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# Cuna Molas: The Geometry of Background Fill

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The Cuna Indians, also known as the San Blas Indians, occupy the Archipelago de Las Mulatas made up of a string of more than three hundred islands which lie off the northeastern coast of the Republic of Panama. Here, against a tropical setting of turquoise seas, coral islands, white sandy beaches, and coconut palms, some twenty thousand Cuna live in crowded conditions on the larger islands lying nearest the mainland.

One of Panama's three indigenous Indian cultures, the Cuna were well-established in Panama's interior upon the arrival of the Spaniards, and Cuna villages are still found along the rivers of Panama's Bayano region. It is thought by many scholars of Panamanian history that the San Blas Cuna were originally river people who gravitated to the islands to escape Spanish persecution. Whatever the reason, the islands provided an ideal environment for growing the coconuts on which their economy has come to be based, and gave them the isolation from non-Cuna people which they found so desireable.

The Cuna fostered their insular society and until well into the twentieth century they entertained a non-violent hostility towards strangers. Today, the Cuna continue to protect their racial purity and retain many traditional customs and beliefs, even while strangers of various persuasions are visitors on their islands and acculturation goes on apace.

In order to maintain communities, occupied islands must be near enough to the mainland so that daily trips may be made by boat. On the mainland the men farm small plots of land, and the women obtain fresh water from mainland rivers to take to the islands, wash

clothes, bathe, and enjoy a social hour with friends. Much of Cuna livelihood is obtained from the sea, and Cuna men often sail on foreign vessels.

Cuna society is matriarchial so that many traditions, customs and ceremonies center about the women. Upon marriage, the bridegroom will live with, and work for, the bride's family, and although the eldest male is the head of the household, women enjoy much prestige and authority.

Cuna men wear rather ordinary western-style clothing, but the dress of Cuna women is exceedingly colorful and the pride of Cuna culture. They also wear golden nose rings and necklaces made of trade beads or fish, animal and bird bones. Their wrists and ankles are bound tightly with strings of colored beads to form interesting designs with the purpose of keeping this portion of their limbs elegantly slender. A hand-sewn, short-sleeved blouse which the Cuna call mola, decorated with complicated designs, along with a sarong-like skirt and a yellow and red bandana covering their short-cropped hair, completes their everyday wearing apparel. On festive occasions they may wear large, round gold ear plates, a number of gold finger rings, and gold necklaces. Red paint on the cheeks, and a black line down the center of the nose are added for beauty's sake.

It is the blouse, however, for which the Cuna are best known, an item which may take Cuna women six to eight weeks of leisure time to complete, and which has earned them a well-deserved niche in the annals of needlework. In an article on molas, art critic John Canaday observed that:

> ...the panels which they create... are brilliant artifacts at the very least, or at a higher level are folk art of a superior kind... and are very often works of fine art...[1]

The panels to which Mr. Canaday refers are the front and back panels of the Cuna blouse which are made of two or three layers of colored cotton cloth, averaging 14 x 18 inches in size. The first step involves the basting together of two layers of differently colored cloth. The outline of a preconceived design is then cut from the second layer, leaving a silhouette of the desired motif. The rough edges of the second layer are tucked under and stitched to the bottom layer, a technique often referred to as reverse applique. At

this point, should the panel be completed, a two-color mola has been produced. It is more likely, however, that a third layer will now be added, the design cut out in the same fashion as the second layer, the edges again turned under and stitched down, this time leaving a narrow border of the second color framing the silhouette. The motif now can be appliqued in the area prepared for it and, depending upon its complexity, it will be completed with additional applique, inlays, inserts and other needlework embellishments. In a good mola, there will be little or no evidence of the stitching except on the reverse side of the panel where it is likely to approach machine-like perfection.

Having completed the primary motif, the Cuna needlewoman will turn her attention to the empty space surrounding the design. Here she will follow the example of many other primitive people who, in art, often avoid empty space. This is usually accomplished by introducing subordinate elements to fill those areas left blank by the motif, or by so arranging the motif that it covers the entire area which is to be decorated. Among the Cuna, space fillers are the rule, certainly in pictorial molas, but even in those abstract and geometric motifs which may occasionally cover the entire panel, there is usually some evidence of a filling pattern. It is often in the background fill that the consummate skill of the master needlewoman will appear, and the discipline of the dedicated individual becomes most apparent in the fine detail accorded to tedious and time-consuming fill elements. Cuna women resort to the use of a wide variety of shapes and forms for background fill, and the manipulation of color to achieve effects which are quite sophisticated.

