THE KUNA AND THEIR MOLAS

The Rainforest
Golden beetles, termites
Morning glories, army ants
Butterflies, tree frogs
Hummingbirds and bees
Acrobatic birds and colorful macaws
Long-tailed green iguanas
Hiding in the trees
All in the rainforest
Where do you get coconuts, fruits
Chocolate, nuts, spices and roots
From the rainforest
The rainforest
Where do you get cures for disease?
Maybe from plants and trees
From the rainforest
The Rainforest

Sherman Elementary School 1995

Grade Level
Grade 3-6

Curriculum Area
Art • Language Arts • Music • Social Studies

Overview
The Kuna live on the northern coast of Panama and on the San Blas Islands off the coast. They call their territory “Kuna Yala,” the land of the Kuna. Molas are the colorful, richly decorated appliqué blouses made by the Kuna women that depict images from their environment or everyday life. The word mola means “clothing”, “dress”, or “blouse” in Kuna language, but through constant usage it has come to mean simply the single panel of a Kuna woman’s appliquéd blouse.

The mola came into being a little over 100 years ago. Its design origins were a natural extension of body painting. After migrating from the mainland villages in Panama, the Kuna on the San Blas Islands came into frequent contact with sailing ships whose crews bartered goods for coconuts. Although some cloth had been traded since the 1700’s, new materials emerged – commercial cloth, thread, needles, thimbles, and scissors – without which molas would never have been developed. The mola blouse was born, and by the turn of the century it was to become a rich textile art.
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Objectives

To introduce a people that are an advocate for indigenous rights, the Kuna.

To introduce the Kuna Yala Reserve as a cause celebre among environmentalists and advocates of indigenous peoples’ rights.

To identify the various kinds of plants and animals from the rainforests of Panama, Colombia, and San Blas Kuna Yala.

To understand that rare plant and animals are in danger of disappearing from the earth; we call them endangered species; understand that not only are plants and animals in danger of dying out or becoming extinct, even people are endangered.

To introduce and discuss the art (molas) of the Kuna; design motifs, color elements, symbolism, and themes.

To create an online picture dictionary of plants and animals from the rainforests of Panama, Colombia, and San Blas Kuna Yala.
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Key Words

Environment
Definition-the surroundings or conditions within which something or someone exists.
Context-Molas are the colorful, richly decorated appliqué blouses made by the Kuna women that depict images from their environment or everyday life.

Advocates
Definition-a person who supports an idea.
Context- The Kuna Yala Reserve is known as a cause celebre among environmentalists and advocates of indigenous peoples' rights.

Indigenous (rights)
Definition-rights belonging naturally to an area; native to an area.
Context-The Kuna Yala Reserve is known as a cause celebre among environmentalists and advocates of indigenous peoples' rights.

Cause celebre
Definition-to celebrate the effect of something.
Context-The Kuna as environmentalists and their cause celebre is known throughout the world.

Endangered
Definition-to place in danger; a loss.
Context-Rare plant and animals are in danger of disappearing from the earth; we call them endangered species; understand that not only are plants and animals in danger of dying out or becoming extinct, even the Kuna are endangered.
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Activities

Activity
Read the cultural background, history and geography of the San Blas Archipelago and Panama in books, magazines, pictures, and websites on the Internet.

Activity
Mola motifs can be divided into two general categories: indigenous molas and acculturation molas. The indigenous motifs include strict traditional designs, both abstract and linear patterns and depictions of native flora and fauna, objects from Kuna myth and legend or pure fantasy creations. Acculturation molas are those inspired by ideas or images from the outside world. Examples of these motifs are military influences, sporting events, manned flight, illustrations from books, magazines, billboards, games, trademarks, and package designs and labels.

On the Internet search for examples of molas created by the San Blas Kuna. Compare the mola design motifs and have the students classify them according to the following:
• Historic • Myths and Legends • Flora and Fauna
• Sporting Events • Religious • Manned Flight
• Illustrations from Book • Magazines • Games and Entertainment
• Political • Advertisements • Trademarks • Package Labels
• Abstract or Geometric

Activity
Kuna children learn to create abstract designs in beadwork that are used for decorative purposes on their arms and legs. Graph abstract design motifs of the traditional beadwork and make a beadwork in the style of the Kuna. Research and compare the beadwork of the Kuna, the Ndebele and the Indians of the Woodlands, such as the Oneida. How is each used? Write a descriptive essay describing the differences in function and how the environment influences their designs.

Mola Patches Crizmac 1999
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Resources

Geography and History

Visual Art

Music and Dance
Language Arts

Science
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Internet Links

Students
The Art of Being Kuna
http://www.conexus.si.edu/kuna/eng/toc/indexie.htm
Kuna Yala Mola Gallery
http://www.panart.com/mola_gallery.htm

Students/Teachers
Molas International Gallery
http://www.molasinternational.com/molas_shop.htm

Teachers
Kuna Yala Territory
http://www.costarica.org/panama/kunapage.html
Kuna Indian Kids
http://www.zonian.com/Articles/mola-story.htm

Textbooks

• Bananas and Balsa, Quetzals and Quinine
  A Rainforest Unit
  Science and Language Arts
  J. Weston Walch Publishers

• Sharing the Music
  Level 3

• Invitation to Literacy
  Level 1 Theme 3
  The World Outside My Door
  Houghton Mifflin Company

Kuna children and their teachers receiving books from teachers of Milwaukee Public Schools.
Photograph Linda Kref 1999
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Standards and Expectations

• **MPS Standards Level 3 English Language Arts A.3.3**
  Read and discuss literary and nonliterary texts in order to understand human experiences.

• **MPS Expectations Level 3 English Language Arts A.3.3**
  Distinguish fiction from nonfiction, realistic fiction from fantasy, fact from opinion, and biography from autobiography.

• **Wisconsin’s Model Academic Standards for Visual Arts**
  Students will reflect upon the nature of art and meaning in art and culture.

• **Wisconsin’s State Expectations for Visual Arts J.3.8**
  Know that different cultures have different concepts of beauty.

• **Wisconsin’s Model Academic Standards for Science D.6.3**
  Understand that many cultures have made and continue to make contributions to science, technology, and society.

Assessment

**Students will:**

Create a composition in the style of the mola using the endangered environment as their subject matter. The composition must be from research of themes used by the Kuna of the San Blas.

**Teachers will:**

Use the rubrics from the revised Milwaukee Public Schools District Art Assessment—2000.