By Georgia Corin

FOR THE CUNA Indians of the San Blas, 1970 may be the "Year of the Mola."

The diminutive Cuna women, shy when it comes to displaying themselves in their colorful costumes, become aggressive hawks of their cloth molas, which are the most sought after tourist item in Panama. The rectangular, intricately designed panels are worn by the Indian women, young and old alike, but the North Americans who sometimes seem to overflow the small Cuna communities on buying sprees have other ideas. They have taken to framing them for wall hangings, for dressmaking, pillow covers, curtains, hats, head scarfs, bikinis, place mats, clothing patches, and in the Canal Zone the newest fad among teenagers is to put them on T-shirts and jackets.

The market for molas has reached fantastic proportions and the commercial demand for them in the United States cannot be met. Orders for thousands are received by local wholesalers, but only hundreds at a time can be supplied. On the islands most visited by tourists the Indian women spend all of their spare time hand sewing the molas although sewing machines have come into use on a few islands.

The design and workmanship of the unique needlework panels have changed from generation to generation during their approximate 100-year history. Among the molas currently being made, however, there is a tendency to reproduce many of the styles and techniques of the past.

Much Conjecture

Although there is no documented evidence concerning the details of the origin of the mola there is much conjecture. The literature on the Cuna Indian abounds with all phases of their culture and frequently describes in general terms what the Indians were wearing throughout various stages in history.

It is known that the Cuna Indians practiced the art of body painting during the 16th and 17th centuries. The women were in charge of the painting so it follows that they were to become the "artists" of the society. Using a wooden stick gnawed at the end to the softness of a brush and working with pigments of brilliant colors made from berries and clays, they covered their entire bodies with designs. It is easy to imagine that their abstractions of plant and animal forms had much of the same linear quality that we find in the mola designs of today.

While the men of this period enjoyed comparative nakedness, the women had a tradition of modesty. Cotton was cultivated and a homespun-type of cloth was woven for clothing. The women of the 17th century were described as wearing skirt-like garments that were tied behind, but no upper garments. The skirts were made of handwoven cotton or occasionally of old clothes obtained through trading.

One explorer in the 1680's reported the women as wearing cotton clothing "curiously embroidered," but since this period preceded the arrival of commercial needles and thread, and the Cuna Indians did not weave or inlay designs in their cloth, one could theorize that the garments were handpainted in a technique somewhat related to body painting.

Nakedness

There is little information available on the Cuna dress for the years between 1700 and 1850. But a trend away from nakedness had definitely begun by 1700, and by 1850 the women were reported as wearing handpainted, wraparound skirts which were worn under knee-length blouses, usually dark blue and decorated with a band of red at the bottom.

The women still engaged in weaving at this time but they took much more
delight in being able to secure pieces of fabric or old clothes, usually of gaudy colors, from passing traders and preferred to use these since they represented such prized articles.

**Trading Ships**

A generation or so prior to the close of the 19th century the ingredients of the mola which we know today were the geometric designs and the different colors of cloth. What remained was the integration of these elements. In this case, opportunity was the mother of invention. With the coming of the high-powered looms and the development of color-fast chemical dyes in Europe, factory-woven cloth in a variety of bright colors and prints soon found its way via trading ships to the San Blas Islands.

As the traders brought in more colorful cloth the women began to decorate the hems of their basic blue and red tunics with simple applique. Needles, thread, and scissors also were easily procured items from the trading ships of the late 1800’s. The particularly intricate Cuna “applique” technique itself appears to have been an indigenous development. Actually, the term “applique” is not technically accurate in this case. The term “cut work stitchery” would be more descriptive, for the Cuna found a completely incongruous printed fabric was often used to “top” the artistic needlework, a practice which continues to this day.

**New Art Form**

The women, apparently carried away with their new art form, gradually widened the decorated hem until by the early 1900’s it included the whole area below the armpits. The yoke and sleeves were usually white, although one finds in early photographs that a completely incongruous printed fabric was often used to “top” the artistic needlework, a practice which continues to this day.

