INTRODUCTION

In conjunction with the University of Florida’s commemoration of the centennial of the Panama Canal opening, this exhibition celebrates the artistic heritage of indigenous peoples of Panama. Exquisite works in gold, ceramic and stone produced by ancient Panamanian cultures pre-dating European conquest, are juxtaposed with an array of twentieth-century appliquéd textiles called molas made by the Kuna people of eastern Panama.

Ancient works from cultures in west and central regions, with their refined formal qualities and diversity of mediums and styles, are evidence of the wealth and prestige of powerful chiefs who also functioned as religious leaders. The molas of the Kuna reflect ancient practices and ideas, as well as adaptation to vast and rapid changes in Panama, mainly stemming from the construction of the canal.

Divided by several centuries, these artworks share common traits of deriving inspiration from nature as well as envisioning the supernatural world. Both ancient and modern art works feature brilliant, maze-like designs that demonstrate blending keen observation of nature with a mastery of abstraction. In both ancient and modern societies, art provides us with a worldview expressed with a transcendent aesthetic.

Susan Cooksey, Curator of African Art

ORLANDO MUSEUM OF ART LOANS

Double-chambered Vessel, AD 800-1200
Chiriqui; Panama
ceramic
2 in. x 4 1/4 in. x 4 1/4 in.
Gift of George Simon, 78.04.06

Tripod Bowl, AD 1200-1500
Diquís/Chiriquí; Diquís Delta, Western Panama, Costa Rica/Panama
ceramic
6 1/2 in. x 11 1/4 in. x 11 1/4 in.
Gift of Howard Campbell, 80.177

**Necklace with Lizard Pendant, AD 800-1500**  
Coclé; Panama  
high gold, greenstone  
9 in.  
Gift of William D. and Norma Canelas Roth, 91.86

**Hunchback Shaman Jar, ca. AD 800**  
Veraguas; Panama  
ceramic  
10 in. x 9 1/2 in. x 10 in.  
Gift of Howard Phillips, by exchange, 98.07

**Armadillo Vessel, ca. AD 1100**  
Herrera/Veraguas; Panama  
ceramic  
7 in. x 8 1/2 in. x 9 in.  
Gift of Howard Phillips, by exchange, 98.09

**Double Bowl with Spider Motif, AD 600-650**  
Veraguas; Panama  
ceramic  
6 in.  
Gift of Howard Phillips, by exchange, 98.10

**Ceremonial Cup with Two Lizards, ca. AD 900**  
Veraguas; Panama  
ceramic  
6 1/4 in. x 4 1/4 in. x 4 1/4 in.  
Gift of Howard Phillips, by exchange, 98.11

**Deer Jar, 300 BC - AD 300**  
Veraguas; Panama  
ceramic  
7 in. x 9 in. x 4 1/4 in.  
Gift of Howard Phillips, by exchange, 98.12

**Jar with Lid, ca. AD 900**  
Veraguas; Las Tablas province, West Central, Panama  
ceramic  
5 in. x 5 1/4 in. x 5 1/4 in.  
Gift of Howard Phillips, by exchange, 98.13.a-b
**Tripod Vessel, AD 600-650**  
Chiriqui; Panama  
ceramic  
5 in. x 6 in. x 6 in.  
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Glen E. Murphy and Family, 98.16

**Small Bowl, ca. AD 800**  
Chiriqui Province, La Concepcion, Panama  
ceramic  
2 1/2 in. x 6 3/8 in. x 6 3/8 in.  
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Glen E. Murphy and Family, 98.22

**Water Vessel, ca. AD 800**  
Las Tablas Province, Tonosí site, Panama  
ceramic  
10 in. x 9 in. x 9 in.  
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Glen E. Murphy and Family, 98.25

**Large Plate, ca. AD 900**  
Veraguas; Panama  
ceramic  
11 3/8 in. x 11 1/2 in. x 1 5/8 in.  
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Glen E. Murphy and Family, 98.26

**Vessel with Star and Diamond Pattern, AD 600-1200**  
Veraguas; Panama  
ceramic  
3 1/2 in. x 3 3/8 in. x 3 3/8 in.  
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Glen E. Murphy and Family, 98.27

**Turtle Bowl, 300 BC - AD 300**  
Veraguas; Panama  
ceramic  
1 5/8 in. x 5 in. x 4 7/8 in.  
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Glen E. Murphy and Family, 98.39

**Shark Design Pedestal Bowl, ca. AD 1000**  
Veraguas; Panama  
ceramic  
9 3/4 in. x 9 3/4 in.  
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Glen E. Murphy and Family, 98.46
Nose Ring, AD 800-1000
Veraguas; Panama
cast gold
1/2 in. x 1 in. x 7/8 in.
Gift of Howard Phillips, by exchange, 98.75

Deer Pendant, ca. AD 800
Veraguas; Panama
cast gold
1 3/4 in. x 2 1/4 in. x 1 1/8 in.
Gift of Howard Phillips, by exchange, 98.76

FROM GEORGE A. SMATHERS LIBRARY-PANAMA CANAL ZONE MUSEUM COLLECTION

CERAMICS
The following ceramics are from the Panama Canal Museum Collection, Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida

Armadillo Whistle
Chiriqui; Panama
Ca. 800-1500
2 x 3 in.

