

## DESIGNS, SKILLS AND OBJECTS IN GUNA LIFE

As an everyday garment and a commodified indigenous textile, the *mola* has long captivated the imagination of tourists, art collectors and scholars. Amongst their distinctive features, *molagana* display an almost infinite repertoire of designs and motifs, always open to novel incorporation of images from Panama City and elsewhere. This depends both on the creativity and personal taste of the individual woman who makes a *mola* and on the intrinsic versatility of this rather unique form of female attire. Another distinctive feature is the visual density of *molagana*, the fact that they are always filled in with iconic elements, patterns and shapes that fill the space so that no area of the composition is ever left empty. The result of this visual density combined with the extreme variation of designed motifs and other formal features is that the *mola* has become a distinctive indigenous artefact appealing to the international art market and museums the world around. Their fate has most often been that of becoming detached from the other components of women's dress, as a flat rectangular panels hung on a wall, detached from the social and cultural context in which they were made. Our goal here and in the accompanying exhibition is to show the multidimensionality of the *mola*, situating it in the everyday life of the Guna people, and how it relates with other objects, its makers and their ideas.

In living our lives, we inevitably come across objects that vary in their expressiveness, in their capacities to stimulate us, or elicit prior memories that evoke affects and meanings. We use objects according to a map of significances that are connected to the context of use, to time and to place. For instance, if we play with a child, we are led by a use of objects and imagination that is mapped on the emotional landscape of childhood

in a particular context. If we visit a museum, this involves us with a different notion of objects, and a different map of feelings and attitudes evoked by the experience and by the place. In this last map of significance, objects can tell us a new story and as such, we might pick up an unanticipated thread of meaning different from what we previously felt and experienced.

Encountering the Guna through *mola* and *nudsu* is a fascinating experience for the curious-minded. These Guna objects are loaded with the collective experiences and the personal meanings of their makers. The two are closely intertwined, as we discovered on a hot and humid afternoon in Ogobsuggun, one of the Guna villages of the San Blas Archipelago. Leopoldo Smith, a Guna woodcarver in his eighties, sat on a bench, calmly bent over the wooden figurine that he was carving. He then held it close to his chest for a moment, and, looking at it, said: "I'm the one who looks after you. I'm going to give you food and drink. Although I cannot see you, you are going to protect me. Evil people and demons will not come to me. You will remember me and I will take care of you." In the following, we will explore some aspects of the rich visual repertoire of the Guna people and how these relate to Guna concepts about the world and to everyday practice.

## **MOLA**

*Molagana* have what could be called a 'public life' as textiles displayed in some of the most famous natural history and ethnographic museums around the world and as commodities in the tourist market. *Molagana* have a more ordinary life as well, as garments worn by adult Guna women. This ordinary and apparently mundane aspect of the *mola* has been generally overlooked in the vast literature concerned with it.<sup>1</sup>

Most Guna women wear *mola* blouses as everyday clothing, together with a bright coloured wrap-around skirt – a *sabured* – and a red headscarf – a *muswe* – fastened or just pulled over the head. The everyday use of a *mola* blouse presupposes enough clothes in the wardrobe for daily use alongside the economic resources for purchasing fabric and sewing accessories, in addition to the considerable time needed to make *mola* blouses. Upon a closer look, this ordinary aspect of the *mola* is also connected to more sensorial aspects and intertwined with the reproductive capacities of women and their bodies, wrapped in colourful designs.<sup>2</sup>

It is when considering the corporeal connection between the garment and the woman who makes and wears it that analogies between clothing, fertility and the body come to the fore. *Molagana* are worn in pairs, at the front and the back of the blouse. The two panels stitched together form a sort of fabric tube that envelops the female body at the level of the abdomen and the womb. To this the maker adds a yoke and sleeves in her size to finish the blouse. The practice of making a *mola* – like the carving of wooden figurines, as we will address below – points to a special connection between the making of artefacts and the making of bodies. For one thing, pregnancy for Guna woman is a time when they can be most prolific making *molagana*. While pregnant women stop wearing their *mola* blouses as their abdomen grows, they in turn sew a great number of them, since they slowly stop carrying out their other daily chores and spend more and more of their time at home. Guna specialists describe pregnancy by making reference to phenomena occurring in the invisible world that complements and forms a counterpart to the visible one.<sup>3</sup> There, female beings called *Muugana* – grandmothers – sew a foetus' first *mola* blouse, its amniotic sack, described as a designed cloth that envelops the baby in the womb. At birth, great attention is placed on the amniotic sack and the designs covering it. Here begins the special significance of the *mola* in the life course of a Guna, underlining the social and cosmological dimensions of human reproduction.

