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Kuna Mola Tradition: The Jane Gruver Collection

Jane Gruver

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KUNA MOLA TRADITIONS

THE JANE GRUVER COLLECTION



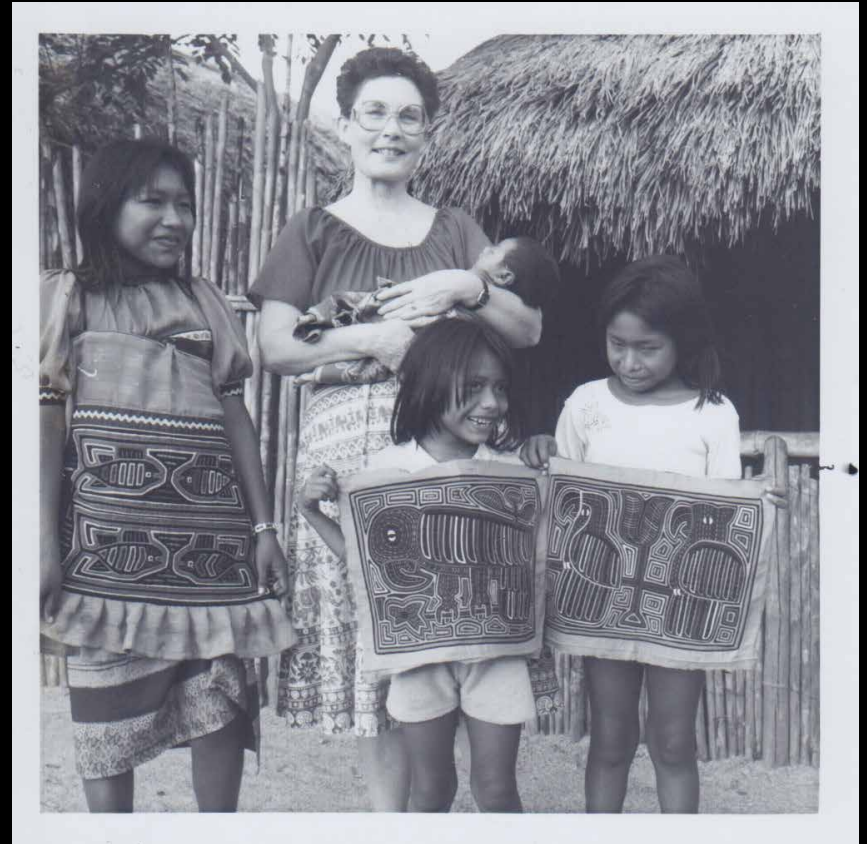
HUDSON MUSEUM
THE UNIVERSITY OF MAINE

INTRODUCTION

Jane Gruver, the Mola Lady, collected these molas between 1964 and the present to document the tradition and its evolution. Jane had a keen eye for selecting works that were well executed and artistic, but also documented the world of the Kuna and their traditions. These molas were set aside by Jane and were destined as a museum collection. They are now among the holdings of the Hudson Museum and join other molas donated by Jane.

Molas are reverse applique panels made in pairs for the front and back of women's blouses. Several layers of cloth are stacked together and the design is made by cutting through the different layers of fabric to expose the desired color. Once the specific shape is achieved, the area is stitched around. Sometimes embroidery and applique are also used to add detail.

When Kuna women get tired of their mola blouses, they make a new panels with designs that suit their fancy. Their "old" blouse is taken apart and the mola panels end up as art. Some are acquired by passengers of cruise ships; others are sold in Panama City or tourist spots in the region. What makes Jane's collection unique is that she knew many of the women who made these molas and the "hidden" meaning of the designs—which is not typical for most molas.





A geometric mola, based on Kuna stools.



Waves and Flowers

Traditionally, mola fabrics are solid colors. This mola uses printed fabric—a more modern trend.



This is an early design based on the use of four motifs repeated. This mola features tables with flower vases and uses flattened perspective.

