

Designs, Skills and Objects in Guna Life

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As an everyday garment and a commodified indigenous textile, *mola* (pl. *molagana*) has long captivated the imagination of tourists, art collectors and researchers. Amongst their distinctive features, *molagana* display an almost infinite repertoire of designs and motives, 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, as well as other formal features, is that *molagana* have become over the past decades a distinctive indigenous artefact appealing to the international market and museums the world around. Their fate has most often been that of becoming detached from the other components of women's dress, treated as a flat rectangular panel hung on a wall, and detached from the social and cultural context in which they had been made. What we want to do in this text and the exhibition that it accompanies is show the multidimensionality of *mola*, placing it in the everyday life of Guna people and showing its relations with other objects, its makers and their own ideas.

In living our life, we inevitably come across objects that vary in their

expressiveness, in their capacities to stimulate us, or to 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, and 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. Within this last map of significance, objects can tell us a new story and as such, we might pick up an unanticipated thread of meaning from what we previously felt and experienced.

Encountering the Guna through *molagana* 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 entwined as we discovered on a hot and humid afternoon in Ogopsuggun, 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 figure that he was carving. He then held the figure close to his chest for a moment, and, watching it, told: “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.” Here, we encourage the reader to explore with us some aspects of the rich visual repertoire of Guna people and how these relate to Kuna concepts about the world and to everyday practices.

Mola

Molagana have what could be called a ‘public life’ as textiles displayed in the most famous natural history and ethnographic museums worldwide, and as commodities in the tourist market. *Molagana* have a more ordinary life as well, as garments worn by Guna adult women. This ordinary and apparently mundane aspect of *molagana* has been generally overlooked in the vast literature concerned with *mola* (Hirschfeld 1977; Parker and Neil 1977; Salvador 1976, 1978, 1997; Sherzer and Sherzer 1976; Tice 1995).

Most Guna women use *mola* blouses as everyday clothing, together with a bright coloured wrap around skirt, *sabured*, and a red headscarf, *muswe*, fastened or just pulled over the head. The everyday use of *molagana* presupposes enough clothes in the wardrobe for daily use alongside the considerable economic resources for purchasing fabric and haberdasheries, in addition to the equally considerable time needed to make *molagana*. At a closer look, this ordinary aspect of *mola* is also connected to more sensorial aspects and entwined with the reproductive capacities of women and their bodies, wrapped in colourful designs (Margiotti 2013).

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 female blouse. The two panels stitched together form a sort of tubular fabric cloth that envelops the female body at the level of the abdomen and the womb. To this the maker adds yoke and sleeves fitting her size to finish the blouse. The practice of making *mola* - and as we describe below the carving of wooden figurines too - points to a special connection between the making of artefacts and the making of bodies. For one thing, pregnancy for Guna woman is the most prolific moment to make *molagana*. While during this period women stop wearing *mola*, as their abdomen enlarges, they certainly sew a great number of them, since they slowly stop carrying out other most tiring daily chores and spend most of their time at home. Moreover, Guna specialists describe pregnancy by making reference to phenomena occurring in the invisible world that complements and forms a counterpart to the visible one (Nordenskiöld 1938; Chapin 1983). There, female beings called Grandmothers, *Muugana*, sew the first *mola* of foetuses, their amniotic sac, described as a designed cloth that envelops the baby in the womb. At birth, great attention is placed on observing the amniotic sac and the designs covering it. We will delve more into the significance of these designs below. Here, suffice to say that *molagana*, as designed cloth, have a special significance in the life course of Guna persons and point to the social and cosmological dimensions of human reproduction.

Making *mola* is part of a chain of significance that connects the material processes 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.

Nuchu

If we compare Guna wooden figures with *molagana*, 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, in a way, quite standardized. 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. *Nudsugana* do not appear to be made to look like anybody in particular. As a matter of fact, it is not by thinking of lifelikeness or realism that we can approach these sculptures.

This challenges the eye of the art historian, the artist, and, more in general, the public that is used to look at sculpture with the realistic beauty of renaissance or classical art in mind – an ideal beauty rooted in the natural representation of the human body. The power of this approach is that it implicitly affects our gaze, the way we look and appreciate sculptures and figurative art in general. Thus those forms of sculpture that were previously described as ‘primitive’ are now often confined to the rather limited and peripheral position of the ‘rest’ – as opposed to the ‘west’ - which often evokes sensual scenes charged with a sense of the archaic, and the lost in our experience of form.

