸ Wafer, *A New Voyage and Description of the Isthmus of America*, 1903 Reprint of 1699 original edition, 136; Keeler, *Cuna Indian Art*, 1969, 37.

¹⁵⁹ Wafer, 1903 reprint of 1699 original edition, 137.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 1970, 153.

¹⁶¹ Nordenskiöld, *An Historical and Ethnological Survey of the Cuna Indians*, 1938, 135.



Figure 60: Early depiction of the Kuna women as included in Lionel Wafer's diary. Reprinted from Lionel Wafer, *A New Voyage and Description of the Isthmus of America*, (Cleveland, OH: The Burrows Brothers Co., 1903, Reprinted from the original edition of 1699), 136.

By 1868, the Kuna women were wearing short-sleeved chemises that went down to their knees, demonstrating the influence of the Europeans around them. They were made of plain fabric, usually blue, and had a band sewn around the bottom. The wrap-around cotton skirt remained, and was worn under the chemise. The bottom edge was decorated with a geometric and interlinking design, usually painted on in blue.¹⁶²

Labyrinthine geometric patterning is a natural consequence of strip basket weaving, an art/craft form practiced by the men. They incorporated designs using dyed strips, highlighting the interlinking geometric shapes.¹⁶³ Nordenskiöld includes a photograph of a blue, red and yellow beaded bib-like accessory that was worn over the

¹⁶² Lucien DePuydt, "Account of scientific explorations in the Isthmus of Darien in the years 1861 and 1865," 1869, 97; National Museum of the American Indian Artifact #20/4531.

¹⁶³ Wafer, *A New Voyage and Description of the Isthmus of America*, 1903 Reprint of 1699 original edition, 153.

breast. It repeats a geometric labyrinthine design, much as the *wini* do when they are in their intended position on the lower arm or leg (see Figure 61).¹⁶⁴ Also, a photograph shows a woman wearing a longish untucked mola blouse, clearly decorated in a geometric labyrinthine style, dating to 1927 (see Figure 62).¹⁶⁵ Therefore, there is ample evidence that the Kuna appreciated the design potential of the labyrinthine category. Both styles, the naturalistic and the geometric, were important early on in the mola-making tradition and may well have been the original type of design.

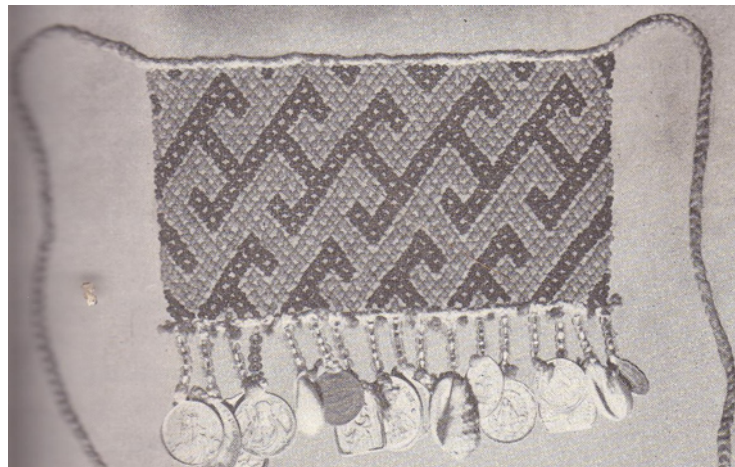


Figure 61: Decoration of blue, yellow and red beads worn on the breast. Reprinted from Erland Nordenskiöld, *An Historical and Ethnological Survey of the Cuna Indians*, (Goteborg, Sweden: Goteborgs Museum, Etnografiska Avdelningen, 1938), 521.

¹⁶⁴Nordenskiöld, *An Historical and Ethnological Survey of the Cuna Indians*, 1938, 521.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 1938, 507.

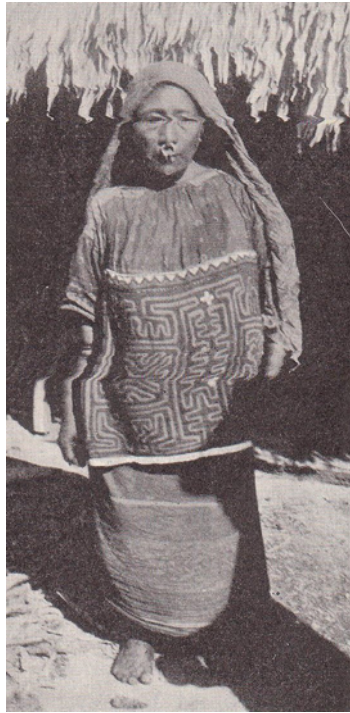


Figure 62: Kuna woman wearing the long mola over her skirt. This image dates to 1927. Reprinted from Erland Nordenskiöld, *An Historical and Ethnological Survey of the Cuna Indians*, (Goteborg, Sweden: Goteborgs Museum, Etnografiska Avdelningen, 1938), 507.

