

VOICES
PEACE • PRIDE • ACTIVISTS • SOCIAL ACTION

**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



Photograph Linda Kreft 1999

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 (molos) 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.



Molas Photograph Maricel E. Presilla 1996

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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

Enchantment of the World: Panama. Ana Mara B. Vazquez. Chicago, Illinois: Childrens Press. 1991.

Endangered Peoples. Art Davidson. San Francisco, California: Sierra Club Books. 1993.

"Kuna: The Natives of Panama." *Skipping Stones: A Multicultural Children's Magazine.* Volume 5, Number 4. 1994.

Visual Art

The Mola Design Coloring Book. Caren Caraway. Owings Mills, Maryland: Stemmer House Publishers, Inc. 1981.

Molas: Art of the Cuna Indians. Hereward Lester Cooke. Washington D.C.: Exhibition Catalogue for the Textile Museum. 1973.

"Molas Paper Style." Sharon Dok. *Arts and Activities.* February 1981. Pages 33-36.

Cuna Molas and Cocle Art Forms: Reflections on Panamanian Design Styles and Symbols. Mary W. Helms. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: A Publication of the Institute for the Study of Human Issues. 1981.

Pre-Columbian Designs From Panama. Samuel Kirkland Lothrop. New York, New York: Dover Publications, Inc. 1976.

"Making Molas." *National Geographic World.* March 1982. Number 79. Pages 13-17.

Folk Art of the Americas. August Pannyella. New York, New York: Harry N. Abrams. 1981.

Molas: Folk Art of the Cuna Indians. Ann Parker and Avon Neal. New York, New York: Crown Publishers, Inc. 1977.

Art From Many Hands. Jo Miles Schuman. Worcester, Massachusetts: Davis Publications, Inc. 1981.

Mola Designs. Frederick Shaffer. New York, New York: Dover Publications, Inc. 1982.

The Ancient Americas: Art From the Sacred Landscapes. Richard R. Townsend. Chicago, Illinois: The Art Institute of Chicago. 1992.

Music and Dance

The Singing Sack. "Andalucia, Spain." Helen East, retold. London: A & C Black. 1989.

Cumbia Cumbia 2. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Rounder Records Corporation. 1993.

Language Arts

- Siabibi's San Blas*. John Mann. Miami, Florida: Dolphin Cruise Line. 1984.
- The Little Painter of Sabana Grande*. Patricia Maloney Markun. New York, New York: Bradbury Press. 1993.
- Mola: Cuna Life Stories and Art*. Marciel E. Presilla. New York, New York: Henry Holt and Company. 1996.
- Telling Stories With Molos*. Marciel E. Presilla. *Muse Magazine*. Volume 4, Number 3. March 2000. Pages 19-25.
- Cuna Song: Cancion de los Cunas*. Harriet Rohmer. San Francisco, California: Children's Book Press. 1976.

Science

- Ecology Watch: Rainforests*. Rodney Aldis. New York, New York: Dillon Press. 1991.
- Life in the Rainforest*. Lucy Baker. New York, New York: Franklin Watts. 1990.
- "Coconuts!" Carolyn Duckworth. *Ranger Rick Magazine*. February 1985. Pages 14-17.
- Here Is the Tropical Rain Forest*. Madeleine Dunphy. New York, New York: Hyperion Books For Children. 1994.
- The Rainforest*. Billy Goodman. New York, New York: Tern Enterprise, Inc. 1991.
- Rain Forest: Look Closer*. Frank Greenaway. New York, New York: Dorling Kindersley, Inc. 1992.
- One Day In The Tropical Rain Forest*. Jean Craighead George. New York, New York: Thomas Y. Crowell. 1990.
- Rain Forest Images*. Michael George. New York, New York: Creative Editions. 1992.
- Tropical Rain Forests Around The World*. Elaine Landau. New York, New York: Franklin Watts. 1990.
- Amazing Tropical Birds. Eyewitness Juniors*. Geral Legg. New York, New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1991.
- Tropical Rain Forests*. Emilie U. Lepthien. Chicago, Illinois: Childrens Press. 1993.
- Rain Forests*. Anna O'Mara. Mankato, Minnesota: Bridgestone Books. 1996.
- Rain Forests: First Starts*. Joy Palmer. Austin, Texas: Raintree Steck-Vaughn. 1992.
- Bananas and Balsa, Quetzals and Quinine: A Rainforest Unit for Science and Language Arts*. Jean L. Pottle. Portland, Maine: J. Weston Walch Publishers. 1994.
- Tropical Rain Forests of Central America*. Alberto Ruiz de Larramendi. Chicago, Illinois: Childrens Press. 1993.
- The Rainforests: A Celebration*. Lisa Silcock. San Francisco, California: Chronicle Books. 1995.
- Why Save The Rain Forest?* Donald Silver. New York, New York: Julian Messner. 1993.

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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
Macmillan McGraw-Hill School
Publishing Company
- ***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 Kreft 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.

