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A LAYERED STORY

The Molas of Colombia

Tracking Down Rosmery Uribe Espitia, head of ASOIMOLA, is nothing short of an adventure. There is one phone and very little signal in Nuevo Caiman, located between Turbo and Necoclí, two remote villages of Antioquia in Colombia. Nuevo Caiman has a temperate climate. It's a lush and biodiverse setting where avocados and tropical fruits grow profusely. The cuisine consists of rice with delicious blue crab, sweet plantain and avocado.

The Gunadule indigenous community, also known as Guna, Kuna, Cuna or Tule, consists of around 60,000 indigenous people who live in Colombia and Panama. Of these, two thousand inhabit Colombia in the departments of Chocó and Antioquia, in the territories of Dairén and the Gulf of Urabá. In Panama, they are located in the Guna Yala region and the islands of San Blas where Gunadule means 'person who lives on the surface of

the earth'. The Guna are famous for their bright molas, panels of colourful textiles that are used to make the blouses worn daily by many Guna women.

ASOIMOLA (Asociación indígena de Mujeres Artesanas) is an award-winning indigenous association of 59 women whose uniqueness is that they revisit ideas and techniques of the molas of their grandmothers. Molas are handmade layered textiles that are part of the traditional attire of the Guna people from Colombia and Panama. It is said that the tradition comes from body painting using natural colours to produce geometric designs originating from their ritual activities and world vision. Similar designs, mimicking the body painting, were rendered on fabrics after the Spanish invaded the region. In the beginning, the Kuna artists painted on fabric and later, from the 1850s onwards, they started using reverse appliqué, possibly as part of the influence of

missionaries in the region. Other more poetic theories narrate how they received the knowledge of 'the scissors' from the ancestral mother that gave access to the different layers of the earth. According to the Guna, the world is organised in layers: four belong to the upper world and four to the one below. This layered world view is always the starting point of every mola, expressed in the layers of fabric and the colours used. Sadly, there is a quote by the well-known missionary Madre Laura from Antioquia that says: 'once dressed, an Indian is conquered'. This would mean understanding the mola as a result of the colonisers' fear of naked painted bodies.

To create a mola several layers (usually up to seven) of different coloured cloth (usually cotton) are sewn together; the design is then formed by cutting away parts of each layer. The edges of the layers are then turned under and sewn down. Often, the stitches are



nearly invisible. This is achieved by using a thread the same colour as the layer being sewn and sewing tiny blind stitches. The finest molas have extremely fine stitching, made using very small needles. The largest pattern is typically cut from the top layer, and progressively smaller patterns from each subsequent layer, thus revealing the colours beneath in successive layers. This basic scheme can be varied by cutting through multiple layers at once, hence varying the sequence of colours. Some molas also incorporate patches of contrasting colours, included in the design at certain points to introduce additional variations of colour. Similar to the development of the decoration technique, the designs have also evolved from the initial geometric ones to depictions of the flora and fauna of the area and now even abstract designs and print on print. One can even find molas with political themes and references to pop culture.

The Gunadules' full attire, worn inside and outside the community, consists of a wrapped skirt, a red or yellow head scarf, beaded bracelets worn around arms and legs, a gold nose ring and earrings and a colourful blouse. When they get tired of a particular item of clothing, the mola is cut out and sold to collectors in search of used authentic molas. A blouse has two panels, front and back with two variations on a theme. Quality varies a great deal and is related to the number of layers and the quality of the stitching; evenness and width of cutouts; addition of details such as zigzag borders; latticework or embroidery; general artistic merit of the design and colour combination. They can take from one week to six months to make according to the complexity of the design and the size.

According to research carried out by The Gold Museum in Colombia, molas capture the way in which the Guna universe is structured. For ▶



Gunadules, the universe is like a gourd with a series of overlapping layers inside it. The layers that hold it are gold, each with a different colour: blue, red or yellow. Everything on them is gold and they are covered by many types of flowers. And among these layers are the Galus, sacred places visited by the Neles, spiritual guides of the community, who walk between them in dreams. However, there is a Galu that not even the Neles themselves managed to access, a Galu guarded by the beautiful specialists of the scissors, who only allowed the entrance of one woman: Nagegiryai. She brought the ancestral knowledge of molas to the women of the community and taught them to dress like mother earth through songs. The Molas Naga, or Protection Molas, have thirteen designs, which aim to guide the behaviour of the community, coordinating the sacred places so that they influence the protection of women and represent the different elements of nature that Nagegiryai saw, when Knowledge of Molas was revealed to her.

Unfortunately, despite the Panamanian legislation to protect folk art, the popularity of molas has generated an industry based on copies of Guna designs, threatening the Guna's greatest source of revenue. Authentic molas are more than just panels or even part of the Guna attire, they are symbols of identity and femininity. Every rite of passage is marked by this precious textile that works as an icon and a portable cultural symbol, a token of exchange and commerce, as well as a powerful vortex between past and future. As in most cultural dynamics, innovation will inform and enrich the cultural memory and the other way around in a constant dialogue of opposite forces. ♦♦♦ **Marcella Echavarría, ASOIMOLA will be exhibiting at the Selvedge World Fair, 1 - 4 Sept**