Evidence for Central Motifs

The knowledge that we have of pre-Columbian style relies heavily on archaeological finds. This is true of the Kuna, yet, as stated earlier; their cultural origin is somewhat unclear. Helms has concluded through the study of pre-Columbian ceramics and metallurgy and subsequent comparisons with contemporary Kuna design, that,

although it is difficult to state with certitude the direct lineage of the Kuna through archaeological finds, enough similarities exist to suggest a common pre-Columbian heritage.¹⁶⁶

Central motifs have been uncovered that demonstrate the vital roles that they play in Kuna traditions. Some of these are formed so that their body shape is used as their exterior shape making delightful creatures with which to share their space.¹⁶⁷ Often this category is expressive of current events that influence them and cause them to create symbolic representations of the players. Carved wooden *uchus* are a wonderful example of this type of motif, a tradition that carries on today. Figures 63 and 64 show examples of *uchus* that depict the arrival of early Europeans, clearly illustrating the fashion of the day. Denison University also has a wonderful *uchu* of General MacArthur, standing over five feet tall. The creation of these kinds of central motifs was driven less by traditional motifs and more by the events of the day and the need to express and describe them.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ Mary Helms, *Cuna Molas and Cocle Art Forms: Reflections on Panamanian Design Styles and Symbols*, (Philadelphia, PA: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1981), 2.

¹⁶⁷ Lothrop, *Pre-Columbian Designs From Panama: 591 Illustrations of Cocle Pottery*, (New York, NY: Dover Publications, Inc, 1976), 97 and 100.

¹⁶⁸ Denison Collection, Granville, OH.



Figure 63: Wooden *uchus* depicting people in European dress. Spiritual significance is attached to the *uchu* and yet their fashionability is worth noting. From the Denison Collection: DU1972.50 and DU1972.52.



Figure 64: Early wooden *uchus*, again showing the peculiarities of the newcomers. These carvings are not of Kuna and again demonstrate the storytelling associated with them. Reprinted from Erland Nordenskiöld, *An Historical and Ethnological Survey of the Cuna Indians*, (Goteborg, Sweden: Goteborgs Museum, Etnografiska Avdelningen, 1938), 425.

The Kuna also have a longstanding tradition in metallurgy, creating large gold plates that they wear around their foreheads or necks, in addition to nose rings and finger rings (see Figure 65). Helms has used the archaeological evidence to establish the common themes and design features of the gold plates and the mola panels. There are many similarities that include the figures and motifs used and their placement within their space, both with respect to the space allotted and to each other, if more than one figure is included.¹⁶⁹



Figure 65: Pre-Columbian figured pendant. Reprinted from Armand Labbe, *Guardians of the Life Stream: Shamans, Art and Power in Prehispanic Central Panama*, (Santa Ana, CA: Bowers Museum of Cultural Arts, 1995), 101.

Helms has taken it one step further, however. She suggests that these mola panels, and their pre-Columbian counterparts, serve as a visual memory of events and information. She explains that this may be extended to contemporary mola panels that depict Western-derived themes. The Kuna attempt to traditionalize these themes, thus

¹⁶⁹ Helms, *Cuna Molos and Cocle Art Forms: Reflections on Panamanian Design Styles and Symbols*, 1981, 23-43.

putting them into their memory and lexicon, by making them fit into the established contexts and formulas, as they understand them.¹⁷⁰ Walter Ong, on the other hand, suggests that, by going through the exercise of converting the Western image to one that fits within their design parameters, the Kuna are relating to the Western world and in fact allowing them to be more flexible and understanding of the changes that are happening around them.¹⁷¹

The gold plates hold a great deal of interest for us, in that they are typically shaped in the form of a central character, are easily rendered and have designs etched into the top surface. Not only have these been found in a pre-historical context, the Kuna women still wear them today. The Kuna no longer makes gold plates, however, they are passed down from generation to generation.¹⁷²

Central motifs also find their way into the central field of an artifact, not therefore taking on the shape of the motif itself (see Figure 66). This type of central motif is of great significance to mola-makers. The design is rendered quickly, with a remaining outside field that may or may not be decorated. Of course, for a mola panel to be successful, it is always decorated. The central motif is also the dominant feature of the item. Mary Helms successfully links the mola panel central motif with the central motif found in ceramics. She also shows that the central motif can be delivered in a number of different formats, singly, bilaterally repeated and repeated in four quadrants.¹⁷³

¹⁷⁰ Helms, *Cuna Molas and Cocle Art Forms: Reflections on Panamanian Design Styles and Symbols*, 1981, 70.

¹⁷¹ Walter Ong, "World as view and world as event," *American Anthropologist* 71, 634-647, 1969, 641.

¹⁷² Salvador, "Contemporary Kuna women's arts," 1997, 163.

¹⁷³ Helms, *Cuna Molas and Cocle Art Forms: Reflections on Panamanian Design Styles and Symbols*, 1981, 23-43.