Feline with Open Mouth Whistle
Chiriqui; Panama
Terra cotta with slip
Ca. CE 800-1500
4 x 6 in.

Two Headed Parrot Whistle
Chiriqui; Panama
Terra cotta with slip
Ca. CE 800-1500
2 x 3 in.
Standing Man Whistle
Chiriqui; Panama
Terra cotta with polychrome slip
Ca. 800-1500
2 x 3 in.

Feline Whistle
Panama
Terra cotta with polychrome slip
Ca. CE
2 x 3 in.

Frog Whistle
Chiriqui; Panama
Terra cotta with polychrome slip
Ca. CE 800-1500
2 x 3 in.

Spotted Animal Whistle
Panama
Terra cotta with polychrome slip
Ca. CE 800-1500
2 x 3 in.

Grinding Stone (metate)
Diquis or Chiriqui; Panama
Volcanic stone
500-1500 CE
11 x 7 x 4 in.
The most celebrated modern Panamanian art form, the mola (meaning cloth) has been a marker of Kuna culture since the early 20th century. According to Kuna lore, sister and brother culture heroes Kikadiyai and Ibeorgun, gave humans the art of making clothing to replace animal skins and feathers. They introduced thread, cloth and eventually scissors, and the art of constructing patterns based on nature and the invisible spirit world. Afterward, it is said all women became mola makers.

A chronology of Kuna adornment based on European documents includes the earliest accounts of both embellished cloth and colorful patterns that presage molas. A 1514 report tells us that women were wearing embroidered cloth skirts, and a 1699 description of body painting remarks on the red, yellow and blue designs preferred by women. By the 18th century, painted designs were applied to cloth, an innovation that French Huguenots may have introduced. Appliqué, the technique associated with modern molas, came into fashion in the Victorian era. In the early 20th century, visitors describe a smock with solid yoke, short sleeves and the body covered by intricate designs of neatly sewed appliqué. Subsequently, molas were made as paired panels sewn on the front and back of blouses. By the mid-20th century, the prevalent use of reverse appliqué was combined with appliqué and added layers of varied colors. Around the same time, mola artists began to embroider over the appliqued patterns.

Mola production, consumption and interpretation has been and continues to be controlled by Kuna women, despite shifting social, economic and political conditions in Panama. Kuna women spend many hours a day producing molas from the time they are children throughout their adult lives. By 1925, molas were so closely linked to Kuna cultural life and ethnic identity that they were transformed into a symbol of resistance in the face of political and ethnic oppression. With the influxes of migrant workers from every part of the globe for the construction of the Panama Canal, a large American community, and a greater flow of tourists, came a new demand for molas. Women responded by producing molas for this new market while creating molas for their traditional wear. Today, there are cooperatives of Kuna women who specialize in mola making and many are recognized as artists locally and internationally.

INSPIRATION FOR MOLA DESIGN

Mola imagery, aesthetics and production are guided by Kuna cosmology. Mola imagery reflects the idea of burba, a life force that resides in all things living and in natural phenomena. The principals that govern the cosmos, creating harmony and unity translate into an aesthetic that values balance and symmetry.

Mola panels are often bilaterally symmetric, with a slight asymmetry suggested in colors and minor motifs. Clustered motifs occur in either groups of four or eight which have ritual significance for the Kuna. Repetition of motifs creates visual harmony but mola artists deliberately vary the composition of each panel. While designs are similar on front and back panels, there is always at least a slight variation that speaks to the idea of a dualistic complementarity that reflects Kuna
belief in a world made up of parallel and complementary elements. Other aspects of mola design that are thought to be desirable are clearly visible images created by contrast and color, and completely filled space.

Overall, the mola, to be pleasing, must demonstrate one’s divinely endowed intelligence and talent, as expressed by the Kuna concept of gurgin, a skill given by Muu, the spirit grandmother midwife to humankind. A finely stitched mola, with bold designs that are balanced and clearly rendered in colors deemed beautiful, is proof of the mola maker’s gurgin.

Mola designs have changed over time, but mola makers cherish old designs as much as they value innovative ones based on modern subject matter. Early mola designs, referred to as sergan “old” or mugan “grandmother”, were primarily geometric and based on images found in nature, or objects used in everyday life. These highly abstracted designs gave way to more naturalistic imagery, and narrated daily life, ritual life or Kuna mythology. Concurrently, mola makers were incorporating designs influenced by imported images and ideologies, historical events, and religious beliefs.

