

No Sew Molas

(art + social studies)

The wonderfully independent Kuna culture flourishes today in the San Blas Islands located off the coast of Panama. The Kunas fought Panama in 1925 and won the right to continue to speak their own language, govern their island and produce and wear their traditional clothing. The women wear their traditional patterned wrapped skirt, red and yellow headscarf, jewelry and a blouse. The Mola is part of the blouse.

Molas are rectangular panels that form the front and back of the blouse. The brightly colored panels are sewn into designs using layers of cotton fabric and the technique of appliqué. The earliest Kuna women chose geometric shapes reflecting body painting worn before 1850. These designs were reflected in the first Molas believed to be sewn around 1850. Spanish colonists and missionaries provided the first cotton cloth and yardage for the women to use. The more detail and finely sewn, the more valuable the Mola is. To this day Molas are made and worn by the artist. When they tire of them, they are disassembled and newly sewn panels put in their place. Old panels are sold and highly prized by collectors.

Current designs reflect colorful animals, people and advertisements. Many new Molas are made for sale to collectors and tourists. Smaller panels and patches are sold as decorative pieces of art along with the bigger, traditional Molas.

Kuna women use both appliqué and reverse appliqué sewing techniques for their spectacular color and design combinations. Sewing these patterns using the layered fabric is very intense work. The “no sew” Molas in this lesson are an easier approach to making a Mola-inspired design. Colorful felt and glue replace thin cotton and needle and thread in this project.

Grade Levels K-8

Note: instructions and materials based on a class of 25 students. Adjust as needed.

Process

1. Draw a simple design on a sheet of drawing paper. Animal or geometric shapes are ideal for this process. The design should be no larger than 7-1/2" x 10-1/2" leaving a 1/2" border around all sides.



Materials

[Blick White Sulphite Drawing Paper](#), package of 500, 9" x 12" sheets (10209-1013), need one sheet per student

[Blick Economy Graphite Pencils](#), box of twelve (20302-2009) need one per student

[Acrylic Felt](#), assorted colors, 9" x 12" (63201-1003) share one package of 100 swatches across class

[Craft Felt Swatches](#), Black, 9" x 12" (63201-2003), need one per student

[Animal Print Felt](#) 9" x 12" swatches (63208-1023), share one 12-swatch package across class

[Snippy Scissors](#), pointed (57040-2009) package of twelve, need one per student

[Elmer's® Glue All](#), 7-5/8-oz bottle (23872-1065) need one per student

[General's® Pastel Chalk Pencils](#) set of eight assorted colors (20533-6009) and set of eight neutral colors (20533-3009), need one of each to share across class

Process, continued

2. Review the drawing to determine the number of layers that will be needed to re-create the basic forms in the sketch. Two to four layers are ideal for this project. Layers will be created using either an appliqué or reverse appliqué technique. In the reverse appliqué process, a shape is cut and removed from the piece to create a negative shape that functions as a window to a layer behind. More than one shape can be cut from a layer. For example, a bird shape could be cut from the center and small leaves or worms can be cut from the corners.
3. Select one sheet of black felt for the top layer and additional sheets of other colors for the other layers. To make the design stand out, alternate dark and light colors from one layer to the next.
4. Use the sketch as a template. Cut out the main shape in the drawing, place on the black felt and trace with a chalk pencil that will show up on that surface. Repeat this process for each shape and layer moving from the outside of the design in. You may choose to appliqué or reverse appliqué each of the smaller shapes. In regular appliqué, the piece of felt is cut to shape and added to the top of a layer. In reverse appliqué, each layer is cut smaller to show underneath the top layer.
5. Assemble the pieces with glue. Press firmly after the glue is applied. Repeat pressure as needed to ensure adhesion.
6. Add additional detail by cutting scraps into shapes such as lines, etc and apply in appliqué style to complement the design.

Options

- Use larger pieces of felt for the top and bottom and use smaller pieces behind the top layer in only the cut out area.
- Limit very young children to only a top and bottom piece. Cut out only the top shape for reverse appliqué and add regular appliqué to the background.

National Standards

Content Standard #1 — Understanding and applying media, techniques, and processes

5-8 Students select media, techniques, and processes; analyze what makes them effective or not effective in communicating ideas; and reflect upon the effectiveness of their choices

9-12 Students conceive and create works of visual art that demonstrate an understanding of how the communication of their ideas relates to the media, techniques, and processes they use

Content Standard #3 — Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas

5-8 Students use subjects, themes, and symbols that demonstrate knowledge of contexts, values, and aesthetics that communicate intended meaning in artworks

9-12 Students reflect on how artworks differ visually, spatially, temporally, and functionally, and describe how these are related to history and culture

Content Standard #4 — Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures

5-8 Students know and compare the characteristics of artworks in various eras and cultures

9-12 Students describe the function and explore the meaning of specific art objects within varied cultures, times, and places

Content Standard #6 — Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines

5-8 Students describe ways in which the principles and subject matter of other disciplines taught in the school are interrelated with the visual arts

9-12 Students compare characteristics of visual arts within a particular historical period or style with ideas, issues, or themes in the humanities or sciences