Though fascinating to explore in their aesthetic and unconscious resonances, an anthropological contribution to the challenges posed by non-western aesthetic forms encourages the reader and the visitor to this exhibition to make space for a third way to look at them. This is a space for a cross-cultural encounter. When we start looking at these objects as part of the lived world

where they are crafted, new and unexpected meanings begin to emerge. New connections emerge within the discrete forms that constituted our former experience of visual art. These discrete forms are, on the one hand, that of decorative designs - colourful, pleasant, but ultimately frivolous and linked to the mundane – and on the other hand, that of sculptural forms – associated to the dimensions of realism, lifelikeness and fine art. By upbringing and by training, we are used to judge and organize objects and visual forms along this hierarchical ladder. Here we propose to suspend aesthetic judgement and approach Guna objects through the concepts and practices that inform them.

Furthermore, the choice of bringing together *mola* and *nudsu* reflects the way Guna people understand their visual forms, their worldview, reflections and concerns about the ongoing social changes and struggles that they face and the rhythm of their day-to-day life.

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 appreciate that designs, for the Guna refer to notions of human skills, and ontological and cosmological questions about the nature of being humans. Let us first delve into exploring the context in which designs are made and the skills to make them acquired.

Designed and carved objects, as the *mola* blouses and the *nudsugana* exhibited at the Völkerkunde Museum, are the manifestation of the skills of Guna people. The skills to sew molagana and to carve these objects are valued by Guna people and they develop in the context of a life-long engagement with the kind of day-to-day life that Guna people so much value and work hard to maintain - despite the many challenges that they have been facing throughout their history (see Howe 1998, 2009).

This is the tranquil life, the living well, that the Guna aim to achieve through the daily efforts of living together with one's kin, caring for one another,

providing sufficient food for the whole family and making sure that tensions, worries and upset do not pull people apart. The skills of Guna people thrive in the day-to-day context of relations between people that care for each other, with kinship relations viewed as in a perennial state of creation and maintenance through everyday acts of care and nurturance (Margiotti 2010).

It is in the context of kinship and the forging of new people that we can understand how the Guna think about the notions of skills and designs. The future and potential skills of a person are in fact visible as designs since birth. The Guna emphasise that the body of newborn babies display designs and these appear as patterns on the head or the entire body covered with the remnants of the amniotic fluids. These designs - amniotic designs - bear important information about the uterine life of a person. The Guna understand the uterine part of our existence as conducted in close proximity to non-human or animal cosmological 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 animal or cosmological beings that occurred before childbirth. Designs tell also important information on the future life of the baby and give adult people a chance to help the baby to develop into a gifted and skilful adult.

Amniotic designs are checked by the midwives who assist the birth. These elderly women are masters of designs' interpretation. They interpret the patterns in the fleeting moments after the birth, before they disappear forever from human eyes when the baby is bathed. Once amniotic designs are washed away they change form, but Guna people say that they do not disappear. Amniotic designs remain as an invisible component of the person. As such, they might trigger again unwanted attacks from animal and non-human entities, the same entities that were close to the person during its pre-natal life and which designs were visible on their bodies as neonates. Designs, in their uterine form, are thus the manifestation of animals' predatory skills. Their manifestation, indeed visibility, on the body of neonates is therefore a chance to prevent such animal attacks, and to transform the proximity with animal species into human skills, important in the everyday life

of Guna people (Fortis 2010). These skills are the development of potential, unformed capacities into refined, mastered human praxes, such as sewing beautiful *molagana*, carving canoes, stools and *nudsugana*, learning healing chants or foreign languages.

Designs and Figures

Let us explore further the meanings of design in the Guna world. Design, *narmaggaled* (from *narmagged* 'to draw design' in Guna language), is a concept evoked in specific life situations and attached to objects and persons. Designs point to the manifestation of skills, they display internal qualities, and call people's attention to the appearance of bodies and objects. The written page, the amniotic sac covered in patterned blood vessels, the leaves and barks of particular trees, the skin of snakes, the fur of jaguars, the clothes of women are decorated with 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, between *mola* and *nudsu*. As we observe through this exhibition, *mola* and *nudsu* are complementary forms when observed through the perspective of Guna people (Fortis 2012). While in Western art tradition 'geometric' designs have always been considered subordinated to 'figurative' forms - decorative art has hardly ever had the same status as figurative art – in Guna and other Amerindians' aesthetic traditions these two categories enjoy a rather different relation.

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 Guna language) to the human body, which is the most sophisticated form of figuration in Guna thought. The creation of such a fine work of art occurs within the womb which is enveloped outside by the coloured *molagana*, and described by Guna specialists as an organ beautifully designed in itself.

Once we consider the human body as the supreme form of figuration, we cannot but observe that the body is a prime canvas for applying designs. Consider *molagana* and the way they beautify the body of women. Consider also the designed amniotic sac, which is described as the first *mola* and covers the emergent body of the foetus. All these examples show how bodies and designs are profoundly linked. Their respective meanings are to be found in the way Guna people conceive their existence and understand the everyday experience of young, growing and aging persons. The life cycle thus provides a key perspective to look at Guna aesthetic.