Making *molagana* is part of a chain of significances that connects the material process of designing, cutting and sewing to the moulding and shaping qualities of the womb. These are in turn related to the activities of invisible beings that participate in the creation of new persons and create the first design that babies wear when they appear in the world, when they are born.

If we compare Guna wooden figurines with the *mola*, the difference is striking. At a first glance these wooden figurines – *nudsugana* – appear as generic figures of a person. They do not look like any specific individual, their features are generic and quite standardised. One aspect that stands out is the way in which the nose is represented, overly long and narrow and sticking out from the rest of the face. *Nud-*

<sup>1</sup>  
I.e. Hirschfeld 1977; Parker and Neal 1977; Salvador 1976, 1978, 1997; Sherzer and Sherzer 1976; Tice 2003 [1995].

<sup>2</sup>  
Margiotti 2013.

<sup>3</sup>  
Chapin 1983; Nordenskiöld 1938.

*sugana* do not appear to be made to look like anybody in particular. And it is in fact so, that these sculptures cannot be approached in terms of one lifelikeness or realism.

This challenges the eye of the art historian, the artist and, in general, the public that has become used to looking at sculpture in terms of renaissance or classical beauty – an ideal beauty rooted in the natural representation of the human body. These art traditions implicitly affect our gaze, the way we look and appreciate sculptures and figurative art in general. Those forms of sculpture that were once described as ‘primitive’ continued to be confined to the rather limited and peripheral position of the ‘rest’ – as opposed to the ‘west’ – and continue to evoke sensual scenes charged with a sense of the archaic and what has been lost in our experience of form.

Though fascinating to explore alone from the perspective of their aesthetic and subconscious resonance, an anthropological contribution to the challenges posed by non-Western aesthetic forms should encourage a reader or the visitor to an exhibition to consider a third way to look at them. This is the space of a cross-cultural encounter. When we look at these objects as part of the lived world in which they are crafted, new and unexpected meanings begin to emerge. New connections appear within the discrete forms that constituted our experience of visual art. These discrete forms are, on the one hand, those of decorative designs – colourful and pleasant to the eye, but ultimately frivolous and mundane – and on the other hand, those of sculptural forms – associated with realism, lifelikeness and fine art. Through upbringing and by training, we are used to judging and organising objects and visual forms based in this hierarchy. Here we propose to suspend our own Western aesthetic criteria and approach these Guna objects through the concepts and practices that inform them.

Already the decision to bring together *mola* and *nudsu* here and in the exhibit reflects the way Guna people understand their visual forms, their worldview, thoughts and concerns about ongoing social changes and the struggles that they face and the rhythm of their day-to-day lives.

## AMNIOTIC DESIGNS AND HUMAN/NON-HUMAN RELATIONS

What are designs in the Guna lived world? What is the meaning of designed things? In distancing ourselves from the notion of decorative design, we can better appreciate that designs for the Guna refer to notions

of human skills, and ontological and cosmological questions about the nature of being human. Let us first delve into exploring the context in which designs are made and the skills needed to master them.

Designed and carved objects, like the *mola* blouses and the *nudsugana* exhibited at the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich, are the manifestation of the skills of the Guna people. The skills to sew *molagana* and to carve these objects are valued by the Guna people; and they develop these skills in the context of the day-to-day life that they so much value and work so hard to maintain – despite the many challenges that they have been facing throughout their history.<sup>4</sup>

This ideal, day-to-day tranquil life that the Guna aim to achieve is informed by their ethos of living well, together with one's kin, caring for one another, providing food for the family and making sure that tensions, worries and disconcert do not pull people apart. The skills of the Guna people thrive in the day-to-day context of relations between people that care for one another, with kinship relations viewed as in a perennial state of creation and maintained in everyday acts of care and nurturing.<sup>5</sup>

