

Making Molas Spanish students re-create ancient art

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

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No body painting occurred in Ligia Peterson's classes last week, just the creation of colorful geometric designs known as molas.

Spanish III students tried their hand at the kind of art Kuna women once decorated their bodies with from dyes extracted from vegetable fibers—most notably red, blue and yellow.

The Kuna are an Indian tribe in Panama and the majority live in the San Blas Islands off the east coast.

At some point, Peterson said the Kunas gained access to store-bought cloth and mola art was born.

In the Kuna's native language, mola means blouse or clothing and geometric molas are the most traditional since they developed from ancient body-painting designs.

Peterson said many Kuna women make molas to not only wear on their shirts (two mola panels are used as front and back panels in a blouse) but to sell.



"They want to preserve their way of living," she said.

Making molas in her Spanish class is a cultural lesson about art in different countries, she said.

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For their assignment, students were asked to incorporate nature into their geometric designs.

“The Kunas are surrounded by nature,” Peterson said, noting that they also use everyday objects like washboards, Kuna legends and other things in their designs.

Student Jessica Schmidt said students also talked about art that represents other countries like the United States.

“We decided that quilts could be representative of us,” Schmidt said.

Some of the class members said they’d like to create real molas, with fabric, if they had time.

Ashley Wilkerson said she thought it was neat to know that a culture still exists “that does things like that.”



Cody Cooper, who was putting the final touches on a poinsettia mola, said the exercise helped him appreciate the work the Kuna Indians put into their designs.

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