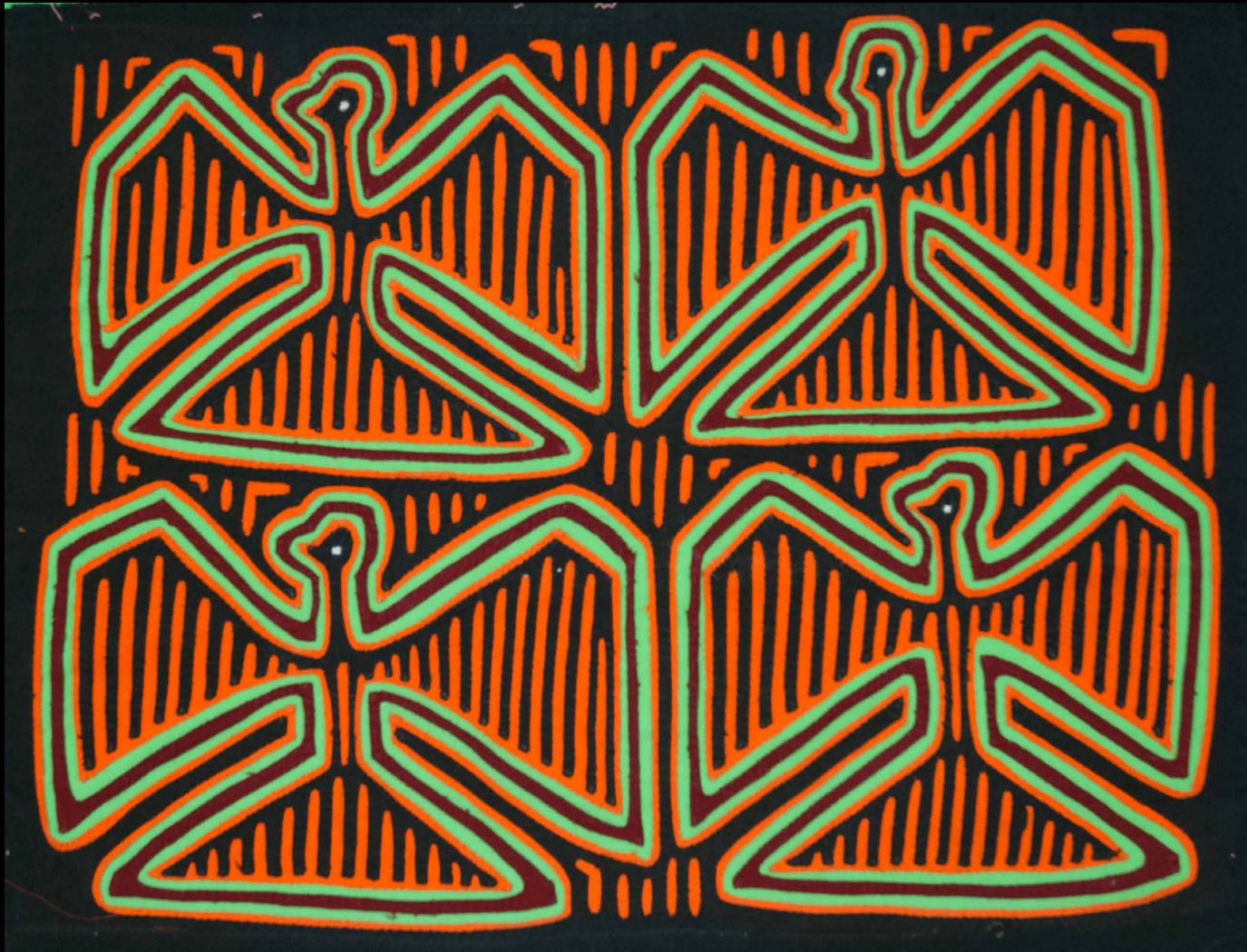


This is an early design featuring birds in mirror image.