Figure 66: Pre-Columbian bowl with crab motif. Notice the recurring crab theme comparing the bowl to the contemporary gold pendants in Figure 70. Reprinted from Armand Labbe, *Guardians of the Life Stream: Shamans, Art and Power in Prehispanic Central Panama*, (Santa Ana, CA: Bowers Museum of Cultural Arts, 1995), 53.

Evidence for Historic Motifs

Samuel Lothrop's book of illustrations depicts the painted motifs from ceramics found in Cocle, a province of central Panama. These finds are from an indigenous culture that existed at the time of the Spanish Conquest. The relevance to the study of mola blouses is simply that it points to the successful abstraction of motifs carried out over time.

From the study of the mola blouses in the Denison collection, it is clear that the Central Motif Category is closely linked with the Historic Category (see Figure 18). Also, the motifs are recognizable to the Kuna, and typically carry names known throughout the community. These mola blouses are called *sergan*, meaning ancestral. Over time their format has changed from being representational to more stylized, still following the internalized aesthetic rules that their ancestors followed. They are not always easy to identify by outsiders. For example, the historic mola panel depicting frogs is not as easily identified as the mola panel of the dancing turtles (see Figures 53 and 50). The images from Lothrop's book demonstrate the steps used in abstraction and, although not directly applicable to the Kuna, nevertheless it does indicate that these methods were carried out in the region (see Figures 67, 68, 69 and 70).¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁴ Perrin, *Magnificent Molas: The Art of the Kuna Indians*, 1999, 97.



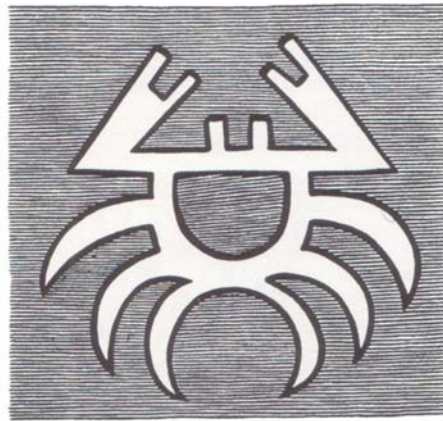
Figure 67: Pre-Columbian ceramic designs demonstrating examples of abstraction. a) depicts the dancing bird, notice the feet. The feet are used again down the midline; b) a face is included with the bird's feet across the midline; c) the bird's feet again with an abstracted form of the face from b). Reprinted from Samuel Lothrop, *Pre-Columbian Designs from Panama: 591 Illustrations of Cocle Pottery*, (New York, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1976), 8 and 9.



a



b



c

Figure 68: Abstraction of the crab motif: a) a somewhat realistic form of a crab and a scorpion; b) the crab simplified with bird's feet; c) an abstracted form of the crab which would be repeated across the entire panel in the Historic Category if it were to be used in that format. Reprinted from Samuel Lothrop, *Pre-Columbian Designs from Panama: 591 Illustrations of Cocle Pottery*, (New York, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1976), 17, 88 and 72.



a



b

Figure 69: Abstraction of a single element. The legs of the bird in a) have been extracted and simplified to become the four sinuous elements in b). Reprinted from Samuel Lothrop, *Pre-Columbian Designs from Panama: 591 Illustrations of Cocle Pottery*, (New York, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1976), 95 and 107.



a



b

Figure 70: Abstraction and connection of figures. a) single bird-like figure; b) the figures connected as is often seen in the Historic Category (see Figure 51). Reprinted from Samuel Lothrop, *Pre-Columbian Designs from Panama: 591 Illustrations of Cocle Pottery*, (New York, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1976), 22 and 23.

Evidence for Narrative Traditions

The Denison University has within its collection pictographic manuscripts that relate closely to the pictograph script of the Kuna. The Kuna do not possess a written language, rather they write in the form of little images that follow lines across a page. The manuscripts are more complex and are typically written by the traditional chieftains and medicine men. They detail a specific event, with different figures and shapes included to extend the meaning. Figure 71 depicts the “Journey of the Soul.” The relationship to the Narrative Category is clear. The circle draws the frame, in this case heaven with the crowned deity, within which the notable activity occurs. This is not unlike the mola panels that have used the bottom layers to create a frame around the activity (see Figure 28). The body sizes are not related or proportional and the shapes are flat. Perspective is not an important aspect of the design. Also, shapes and forms seem to be added ad hoc, as the storyline develops. Local flora and fauna embellish the image, much as they would fill in the surrounding area if it were a mola panel.¹⁷⁵

The “Creation Story” (see Figure 72) shows the crowned deity above, with all of the leaders at a table below. Funeral barges are removing the evil spirits. The entire space is framed, similar to the framing seen in some of the Crucifixion mola panels, (see Figure 32). Included in the image is the local flora and fauna and stylized human forms that are flat and lack perspective, again not unlike the mola panels, for example the image of the Annunciation or St. Francis of Assisi (see Figure 35)).

¹⁷⁵ Steven Rosen, *Art and Artifacts of the San Blas Cuna: An Exhibition from the Denison University Collection*, 1972, 15.



