

Arpillera



Arpillera from Chili, shown at exhibition in Derry, 2008.

Arpilleras reflect a South American folk art that uses [appliqué](#), [embroidery](#) and [patchwork](#) to depict scenes of everyday life. The Spanish word *arpillera* derives from an old Spanish word for burlap. They are sometimes called *cuadros* (squares). Most *arpilleras* are used as pictures and hung on walls. The most famous *arpilleras* and *arpilleristas* (the women who make them) are from Chile.

During the Pinochet dictatorship (1973-1990), poor women in and around Santiago began making *arpilleras* as an income-generating project organized by the Roman Catholic Church's *Vicaría de la Solidaridad*. Church workers donated clothes, paid for the finished *arpilleras* and organised their sale. Many of the women were members of an association (*Agrupación de los Familiares de los Detenidos Desaparecidos*—AFDD) for families of those who were detained by the regime and 'disappeared'.

The women stitched scenes from their daily life: children begging in streets; men standing in line for free soup; women demonstrating in front of the Supreme Court for news of their loved ones; a family sitting around a table, with an empty chair; police raids on homes etc. The first *arpilleras* were anonymous, but by the 1990's women started to sign their first names and the date on the back of their work. The Church smuggled thousands of *arpilleras* out of Chile for sale elsewhere. These decorative panels helped to raise awareness of the human rights abuses taking place inside Chile. As criticism of Pinochet increased, the government made it illegal to own or publically show *arpilleras* in the country.

Sources:

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- BRETT, Guy (1986). *Through Our Own Eyes: Popular Art and Modern History*, London: GMP Publishing.

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