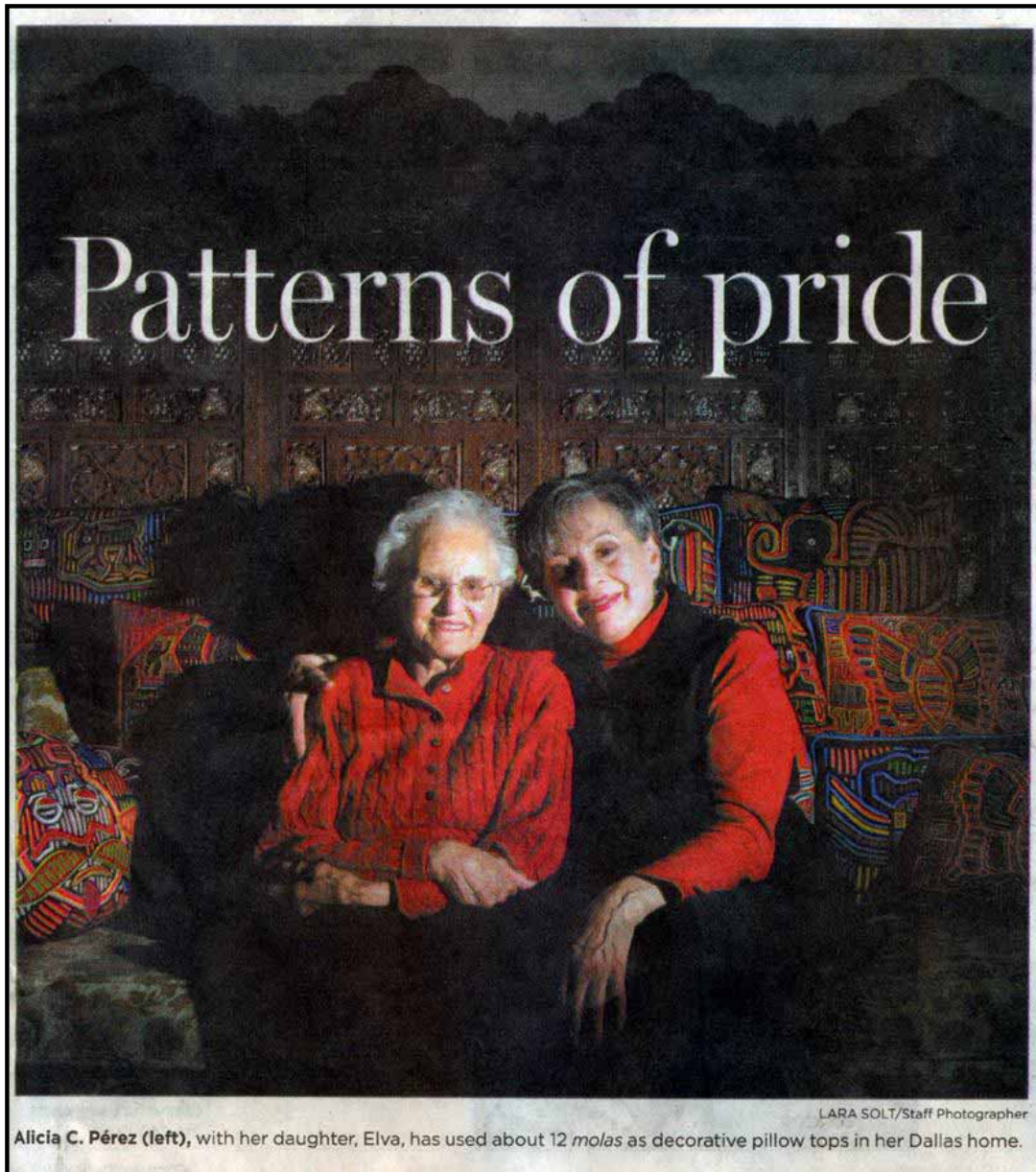


# The Dallas Morning News

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The Guide Sunday – Pg. 1



LARA SOLT/Staff Photographer

Alicia C. Pérez (left), with her daughter, Elva, has used about 12 *molas* as decorative pillow tops in her Dallas home.

# GuideSunday

## Family puts mola compilation from Panama on display to honor missionary, artists

By **MARIANA GREENE**  
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**A**licia C. Pérez and her daughter, Elva, display a shy pride in their cache of colorful Panamanian textiles called *molos*. It has a lot to do with the admiration the two have for the indigenous female artists of the San Blas Islands, but the collection also symbolizes the stature of their late husband and father, a Baptist missionary.

It was because of the collection's connection to Isaac V. Pérez and his life's work that his survivors agreed to exhibit a representative assortment at the Latino Cultural Center through Feb. 14.