Figure 71: Manuscript depicting “The Journey of the Soul.” DU1973.157.



Figure 72: Manuscript depicting “The Creation Story.” DU1973.152.



Figure 73: Manuscript depicting “The Flood.” DU1973.155.

The last manuscript depicts the flood (see Figure 73), and it is easy to see the similarities with the mola panel depicting the flood (see Figure 40). Clearly, the narrative tradition in mola-making parallels the narrative tradition in picture-writing.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁶Rosen, *Art and Artifacts of the San Blas Cuna: An Exhibition from the Denison University Collection*, 1972, 17.

Summary

From the documentation and analysis of the mola blouses housed in the gallery at Denison University, the conclusion can be drawn that they fall into distinct categories, based on their design, their color choice and the technique used to create the design. By examining artifacts and evidence from both pre-and post-European contact, it becomes apparent that the categories have their roots in different art/craft traditions, thus supporting the differences in technique that exist. These varying origins serve to tell different stories or to share different visual experiences. They also help to support the art/craft interplay, providing increased opportunities for developing and demonstrating varying skill levels as well as the forum to create innovatively.

CHAPTER 6

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

By carrying out a thorough literature review, several facts and conditions were established. This was followed by an itemized documentation and an analysis that included a system for establishing the level of design and technical skill for each mola blouse based on the criteria that Kuna women prize. The documentation and analysis enabled categorization of the mola blouses based in large part on the qualities presented by the panels through their design, style, color choice, technique and subject matter. Understanding that this part of the Kuna costume and its method of manufacture resulted from contact with Europeans and that it was not indigenous to the culture, it is also important to consider that the aesthetic sensibilities are Kuna derived. There is an underlying implication, therefore, that the various categories of mola blouses came out of different, pre-Columbian design traditions. Examining the evidence from both the pre- and early post-contact time period, provided many examples to conclude that different art/craft traditions supplied the impetus for the separate mola blouse categories.

Through the careful documentation and analysis of the Kuna mola blouses housed in the Denison University Burke Hall Gallery of Art another crucial goal has been achieved. By employing these mola blouses for this study, the relevance of using material culture that, in this case has been carefully housed and maintained for the past

thirty-five years, has been demonstrated. By extension, therefore, it can be assumed that much information remains to be gleaned from museum holdings around the world. The ability to increase our knowledge of material culture and, hence, the people who created it, through the deliberate and careful examination of collections should not therefore be minimized.

Summary of the Literature Review

The literature review uncovered the importance of the mola blouse as a Kuna identifier, so much so, that mola making has become part of the myths that surround Kuna origin and life patterns. Myths speak of God instructing the women to sew, consequently compelling the women to continue this tradition today. The men sing of the women stitching. Women's family responsibilities and sororities further enable and entrench the time-consuming effort of mola making. They are responsible for clothing themselves, their daughters and their mother, should she no longer be able to stitch her own.

Documentation and Analysis of the Mola Blouses

Through close examination of the mola panels, it can be concluded that different methods, different color palettes, different styles and different subject matter serve to group them into different categories – the Labyrinthine Category, the Central Motif Category, the Historic Category and the Narrative Category.

The Labyrinthine Category further divides into two subcategories – the naturalistic style and the geometric style. Both use two layers of highly saturated colors,

often complementary, to create an image of stunning vitality and vibration. The naturalistic style exhibits a high level of creativity and innovation, using a freestyle cutting technique that requires outstanding conceptualization skills. The geometric style requires a high level of technical virtuosity, as a slip with the scissors would destroy the intended effect.

The Central Motif Category requires a single subject that is placed singly, bilaterally or in four quadrants on each panel, each repeat slightly different from the others, thus increasing the complexity of the design. Subject matter is entirely open, the more creative the better, permitting the mola-maker to use her imagination and her sense of humor. Technically, she would first create a template and reuse the template three times to ensure duplication, requiring reduced virtuosity. Using middle layers of different color, sometimes even top layers of different colors, and switching them from side-to-side heighten the sense of complexity. Thus the middle layer of the area inside the motif would be a different color from the middle layer outside the motif. Easily modified appliqué and embroidery is added, again using a sense of creativity. Background filler and corner appliqués are added to again increase the perceived level of complexity. Inserting pieces of colored fabric, giving the illusion of more layers, is also an easy technique used to confound the viewer. Colors used are typically red, orange, yellow, green and a layer of black.

The Historic Category uses smaller, abstracted motifs that are doggedly reproduced from generation to generation. Even color selection, which is typically more subtle and varied in this category, is duplicated with every replication. This category presents designs that are intricate and complicated, indicating technical virtuosity.

The Narrative Category is subdivided into village, religious and village/religious styles by virtue of the subject matter depicted. Regardless, these panels tell stories, and the fact that a mola-maker placed a religious image and a village image on panels intended for the same blouse indicates that there is little distinction between the two. Sometimes two layers are used, sometimes more, but the number of layers does not affect the final outcome. The story is told incrementally, adding figures to the stage that is set by cutting a line down to the bottom layer. Additional colors are added by inserting pieces of fabric, simulating additional layers. The narrative technique is highly innovative, yet permits the mola-maker to show technical virtuosity with her embroidery needle.