HM8676

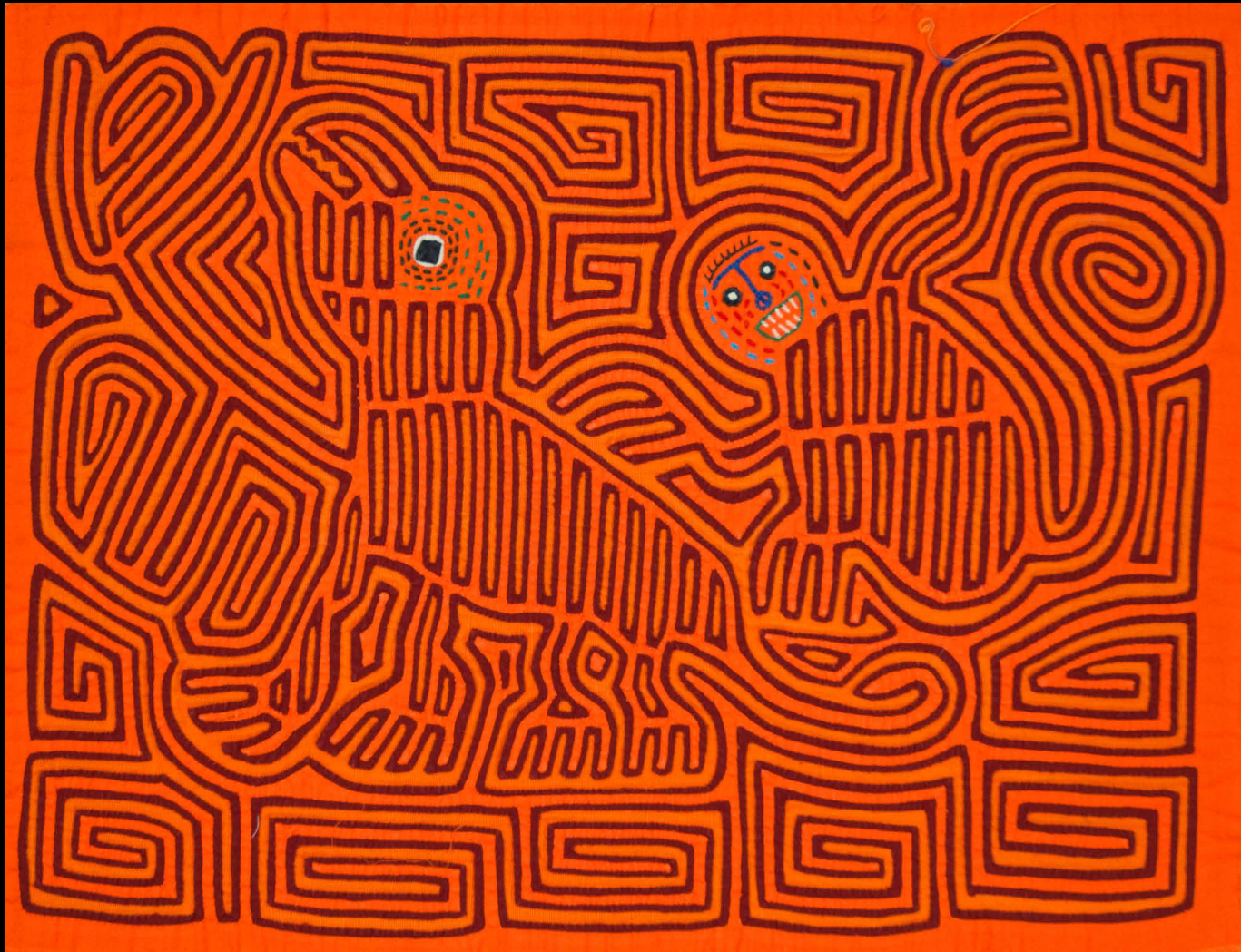


The turtles in this design can be viewed from all directions.



Four Birds

HM8678



In this early design the dogs and monkeys are part of the background.

HM8679



This mola from Ailigandi features skates. This type of mola was popular during the 1960s and 1970s.



Two Toucans on a Branch

This type of mola dates to the 1960s or 1970s.

HM8681



Laughing Leaves with smiling faces was a popular design in the mid 1960s.

HM8682



This mola is the Kuna version of the stork bringing a baby. Among the Kuna, dolphins are sometimes shown delivering babies. A human baby is never depicted, rather babies are depicted as birds, and the name given to midwives is “she who catches the bird.”

