Background Information:
What Is a Mola?

*Mola* (pronounced MO-la) means blouse or clothing in the Kuna language. It is also the word used to describe colorful panels made of cotton fabric and thread created by the Kuna women of Panama.

The cloth panels are attached to the fronts and backs of women’s blouses. They have become part of the cultural dress of Kuna women, which also includes patterned wrap-around skirts, gold nose rings, and beaded arm and leg bands.

*Molas* are still worn by Kuna women, both everyday and on special occasions. They wear them to celebrate their culture, their interests, and their creativity.

Kuna women also create *molas* for sale to people all over the world.
Where in the World Are Molas Made?

The Kuna people have lived in Panama for hundreds of years. Panama is a country in Central America, between North America and South America.

Many Kuna now live on the north coast of Panama in a region called Kuna Yala. Kuna Yala means land of the Kuna. This region is made up of a narrow strip of land on the coastline and over 360 islands in the Caribbean Sea. People travel between islands by canoe and other types of boats.
The Kuna people govern themselves and have worked to preserve their traditional way of life in an increasingly modern world. To make a living, they fish, farm coconuts and plantains (starchy fruit that look like green bananas), and sell traditional crafts.
How Is a Mola Made?

Kuna artists use simple materials to make their molas including:

- Cotton fabric
- Thread
- A pencil
- Scissors
- A thimble
- Needles

**Step 1:** A *mola* is made by layering between two and seven pieces of colored cloth on top of one another.

**Step 2:** The pieces are loosely sewn together.

**Step 3:** A pattern is drawn on the top layer with a pencil. (Some experienced Kuna women do not need to make these drawings.)

**Step 4:** A pair of sharp pointed scissors is used to cut shapes through one or more layers of fabric to expose the colors underneath.

**Step 5:** Small triangles, or notches, are cut into the edges of these shapes, so that when the raw edges are turned under and stitched to the layer below, the fabric will not bunch or pucker. This is called reverse appliqué.

**Step 6:** In general, larger shapes are cut from the top piece. Smaller and smaller shapes are cut from each of the layers beneath.

**Step 7:** Sometimes additional pieces of patterned cotton fabric are slipped between the layers to add more colors to the design.

**Step 8:** In some *molas*, fancy embroidery stitches and small pieces of colored cloth are added to the top layer. This is called appliqué.

Each *mola* can take between two weeks and six months to make!
Look carefully at this *mola* of pelicans and lizards.

Unknown Artist, Kuna peoples, Kuna Yala, Panama, *mola* panel, mid-20th century.

- What color forms the top layer?
- What colors show through underneath?
- Can you find raised, embroidered stitches in a different color thread on the beak of the pelicans?
Where Do Kuna Women Get Their Ideas for the Design of Their Molas?

Kuna women get their ideas from the world around them.

**Nature**
Many ideas come from nature, like this design of a hen with two baby chicks inside her.

![Mola with hen and chicks](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

Unknown Artist, Kuna peoples, Kuna Yala, Panama, mola panel, mid-20th century.

Notice how this large animal design is placed in the center of the mola and the chicks are represented in pairs.

The Kuna believe in a concept called *acala*, that everything in the universe comes in pairs—just like men and women. Each half of the pair are the same (human) but also different (male and female).

*Can you find ways in which the chicks on this mola are the same but also a little bit different?*

**Pattern**
Kuna women also love to cover the surface of their molas with color and pattern. Notice how the background is filled with lozenge shapes.
**Everyday Life**
Kuna artists also get ideas from everyday life, like this fishing scene in which the shark being caught is bigger than the boat catching it!

![Image of a Kuna mola with a fishing scene](image1)

Unknown Artist, Kuna peoples, Kuna Yala, Panama, *mola* panel, mid-20th century.

**Military Subjects**
When the Panama Canal, the waterway through Panama that links the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, was built in 1914, Kuna women found even more subjects to sew into their blouses. This *mola* is decorated with U.S. Navy blimps and airplanes.

![Image of a Kuna mola with military subjects](image2)

Unknown Artist, Kuna peoples, Kuna Yala, Panama, *mola* panel, mid-20th century.
Abstract Designs
Some *mola* designs are purely abstract, made up of shapes, colors, and lines. These *mola* designs are most like the body painting the Kuna did to decorate their bodies before Europeans arrived and brought cloth, scissors, and thread.

Unknown Artist, Kuna peoples, Kuna Yala, Panama, *mola* panel, mid-20th century.

*How do your eyes feel as you look at these contrasting shapes and colors?*
What Makes a Mola a Work of Art?

The finest *molas* have
- many layers of cloth
- clean, smooth, cut edges
- no puckering, or bunching up, of cloth
- almost invisible stitches
- tiny cutout shapes and details
- complicated patterns
- strong colors

The *mola* below was made by a girl who was just learning to sew. Girls learn to make *molas* by practicing with scraps of cloth and gradually working on harder and harder designs. They learn from more experienced women and by sewing together.

*How is this mola different from the mola made by the more experienced artist above?*