



Mola

Molas are the colourful, multi-layered reverse appliqué panels of blouses worn by the Kuna women of Panama. The Kuna live in a region called Kuna Yala, which means “Kuna Land.” This area, more formally known as the San Blas Archipelago, lies off the eastern coast of Panama in Central America.

Molas developed after Spanish colonisation, in particular within the past 100 years when cotton cloth became commonly available to the Kuna. The intricately designed and sewn molas are attached to the front and/or back of women’s blouses and are considered a major form of artistic expression and ethnic identity.

Molas are usually done in reverse appliqué technique, using two or more layers of cloth and cutting through to reveal the colour underneath. The designs and patterns used are particular to the maker and incorporate both traditional and modern elements. Early mola designs were related to the geometric designs of their pre-Hispanic body painting; today, mola designs may include abstract geometric designs, motifs from the natural world, or themes related to politics, popular culture, or Kuna legends.

Reverse Appliqué or Appliqué work is fairly complicated. The basic steps are: drawing the designing, basting (called tacking in UK English), cutting and sewing. The handwork is done in two panels where each panel has a similar design but is never exactly the same.

Mola panels are made by selecting 2 or more layers of fabric (up to 7 layers). They cut several rectangles from a variety of colours and baste (tack) them together, one layer at the time. One of the layers will serve as the base layer and on the additional layers the design is sketched using a pencil starting with the top layer of cloth. The design is then cut away with scissors. The edges are carefully turned under and stitched.

With each layer of cloth they will repeat the same process, cutting around their design to reveal the colours beneath, until the final image is complete.

Keeping in mind that the base layer (bottom layer) will remain uncut. Small geometric figures in applique/or embroidery stitching can be added to infill blank areas and embellish the panel. Most molas are sewn with a blind stitch or hem stitch.

Many hours of careful sewing are required to create an exquisite and fine Mola. A single Mola can take two weeks to six months or more - depending on the complexity of the design - to complete. Some of the more experienced women can work without sketches. This exquisite art has been handed down from grandmothers to mothers to younger girls for centuries. Young girls begin by sewing patterns cut for them by the women in the family. As they learn, they gradually sew more and more complex designs and are sometimes allowed to sew small sections of Molas the women are working on, progressing eventually to cutting and sewing their own blouses.