Pérez, one of five sons in an old Texas family full of ministers, missionaries and religious workers, began his calling with the Baptists

while attending Baylor University. He was "doing work" with Spanish-speaking Baptist churches in Texas, explains Alicia, traveling by bus each weekend from Waco to Bastrop and back, when he met her, a student at the University of Texas. When she married him in 1943, she signed on to the life of a missionary's wife, raising a family

far from home.

"The Panamanians didn't know much about the Baptist church," Alicia says. In the early '50s, her husband "was the first non-Anglo to be sent overseas by the Baptist Home Mission Board," now called the International Mission Board of the Southern Bap-



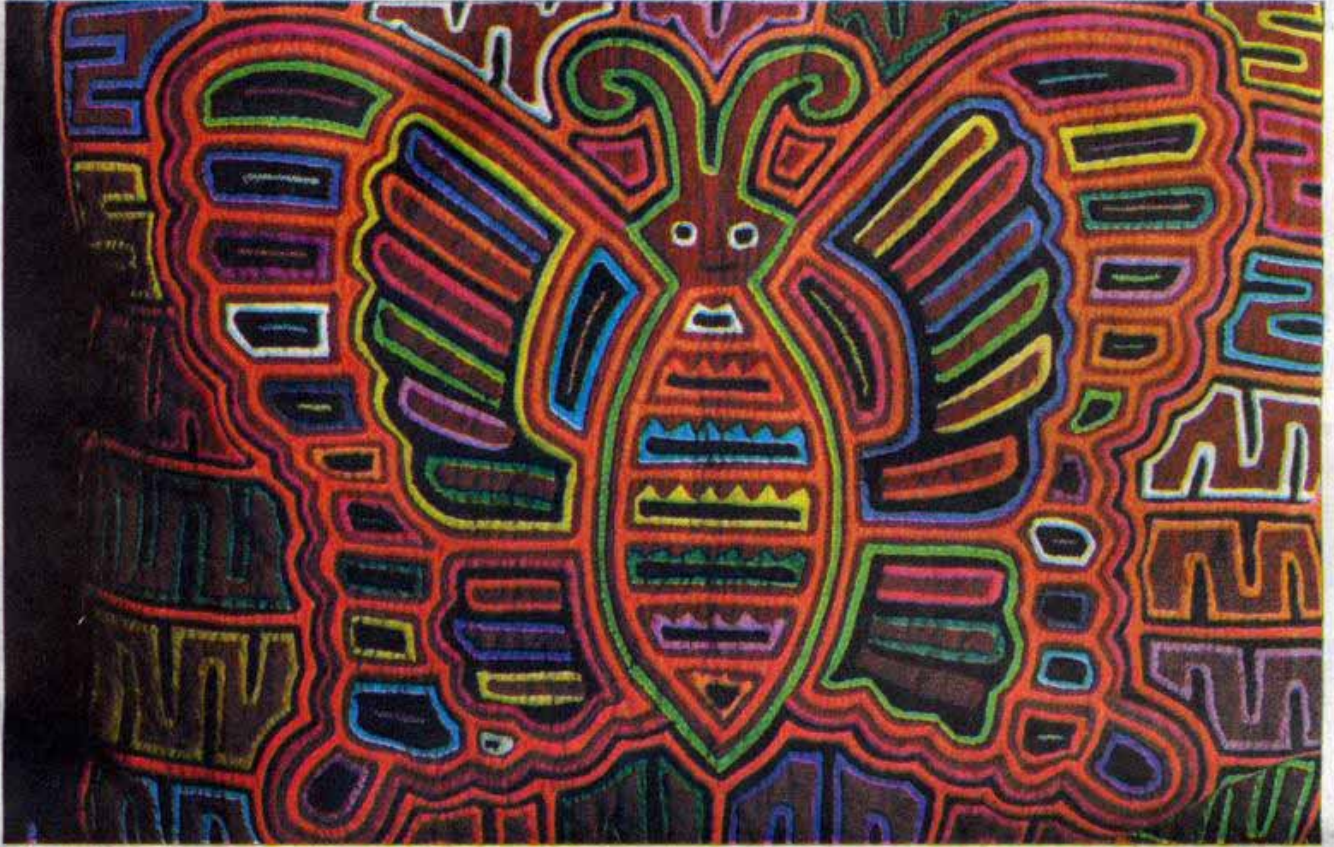
See more of Panama's colorful peoples and customs.  
[dallasnews.com/home](http://dallasnews.com/home)

See **FAMILY** Page 12E

**A turtle** is depicted on a cotton *mola*, which is part of the Pérezes' collection that is on view at the Latino Cultural Center.



# Family displays mola collection



LARA SOLT/Staff Photographer

**Mola designs** are often taken from Kuna culture, including marine and animal life on the San Blas Islands.

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tist Convention.

They lived in Balboa, the administrative center of the Canal Zone, where Alicia taught fifth grade at the public school established for American children. Isaac visited Baptist churches all over Panama, including those in the San Blas Islands off the Caribbean coast, training pastors and lay leaders. Later, he became president of the Panama Baptist Theological Seminary.

