



Molas: Appliqué Art of the Kuna People

**June 12 - August 14, 2013
Gardiner Gallery
Oklahoma State University**

“Molas: Appliqué Art of the Kuna People”

June 14- August 14, 2013

*The OSU Museum of Art staff would like to thank the
Department of Art, Graphic Design, and Art History
for its continued support of Museum
exhibitions and programming.*

Gardiner Gallery
Bartlett Center for the Visual Arts
Oklahoma State University
Stillwater, OK 74078

405-744-9069
<http://museum.okstate.edu>

Admission is free
Summer Hours: Mon - Fri, 8:00am - 5:00pm
Closed on Sundays and University holidays

Cover image 2013.001.543

Curator's Introduction

It has been a busy year for the OSU Museum of Art: over the past twelve months, we've participated in the launch of the new MA program in Art History through graduate research assistantships, renovated and started to move into the new Postal Plaza Gallery in downtown Stillwater, and transferred and catalogued over 700 objects from the former OSU Museum of Natural and Cultural History to the Museum of Art. In addition, of course, we have continued to present innovative exhibitions in the Gardiner Gallery and across campus, and worked with dozens of students and their professors throughout the university, enhancing their curricula and producing new scholarship.

Krystle Brewer, curator of this exhibition, has been profoundly involved in all of these activities. A rising second-year graduate student in the Art History MA program, Krystle exemplifies our intentions for that program—and for the Museum of Art's participation therein. She has been a research assistant at the museum since August 2012, and has been an active participant in planning for the Postal Plaza as well as with the ongoing programs in the Gardiner Gallery and across campus. Krystle has also maintained an active career as an artist and curator beyond Oklahoma State University, including co-curating the reinstallation of the Sheerar Museum of Stillwater History's art collection.

It is with great pleasure that I introduce her exhibition of molas—textiles from the collection of the Museum of Natural and Cultural History, which closed in 1994—in the Gardiner Gallery. Molas are part of the traditional clothing of the Kuna people of South American (primarily Panama and Colombia), created using appliqué and embroidery. As far as we know,

the molas in OSU's collection have not been exhibited for almost thirty years—which, in a university context, is many generations. Equally engaged by their social history and their aesthetics, Krystle has curated an exhibition that is timely in its reconsideration of the relationship between indigeneity and globalism.

Museum collections preserve continuity, in the sense that they both document our experience and memories through objects, and invite the creation of new experiences and memories through the display of those objects. By reintroducing OSU audiences to their collections, the OSU Museum of Art hopes to enhance that sense of continuity. In this exhibition, we also celebrate the university's ongoing global connections.

Louise Siddons, Ph.D.

Curator, Oklahoma State University Museum of Art
Assistant Professor, Art History

Molas: Appliqué Art of the Kuna People

The OSU Museum of Art (OSUMA) is quickly growing in its collection from gifts of art and museum purchases made possible by its generous donors. Another boost to the collection took place during the summer of 2012 as over 700 objects were accessioned that once belonged to the Museum of Natural and Cultural History (MNCH). The portion of the collection from the MNCH now under the care of the OSUMA consisted of fine art, artifacts, jewelry, textiles, and cultural objects. In this vastly diverse group of objects, there was a collection of molas that were donated to the MNCH by Leevera Pepin. Pepin was a faculty member who played a vital role in the expansion and transition of the Household Arts Department into the Department of Housing, Design and Consumer Resources (now known as the Department of Design, Housing, and Merchandising).

Molas are often described as being a traditional craft of the Kuna women; however, they have only been a part of Kuna culture since the mid-1800s with the introduction of scissors and needles from the Spaniards. Before the arrival of the Spanish, the Kuna people decorated their bodies with body paint in geometric patterns. The Kuna women would also paint the same types of designs on their underskirts that reached out beneath a knee-length dress. Very quickly the Kuna women began to incorporate the geometric patterns into molas.

The Kuna word “mola” is translated as a woman’s blouse but outside of Kuna culture the term has began to refer only to the two rectangle portions decorating the front and back panels of the shirt. These panels are created by reverse appliqué, which is a technique of needle work in which several layers of fabric are



Photo credit: Markus Leupold-Löwenthal

sewn together and then cut away to reveal the layers underneath. They use the same color thread as the fabric when making their nearly invisible stitches.

The addition of these works is complimentary to the current permanent collection of the Oklahoma State University Museum of Art while also diversifying it to include an area not previously addressed. These pieces, while visually intriguing also tell the story of a people and the impact felt by globalization.

Krystle Brewer
Graduate Research Assistant, OSU Museum of Art

Traditional Themes

The geometric qualities of the molas have a long history in body painting. Before the Kuna people wore full clothing, their bodies were highly decorated in paint. With the introduction of short skirts with a longer underskirt, the painted patterns were transferred from the skin to the fabric worn by Kuna women. These patterns were also woven into fabrics before finally producing the molas. The first molas were non-objective geometric patterns using up to three colors of fabric. Over time, as the art was being perfected, the intricacy of the designs advanced and the number of colors increased.

Although the first images produced are non-representational, they still held meaning for the Kuna people. In the double figure-eight mola, the maze-like pattern may have been used to trap evil spirits. They believe in a single god who the chief has direct contact with and serves as a prophet for the village. Although they view the god as being distant, spirits inhabit the earth causing sickness. This mola could have offered protection from these spirits to the wearer.

