ABOUT THE ART

The San Bias Islands on the north (Atlantic) coast of Panama are the homeland of the Cuna Indians, creators of the molas featured in this issue. While many of the Cuna groups inhabiting about forty of the several hundred islands in the chain have been very reclusive, the San Bias groups have interacted with the outside world at least since the time of Balboa. Their relationship with outsiders, however, has been cordial but somewhat distant. Until very recent times, interracial marriages or births were generally grounds for banishment or death, so the Cuna are virtually pure Indian, one of the purest in the western hemisphere.

Their cultural values of cooperation, honesty, chastity, and benevolence and some of their oral history and written stories bear striking parallels to the Church and its teachings. In the last forty years, the Church has attracted many members on the islands.

Mola, a native art form, literally means “clothing”, but the word has come to mean a multilayered rectangle worked in applique and reverse applique. A good mola has many cutout areas; tiny, almost invisible stitches; and few, if any, large areas without stitching. Even a skilled mola maker may need several weeks to complete a project. Traditionally, molas have been used as the front or back of women's blouses. The techniques of applique and reverse applique used to make mola blouses have developed and flowered over the last 150 years.

Earliest known molas were adaptations of traditional face and body painting. Some of these early designs are still popular today. More common, however, are pictorial molas, taken from nature, everyday activities, books, posters, newspapers, or in our case, Church periodicals and missionary lesson kits.

ART CREDITS

p. 80: “The Second Coming of Christ,” 12” X 15 3/8”, cotton, reverse appliqué made by Cunna Indian members of the Church, ca. 1983
p. 97: “The Fish,” 20 1/8” X 14 1/8”, cotton, reverse appliqué made by Hermana Perrelez, ca. 1983
p. 134: “Moroni Raises the Title of Liberty,” 19 1/2” X 17 1/2”, cotton, reverse appliqué made by LDS members from San Bias Islands, 1965
p. 139: “This is the Place Monument,” 14 1/4” X 15 3/4”, cotton, reverse appliqué artist unknown, 1980
p. 191: “Danza Kuna,” 16 7/8” X 13 1/2”, cotton, reverse appliqué made by Albecia Fernandez, ca. 1983

All molas used courtesy of the Museum of Church History and Art, Salt Lake City, Utah. Special thanks to Ron Read and Robert Davis.