The simplest and most common of the space fillers used in Cuna needlework is the vertical slot (Figure 1). It, along with the other types of space fillers, is also frequently incorporated as an element of design in the primary motif where it may serve as a feature of the motif, or serve the purpose of space filler. It may be rounded at both ends, or rectangular in shape. In both instances, the slots are cut out of the top piece of material to reveal inserts of plain colored cloth or printed material which have been introduced underneath the top layer to provide color variety. The edges of the slots are tucked under and stitched down in the same fashion as the second and top layers of the panel.

*Fig. 1. An example of well-executed vertical slots.*

In a variation of vertical slot fill, the inserts are replaced with varying lengths of colored strips which are sewn horizontally to empty spaces of the second layer of the panel with colors alternating both horizontally and vertically (Figure 2). Upon completion of this technique, several strips of color appear in the slot, rather than the single color or the printed pattern of an insert. In another, and even more complicated version, horizontal slots are cut into the second layer of cloth prior to adding the horizontal strips, thus adding the color of the bottom layer of the panel to an already dazzling array. Occasionally, striped or printed material may be substituted for handwork in background fill and may lead to unusual effects. Background fill made in this fashion tends to mask the motif, making it difficult to recognize.

Dots are a particularly effective, but time-consuming, form of fill (Figure 3). Here, too, inserts of colored and printed materials are stitched to the second layer, with the dots cut out of the top layer and stitched down. Artfully used, they provide a quite magnificent

*Fig. 2. Vertical slots with strips of vari-colored cloth sewn to second layer for increased color.*

backdrop of glowing color for the dominant motif. In an excellent panel, there may be more than twelve hundred dots, averaging 1/8" in diameter.

The triangle is another type of fill likely to be used by the better seamstresses. Occasionally, the first triangle is cut out of the second layer to reveal the color of the last layer, and the final triangle is cut out of, and finished, on the top layer. In another technique, the triangle is cut out of the top layer only and color variation achieved by appliqueing one or two smaller triangles inside the first triangle. Further variety is sometimes attained by notching the final triangle into a "V" shape. Inserts usually are not used with this form of fill. In an especially good panel, the triangles will be closely fitted together into the empty space, and they will be of uniform size and well-shaped.

Lozenges, or diamonds (Figure 4), are also one of the finer types of fill and are produced by cutting out and stitching, rather than the

*Fig. 3. A striking example of background fill produced solely by dots.*

process of applique. Here, too, color variation may be attained through the use of inserts.

Words, names and phrases sometimes are part of the primary motif, but at other times appear as background fill. They most often appear in subjects that are exotic to Cuna culture. Often the Cuna seamstress responds to the visual quality of the printing she is copying rather than to any symbolical meaning that she may recognize. As a result, the letters may appear upside down, reversed, placed in the wrong order or dropped completely. Then, perhaps as a warning to the unwary, and to emphasize that generalities must be approached with caution in any discussion of Cuna art, a legend of some length and complexity will be reproduced perfectly.

A whole catalog of shapes and geometric forms in sizes ranging from small to large commonly serve the Cuna as space fillers. These include crosses, four and five-pointed stars, swastikas, zig-zags, Cuna-manufactured rick-rack, esses, ems, zees, and others too

*Fig. 4. Both dots and lozenges used as fill. Color varied by inserts stitched to the second layer.*

numerous to describe. Many are geometric elements (Figure 5) and running rectilinear or curvilinear patterns which are the products of the individual needlewoman's imagination. An element often figuring in background fill, especially in pictorial molas, is that of diminutive silhouettes of a major element of the motif, or several smaller elements related in some fashion to the motif theme. Perhaps most common of all is the custom of utilizing several of the types of fill described in one mola.

Abstract and geometric design molas on the whole tend not to abound in the infinite variety of space fillers so typical of pictorial molas. Often, the design is so ordered that background fill appears as an integral part of the central motif (Figure 6), a generality to which there are many exceptions.

In producing molas, Cuna women employ the color range to its fullest extent, a fact which applies as much to the background fill as

*Fig. 5. Geometric elements as fill. The rectilinear shapes contrast with the curved lines of the motif.*

it does to the dominant motif. When new, the colors are often brilliant and explosive, since there is no hesitation in putting together the brightest of primary colors, and using them in all hues and shades. A sensation of dizziness may be created by the use of a green top layer producing a design of whirligigs against a red background; or an orange and purple maze may seem to be in motion. Color is primarily decorative, rather than naturalistic, and may reflect the needlewoman's desire to place utilitarian or familiar objects in a different and more exciting context. The use of color in background fill is also a convention that prevents monotony. And while the intensity of colors in a new mola may seem garish to the mola novice, the frequent washing by Cuna owners radically alters the character of the mola and softens the colors, giving them new complexity and range.