HM8683



Womb and Ovaries

According to Kuna beliefs, men do not know the meaning of this mola. The bird represents a baby.



Dragon in Womb

This figure is another version of the womb and ovaries. For the Kuna, dragons inhabit the sky and live under the roots of the mangrove swamp.



Nele, or witch doctor, carrying smoke pots to keep evil spirits away. *Nele* are depicted wearing a three-feathered hat and a tie—the tie signifies that the individual is a person of importance. The legs indicate that he is drunk.



A man and a woman beat rice in a wooden container to loosen the husks. Note that the woman is wearing a cross pendant.



Men Playing Dominoes



These two molas feature a classic design where one figure flows into the next figure. Both depict men holding birds and standing on fish. The outlining in one is the reverse sequence of the outlining in the other. One mola features outlining in orange, black, and blue, while the other is done in blue, black, and orange.

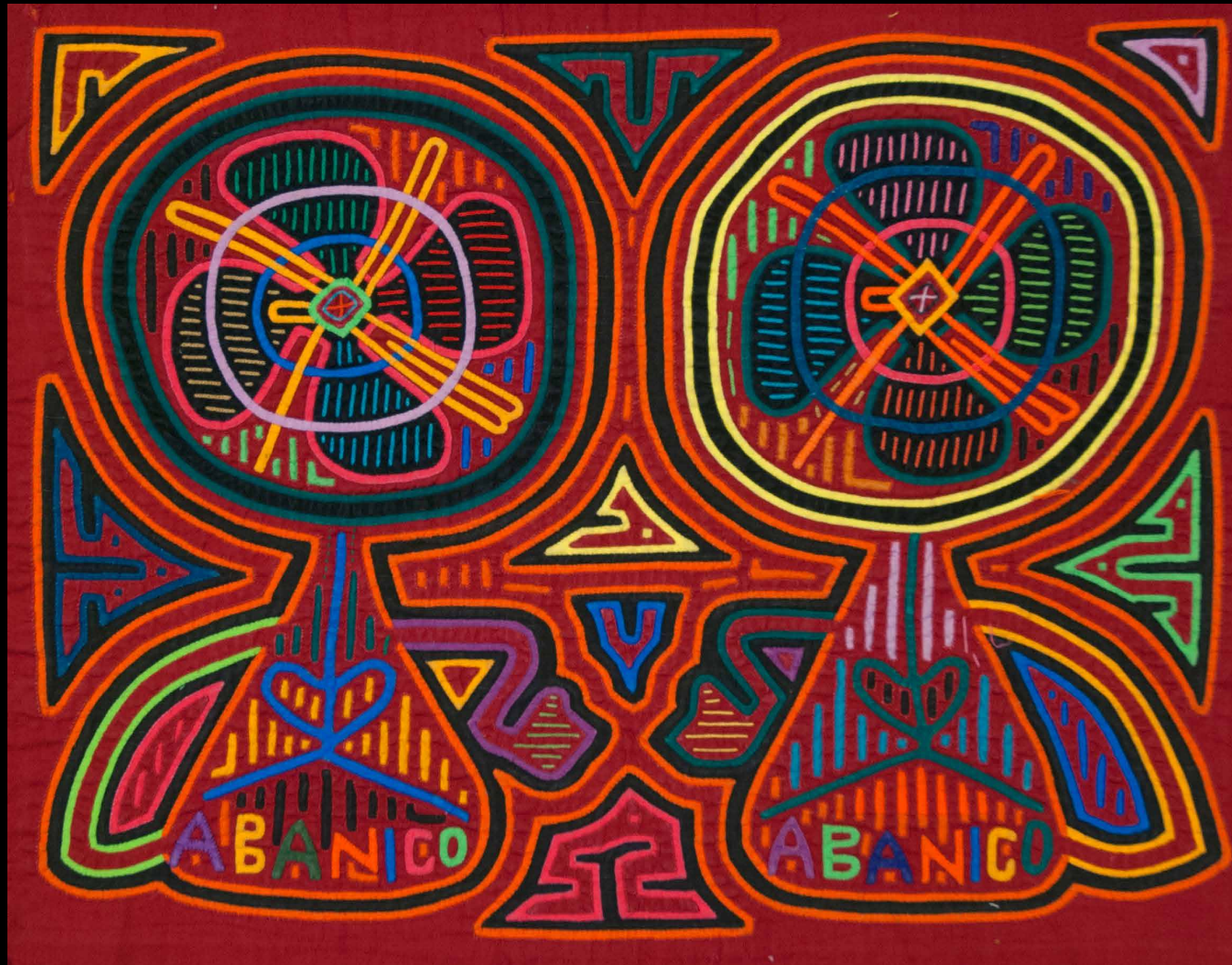
HM8688



This scene is not typical of the San Blas Islands and is more likely depicting an event seen in Panama City. The mola maker misspelled “bang.”



Inspiration for this mola probably came from a visit to Panama City, as there were no television sets on the San Blas Islands until 2000.



“*Abanco*” is the Spanish word for fan. The first fans came to Ailigandi when the hospital installed a generator in the late 1960s. They were a great luxury.



This mola was given to Jane's husband Dr. Daniel Gruver, as a birthday card from Betty, the secretary of the hospital.

HM8692



At the time that this mola was made many of the older women had never left the islands, but they were familiar with airplanes, which were one of the ways of getting goods and people to the islands.

HM8693



Spider webs were popular themes for molas, but this one features two webs, rather than one large web. It also has an unusual background using the numbers “2” and “5” in various combinations.

HM8694



“Mr. Froggy Went a’Courtin”

Children’s coloring books often provide inspiration for mola designs.



Two Bras

On the islands bras may be worn under, or instead of a blouse, especially by younger women.

HM8696



The San Blas Islands are protected from the ocean by reefs. Tourists come to the area to dive near the reefs and enjoy their beauty. The diver is using a snorkel and is collecting items in nets. His boat is waiting at the top of the mola.

