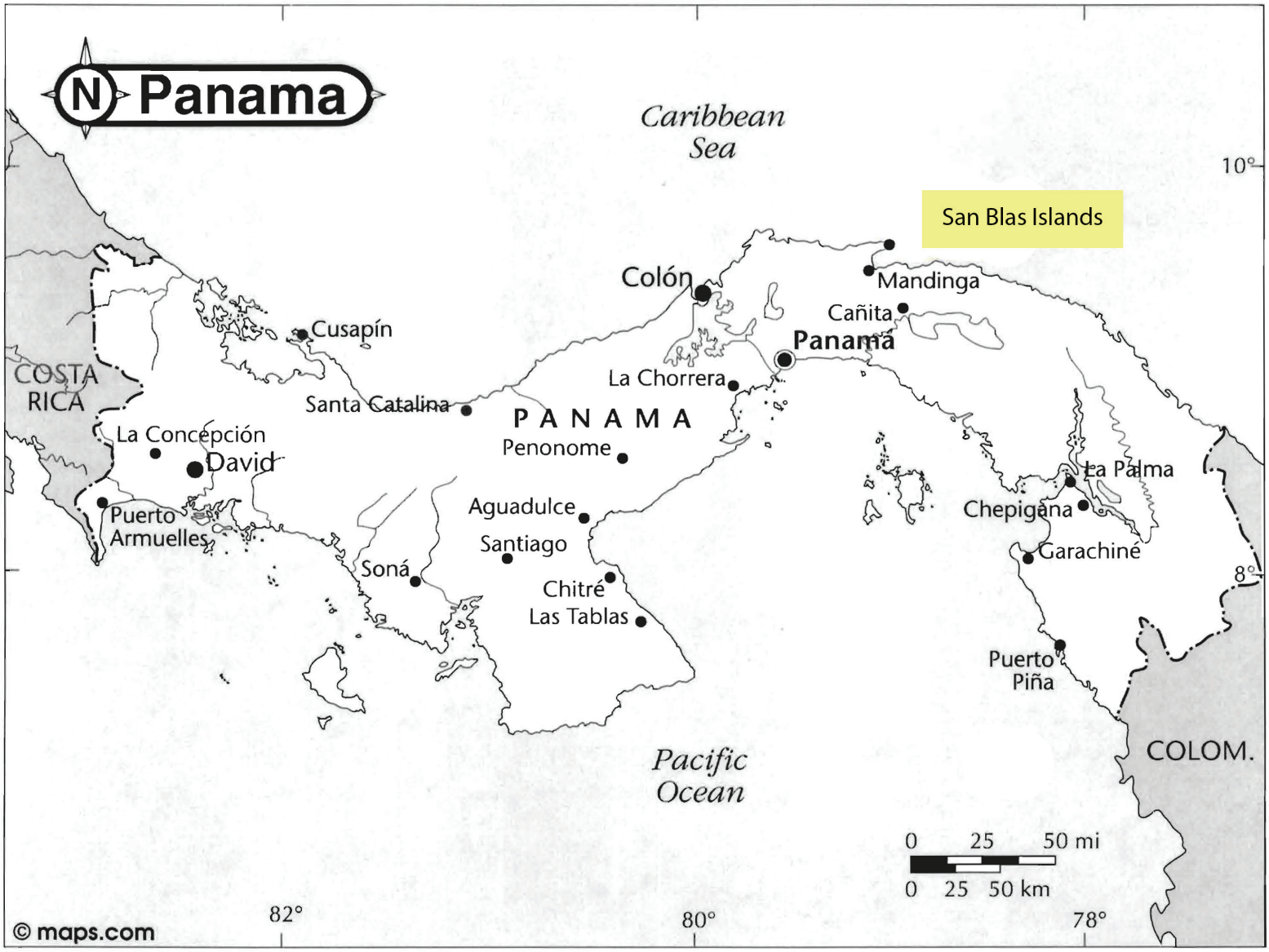
FROM EDEN TO ETERNITY

A COLLECTION OF PANAMANIAN

• MOLAS •

The mola is the signature textile craft of the Cuna Indian women of the San Blas Islands, an archipelago of more than 300 islands on Panama's northern coast. Developed to provide elaborate front and back fabric panels for the traditional blouse worn by the women, the technique involves a process of reverse applique which combines layers of brightly colored fabrics stitched together and then cut into intricate patterns, exposing colors from underlying layers. The top layer is typically treated with both direct applique and embroidery to create an even richer surface. Animals and marine life are common motifs for the molas, as are geometric and mythological patterns. The collection in this exhibition features whimsical interpretations of Biblical stories and symbols.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The Molas of the San Blas Islands:
An Historical Perspective:

Home to the Cuna Indians, the San Blas Islands stretch along the Atlantic coast of Panama from Colon to Columbia. In 1938 the islands and adjacent coastline, the Comarac de San Blas, became an autonomous state within Panama with a Panamanian governor on the island of Porvenier as liaison to Cuna village chiefs and the national government. Isolated for much of their history, the Cuna have only grudgingly acclimated to some aspects of Western civilization. Contact with the Cuna has increased dramatically since the 1930's and during and after World War II. Today, cruise ships anchor off the islands on a regular basis.