The Outstanding Category displays mola blouses that take elements from more than one category, often from several categories if the two mola blouses in this study are any indication. The result is a pair of panels that have taken both designing and technical wizardry to new heights. These panels are joined with blouse design and stitchery that are superlative in every way. Clearly, these blouses are outside of the norm, and the women that take on such a project understand that they are doing something special. This avenue is obviously open to them should they have the skills to carry out their responsibility to this category.

Through the evaluation system developed for use while analyzing the mola blouses, some additional facts emerge. The women placed equal emphasis on the panel and the blouse. If the stitcher had the capabilities or had an upcoming event that warranted the very best blouse that she could make, she would make a blouse that would measure up to the caliber of the panel or vice versa. Also, no one category deserved a

yoke and sleeve addition of higher caliber than all the others. There was, therefore, no one category that can be considered to be superior to another, excluding the outstanding category. There were excellent mola blouses in each of the categories, and some that were not so wonderful. It follows, therefore, that one skill is not more revered than another skill. The innovative designer and the skillful stitcher are therefore equally validated.

Archaeological and Historical Evidence Related to Mola Panel Categories

Kuna mola blouses present one idiosyncrasy: this art/craft is not indigenous. The making of mola blouses relied on European contact and a continuous supply of European goods. The Kuna drew on what they already knew and loved to design the pattern for the mola panels. Although there is a paucity of evidence, by using the archaeological finds and images from early reports, a picture emerges of different art/craft traditions that shape the categories developed by the Kuna. The different techniques used to execute the panels were the best method possible to achieve the look of the original inspiration. From early written accounts, it seems quite likely that the Labyrinthine Category: Naturalistic Style developed directly from the body painting done prior to European contact. Likely the Geometric Style had also been used for body embellishment, however we have physical evidence of it also being used as a painted design along the bottom edge of the wrap-around lower body covering. Later, we see the patterns in beadwork used as leg and arm wrappings and breast coverings. We know, too, that the men made plaited baskets with colored materials to create designs that would inevitably take on geometric patterns. Central motifs were important in ceramics, wood carving and

gold chest plates. These innovative designs were easily adjusted to fit the mola making conventions. The central motifs were also abstracted, using highly visible characteristics that were optimized and highlighted, while simplifying other details, until they had a repeatable design that could be joined endlessly. These abstracted forms were evident in applied designs on ceramics. They could certainly be easily formatted to fit within the mola making constraints and to ultimately create the Historic panels. Finally, the Narrative Category appears to come directly from the pictorial form of script and the manuscripts created by the chiefs to tell the Kuna story. It is also interesting to see that the Christian message was so readily absorbed into Kuna culture and storytelling, so much so that even the more contemporary mola blouses include images where the two mesh intimately. Evidently, from the technique used, the Kuna stories and Christian stories have equal narrative importance.

Mola Blouses in the Art/Craft Tradition

The comprehensive literature review reveals that all societies partake in some aesthetic behavior. Although, among mankind in general there is no unifying feature, the prevailing art/craft does serve to identify and unify a single cultural group. Ray Crozier has established different societal needs that are fulfilled through the creation of art and craft and he has itemized these needs, all of which may or may not apply to each specific unit. These requirements have been listed previously, yet are worth repeating again.

They are as follows:

1. The art/craft is a social identifier, giving those within and without the community a sense of place and belonging. By extension, therefore, art/craft

can also be what separates by establishing boundaries and controlling social interaction. This is typically accomplished through the use of a style that is recognizable.¹⁷⁷

2. The art/craft operates on an individual level as well. It can establish self worth and individuality. This can be accomplished through innovation or virtuosity.¹⁷⁸ The art/craft activities are used as a means of validating the abilities of all participants in the community by championing both innovation and virtuosity.

3. The art and craft is sensitive to the traditions, history and mythology of the community. By supporting the traditional art/craft, the community is validating the elders as well.¹⁷⁹

4. By incorporating images of the landscape, including familiar flora and fauna, one establishes a sense of place. These images often provide inspiration for subsequent innovation, permitting the observer to participate through efforts of recognition, providing again a sense of engagement and belonging.

Mola-making satisfies each of these. The easily recognizable mola blouse serves to separate the Kuna women from all those that are not Kuna. Innovation is not only revered, there are different kinds of innovation – innovation of design created through cutting, innovation of a central motif and innovation of character placement in the Narrative Category. Technical virtuosity is also highly respected and it comes in various forms – cutting skill of the Geometric Labyrinthine Category, the cutting and sewing

¹⁷⁷ Crozier, *Manufactured Pleasures: Psychological Responses to Design*, 1994, 33 and 85.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 1994, 105.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 1994, 114.

abilities demonstrated with the historic panels and the embroidery that is included in the narrative panels. Historic mola blouses serve to validate the patterns used by the elder Kuna women, whereas the narrative panels serve to keep the mythology and village stories alive. Religious stories are also promulgated through the use of the narrative panels. The flora and fauna are depicted in the Naturalistic Labyrinthine Category as well as the Narrative Category, and somewhat in the Central Motif Category, thus establishing a sense of place.