HM8697



Diver spearing a fish. This mola features some odd combinations. The fish has been hooked as well as speared and there is a rooster on top of a globe with directions marked.

HM8698



This mola design can be traced back for 150 years. It depicts a coconut palm, which grows on the mainland and are one of the Kuna's main sources of income. The most serious crime that can be committed on the San Blas Islands is the theft of coconuts.

HM8699



This mola was inspired by a political cartoon that poked fun at how slowly politics move.



Biblical themes are common in Kuna molas. The first missionary Annie Coope, came to the islands around 1900s. By 2007 there were churches on 27 islands and 10 Kuna churches in Panama City.



Golden Frogs

This design harks back to the Precolumbian world. Golden frogs, are found in the mountain streams of Panama and are gold in color. In earlier times the Kuna worshipped the golden frog and referred to themselves as “The People of Gold.” Their wealth is manifested in gold earrings, nose rings and elaborate breastplates worn by women.

HM8704



Pelican Feeding Her Chick

The brown pelican nests on the islands. This is the back panel of a blouse with the word for pelican, "*pelicano*" written backwards. On the front panel the word is written correctly.



Turtle and Fish

This is an old classic design, usually with orange as the predominant color.



Crab and Leaves

The detail work of this mola appears as a picture mola on close inspection. From a distance, the mola appears to be a geometric mola.



Dragon Eating the Moon

According to Kuna mythology, a dragon eats the moon during an eclipse. During an eclipse, the Kuna yell, bang pots and pans, and shoot off a rifle (if the island has one) to scare the dragon away.



Dragon

Dragons not only eat the moon during an eclipse, but they also wreak havoc and cause epidemics.



Living the Easy Life

This mola features a non-Kuna, based on the large nose and high heeled shoes, relaxing in a hammock and picking bananas from the tree.

HM8709



Sick Squid

In mola art, anyone who is sick is depicted with their tongue sticking out. Each of the objects that the squid is holding is used by the *nele* or witch doctor in healing ceremonies.



Putting a Man on the Moon

The Kuna were aware of efforts to put a man on the moon. This design was made before they had seen images of the event and represents how they envisioned spacecraft—which has a very flying insect look.