Child's Mola with Birds (Kuna, Panama)

Textile, 20th century

23" x 27"

From the Museum of Natural and Cultural History

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Abstract Motif Mola (Kuna, Panama)

Textile, 20th century

23" x 27"

From the Museum of Natural and Cultural History

2013.001.543



Abstract Motif Mola 2013.001.543

Abstract Floral Motif Mola (Kuna, Panama)

Textile, 20th century

23" x 27"

From the Museum of Natural and Cultural History

2013.001.546

Abstract Floral Motif Mola (Kuna, Panama)

Textile, 20th century

23" x 27"

From the Museum of Natural and Cultural History

2013.001.547

Nacruz Mola (Kuna, Panama)

Textile, 20th century

23" x 27"

From the Museum of Natural and Cultural History

2013.001.554

Kuna Culture and Politics

Quickly after the transition from paint to fabrics, the Kuna women moved from nonobjective to representational imagery of Kuna culture. As beliefs in spirits are highly influential in Kuna culture, they are a recurrent theme throughout molas. Depictions of good spirits protected the wearer from illness and other tragedies caused by bad spirits. Specific spirits aided the wearer in designated tasks as shown in *Kuna Spirit of Good Mola Making*. Other images that were popular were those of flowers and the landscape, animals- both land and aquatic, and everyday activities such as fishing and harvesting.

Kuna Men Under Palms Mola (Kuna, Panama)

Textile, 20th century

23" x 27"

From the Museum of Natural and Cultural History

2013.001.534

Galindo Poster Mola (Kuna, Panama)

Textile, 20th century

23" x 27"

From the Museum of Natural and Cultural History

2013.001.538



Kuna Spirit of Good Mola Making Mola 2013.001.540

Kuna Men Under Palms Mola (Kuna, Panama)

Textile, 20th century

23" x 27"

From the Museum of Natural and Cultural History

2013.001.534

Galindo Poster Mola (Kuna, Panama)

Textile, 20th century

23" x 27"

From the Museum of Natural and Cultural History

2013.001.538

Kuna Spirit of Good Mola Making Mola (Kuna, Panama)

Textile, 20th century

23" x 27"

From the Museum of Natural and Cultural History

2013.001.540

Cat Mola (Kuna, Panama)

Textile, 20th century

23" x 27"

From the Museum of Natural and Cultural History

2013.001.541

Liberal Party Mola (Kuna, Panama)

Textile, 20th century

23" x 27"

From the Museum of Natural and Cultural History

2013.001.542

Tiger Mola (Kuna, Panama)

Textile, 20th century

23" x 27"

From the Museum of Natural and Cultural History

2013.001.544

Kuna Spirits Mola (Kuna, Panama)

Textile, 20th century

23" x 27"

From the Museum of Natural and Cultural History

2013.001.545

Elephant Mola (Kuna, Panama)

Textile, 20th century

23" x 27"

From the Museum of Natural and Cultural History

2013.001.552

Lion Mola (Kuna, Panama)

Textile, 20th century

23" x 27"

From the Museum of Natural and Cultural History

2013.001.553

Octopus Mola (Kuna, Panama)

Textile, 20th century

23" x 27"

From the Museum of Natural and Cultural History

2013.001.555



Liberal Party Mola 2013.001.542

Outside Influence

Molas became popular among tourists who admired the detailed needlework of the Kuna Women. As the molas sold and a market for them developed, the Kuna women started incorporating imagery from outside of their culture in order to make the works of art more appealing to tourists. These influences came in the form of both subject matter and design. The *Crucifixion* mola depicts Christ on the cross as a direct example of appealing to Christian audiences outside of Kuna culture. The layout of the mola could also be informed by outside influences such as a poster or advertisement. In *Football*, the elements of the field goal, the player and the field were possibly taken from a vertically oriented poster and rearranged to fit within the horizontal confines of the mola. The incorporation of outside influences were used both as new inspiration for designs and as a way to make their business more profitable.



Crucifixion Mola 2013.001.539

Boxers Mola (Kuna, Panama)

Textile, 20th century

23" x 27"

From the Museum of Natural and Cultural History

2013.001.535

Adam and Eve Mola (Kuna, Panama)

Textile, 20th century

23" x 27"

From the Museum of Natural and Cultural History

2013.001.536

Santa Clause Mola (Kuna, Panama)

Textile, 20th century

23" x 27"

From the Museum of Natural and Cultural History

2013.001.537

Crucifixion Mola (Kuna, Panama)

Textile, 20th century

23" x 27"

From the Museum of Natural and Cultural History

2013.001.539



Football Mola 2013.001.550

Football Mola (Kuna, Panama)

Textile, 20th century

23" x 27"

From the Museum of Natural and Cultural History

2013.001.550

Boxer Champion Mola (Kuna, Panama)

Textile, 20th century

23" x 27"

From the Museum of Natural and Cultural History

2013.001.556

Pringles Mola (Kuna, Panama)

Textile, 20th century

23" x 27"

From the Museum of Natural and Cultural History

2013.001.557

Oklahoma State University Museum of Art

Director
Victoria Berry

Curator
Dr. Louise Siddons

Exhibitions Curator
Shawn Yuan

Graduate Research Assistants
Krystle Brewer
Mary Kathryn Moeller

Student Interns, Summer 2013
Casey Pankey
Randall Barnes

Find out more about the Museum of Art, including the
Gardiner Art Gallery and Postal Plaza Gallery:

on our blog:
<http://osuma.wordpress.com/>

on Facebook:
<http://www.facebook.com/OSUMuseumofArt/>

on Twitter:
<http://www.twitter.com/OSUArtMuseum>

Curator Walk Through

Gardiner Gallery
Thursday June 13th at 4:00pm

A screening of the documentary
The Spirit of Kuna Yala, (1991)
will take place in Bartlett Room 109
following the walk through



Photo credit: Yves Picq