The Art/Craft Interplay

Roe explains the art and craft interplay as a method of validating the various skills within the community. Some of the members may be better at being innovative and creative, while others are experts at some of the technical skills required. The art/craft interplay also serves to keep the activity vital. Sameness can create boredom, if innovation is not injected. Yet, too much innovation results in a loss of skill and hence integrity. The system implicitly knows what it needs to survive and the pressure is applied through censure or approval by the participating members.¹⁸⁰

The success of the art/craft interplay becomes exceedingly important when every member must participate, as is the case with Kuna women. We have seen that in Kuna society there is an understanding that every woman must sew mola blouses for herself, her daughters and her mother. This implication can only hold if every woman is satisfied with her outcome and if she is receiving approval from her peers, regardless where the

¹⁸⁰ Roe, "Style, Society, Myth and Structure," 1995, 28.

dictate comes from. Everyone's skills and abilities differ, and to keep everyone satisfied with the results these varying attributes must be rewarded. This becomes possible if there are options, as is the case with the various categories of mola panels.

The different types of skills and creativity that each category calls on further supports the separation of the panels based on original inspiration, a process that supports the concept of an art/craft interplay. When this occurs the system is in balance, and this balance goes on to perpetuate the art/craft form. This notion of balance is supported by the analysis carried out in this study. All categories receive the same amount of respect. There are mola blouses within each category that are done well and there are mola blouses that are not done as well. We know that the women understand the caliber of each panel that they make and make a blouse of similar caliber. It would seem that if one category intrinsically had a higher level of prestige, both the blouse and the panel would reflect this higher evaluation and there would be no blouses in this category that would not measure up. By carrying out the analysis of the mola blouses in this study, it can be seen that there are blouses reflecting a broad range of quality within each category. There is therefore no hierarchy amongst the categories.

Implications of this Study

Mari Lyn Salvador noticed, when carrying out her research, that some women build their panels up from the bottom, rather than cutting down from the top.¹⁸¹ From this study, we now know that to be the case for some categories. We also know that only with the geometric labyrinthine category do we have the method that most closely

¹⁸¹ Salvador, *Molas of the Cuna Indians: A Case Study of Artistic Criticism and Ethno-Aesthetics*, 1971, 128.

resembles what we have always considered “reverse appliqué” to be, that is, a cutting down from the top once all of the layers are in place, turning under the raw edges and stitching. Likely, the more correct technical label for this technique is “appliqué.”

There are a number of issues that arise out of this study that warrant further examination. Karin Tice explains that a mola cooperative, known as Los Productores de Molas, came out of a project organized by the American Peace Corps in 1967. The intent was to provide women with an income-generating device.¹⁸² The mola blouses in the Denison University Collection were all collected prior to this time. Has the presence of the cooperative affected the categories?

Would a larger sampling of mola blouses, from any given time, help to establish where along the art/craft interplay the community resides? Is the position before the time of the cooperative different from today and for what reason is the position changed?

Are there other small scale societies that display the art/craft interplay? Clearly, in the interest of retaining vital societies, yet with the resources to live productive and enriched lives, this information is worth seeking out.

Implications of this Study Outside of Kuna Yala

The globalization of the world economy has made it imperative for communities that hope to stay vital, to base their own economies more on a capitalistic system. Often this means that they must rely more on foreign currencies. To do so, they must develop a commodity that the rest of the world wants and often this becomes that very art/craft that identifies them as a distinct community. Engaging in activities that formerly helped the individual gain recognition and prestige within the community, for monetary rewards

¹⁸² Tice, *Kuna Crafts, Gender, and the Global Economy*, 1995, 101.

changes the activity. The art/craft interplay that had ensured that the activity not only remained vital, but also ensured the vitality of the community becomes distorted. Brian Backe, marketing director of SERVV, a fair trade organization that deals in indigenous arts and crafts, recognizes the conundrum. He says,

“Philosophically, one of the challenges with product development is that it’s a very difficult line where you’ve come in and imposed a design that has no reflection on that culture versus adapting a design. But the producers would say, “Forget it. We’re not concerned. Give us stuff that will sell.” From the short term point of view, they want sales from us and they want product design. And they say, “You can worry about all this philosophical stuff. We want sales. And if that means new designs, great.” I worry greatly that if we get too much product development going and we’re too successful, we could take away what is unique about our products. It’s both a long term and a short term issue.”¹⁸³

Understanding the art/craft interplay and knowing what feeds the system can permit sensitive growth in production, thus enabling the community to maintain control and meaning in their lives, while at the same time, bettering their living conditions. Ultimately, this level of understanding could mean that they, too, could benefit from the global marketplace.

