

Hands-on Culture of Mexico and Central America

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Panama: Molas

OBJECTIVES

Social Studies

- Students will understand that information about a region is not limited to written sources.
- Students will understand that art can provide a way of communicating and preserving historical events.
- Students will understand that art can help preserve the traditions and customs of a culture.

Art

- Students will understand some of the ways in which the history of a society affects its artistic development.
- Students will experiment with creating visual symbols for communication.
- Students will understand that art often uses symbols unique to the culture in which it is created.

MATERIALS

Panama: Molas handout
paper, pencils, scissors, markers, glue sticks, and construction paper in a variety of colors
optional: examples of *molas*

BACKGROUND

The Cuna Indians live on the San Blas Islands, off the coast of Panama. They have developed a striking reverse appliqué technique, known as *molas*. To make a mola, a Cuna woman stacks as many as seven layers of cloth together, a different color on each layer. She then draws a design on the top layer. The largest design elements are cut out, revealing the colors of the layers below. The cut edges are folded under and stitched down. The process continues with smaller elements cut from the layers. Eventually, all the large areas of color are broken up and filled with smaller shapes and lines.

PREPARATION

This activity can be done with fabric or with colored paper. Directions are given on the handout for making a paper mola. Simplified directions for making a fabric or felt mola are given under Variation, on the next page. The fabric gives a more authentic product, but the paper is easier to use.

PROCEDURE

1. Although this project can be successfully performed by individuals, it is also an excellent cooperative activity. Groups of three to five students work well.
2. Distribute the handout and discuss it with students.
3. Distribute materials. Model developing a pattern for a mola.
4. Most Cuna women use related colors to develop their molas. Encourage students to select analogous colors as they make their selections.
5. Display the completed molas in the classroom.

VARIATION

Cloth Molas

Materials

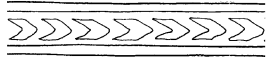
felt, fabric glue, needles and thread

Procedure

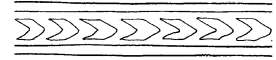
1. Develop steps 1 through 7 as with paper molas.
2. Do not glue paper mola pieces. Instead, use them as patterns to cut out felt pieces.
3. Assemble and stitch or glue felt pieces together. Begin by attaching the feature and/or detailed shapes to the basic silhouette.
4. Stitch the basic shape to the silhouette shape.
5. Stitch the silhouette shape to the base piece of felt.
6. Stitch background shapes.



A cloth mola design



Panama: Molas



The San Blas Islands lie off the shore of Panama. Among the people who live there are the Cuna Indians. About a hundred years ago, the Cuna developed a fabric-decorating technique called *mola*. In the Cuna language the word *mola* means “blouse.” At first, the mola panels were used on the front of blouses. Today, *mola* refers to any fabric panels made by the Cuna Indians.

To make a mola panel, Cuna artisans layer different colors of fabric together. They then use appliqué and reverse appliqué techniques to create a design. The word *appliqué* comes from the French word for *applied*. To make a piece of appliqué, the artist cuts small shapes from fabric and applies them to a larger piece of cloth. To make reverse appliqué, the artist puts three or four layers of different colored fabrics together, then cuts a design through the layers and stitches the patterns to show the different layers of fabric. Embroidery stitches are used to add detail.

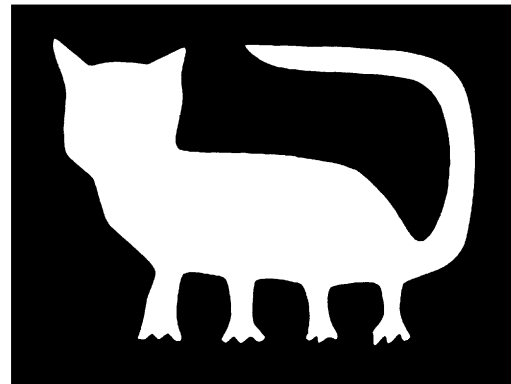
A variety of designs are used in creating molas. The Cuna often choose subjects that are part of their environment, such as fish, birds, animals, plants, and flowers. Sometimes they create geometric designs as well.

The background on most molas is suggested in a special manner. Long and short strips of fabric with rounded corners completely surround the design.



You can use colored paper to make your own version of a mola.

1. Begin by sketching two or three designs or drawings. Traditional designs using birds, animals, or fish make attractive molas. Geometric shapes, masks, plants, or flowers make good choices as well. Choose the best design to develop a mola.
2. Pick three colors of construction paper plus one sheet of black and one of white. The bottom layer serves as a base. It will remain a solid piece of paper.
3. Cut out a silhouette shape of your basic drawing. Do not include any detail. **Do not glue any pieces until all patterns are cut out.**



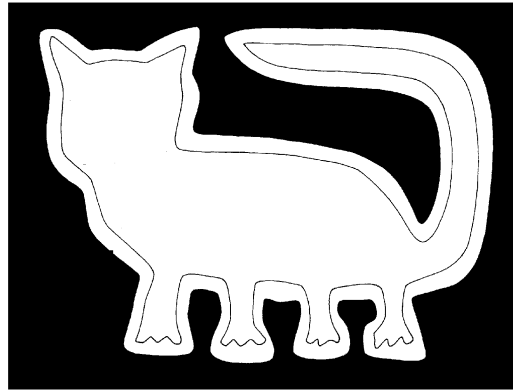
Step 3

(continued)

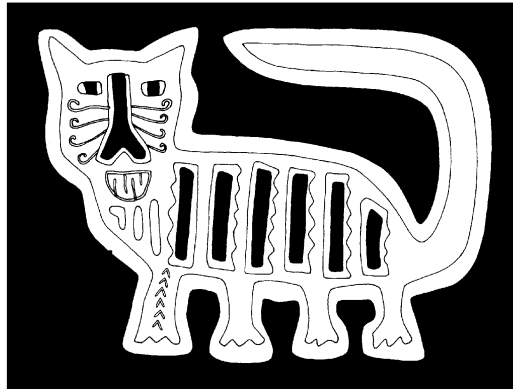


Panama: Molas (continued)

4. Cut out a silhouette shape slightly larger than your basic drawing. Now you have a basic shape surrounded by a larger silhouette.
5. Cut out features and detailed shapes. This step takes careful planning. Shapes should complement the basic shape.
6. Cut out and plan background shapes.
7. Carefully glue assembled pieces to the base piece of paper.



Step 4



Step 5



Steps 6 and 7

