WHAT DO PEOPLE DO WITH molas?

While the Cuna women in Panama's San Blas Islands are doing exactly what they always did with them—wearing them as blouses—mola fanciers in Panama and the Canal Zone are fashioning them into everything from purses to lampshades.

And there is no generation gap where their use is concerned. They are found on the seat of teenagers' jeans as well as the skirt of mother's party dress. Grandmother may have a mola-decorated knitting bag while her granddaughter carries a mola shoulder bag.

The traditional mola which is proving so popular with amateur as well as professional designers, is rectangular in shape and consists of three to five layers of various colored cotton cloth. The intricate designs are fashioned by cutting through the layers of cloth to the color desired and the edges of the design are sewn so that the stitching cannot be seen. The technique has been described as "reverse applique" or "cutwork stitchery."

Mrs. Sherry Holland, of Diablo, models a skirt which she designed to be worn opened up the side or the front.
The Cuna seamstress makes no preliminary drawing but starts out with a picture idea and develops the design as she goes along. A good mola may take a month or two to make.

Custom-made molas may be ordered—at a slightly higher price. Just show the inventive folk artists of the San Blas a picture or sketch of the subject you want depicted and you'll have a mola that is not only personalized, but a unique conversation piece. Of course, the results are sometimes surprising. A likeness of your family dog, for example, may be so highly stylized that he'll come out looking like a giant anteater. But no one else will have a mola like it.

Until recently molas were simply framed on a background of colored burlap and hung on a living room or den wall, but they are now being given new dimensions by imaginative people with a propensity toward individualism.

On these pages are some of the interesting ways molas are being used by Isthmian residents with a flair for fashion.
The Classic Cuna Costume

THE CUNAS USE TWO MOLAS to a blouse, one in front and one in back, usually of the same design and color. They add sleeves and a yoke edged with borders of a blending color.

The early Cuna blouses were knee length and were decorated with a band of red at the bottom. As colored cloth became more common and as island traders brought in needles, thread and scissors, in exchange for coconuts, the women expanded their decoration, shortened the blouse to waist length, and gradually developed the technique of cutting outlines of the desired figures in the top layer of cloth allowing the next layer to show the design.

Not unlike fashion-conscious women all over the world, a San Blas lady discards a blouse when the colors get dull or when she feels the need for a change in wardrobe.

Having discovered that tourists will buy almost anything made of molas, she usually offers the used blouse for sale or rips it apart and sells the two molas separately. Serious collectors are always on the lookout for these as they know that the Indian women save the best ones for themselves and the used molas, though faded, are often superior in design and in needlework.

An attractive San Blas seamstress wears the typical everyday costume of the women of the Islands.
Quite different from the traditional Cuna blouse is this one made by Mrs. Holland. Around her waist is a mola necktie.

Thirty molas were needed to make this banquet-sized tablecloth which Capt. Julius Grigore, USNR, took with him when he left the Canal Zone following his retirement.

Anne Castles, Canal Zone College student, wears a bikini which she made from two molas.