Today, sergan designs are produced along with new designs based on products advertised on television, illustrations in storybooks, or derived from logos of imported goods. The molas in this exhibition include both older traditional molas made for Kuna women’s own use, and those made for trade. Both types include older designs and designs reflecting Kuna artists’ quest for new and exciting visual ideas.
FROM GEORGE A. SMATHERS LIBRARY-PANAMA CANAL ZONE MUSEUM COLLECTION

MOLAS

Unless otherwise noted, the following molas are made from cotton factory cloth by Kuna people, Panama, and are on loan from the Panama Canal Museum Collection, Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

*Animals and Plants*

**Mola with Iguanas**
Ca. 1960

**Blouse with Fish and Turtle Mola**
Ca. 1960
30 x 20 in

**Mola with Frogs**
Ca. 1950
14 x 17 in

**Mola with Bat**
14 x 17 in
Ca. 1970
Mola with Armadillo
14 x 17 in
Ca. 1960

Mola with Fish-Headed Pelicans
Ca. 1960
13.2 x 16.4 in

Mola with Scorpions
1950s
16 x 18 3/4 in
Gift of Edith Emily Adams in Memory of Christine Householder
1991.26.7

Two-Color Mola with Birds
Ca. 1930
**Tree of Life**

**Mola with Tree of Life with Felines**
Ca. 1980
13.6 x 16.5 in

**Three Color Mola with Tree of Life**
Ca. 1970
14.5 x 21.6 in

**Blouse with Chickens on Mola Panels**
Ca. 1940

**Blouse with Floral Mola**
Ca. 1930
30 x 18 in

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**Geometric-Abstract**

**Mola with Hermit Crab Path**
Ca. 1970
11.6 x 17.1 in
Mola with Amphibian Designs
Ca. 1970
14.2 x 17.3 in

Mola with Letter S
Ca. 1960
15 x 19.25 in

Mola with Flower
Elida Gonzalez, Panamanian
1995
14.2" X 16.1

Mola with Amphibian Designs
Ca. 1930
14.2 x 17.3 in

Mola with Butterfly
Ca. 1960
**Mola with Trees of Darien Motif**
Ca. 1950
13 x 16.75

**Kuna Domestic Life**

**Mola with Panama Canal Locks**
Ca. 1960
15.6 x 20.5 in

**Mola with Sea Turtle Hunters**
Ca. 1970
14.1 x 17.8 in

**Mola with Couple**
Ca. 1980
13 x 17 in

**Mola with Orchard Scene**
Ca. 1960
13.2 x 17 in
Mola with Two Mothers and Children
Ca. 1980
14.2 x 20.5 in

Mola with A Mother and Child
Ca. 1960
13.9 x 17.75 in

Kuna ritual

Mola with Ritual Specialists
Ca. 1960
14.1 x 17.75 in

Mola with Men Brewing Cane Beer
Ca. 1960
14 x 16.1 in

Mola with Girl’s Initiation Scene
Ca. 1980
14 x 16 in
Mola with Chiefs in Meeting House
Ca. 1980
14 x 19 in

Mola with Healing Ceremony
Ca. 1960
13 x 18 in

Kuna Myth and Legend

Mola with Mythical Bird
Ca. 1980
12.9 x 16.1 in

Mola with Mermaid and Sailors
Ca. 1980
11.9 x 16.5 in

Mola with Two Demons
Ca. 1960
23.5 x 19 in
Blouse with Female Demon Mola
Ca 1970

Mola with Snake House
Ca. 1960
13.5 x 16 in

Mola with Dragon
Ca. 1960
13.5 x 16 in

**History**

Mola with WWII Bombers
1940s-1950s
17 1/4 x 22 in
Gift of Edith Emily Adams in memory of Christine Householder
1991.26.9

Mola with Balboa Portrait
Ca 1970
12.7 x 14.8 in
Mola with US Navy Airships
Late 20th Century
14 x 17 in

Mola for Political Party
Ca. 2000
14 x 17 in

Acculturation

Mola with Kool Cigarette Advertisement
1950s-1960s
16 x 18 1/2 in
Gift of Edith Emily Adams in memory of Christine Householder
1991.26.8

Mola with Mighty Mouse
Ca. 1960
14 x 17 in
Mola with Octopus
Ca. 2000
14 x 17 in

Mola with Avatars of Vishnu
1950s
15 ⅞ x 19 ¾ in
Gift of Edith Emily Adams in memory of Christine Householder
1991.26.10

Mola with Santa Claus
Ca. 2000
14 x 17 in

Mola with Panamanian Coat of Arms
Ca. 2000
14 x 17 in

Mola with Shoppers
Ca. 2000
12.5 x 17 in
Biblical Scenes and Christianity

Mola with Adam and Eve
Ca. 2000
12 x 15.1 in

Mola with Angels
Ca. 2000
15 x 18 ¼ in

Mola with Adoration [Mary, Angels, Christ child]
Ca. 2000
13.5 x 16 in

Mola with Birth of Christ
Ca. 2000
14 x 19 ¾ in

Blouse with Noah’s Ark Mola
Mid-Late 20th c