It is in the context of kinship and the forging of the community that it is possible to understand how the Guna think about the notions of skills and designs. The future and potential skills of an individual are in fact visible from birth – if one can read the patterns properly. The Guna emphasise that the bodies of newborn babies reveal these designs – as patterns on the head or body covered with the remnants of the amniotic fluids. These patterns – amniotic designs – bear important information about the uterine life of a person. The Guna understand the uterine part of our existence as lived in close proximity to non-human or animal beings that are powerful and potentially harmful to humans if not mastered properly. Amniotic designs are animal designs; they reveal important connections between the baby and particular animals or cosmological beings that developed before childbirth. These patterns also reveal important information on a baby's future and help adults to interpret how they might help the baby to develop into a gifted and skilful person.

Amniotic designs are interpreted by the midwives who assist the birth. These elderly women are masters of design interpretation. They do so in the fleeting moment after the birth, before they disappear forever when the baby is bathed. While these amniotic designs are washed away, the Guna say that they do not disappear. Amniotic designs remain as an invisible component of a person. As such, they might trigger attacks from animal and non-human entities, the same entities that were close

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I.e. Howe 1998, 2009.

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Margiotti 2010.

to a person during their pre-natal life and could be identified on their bodies immediately after birth. Designs in their uterine form are thus the manifestation of an animal's predatory intention, and their brief manifestation, indeed visibility, on the body of a newborn provides a chance to prevent such attacks, and to transform the capacities of the respective animals into human skills, an important aspect of the everyday life of the Guna people.<sup>6</sup> These skills are the basis of potential, refined human practices, such as sewing beautiful *molagana*, carving canoes, stools and *nud-su-gana*, singing healing chants or speaking foreign languages.

## DESIGNS AND FIGURES

*Narmaggaled* (design; from *narmagged* 'to draw designs' in the Dulegaya), is a concept evoked in specific life situations and attached to objects and persons. Such designs point to the manifestation of skills, they reveal internal qualities and call attention to the appearance of bodies and objects. The written page, the amniotic sack covered in patterned blood vessels, the leaves and bark of particular trees, the skin of snakes, the fur of jaguars and the clothes of women are decorated with such designs.

To understand how the notion of design is applied to multiple forms and figures, we need to consider the relation between designs and figures, and in turn between *mola* and *nudsu*. *Mola* and *nudsu* are complementary forms when observed from the perspective of the Guna people.<sup>7</sup> While in Western art tradition, geometric patterns have always been considered subordinated to figurative forms – as decorative art, which has seldom been attributed a status even approaching figurative art – in Guna and other Amerindian aesthetic traditions, these two categories enjoy a rather different relationship.

Importantly, designs are thought to stimulate the creation of forms and figures; they are, as it were, their precondition. Take the example of babies. The maternal womb is viewed as the shaper par-excellence. The womb 'gives shape' (*sobed* in the Guna language) to the human body, which is the most sophisticated form of figuration for the Guna. The creation of such a fine work of art occurs within the womb, which is enveloped by colourful *molagana* and described by Guna specialists as an organ beautifully patterned in and of itself.

Once we consider the human body as the ultimate form of figuration, we cannot but conclude that it is also a prime canvas for applying designs.

Consider the *mola* and the way it beautifies the body of women. Consider also the amniotic sack, which is described as the first *mola* and covers the body of the foetus. These examples show how bodies and designs are profoundly linked. Their respective meanings are to be found in the way the Guna people conceive of their existence and understand the everyday experience of the young, the grown and the elderly.

Guna cosmological and mythical narratives provide another key perspective. As one Guna myth describes, the origin of designs can be traced back to ancient times when a Guna woman named Nagegiryai travelled to the underworld village of Galu Dugbis. There she saw designs for the first time. They covered the bark and leaves of the trees. She was fascinated and when she returned to her own village she taught the women there how to make them on *mola* blouses. Following her teachings, women started making designs and decorating their clothing.<sup>6</sup>

This myth is illuminating and suggests that *mola* blouses, mythic tree bark and the amniotic sack are all layered and covered with designs. *Molagana* are made by superimposing layers of fabric of different colours; the beauty and complexity of the designs depends on the number of layers – the more layers, the more colours and the more exquisitely complex and fine the design. Similarly, the Guna describe the amniotic sack as formed of layers of membrane. The bark of trees is interpreted as a sheddable skin, recalling again the idea of layers. The bark of trees is interpreted as a sheddable skin, recalling again the idea of layers. The idea of layers is recurrent in Guna cosmology as well, the world being conceived as a succession of layers both below and above the layer upon which people live.