It was during this time that a blue, factory-woven cloth suitable for wrap-around skirts became available and fashionable, and so the blouse was shortened to hip length in order that the skirt could show. Skirt styles have not changed basically since.

The cutwork panels which formed the back and front of the early blouses were usually of two or three layers of cloth. Red, orange, and black became the favorite basic color choices. The designs were most frequently geometric, continuous-line compositions with about an equal distribution of background and foreground colors. When figures did appear they were highly stylized and abstract.

This same style of the early 1900’s is still being produced today.

As the mola grew in size, it also grew in complexity. The brilliantly colored cloth of good quality that was available had the same effect on the women of San Blas as a large box of crayons has on a small child.

By the 1920’s the Cuna women were known to have one of the most striking costumes among the indigenous people of the Americas. No visitor failed to report the colorful apparel and he usually tried, with success, to obtain an example of this remarkable folk art.

**Hardy Visitors**

Visitors were few and hardy in those days, usually limited to scientists, Panama Canal employees, and adventurous tourists. But the mola of this period was relatively crude compared to what it would become in the next generation. The parallel spaces in the cutwork was often ½ to 1 inch wide and in some of the photographs taken prior to 1930 one can even see evidence of the stitches.

The unique geographical location occupied by the San Blas Archipelago, located off the Caribbean shore of eastern Panama, is no doubt responsible for the Cuna having a longer history of contact with Europeans than any other Indian group of the Americas.

Beginning with Columbus, who in 1501 gave the San Blas Islands their name, there has been an unending stream of explorers, exploiters, buccaneers, would-be settlers, surveyors for the railroad, builders of the Canal, missionaries, U.S. military forces, scientists, and tourists. And yet, from earliest recorded times, the Cunas have resisted integration with other groups and have managed to retain their own integrity.

The increased exposure to other cultures, however, did have the effect of creating new inspiration for mola designs. Any subject was fair game for translation into their unique visual vernacular. In 1938, the islands were opened for day tourists and it was not long afterward that the mola became an elaborate masterpiece of four or five layers of cloth and as many colors.

**Wide Repertoire**

From the 1950’s to the present, the wide repertoire of subject matter included such nonindigenous items as product labels, magazine pictures, calendar art, pictures from children’s storybooks, Christian iconography (following the arrival of missionaries), and illustrations of current events, as well as interpretations of their own folklores and scenes from everyday life. These professional primitives had reached the epitome of fusing originality with borrowed ideas. Add to this an ever increasing supply of materials and a growing enthusiastic market of tourists, private collectors, interior decorators, fashion designers, gift shop owners, and museums and the results could be termed the heyday of the molas.
With so many hands busy sewing molas to meet these demands the question of quality arises. Are all molas works of art? Probably not. In a primitive society, native crafts are originally made for utilitarian purposes, whether ceremonial or practical. Art is not a profession as it is in Western civilization but a social duty. When everyone not only can but must produce, it follows that the clumsier hands are going to produce inferior work.

Anybody's Guess

Recently, the mola has experienced a further lessening of quality due to a speeding up of the length of time spent on sewing each panel. It is estimated that the average panel takes from 4 to 6 weeks to complete. How much of this time is spent in actual sewing hours, however, is anybody's guess. The women spend every free moment sewing and they usually have several pieces of needlework going at one time.

But despite the fact that for a while it looked as though there would be enough of these brilliant panels to cover the earth, at the rate that molas are leaving the islands the supply will eventually diminish. And although a few of the very complex and good quality molas are still being made, it is at an ever decreasing rate. There are still some old but good ones to be found but this supply is also on the wane, and once they are gone—like the Old Masters, they will never be replaced.