¹⁸³ Mary Littrell and Marsha Dickson, *Social Responsibility in the Global Market: Fair Trade of Cultural Products*, 1999, 98.

APPENDIX

DOCUMENTATION TABLES FOR THE MOLA BLOUSES

Accession Number	DU1972 294	DU1972 314	DU1972 352	XX.109	XX.115
Length of mola panel (cm)	37.0	39.0	34.3	29.5	33.2
Width of mola panel (cm)	53.5	51.0	43.5	46.0	48.0
Length of mola blouse (cm)	68.5	71.0	51.0	52.0	52.0
Sleeve band width (cm)	1.5	2.0	2.2	1.4	1.5
Shoulder band width (cm)	3.5	2.7	3.2	3.0	8.0
Neckline drawstring present	no	yes	yes	yes	yes
Width of top band of mola panel (cm)	4.4	2.3	2.0	1.5	1.8
Length of bottom band (cm)	2.0	2.5	2.2	10.0	7.5
Number of color changes diagonally across panel	67	68	72	68	52
Number of layers for panel	2	2	2	2	2
Color ID for each layer	Orange - 17.1562 Yellow - 12.0633	Red - 19.1955 Blue - 18.4247	Red - 18.1756 Blue - 18.4247	Red - 19.1764 Off-white - 11.0603	Black Pink - 18.2043

Table 9: Documentation of Labyrinthine Category: Naturalistic Style

Accession Number	DU1972 375	DU1972 376	XX.116
Length of mola panel (cm)	41.5	38.4	35.5
Width of mola panel (cm)	53.0	51.5	48.0
Length of mola blouse (cm)	61.0	56.0	53.4
Sleeve band width (cm)	1.0	0.7	1.5
Shoulder band width (cm)	2.5	2.8	2.5
Neckline drawstring present	no	No	no
Width of top band of mola panel (cm)	2.7	1.5	2.0
Length of bottom band (cm)	1.5	n/a	7.0
Number of color changes diagonally across panel	74	75	83
Number of layers for panel	2	2	2
Color ID for each layer	Black Orange - 16.1364	Blue - 19.3947 Red - 19.1764	Lime green 13.0532 Orange - 17.1462

Table 10: Documentation of Labyrinthine Category: Geometric Style

Accession Number	DU1972 3	DU1972 5	DU1972 6	DU1972 8	DU1972 10	DU1972 280	DU1972. 283	DU1972 367	DU1972 370	DU1972 372
Length of mola panel (cm)	36.5	34.5	37.0	35.0	35.5	36.7	37.0	35.7	37.0	36.3
Width of mola panel (cm)	47.0	47.2	50.0	43.5	43.0	47.0	43.0	43.5	46.5	45.0
Length of mola blouse (cm)	52.5	49.5	54.0	49.0	49.5	54.6	66.0	54.6	54.0	54.0
Sleeve band width (cm)	1.5	3.0	1.4	2.0	1.5	1.5	2.0	2.2	2.8	1.5
Shoulder band width (cm)	3.0	5.0	2.5	3.0	2.7	4.0	3.7	5.5	4.5	4.4
Neckline drawstring present	no	yes	no	no	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Width of top band of mola panel (cm)	4.0	3.6	2.2	2.5	3.5	3.0	2.0	2.5	2.2	2.0
Length of bottom band (cm)	1.5	1.4	3.4& 4.8	3.5	2.5	3.5 & 1.5	2.6	4.5	6.0	8.0
Number of color changes diagonally across panel	100	96	102	71	82	65	78	94	76	84
Number of layers for panel	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
Color ID for each layer (middle layer color is different from front to back)	Red - 18.176 Pink - 16.213 Red - 17.166 Black	Pink - 17.262 Purple - 19.322 Orange - 16.146 Red - 19.176	Red - 19.166 Orange - 17.146 Green - 18.563 Black	Black Orange - 16.146 Green - 17.633 Red - 19.176	Red - 19.176 Orange - 16.136 Yellow - 13.095 Black	Red - 19.1664 Orange - 16.1452 Pink - 16.2126 Black	Black Orange - 16.146 Green - 15.553 Red - 19.176	Red - 18.176 Orange - 16.136 Yellow - 14.096 Black	Red - 18.176 Orange - 16.136 Yellow - 14.096 Black	Black Orange - 16.136 Green - 17.615 Red - 19.176

Table 11: Documentation of Central Motif Category

Accession Number	DU1972 9	DU1972 284	DU1972 336	XX.114
Length of mola panel (cm)	34.0	37.4	29.5	36.0
Width of mola panel (cm)	46.6	52.3	49.5	52.0
Length of mola blouse (cm)	51.0	63.5	68.6	56.0
Sleeve band dimension (cm)	2.0	1.5	1.5	n/a
Width of shoulder band (cm)	2.0	3.6	4.6	5.0
Neckline drawstring present	yes	yes	yes	no
Width of top band of mola panel (cm)	3.5	3.2	2.5	2.5
Length of bottom band (cm)	torn-3.5	0.0	5.5	1.0
Number of color changes diagonally across panel	158	76	114	80
Number of layers for panel	4	3	3	3
Color ID of layers (layers may alternate front to back, thus more colors may be listed than the number of layers indicate)	Black Orange - Yellow - Red - 19.1664	Navy - 19.3619 Purple - 19.3714 Orange - 17.1464 Red - 19.1759	Black Orange - Dk. Red - 19.1762	Black Red - 19.1759 Orange - 16.1462