Most of our knowledge of the early history of the Cuna is drawn from the English surgeon cum pirate, Lionel Wafer, whose shipmates left him in Panama in 1681 to recover from a gunpowder accident. Cared for by isthmian natives known as the Cuna, who preferred the English to the Spaniards (the latter whom they took great honor in killing), Wafer carefully chronicled the lives and customs of the tribe and accurately described animal and plant life. He wrote of a matrilineal society, where property was passed through the female line. The woman's family chose her mate, who then moved into her household. Wafer was astounded by what he called "white Indians" living among the Cuna. Actually they were albinos; perhaps the world's highest incidence of albinism is found on the San Blas Islands. Male albinos were, and still are treated as women.

Wafer was also intrigued by the custom of body painting: "They make figures of birds, beasts, men, trees, or the like, up and down every part of the body, especially the face ... " The women are the painters and take a great delight in it. This is the likely origin of the colorful mola, literally "clothing," "dress" or "blouse." Today the term has come to mean the applique panels of a Cuna woman's blouse (image) which have gained renown as a distinct form of fold art. The transition from body painting to the mola, in the words of Ann Parker and Avon Neal, "could never have developed without the cotton cloth, needles, thread, and scissors acquired by trade from the ships that came to barter for coconuts during the 19th century," or, it might be added, from the insistence of missionaries that the Cuna wear clothing.

For Cuna women the range of themes for body painting was diverse; the range of themes for their molas appears endless. While designs of the earliest molas tended to be geometric abstractions, by the 1940's Cuna women had kindled an interest in the recreation of traditional themes common to body painting, e.g., the animals, trees, and men mentioned by Wafer, and had introduced new designs such as circus posters, comic book characters, United States Navy blimps, and advertising logos. The appearance of themes from "Western Civilization" does not automatically imply, however, that the indigenous culture of the Cuna is somehow doomed. On the contrary, the Cuna have made significant choices that simultaneously preserve the traditional and cater to the modem. Viewed from the perspective of the historian, the body painting of the 17th century and the fabric creations of today show how Cuna women, through their designs, capture unique images of the world in which they lived.

Karin Tice's excellent study of *Cuna Crafts, Gender and Global Economv* notes that the "shift from sewing molas for personal use to producing them for exchange on the global market has affected mola sewers and their relationship to their craft profoundly." In the 1960's molas became a commodity and those actually worn by Cuna women became especially prized. Growing world demand for their creations convinced Cuna women to produce molas for a global market. As acknowledgement of their commercial importance, by the 1970's Cuna women who have *kurgin*, defined as special gifts and talents in design, had achieved positions of high prestige in many communities.

In the 1990's wholesale buyers have tried to impose constraints on producers, demanding color combinations more appealing to Europeans, different sizes and shapes, and themes that would cater more to "western" tastes. Because of the need for revenue, the Cuna have complied. For example, one buyer wanted snowmen. Although the women had no idea of what a snowman was, where he lived, or what he ate, they sewed snowmen. In Tice's words: "These molas produced specifically for sale were not worn by Cuna women; they were valued because they generated income."

Unfortunately, the popularity of molas has stimulated a large industry that churns out copies of Cuna designs on everything from fake molas, i.e., not sewn by Cuna Indians, to shopping bags and coasters. Unauthorized reproduction threatens what is the Cuna's greatest source of revenue. Despite Panamanian legislation passed in 1984 to protect its folk art, imitations of Cuna molas and design continue to flood the market.

But the marketing of molas should not obscure their real purpose as an expression of cultural identity. Tice observes that "wearing molas symbolically expresses Cuna ethnic identity and . . . a desire for autonomy from the non-Cuna world." Some Cuna communities insist that women wear molas as an "important ways of upholding and valuing their traditions and therefore their identity as Cuna people." Women sew molas to generate revenue, but they wear them to express something specific, from social or political commentary to the depiction of an event. A favorite political candidate and the party's logo and slogan might appear on one mola, and a child being eaten by an alligator might grace another. Tice states that in the latter example the Cuna mother wanted to impress on her children the dangers posed by certain animals. Despite their production for the world market, molas are still sewn for personal use and serve an important role within Cuna society as "a medium for social commentary, for personal creativity, and for fashion."

Although molas as a commodity found strong markets in Europe, the United States and Japan, until recently Panamanians did not buy them in large part because they viewed folk art as "inferior." However, the purchase of molas by Panamanians became significant after the invasion of Panama by the United States in 1989. While many in Panama detested Manuel Noriega and his henchmen, most resented the United States' solution to the problem. Buying and wearing molas, which represented something that was indisputably Panamanian, became a quiet form of national protest against the forceful foreign policy of their northern neighbor. And in the 1990's what had been an expression of national pride became acceptable as fashion. Responding to the high praise for molas outside Panama, the upper classes of the country have also accepted them as fashion.

Molas, then, have historically served a variety of purposes. They have expressed Cuna traditions and independence and have protected Cuna Culture; they have commented on Cuna Society and expressed opinions about Panamanian politics and politicians; they have expressed the national pride of all of Panama in the face of an interventionist United States. Although many are still intensely personal, most are now rather impersonal items for sale abroad. For the outside world, as well as for Cuna women, they have become fashionable. But to appreciate fully and understand them, we must see them first and foremost in the traditional context of the community.

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