

## ARPILLERAS AS A MEANS OF EXPRESSION AND DENUNCIATION. MORE VALID THAN EVER.

Cecilia Salazar<sup>1</sup>. April 2009.

Chile, September 11, 1973. *The Coup D'Etat* directed by the rule of General Augusto Pinochet ended the democratically-elected government of Salvador Allende, a government of mass participation in which women, workers, students, and mothers all shared a voice in the policy-making. University students, with ambitions, dreams and hope along with a social conscience for justice had the security that a better society for everyone could be changed with a peaceful movement. These dreams were destroyed by the *Coup* and the new reality became a violent, repressive totalitarian nightmare, where Chileans were arrested, tortured, raped, disappeared and assassinated by the Coup's military, the same military who once swore to respect the Chilean Constitution and its people.

As a result of this dire situation many women were left alone now that their husbands, fathers brothers and friends were detained, disappeared or murdered, outside of other women who too were arrested or disappeared. From this context the *community Kitchens* were created to end the hunger, now that many lost their jobs and the sole bread-winner of the family.

*La Vicaria de Solidaridad* together with los *Centros de Madres* started to organize the first **arpillera-making workshops**, arising as a **medium for popular expression and denunciation** during the military dictatorship (1973-1989), along with being a means of **economic relief** for those women and their families.

They are ready-made with remnants of fabric, threads, colored wool and whatever material or memory of their missing beloved, that can be sewn onto a rectangular burlap material, commonly referred to as the arpillera.

These brave women armed only with their sewing needles commenced to embroider and form the heart-breaking stories of their actual lives. Starting with a simple brown rectangle which was transformed into a blank page waiting to receive their stories and emotions, with their humble work, denouncing the human rights abuses, hiding secret messages within the seams, recording the names of their beloved, asking "Where are they?", showing the concentration camps, the tortures, the murders and the common graves, showing the hardened scenery through which their Arpillera-maker had crossed. It was a labour of love, impotence and hurt which was left embroidered with the stitching of hope, solidarity and bravery of the working-class women of the towns of Chile.

In many cases this marvelous work with the hidden messages and denunciations in their seams, flew to other countries like messenger doves unfolding themselves before the eyes of people in solidarity, in Canada, France and Spain and many other countries that purchased them in many cases without knowing the impact and story they showed, however by buying them and showing solidarity they helped to ease the misery these families, mothers, wives, daughters, sisters, girlfriends and friends of the detained and disappeared lived. The purchase of these works of art gave financial support to the brave and sacrificing Arpillera-makers who with their works made history and continue to do so.



<sup>1</sup> Cecilia Salazar is an instructor in workshops for Arpilleras/Quilts in Toronto, Canada. She has been teaching this particular craft to groups from different countries, age and profession. She also gives talks about how important *arpilleras* are as a means of denunciation, to both school and university students. Salazar has also organized several exhibitions of *Chilean Arpilleras*, like the one recently shown in March 2009 to celebrate International Woman's Day at University of Toronto where she delivered the opening speech.

Cecilia Salazar's photographs have been reproduced with her authorization. The Arpillera was made by Rosario Moncada.

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