Spacecraft

This is the scientific companion to HM8712. This depiction of a space capsule is based on photos.

HM8743



A Kuna Mermaid

Mermaids are evil spirits who live on the bottom of the ocean and swim to the surface and pull sailors from their boats and drown them.



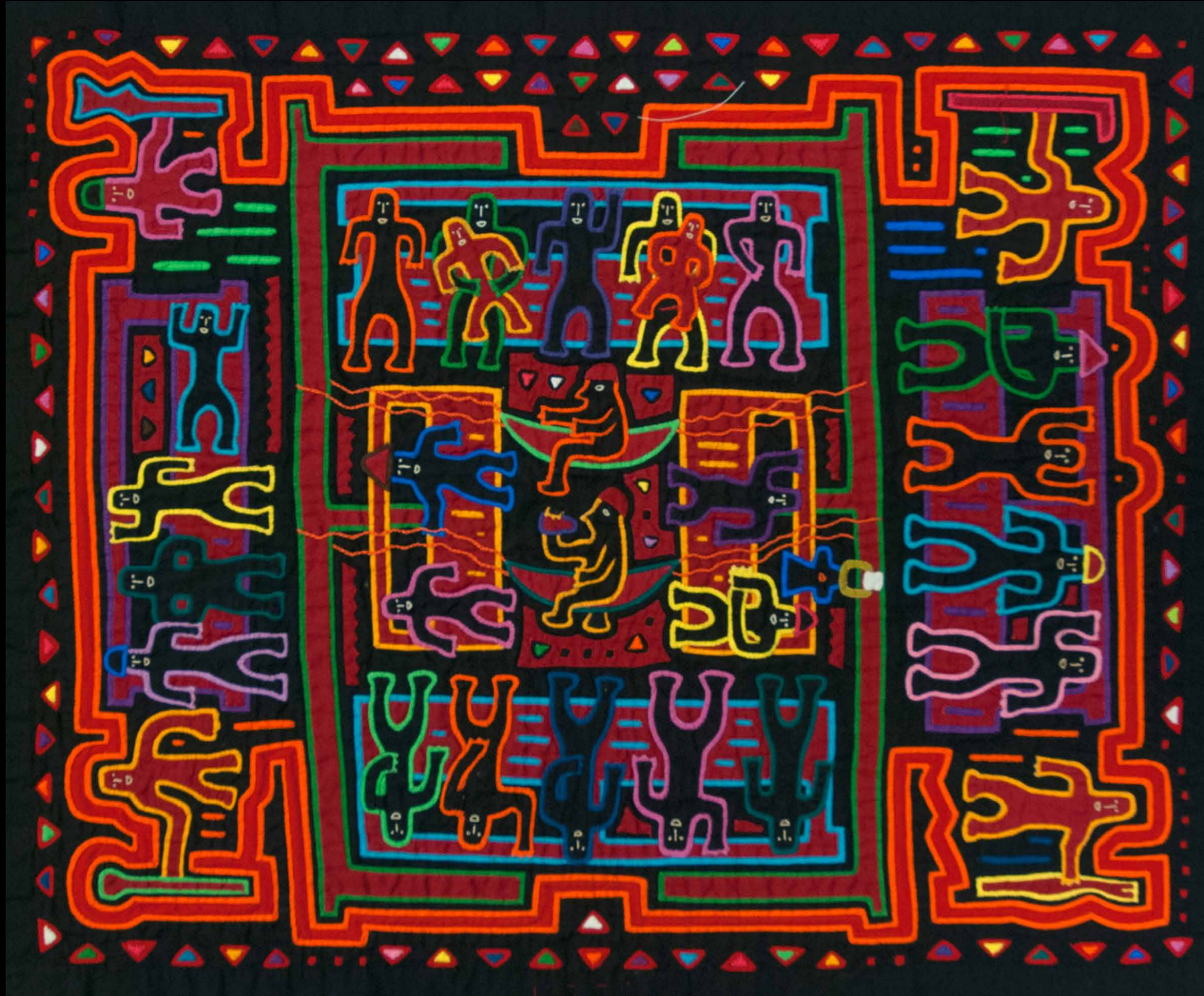
Spanish Galleon

Columbus encountered the Kuna on his fourth voyage to the New World. Depictions of ships dating to this era continue to pop up on molas.



