

Arpillera workshop, 29th June 2016

Text and photos by Shelley Anderson

It was both fun and inspiring to learn more about arpilleras at the TRC's recent workshop. Fun because it was enjoyable making little dolls out of old tights and scraps of cloth—several participants said they were going to do this with their grandchildren. But inspiring too, because armed with similar scraps and needles, Chilean women found a voice and helped to overthrow a dictator.



Arpilleras are a traditional South American folk art. Using patchwork and appliqué techniques and stitches like the blanket stitch, scenes of everyday life are created, to be used as wall decorations. The word arpillera derives from the Spanish word for burlap, as these cloth stories were usually stitched on the backs of flour sacks.

Arpilleras became something more than a folk art around 1975, explained Roberta Bacic, who collects and curates arpilleras. She held up on cloth picture made during this time. At first glance it's a pleasant scene on a beach, with small groups of people, and the sun shining on three sail boats. But arpilleras can have many layers and be read on different levels. This was made by a woman who had three disappeared sons. She shared her story



with another woman, who told her she had to hold on to the most beautiful moment she'd had with her sons, like this holiday on the beach. Like most arpilleras from Chile, the Andean mountains can be seen in the pictures background, a strong symbol of Chilean identity. And, too, the sun is shining—a symbol of the truth being made public: thousands of people were being “disappeared”, illegally jailed,

tortured and killed, by the Pinochet dictatorship (1973-1990). It also added another layer of meaning when it was explained that the grey fabric in the picture was made from children's school uniforms.

It was in the mid-1970s when the Roman Catholic Church's *Vicaría de la Solidaridad* began an income-generating project for poor women in Santiago. Using second-hand clothes

collected by the Church, women produced arpilleras that were then bought by the Church for re-sale, often abroad. Women began sharing their stories, both with each other and in their sewing: there were scenes of soup kitchens; of police raids; of demonstrations of women demanding to know where their disappeared children were. One large arpillera we were shown was made collectively, commissioned by a bishop when he was summoned to the Vatican to explain what exactly the Church was doing in Santiago: there are scenes of the arpillera workshops, of the free legal aid office, and of a newsletter.

These cloth stories became so effective in telling of the dictatorship's human rights abuses that the government made it illegal to own, make or transport an arpillera. The women began signing their work and making pockets in the back where they placed letters, explaining the story; the figures depicted, too, became less flat and more three-dimensional. Women in Peru began making story cloths, with their own distinctive style. Bacic has done workshops in Northern Ireland, Argentina, Catalonia, Zimbabwe and beyond; where women share their stories and learn how to make "disobedient dolls".

We enjoyed one last arpillera, which literally had different layers: it was the story of a woman who gave birth at home, as the ambulance came too late to take her to hospital. There is a house, with the ambulance speeding towards it. When you lift the cloth house, there is a scene of a woman on a table, surrounded by other women. Lift the tiny blanket that covers the women and a pink embroidered baby is revealed. Then it was our turn to make dolls, from bodies of used tights and fabric squares, yarn and thread. The result was a stylish Frida Kahlo doll; a kerchiefed St. Distaff, the TRC's patron saint; two lovely grandchildren and a crowned Queen Maxima. The workshop was a good lesson in the fact that textiles are both a language and a way to tell our stories.



For more on arpilleras see the TRC's *Needles*: the TRC's Digital Encyclopedia of Decorative Needlework at www.trc-leiden.nl/trc-needles