Guna cosmological and mythical narratives provide another key perspective. As a Guna myth describes, the origin of designs can be traced back to the ancient time when a Guna woman called Nagegiryai travelled to the underworld village of Galu Dugbis. There she saw designs for the first time. They were covering the bark and leaves of the trees. She was fascinated and when afterwards returned to her village she taught to the women there how to make these designs on *mola* blouses. Following her teachings women started making designs and decorating their clothing (Fortis 2014).

This myth is illuminating and suggests that *mola* blouses, mythic tree bark and amniotic sac are all composed by layers as well as all covered with designs. *Molagana* are sewn by superimposing layers of fabric of different colours and the beauty and complexity of designs depends the number of layers – more the layers, more the colours and most exquisitely complex and fine the design. Similarly, the Guna describe the amniotic sac as formed by layers of membrane. The idea of layers is recurrent in Guna cosmology as well, and the world conceived as a succession of layers both below and above the surface where people live. In the environment, Guna people note that the bark of trees might shed like skin, recalling again the idea of layers covering a surface like a *mola*.

Molagana are the visual manifestation of women's crafting skills and fertility. They beautify their bodies by making them visually compelling. They are also

the product of women's relations to each other and the enactment of their fertility and reproductive abilities to shape new bodies. Let us now explore the skills involved in making *Nudsugana*, the house of powerful spirits that come to this world to protect human beings against the malicious attacks of predatory spirits.

Woodcarving

Carving is considered a skill that not all Guna men are able to acquire. When fully mastered, it involves the capacity to give shape to wooden logs and more importantly to transmit life qualities to them. Guna young men may learn to carve canoes, dug out from tree trunks, or stools and small kitchen utensils if they feel inclined to. Elderly men carve *nudsugana*. Young men acquire knowledge of plant and tree species when they begin to visit the forest with an elder relative who teaches them. In this way the skill to carve is slowly acquired through experience and through imitation, by looking at experienced carvers for instance. In some cases, inspiration for carving is acquired through dreaming. With age men become more knowledgeable and develop their eloquence, their capacity to speak, through which they are 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 trustful helper. Importantly *nudsugana* are considered to be alive and therefore cosmologically dangerous, in contrast to other carved objects like canoes and utensils that are considered as inanimate objects and are usually carved by younger men.

It is important therefore to stress that carving skills are acquired through the life cycle. They do not mainly involve technical skills, but rather a more complex knowledge that involves technique, myths, knowledge of animal and plant species as they are in nature and as they are in cosmological thought. Men who carve *nudsugana* have acquired all these skills during their life, and are elderly and wise. They know the properties of trees, they are able to choose the right branches or roots, they master the process of carving, and

they know the ritual formulae to speak to the spirits of the tree. In short, they know how to bring them to life.

Amongst these, of a particular importance is the skill to 'speak well', that is the ability to know and to master the different speech contexts in daily life. On the one hand, elder men should speak to their grandchildren at home using the appropriate tone to give them advice, or scolding them when necessary. On the other hand, they should know how to speak in the gathering house, using the appropriate vocabulary and speech register, making reference to episodes from mythic Guna history (Sherzer 1983). These qualities need also to be complemented by self-restraint, avoiding speaking too much, or too loudly.

Elder men's capacity to speak well is transmitted to the *nudsugana* that they carve. The importance of such a quality is that *nudsugana* speak and reveal the illness of sick persons to the ritual specialists who try to cure them. As such a *nudsu* acts as a doctor diagnosing the illness of its patient. By the same token, the diplomatic capacity allows *nudsugana* to overcome the evil entities responsible for making human beings 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. By carving a *nudsu* an elder man is thus able to generate a new person, which stands out from the generic primordial vitalities embodied in trees, and takes up human qualities from its carver. A *nudsu* is a powerful being that has a mixed human and non-human nature and acts as a mediator between humans and other entities.

Guna men often describe the process of carving *nudsugana* as the process of birth. Let us consider this process and its analogies with the human forging of new persons. When the man goes to the forest with the aim of collecting wood for carving a new figure he first looks for the appropriate tree. He will choose from the species that are associated to primordial spirits. He will then cut either a branch or an exposed root of the appropriate size. In doing so he will make an incision with his machete to the part of the log closer to the ground. Once returned back home and upon beginning to carve, the man will follow 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. The head, turned downward, is made first and it is followed by the rest of the body. As Guna elderly carvers explain, this is like a newborn appearing to this world face down.