Fish Hooks

All of the Kuna geometric designs are based on common items, such as fishhooks. Fish are the main source of protein on the islands.



Congresso

The Kuna elect their chiefs, making them one of the few indigenous democracies in the New World. Every evening the chief and the people meet in a large hut called the congress to talk and make decisions.



Lobster

This mola uses a traditional technique of showing both the outside and inside of the lobster.

HM8718



Sea Turtle

For Jane, this is one of the most beautiful of her collection. Acquired on Mulatupu, the mola features a sea turtle, which were common around the San Blas Islands. Today, the number of turtles is decreasing in part due to the Kuna custom of eating sea turtle eggs.

HM8719



Pre-Columbian Bat Design

These figures, which are Pre-Columbian in origin, are rare. It is unclear if they have been passed down through the ages or are the result of seeing similar images in books.



Fish with Baseball Hat

This design uses three common mola techniques: the use of flattened perspective, depiction of the animal, fish or person, which shows both the inside and outside, and putting human attributes on a non-human figure.

HM8721



Singing Lullabies

A *Mu* (grandmother) swings in a hammock with two grandchildren, singing them to sleep. This is considered to be a *Mu*'s main job. She is dressed in a red and yellow print skirt, with mola blouse, gold earrings and breastplate and her arms and legs are covered with intricate beadwork.

HM8722



American and Panamanian Flags

The first missionaries to the Kuna were Americans and in general the Kuna are kindly disposed to the United States. This is a new mola style which dates to 2007.



Gossiping Women

These two Kuna women are depicted face to face with their hands towards the bottom of the mola design.



Blue Turtle

Until recently, molas used background colors of dark red, black or orange. Recently blue molas have started to appear.



Thatching a Roof

This is a “modern” mola that uses an applique technique rather than the traditional reverse applique method.



Butterfly and Snake

The wings of the butterfly are snakes—a deviation from traditional mola butterfly designs.



Evil Spirits

The figure in the middle depicts someone who is sick. Among the Kuna illness was traditionally attributed to evil spirits.



Hair Cutting Ceremony

A girl's first haircut comes at her cutting ceremony, which announces her eligibility for marriage. The timing of this event has nothing to do with puberty, but rather with the family's ability to afford the island-wide feast that comes afterwards.

HM8729



Gathering Sopture

Sopture is the juice of the juniper tree that turns black when it hits the air. Kunas believe evil spirits cannot see black objects. To protect pregnant women, they paint their bellies with the black dye.



The Water Carrier

When a Kuna baby is born, people ask “Is it a wood chopper or a water carrier?”



A Hammock Wedding

In a traditional wedding, the prospective bride informs her parents whom she wants to marry, and soon a gang of the young man's friends grab him, carry him to the girl's hammock, and tie them in.



Secret Writing

At first glance, this mola features two roosters playing musical instruments. Surrounding the roosters is a bird with outstretched wings, which is the same figure found on the walls of the chica hut used by the neles or witch doctors for ceremonies.

HM8733



Caught Between Two Cultures

Here a Kuna has tied his hammock between two satellite dishes. Oddly enough there are no satellite dishes on the San Blas Islands, so the mola is pure whimsy.



Sea Horse

Based on an article on seahorses for which there were no illustrations or photos, the mola maker created this version of what a sea horse looks like.



These two molas are derived from the Jungle Book. “Maria” is probably the name of the woman who made the molas.



Mola Pairs

Sick Man and Dead Man

In this mola, the sick man lies in his hammock. The *nele* or witch doctor chants and burns hot peppers to scare off the evil spirits that cause illness. The wife and child wail and the black bird of death hovers above.

The second mola shows that despite the *nele's* efforts the man died. His body is covered by his own clothes and he is wrapped in his hammock. The hammock is transported on a pole to a boat, which will carry the body to the burial ground on the mainland. Family and friends follow the body.