*Molagana* are the visual manifestation of women's artisanal skills and fertility. They beautify their bodies by making them visually compelling. They are also the product of women's relations to one another, the enactment of their fertility and reproductive ability to shape new bodies.

## WOODCARVING

What skills are involved in making *nudsugana*, which house powerful spirits that come to this world to protect humans against the malicious attacks of predatory spirits? Not all Guna men are skilled woodcarvers. When fully mastered, it involves the capacity to give shape to wooden logs and – more importantly – to transmit life qualities to them. Young Guna men

<sup>6</sup>  
Fortis 2010.

<sup>7</sup>  
Fortis 2012.

<sup>8</sup>  
Fortis 2014; Méndez 1996.

may learn to carve dugout canoes, or stools and kitchen utensils if they feel inclined. Elderly men carve *nudsugana*. Young boys acquire knowledge of plant and tree species when they visit the forest with an elder relative. In this way the skill to carve is slowly acquired through experience and imitation, by observing experienced carvers. In some cases, inspiration is acquired through dreaming. With age, men become more knowledgeable and develop their eloquence and their capacity to speak, through which they are in turn able to impart knowledge and give advice to younger people. Moreover, when an elder man is carving a *nudsu*, his knowledge and his capacity to speak are transmitted to the spirits that will inhabit the wooden form, making it a trustworthy helper. *Nudsugana* are considered to be alive and therefore potentially dangerous, in contrast to other carved objects like canoes and utensils, which are considered to be inanimate objects and are usually carved by younger men.

It is important to stress that carving skills are acquired over time because they are not only technical in nature but include a more complex knowledge that involves knowledge of myth and knowledge of animal and plant species as they are in nature as well as they are in cosmological thought. Men who carve *nudsugana* have acquired all these skills over time; they know the properties of trees, they are able to choose the right branches or roots, they have mastered the technical process of carving and they know the ritual formulae to speak to the spirits of the respective tree. In short, they know how to bring a *nudsu* to life.

Among these skills, one of the most important is to 'speak well', that is, mastery of different day-to-day speech contexts, from speaking with children to speaking in the gathering house, using the appropriate vocabulary and register, making reference to episodes from Guna myth and history as appropriate.<sup>9</sup> These qualities are complemented by self-restraint, avoiding speaking too much or too loudly.

This capacity to speak is transmitted to the *nudsugana* that they carve so that the *nudsugana* can speak and reveal, for example, the illness of a sick person to the ritual specialists who try to heal them. By the same token, this diplomatic capacity permits *nudsugana* to overcome the evil entities responsible for making humans sick. Powerful *nudsugana* are those who embody both the primordial qualities of the trees from which they have been cut and the human skills of the men who carved them. They act as a mediator between humans and other cosmological entities.

Guna men often describe the process of carving *nudsugana* as a birth.

<sup>9</sup> When the man goes to the forest with the aim of finding wood for carving a new *nudsu* figurine, he first looks



for an appropriate tree. He will choose from the species that are associated with primordial spirits. He will then cut either a branch or an exposed root of the appropriate size. In doing so he will first make an incision with his machete to the part of the branch or root that is closer to the ground. Upon returning home, he begins carving, following the incision made in the forest to make the nose of the *nudsu*. He will then carve the head, followed by the rest of the body. Guna carvers explain that this is how a child is born into this world: face down and the head appearing first.

In observing the process of carving *nudsugana* we can thus better appreciate Guna ideas about personhood and the cosmos. As the most skilled woodcarvers – who are recognised as such by the other members of the community – these elders have the capacity to master the primordial life forces of trees and other powerful non-human entities. In doing so they literally give life to *nudsugana*, they manifest their creative fertile capacities. This fertility is the transformation of the fertility they had as younger men fathering their babies.

