

# About Molas



The San Blas islands are even too small to locate on this map, but they include about 365 islands, 49 of which are populated that are found in the area circled in red. Rising sea levels are a threat to the area.

**Who are the Kuna Indians?** The Kuna Indians are indigenous people living on a chain of islands called San Blas Archipelago, on the Atlantic side of the Republic of Panama. The Kuna Indians have managed to retain their tribal identity and lead a life free from the complexities of the modern world. An interesting fact is that the Kuna are a matriarchal society which means that females hold the primary power positions in the Kuna society.

**What is a mola?** In the Kuna's native language, "mola" means "shirt" or "clothing". The mola originated with the tradition of Kuna women painting their bodies with geometrical designs. They then transferred to painting on cloth and that grew into sewn designs over time. Today the mola forms part of the traditional costume of a Kuna woman, two mola panels being incorporated as front and back panels in a blouse. The full costume traditionally includes a patterned wrapped skirt (sabu-

ret), a red and yellow headscarf (musue), arm and leg beads (wini), a gold nose ring (olasu) and earrings in addition to the mola blouse (dulemor).



A Kuna woman in traditional attire, including a mola, sells her molas to tourists. Molas are important to the local economy.



## About Molas cont.

**How are molas made?** To make a mola, a Kuna woman first draws the design on the top layer of fabric (usually two or three). Traditional molas are made of primary and other bright colors and from solid colored fabrics.

Using a technique known as reverse appliqué, slits are cut through—or shapes are cut out of—the top layers of the fabric to allow the remaining layers of cloth below to show through. Sometimes smaller pieces of fabric are sandwiched between the layers, a technique known as inlay appliqué. Traditional or overlay appliqué is also used to apply fabric cutouts on top of the background.

**What makes a good Mola?** The standards that guide the Kuna artist are: careful cutting, meticulous sewing, evenness of lines, evenly spaced elements, visual organization and vibrant color combinations.

**What inspires the visual design?** The Kuna artists often choose subjects inspired by the world around them. Common topics include sea life, land animals, biblical scenes, flowers, plants and geometric designs. Tribal teachings, superstitions and village life are also recorded in the fabric panels. Selling molas has become an important income for the Kuna Indians. As a result, the Kuna people today choose subjects that appeal to tourists' preferences and tastes.

Typically, every inch of space in the design of a quality mola will be used in some creative manner. No shape or space goes unfilled. In the background, the Kuna artists have common ways to fill it. One design looks like labyrinth shapes, a second type displays vertical or horizontal lines, and a third method uses triangles or other shapes repeatedly.



Examples of mola topics and techniques. Do you see the variety in how backgrounds have been handled?