Background fill is an integral part of the mola-making process.

*Fig. 6. A continuous line pattern eliminates the need for background fill.*

All of the fill elements now utilized may be found in older molas in one form or another. Nevertheless, changes seem to have occurred in fill quality, and it is tempting, but risky, to state that on the whole it has improved. Certainly the art of mola-making has not remained static and Cuna women have complete freedom in utilizing design motifs and background fill as they wish, as opposed to cultures in which art styles are more traditional. Among the Cuna, no motif is seen in precisely the same fashion by any two needlewomen, nor is a particular type of fill always used with the same subject matter.

A question arises. Does background fill fulfill a basic need? Is there a necessity for such a device, whether it be in molas, or in more sophisticated forms of art? Perhaps it would be informative to look at the world around us.

Consider a clear, blue sky meeting an empty, calm sea at the horizon. Think of yourself as the only sign of life on a flat, treeless seashore. Nature at this moment is lonely, monotonous and not very

attractive. Now, against the horizon paint in a ridge of wooded mountains. There, at the edge of the shore, sketch in rocky ledges which have been worn down by waves, wind and time. Notice how the character of the sandy beach changes with the addition of pebbles of varying size, as well as sea shells left by waves. Add clouds, their shapes and colors in a state of constant change, moving across the sky as a playful breeze gradually becomes a more purposeful wind. Whitecaps appear, giving texture to the smooth water. Pelicans and gulls dip, glide, soar; crabs scuttle along the shore; the wooded hillsides are in motion as treetops sway with the wind. Suddenly an almost blank canvas has come alive. It has been transformed by background fill.

Imagine a newly-completed house in which no one is yet living, a house without character or life. The walls need paintings, hangings and other decorative objects. The floors need rugs to complement the furniture. Curtains will further serve to relieve the starkness of the bare walls, as well as framing the view outside the house. It is clear that this house will require a great variety of background fill to relieve its primarily utilitarian nature and satisfy the esthetic needs which are so integral a part of the human condition.

When an artist uses space on a canvas, or a composer writes a symphony, or an interior decorator looks at blank walls, or a Cuna woman starts putting together rectangles of cloth, all are faced with the common problem of empty space. The technique that will be used in filling the space is a problem that each of these individuals must solve to his own satisfaction. In the mola, the pictorial design, no matter how intricate and colorful, is stark and uninteresting when presented against a background of plain, unadorned cloth. Three moths spread out over a rectangle of material only emphasize the space that is empty. The mola requires the background fill, perhaps more so than some other forms of art.

Filling space in a symmetrical or balanced fashion is a function related to geometry. A design may be perceived at an intellectual level, or sensed at an intuitive or subconscious level. In the first instance, the design or geometrical elements can, perhaps, be reduced to an intelligent formula. This, however, is not necessarily successful art or design, since the formula cannot take into account the skill and flair of artist or designer. Rather the successful use of

geometric elements involves physical response to intuitive or subconscious logic which results in a pleasing combination of forms, which may be square, rectangular, circular, triangular, elliptical or free form, the arrangement of which, in this instance, will serve as the basis of background fill. A variety of geometric shapes in interplay is one of the chief means of creating good design quality. The skilled Cuna needlewoman may well think in design terms, though she may not find it possible to verbalize them. The artistic needlewoman understands the need to maintain symmetry in her design, yet this may be more apparent than real. Examination may reveal that the design is balanced, giving the illusion of symmetry, and this illusion will be carefully maintained. Small elements can be fitted nicely both into large and small spaces. Large elements fitted too closely together may hide the motif regardless of the amount of space available. A variety of highly differentiated elements may avoid monotony, but the motif may become just one more item of background fill.

Among the Cuna Indians, molas were originally made only for utilitarian purposes, and for the most part this remains true today, for the mola has come to be regarded as art only in the relatively recent past. With the Cuna, however, art cannot be considered a profession which is separated from other duties. Mola-making is a part of the Cuna woman's life cycle, a function which every woman performs, beginning in childhood. With molas playing an ever-increasing role in Cuna society, however, it is likely that most Cuna women strive for artistic quality in their work. But even those who fail to achieve art will not be closed out since they must produce molas for their own use, and rarely is a mola so poor that there is no demand for it in the marketplace.

The matriarchal role of Cuna women seems to have created an environment in which creative independence and artistic ability thrive as illustrated by the best of Cuna needlework. It can be hoped that the proud Cuna men will continue to protect and nurture their women, while encouraging them to continue this fascinating Cuna tradition.

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