HM8737



Mola Pairs

Talking to the Dead and At the Burial Ground

When someone dies, their body is kept in their hammock for three days, after which the community is sure that the person is truly dead. During these three days their relatives and friends sit beside the body and tell the deceased messages to convey to their relatives in the underworld.

The body in its hammock has been brought by boat up river to the burial grounds. A hole is dug and the pole is lowered, so the hammock swings free. The hole is roofed over and dirt is piled on top of that. Then a temporary structure is built over the grave. A kerosene lamp will be kept burning for a year.

HM8738



Spirit Boat

At every funeral, a spirit boat is brought to the river. It is a miniature *cayuco* (canoe) with paddles, spears, packets of food—everything the spirit will need for its journey to the underworld. A string is tied from the boat to the grave. The last person to leave the funeral cuts the string and allows the boat to drift downstream and out to sea. This mola is a very accurate depiction of these burial traditions. The scene at the upper right is a cross section of the grave with the body in a hammock. On top of the grave is a Kuna stool, food, drink and a smoke pot. There is also a suitcase, as the spirit is making a trip. The two stands at the upper left are sugar presses, representing one of the traps that the spirit must navigate to make it to heaven. If the deceased stole something during their lifetime, their hands will be caught in the press.

HM8739



Skeletons

An old classic design.



Panamanian Social Security logo

The symbol is a world held by two hands. On the world is the family, represented by parents and two children. They are looking out on the mola's front and are looking inward on the back panel.



Women with Fans

A Kuna women sits in her hut on a low stool and fans the open fire in the middle of the hut. The fans are almost to scale as they are about 8" long. All basketwork is done by men.

HM8742



Dancing *Neles* in Cat Masks

In the center an *uchu* held by two daggers is the object that the chanting *neles* will send into the underworld to fight evil and sickness. Although Jane never saw *neles* wearing masks, this form of mola shows up periodically.



Women Arranging Beading on Arms

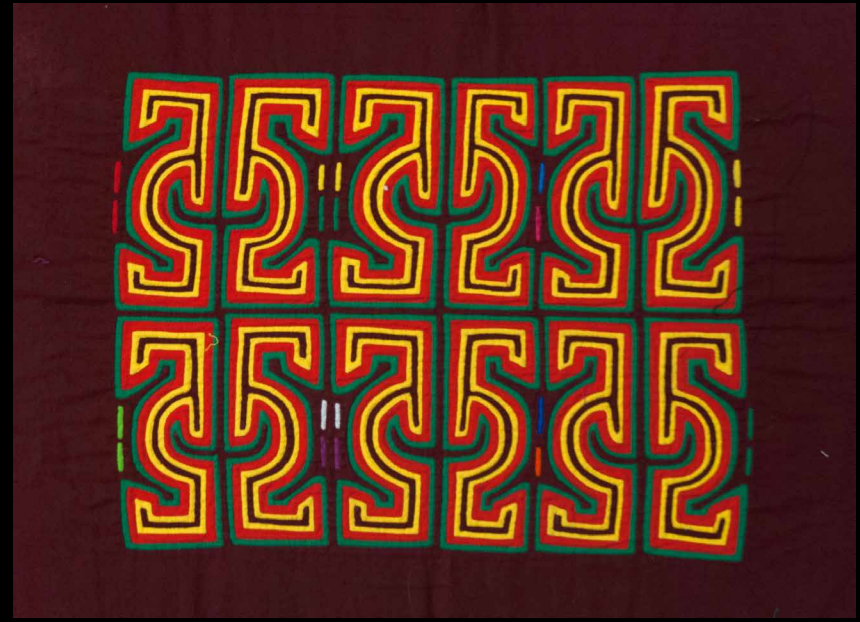
Strings of glass beads are wrapped around the arms and legs of Kuna women. They are threaded a bead at a time to create elaborate geometric designs. They are not removed, but need regular straightening to fix the patterns. This mola features applique work and dates to 2012.

HM8745



Cross Design

This is a traditional design where elements are repeated. The different colors also make unique patterns.



Mola Pair

These two molas feature the number “5,” which is worked into the design in two different ways.

HM8702; 8703