The time spent, the care taken, and the quality of materials used all combine to make the mola an outstanding achievement among folk art today. There is such a tremendous variety on the market that the prospective buyer could easily become confused. Here are a few guidelines.

First, styles may vary from very simple, two-layer designs to the ultimate in complexity with four or five layers of cloth and intricately embroidered detail. So, examine the mola for number of layers of cloth.

A Clue

Second, notice the quality of fabric used. If you can, try to determine if it has been worn and washed. This would give you a clue to its durability. There are some very old molas which were made with quality cotton and have survived countless washings and wear with little or no fading. But thin and even synthetic material is often found in the molas currently being produced.

Third, examine the width and evenness of the lines and spaces. The more carefully sewn molas may have spaces no wider than ⅛ inch. And there was a time when a good mola was one that had no space greater than one ⅛ inch without some work on it. In addition, good stitching does not show on the top layer, only on the bottom.

Fourth, besides the more frequently seen "slot" technique used for filling in background areas, there are other more time-consuming techniques. These include filling large areas with tiny dots, a modified Greek-key motif, and surrounding the edges of figures with a saw-tooth pattern or one that resembles tiny gears, to mention a few.

Fifth, color and subject are largely a matter of personal taste. There are those collectors who find the subtle tones of the old, closely keyed panels highly desirable. On the other hand, some prefer the ones made with vibrant and bright colors. Also, clashing colors are often used to achieve striking effects. As far as subject matter goes, the variety is infinite and whether you prefer an Adam and Eve wearing top hats, a portrait of a famous person such as General MacArthur, or perhaps an amazing reproduction of a sardine can label, is entirely up to you.

Prices

Prices on the San Blas Islands begin at $2.50 for a very ordinary mola panel. A whole blouse, right out of a Cuna woman's wardrobe, can usually be purchased for from $5 to less than $10. In Panama City and Colon, prices begin at around $5 a panel and increase according to quality.

Collectors' items begin at approximately $25 and sometimes reach $100. In the United States it is difficult to find any of the San Blas needlework for less than $10. The panels are frequently sold framed which increases the price considerably. In a May issue of the NEW YORKER magazine, an article describing a new gift shop stated that mola wall hangings sold at $40 to $45 each, and mounted on a 20 x 24-inch piece of Formica, $75.

There are many theories regarding what the future of the San Blas Cuna Indians of Panama might be. Their reluctance to join the 20th century may preserve them and their art. And, perhaps, these Indians, with their fantastic imaginations, marvelous innate sense of design and color, and their skill, will continue sewing in spite of creeping civilization.

Mrs. Corin has taught art in the Canal Zone and recently completed her master of arts thesis in art education on the mola.
THE MOLA achieved art status when Dr. Louis Hoover, head of Illinois State University Art Department, decided to devote the remainder of his life to helping the Cuna artists. Dr. Hoover first collected more than a thousand quality molas from all the areas of the San Blas. These molas formed a background or research group for study, classification, and development of nomenclature. After many trips into the Cuna country and long talks with the tribal leaders it was possible to begin to understand the stories being told by the molas.

In December 1968, the Hoover Collection was unveiled for the art world. The Center for Inter-American Relations in New York held an exhibit and turned all its facilities over to the collection and printed an extensive catalog. The exhibit next opened at the Pan American Union in Washington, D.C. where the Ambassador of Panama held a formal reception attended by President Nixon.

Following these beginnings the collection has been sought by museums and galleries all over the United States and Canada. Molas as art are now accepted and as a result higher quality molas are being avidly sought. This should lead to the ultimate realization that a mola as a tourist souvenir and as an art object are two separate entities.

The Hoover collection has made it possible for anthropologists and sociologists to study the "writings" of the Cuna in great detail. One mola in the Hoover collection is identical to a third millineum Mesopotamian drawing. Recent indications are that designs such as this were transmitted down through the ages by grass weavings until the molas offered a better medium.

W. D. Barton, Islandia.