Table 12: Documentation of Historic Category

Accession Number	DU1972 4	DU1972 7	DU1972 290	DU1972 327	DU1972 343	DU1972 353
Length of mola panel (cm)	34.5	39.5	38.5	38.0	40.5	41.0
Width of mola panel (cm)	47.0	50.0	45.5	51.5	53.3	47.0
Length of mola blouse (cm)	73.6	78.5	67.5	63.5	66.0	72.5
Sleeve band width (cm)	1.5	2.4	1.5	2.5	0.7	n/a
Shoulder band width (cm)	2.75	4.5	5.5	4.0	3.0	2.8
Neckline drawstring present	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Width of top band of mola panel (cm)	3.5	5.0	2.0	4.5	2.8	1.5
Length of bottom band (cm)	2.0	1.3	7.3	1.0	2.7	5.5
Number of color changes diagonally across panel	82	96	97	81	86	109
Number of layers for panel	3	3	3	2	3	3
Color ID for each layer	Red - 19.1764 Orange - 17.1562 Red - 19.1764	Red - 19.1762 Orange - 16.1462 Red - 19.1762	Black Pink - 17.2624 Red - 19.1664	Black Red - 19.1664	Green - 17.5421 Black Red - 19.1955	Orange - 16.1459 Red - 17.1753 Purple - 19.3536

Table 13: Documentation of Narrative Category: Village Style

Accession Number	DU1972 287	DU1972 308	DU1972 326	DU1972 335	DU1972 355	DU1972 358	DU1972 365	DU1972 369	DU1972 378
Length of mola panel (cm)	35.5	39.5	38.0	37.0	39.1	40.7	39.9	38.7	41.5
Width of mola panel (cm)	50.4	41.5	52.5	45.5	45.0	50.0	52.0	49.5	50.7
Length of mola blouse (cm)	68.8	55.3	71.2	58.4	57.8	63.5	56.0	65.5	58.5
Sleeve band width (cm)	2.4	1.0	3.5	1.7	1.4	1.5	1.2	2.7	1.5
Shoulder band width (cm)	3.0	3.5	3.8	4.0	4.1	3.4	4.3	5.5	2.7
Neckline drawstring present	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Width of top band of mola panel (cm)	3.7	1.7	4.0	3.5	3.7	1.9	2.5	3.0	2.7
Length of bottom band (cm)	8.4	3.7 & 3	7.5	6.5	2.0	5.0	1.7	4.0	7.2
Number of color changes diagonally across panel	108	91	100	92	86	126	80	110	92
Number of layers for panel	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	2
Color ID for each layer (middle layer may use a fourth color, reversing the order from front to back)	Orange- 16.146 Navy - 19.413 Pink - 17.184 Red - 19.176	Purple - 19.371 Orange- 16.136 Red - 19.176	Green - 17.543 Black Red - 19.176	Red - 19.166 Orange- 16.136 Green - 16.583 Red - 19.166	Pink - 18.233 Navy - 19.384 Red - 19.176	Black Orange- 16.136 Red - 19.176 (4th layer is not visible on right side)	Lt. Blue - 15.431 Black Red - 19.166	Black Red - 19.176	Black Red - 19.176

Table 14: Documentation of Narrative Category: Religious Style

Accession Number	DU1972
	312
Length of mola panel (cm)	39.3
Width of mola panel (cm)	47.5
Length of mola blouse (cm)	67.3
Sleeve band width (cm)	1.5
Shoulder band width (cm)	3.4
Neckline drawstring present	Yes
Width of top band of mola panel (cm)	2.6
Length of bottom band (cm)	6.8
Number of color changes diagonally across panel	96
Number of layers for panel	2
Color ID for each layer	Black
	Red -
	19.1759

Table 15: Documentation of Narrative Category: Religious and Village Style

Accession Number	DU1972 316	DU1972 337
Length of mola panel (cm)	31.0	33.0
Width of mola panel (cm)	40.0	47.0
Length of mola blouse (cm)	55.8	52.8
Sleeve band width (cm)	2.3	1.5
Shoulder band width (cm)	3.5	2.5
Neckline drawstring present	no	No
Width of top band of mola panel (cm)	4.5	3.0
Length of bottom band (cm)	7.3	4.7
Number of color changes diagonally across panel	74	91
Number of layers for panel	2	2
Color ID for each layer	Red - 19.1764 Navy - 19.3839	Off-white Fuschia - 19.1955

Table 16: Documentation of Outstanding Category

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