In observing the process of carving *nudsugana* we thus appreciate Guna ideas about the person and the cosmos. Carvers are the most skilled when they are able to carve *nudsugana*. Their skill consists in the capacity to master the primordial life forces of trees and other powerful non-human entities that their fellow villagers recognise. In doing so they literally give life to *nudsugana*. Through carving *nudsugana* elder men manifest their creative fertile capacities. These, in turn, are the transformation of the fertility that they possessed as adult men in making and fathering their babies.

Guna young men work hard in the forest in order to produce enough food to feed their children. Their strength and skill to garden, fish and hunt are equated to their capacity to beget children. Also women are considered strong when they have children and often people joke that if a man is a lazy worker, his wife will win him in bed! *Burba*, the immaterial double of the person – which we often so unsatisfactorily translate 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 men's and women's fertility, to their 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 people by means of speaking to them, giving advice and life teachings. They instil moral conduct in them, and importantly they protect younger people by carving *nudsugana*, while elderly Guna women protect women in their reproductive age with their knowledge about reproduction and birth and with interpreting babies' amniotic designs.

By means of giving advice, teaching, preparing plant medicines, preparing daily meals, interpreting amniotic designs and generally caring for young family members, elder men and women have thus the important role of turning youngsters into mindful and caring adults, who will work to maintain

the well being of future generations.

Aesthetics and the Everyday

There is a final important aspect to consider in relation to the making of *mola*. *Molagana* partake in those everyday activities that constitute and contribute to the relentless flow of Guna social life. We have already suggested the practice of making and wearing the *mola* is linked to fertility and reproduction. This may be an unexpected connection, which nonetheless comes to the fore when we carefully consider the practice of making *mola* in relation to the life and to the body of its maker, in a way that the cycles of fertility and of *mola* making seem so closely entwined.

On the other hand making *mola* occupies a central place in Guna everyday life and partakes to the times and the motions of daily activities of food production and preparation that are crucial in perpetuating Guna social life. The processes of feeding, nurturing and protecting are considered core values of kinship. The Guna, as other people elsewhere, consider these processes as fundamental in forging and fostering kinship ties, the good health of children and the social and personal well-being of the community. These processes take place everyday in the distinctive experiential tone and landscape of Guna social life (Gow & Margiotti 2012).

In the motion and the times of Guna life, morning is for carrying out productive activities in the forest or the sea where men produce food for their families. In the early morning the village is calm and quiet, with the dawn mist enveloping the island and people sleeping or sitting by the cooking fire to warm up and sipping a hot drink. Men, as generators of food abundance, are active mostly outside the village space, in the forest where they make food in the gardens belonging to them and to their wives. Making food is what a man should do for his wife. It is the enactment of care and love, or more generally the 'keeping in mind', *binsaed*, of one's wife and their children through nurturance.

Women rarely go to the forest, but their activities at home take place

alongside the male tasks. In the morning, when clothes have been washed and the house's patio cleaned, before preparing food and cooking, and when children are at school, women gather together with their kinswomen to make *mola* blouses. They sit on the house's patio, bent on their work and the intense sewing activity is only interrupted by occasional chats, a visitor coming and bringing some news, or a laugh.

In the morning the village is silent and seems still, everything feels almost motionless. The village pathways seem as almost deserted, with men in the forest and women at home and with children at school or babies taking naps between feeds. The village atmosphere during this period is described as a manifestation of 'quietness' or 'tranquility' and this state reminds people that everyday activities are taking place and that nothing disrupts their flow.

For adult women, quietness is also linked practically to the skills of *mola* making and to the bodily behaviour related to such activity. Tranquillity is the essential pre-condition for the tactile and visual activity of making *mola*. This activity is governed by an elaborate set of skills related to reduced mobility. These skills imply the strong control of movements, with women sitting and bending their heads and shoulders slightly to cut, fold and sew layers of colored fabric, progressively revealing a graphic form, among the layers. In short quietness relates to the ideal of conducting a peaceful social existence, characterized by the monotonous and relentless repetition of daily activities that people carry out according to the values of kinship.

To conclude, the skills to make objects extend to the moral and social qualities of living together of people who care for each other and act in reciprocal and complementary ways across genders and generations. There is a kind of mutual reciprocity between a husband working in the forest and a woman working at home for her family and interspersing domestic chores with the making of beautiful clothes. *Mola* making plays a crucial role in the values of social life that people continuously strive to generate in order to live well within their communities. In turn the carving of *nudsu* aims to protect people from cosmological dangers and mediates between the human domain and its

invisible counterpart, the spiritual realm. A tranquil social life and well-being can only be achieved through maintaining safety on the cosmological level. Thus *mola* and *nudsu* seen together are expression of an aesthetics of Guna life achieved through the daily skilful actions of women and men engaged in the regeneration of their lived world.

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