Young Guna men work hard in the forest in order to produce enough food to feed their children. Their gardening skills, fishing and hunting skills are associated with their capacity to beget children. Women are also considered strong when they have many children, and often people joke that if a man is a lazy worker, his wife will beat him in bed! *Burba*, the immaterial double of a person – a term so often unsatisfactorily translated as soul – is the will, the motivation that moves people to work in the forest, at sea and in the house. It is also linked to fertility, to the capacity to have children. For this reason men and women often take plant medicines to strengthen their *burba*, enhancing their capacity to work and have children.

Elder men transmit *burba* to younger members of the community by means of speaking to them, giving advice and life teachings. They instil the rules of moral conduct in them and, importantly, they protect younger people by carving *nudsugana*. Elder Guna women protect other women in their reproductive age with their knowledge about reproduction and birth and by interpreting babies' amniotic designs.

By means of giving advice, teaching, preparing plant medicines, preparing daily meals, interpreting amniotic designs and generally caring for younger family members, elderly men and women have an important role in raising children to become mindful and caring adults who will in turn work to ensure the well-being of future generations.

There is one final important aspect to consider in relation to the making of a *mola*. The practice of making and wearing a *mola* is linked to fertility and reproduction. This fact comes to the fore when we carefully consider the practice of making *molagana* in relation to the life and to the body of its maker and the way that the cycles of fertility and of making *molagana* are so closely intertwined. By the same token *molagana* are ever-present in the relentless flow of Guna everyday life and the events and the motions of daily activities of food production and preparation that are crucial for perpetuating Guna sociality. The processes of feeding, nurturing and protecting are considered core values of kinship. The Guna, as other peoples elsewhere, consider these everyday processes fundamental to forging and fostering kinship ties, the good health of children and the social well-being of the community.<sup>10</sup>

In the motion and rhythm of everyday Guna life, productive activities in the forest or on the sea are done in the morning. In the early morning the village is calm and quiet, the people sleeping or sitting by the cooking fire sipping a hot drink. The men, who are the primary providers of food, are active mostly outside the village, in the gardens belonging to them and their wives. Producing food is what a man should do for his wife. It is the enactment of *binsaed*, of 'keeping in mind' one's wife and children.

Women rarely go into the forest; their activities are focussed around the home. After the clothes have been washed and the yard around the house cleaned and before preparing food, when children are at school, women gather with their kinswomen to make *mola* blouses. They sit in front of their houses, bent over their work, their concentration interrupted only by occasional chats, a visitor coming and bringing some news or a laugh.

In the morning the village pathways seem almost deserted, with the men in the forest, the children at school and the women at home, their babies taking naps between feedings. The village atmosphere at this time is described as the manifestation of 'quiet' or 'tranquility,' and this state reminds people that everyday activities are still taking place and that nothing disrupts their flow.

For women, this tranquility is also associated with the skills of *mola* making and the bodily behaviour related to this activity. Tranquility is the essential precondition for the tactile and visual activity of making *molagana*. It is governed by an elaborate set of skills that imply the strong control of movements, the women sit-

ting and bending their heads and shoulders over their work, cutting, folding and sewing layers of coloured fabric, progressively revealing a design in the layers. This ideal quiet is mirrored in the ideal of peaceful social co-existence characterised by the monotonous and relentless repetition of daily activities based on the values of kinship.

The skills needed to make objects such as *mola* and *nudsu* extend into the moral and social qualities of living together, of caring for one another and of acting in reciprocal and complementary ways across genders and generations. There is a mutual reciprocity between a husband working in the forest and a woman working at home, interspersing her domestic chores with the making of beautiful clothes. The making of *molagana* plays a crucial role in social life, it is a key element in creating and fostering a desired order in the community. The carving of *nudsugana* plays the same role in the spiritual world, protecting people from cosmological dangers and mediating between the human domain and its invisible counterparts and in turn ensuring order in this world. *Mola* and *nudsu* seen together are an expression of Guna aesthetics and values, the materialisation of the women's and the men's endeavours to create harmony in their lived world.