Mother and daughter remember when Pérez brought home the first *mola*, a part of the traditional costume of the Kuna women. The front and back panels of their blouses are colorful, graphic reverse appliqué, with multiple pieces of cotton superimposed on others. The top layer is snipped with tiny scissors and stitched down to create a complicated pattern of underlying colors.

"We were stunned that all of this was handwork and was so creative, so different and so exquisite," Elva says.

The designs are often taken from native culture, including mythology, marine and animal life on the coral islands, biblical themes and even artwork on packaged foods. Geometric *molás* are the most traditional, says Elva, as they've developed from ancient body-painting designs using natural dyes.

She says it takes about two months to complete a *mola*, not only because of the intricacy of the stitchery but also because the Kuna women traditionally handle all the household chores and raise the children; Kuna men fish and farm coconuts.

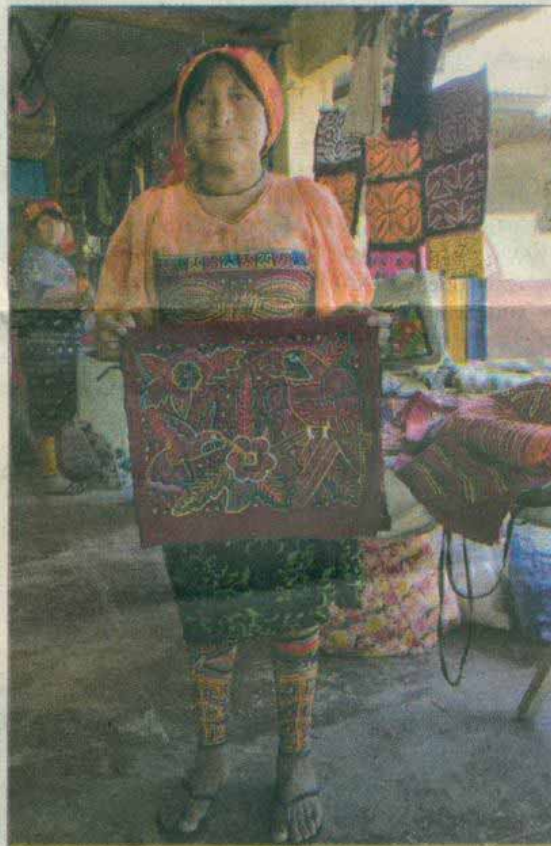
The ability to make a fine

## SEE MOLAS

The free exhibit runs through Feb. 14 at the Latino Cultural Center, 2600 Live Oak St. at Good-Latimer Expressway. Tuesday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Saturday, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., 214-670-3320, [www.dallasculture.org/latinocc](http://www.dallasculture.org/latinocc)

Mesquite collector and retired art teacher Cathy Bradley will teach the basics of *mola* construction and workmanship from 1 to 4 p.m. Feb. 14. \$5 fee includes fabrics and patterns. To register, call 214-671-0051.

The Mesquite Arts Center exhibits 47 examples from Dallas and Mesquite collectors through March 15. 1527 N. Galloway Ave. Weekdays and during performances, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Free. 972-216-6444, [www.cityofmesquite.com/artsweb](http://www.cityofmesquite.com/artsweb).



Courtesy of Kristen Dale

**A Kuna woman** sells her handmade *molás*, which have become a symbol of the Kunas' independence.

*mola* is a source of status in the matriarchy. Quality is determined by several factors, including the number of cloth layers, the fineness of stitch-

ing, evenness and width of cutouts, and the addition of trimmings and embroidery at the top and bottom of the blouse that frames the appli-

qué. Although only adult women wear *molás*, "girls start learning how to make them at 6 or 7," Elva says. "Younger women prepare for marriage by making 20 or 30 for their dowry."

The garment is symbolic of a fiercely independent people. When the Panamanian government tried to prevent Kuna women from wearing their traditional costume, a rebellion in 1925 led to the establishment of a semiautonomous territory.

Alicia never visited the San Blas Islands with her husband. "She didn't want to fly in a one-engine Cessna over the jungle," says her daughter, who moved with her parents to Panama when she was 9, "and I don't blame her."

The daughter was more adventurous. "I wanted to see where all this beauty had come from," Elva says.

Although Alicia did not intend to be a collector, she acquired about 65 panels and several traditional ceremonial costumes during her husband's time in Panama. In the more than 30 years since the couple returned to the United States to live, Alicia has framed a couple of *molás* and used about 12 as decorative pillow tops. The rest of the individual panels were stored in a box until the Latino Cultural Center framed 38 examples for the exhibit.

"We didn't start collecting because we are collectors," says Elva. "There's a very deep connection to the San Blas Indians and that part of the world. These works of art mean far more to us than these are just pretty."

"They are a strong reminder of our past and the privilege we had to be a part of it all."