



# Catalogue of Chilean Arpilleras

Curator of the Exhibition, Roberta Bacic  
Exhibition 8 February to 19 April 2008  
Harbour Museum, Derry

Catalogue compiled 23 January 2008



## The politics of Chilean “arpilleras “

Curator: Roberta Bacic, Chilean living in Northern Ireland.

Arpilleras (pronounced "ar-pee-**air**-ahs") are three-dimensional appliqué textiles of Latin America. “Arpilleras” is actually from the Chilean tradition, an old regional pictorial appliqué technique from Isla Negra on the coast of Chile, whereby rags were used to create images and then embroidered on large pieces of cloth. Initially Hessian, or in Spanish "arpillera", was used as their backing, and that then became the name for this particular type of quilt. Generally they are known as quilts or wall hangings. They are considered contemporary craft. Sometimes small dolls were made and added to make the three dimensional effect.

After the military coup in 1973, which introduced the Pinochet regime, the Association of Relatives of the Disappeared in Chile began to make arpilleras. They were handcrafted, using scraps of materials collected by women or donated by the churches in Chile. They tell their stories and support their families. They were also made by women political prisoners, either while inside prisons or when released. They used them to camouflage notes sent to the world outside, to people who would denounce what was happening at national or international levels or people who could act on their behalf to either assist them in their different needs or would be able to pass on messages to their dear ones. Even the most suspicious guards in jails did not think to check the appliquéd pictures for messages, since sewing was seen as inconsequential 'women's work'. Nor did other people recognise the power they could have when denouncing what was really happening and was otherwise denied by the government authorities and ignored by most of society.

Chilean women found refuge in the Vicariate of Solidarity organized by the Catholic Church. In dark basements and other secret meeting rooms in churches, NGOs and other solidarity places, mothers, wives, lovers, friends, daughters and sisters began to design and sew together in order to capture their common tales of torture, of pain and love and save them from oblivion. Part of the church and a network of solidarity people smuggled ‘arpilleras’ out of Chile and so the world – and the ones who listened - came to know more about the oppressive, unjust and bloody life under the dictatorship. They were often bought as a way to support the struggle, including some of the ones you see in this display.

In the arpilleras are elements such as photos, images, and names of the missing and sewn words and expressions such as "**¿Dónde están?**" (Where are they?) The tapestries often have a "relief" quality and are far from two-dimensional pictures. The scrap material and stitching that ultimately create the simple and clear lines and forms of the figures and motifs depicted on these arpilleras allow the viewer to perceive the determination of these Chilean craft women. These

arpilleras have served as testimony to the tenacity and strength of these Chilean women in their determined struggle for truth and justice and to break the code of silence imposed upon them and upon the country.

At the time they were done they depicted what was actually happening, today they are witnesses to what can not be forgotten and is part of our present past that needs to be dealt with.

February 2008

## The Art of Survival (Chilean Arpilleras)

### *List of exhibition pieces*

1 **Arpillera**, Jürgen & Marta Schaffer: *Vida en Nuestra Población / Life in Our Poor Neighbourhood*

2 **Arpillera**, Alba Sanfeliu: *Paz Justicia Libertad / Peace Justice Freedom*

3 **Arpillera**, Traude Rebmann: *Corte de Agua / Water Cut*

4 **Arpillera**, Roberta Bacic: *Recuerdos de Guadalupe / Guadalupe's Longings*

5 **Arpillera**, Marjorie Agosín: *¿Dónde están? / Where are They?*

6 **Arpillera**, Gaby Franger: *Aquí se Tortura / Here They Torture*

7 **Arpillera**, Fátima Miralles: *No a las Alzas, No a la Dictadura, Basta de Hambre / No to Inflation, No to Dictatorship, Enough of Hunger*

8 **Arpillera**, Marjorie Agosín: *Nuestra Carnicería / Our Butcher's*

9 **Arpillera**, Marjorie Agosín: *Centro Abierto / Women at a Soup Kitchen*

10 **Arpillera**, Marjorie Agosín: *Exilio / Exile (Women at the Airport)*

11 **Arpillera**, Fátima Miralles: *Homenaje a los caídos / Homage to the fallen ones*

12 **Arpillera**, Marjorie Agosín: *La Cueca Sola / They Dance Alone*

13 **Arpillera**, Marjorie Agosín: *Exilio II / Exile II (Woman Mourning Those who have been Exiled)*

14 **Arpillera**, Marjorie Agosín: *Algo que Celebrar: Vacaciones en Nuestra Comunidad / Something to Celebrate: Holiday in a Poor Neighborhood*

15 **Arpillera**, Marjorie Agosín: *Sala de Torturas / Chamber of Torture*

16 **Arpillera**, Roberta Bacic: *Nuestra Vida en Chile / Our Life in Chile*

*“The Arpilleras are story tellers, for it is through them that these women have recorded and preserved the memory of a period of Chilean history that many others have chosen to forget”*

This quote comes from Marjorie Agosín's book: **“Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love, The Arpillera movement in Chile 1974-1994”** with a foreword by Isabel Allende, University of New Mexico Press 1994.

A very special thanks to Marjorie, a Chilean academic living in the United States of America, for her support to this project and her openness to allow us to use anything we felt pertinent from this book of hers, which we signal in each caption by writing in italics. We also thank her for her generosity to send us eight pieces of her private collection of Chilean *arpilleras* what has significantly improved our small Chilean exhibition in the context of the upcoming one: **“The Art of Survival, International and Irish Quilts”**, to be launched March 8<sup>th</sup>.

Early in 2008, Marjorie published a second edition to her book through Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. We are aiming to launch it in Derry before the end of the year. More details will be forthcoming.

It has been crucial to have the support of Maureen Hetherington who welcomed this project into The Junction and has believed in it every step of the way, encouraging its growth and embracing its mission wholeheartedly.

At the same time I would like to thank Karen Duhai who has been an invaluable assistant to this project. Many other people have volunteered and helped in this process, and naming them here would mean writing a long list, but they will be receiving their acknowledgment during the life of this project.

Roberta Bacic  
Curator of the Chilean *Arpilleras* Exhibition,  
February 2008



## **Vida en Nuestra Población / Life in our Poor Neighbourhood**

Created by *taller Recoleta*/ Recoleta workshop in Santiago de Chile in the late 1980's

This was created as a result of a workshop run by a nun, Sister Carolina. Created towards the end of the dictatorship, it portrays life in the community—both the good and bad parts.

The scene is happier than those created in the midst of the dictatorship. Though the people are still poor and unable to afford their own electricity (note the wires tapping into the main power line), they are happier, celebrating all the comings and goings of life. In one scene, a couple is being wed. In another, mothers hug their children.

Women are not alone in this arpillera. Men and children play prominent roles. Children's activities dominate the whole of the centre of the arpillera - skipping, jumping on a trampoline, and playing on the swings; a complete contrast to nearly all the quilts produced during the dictatorship. The left side shows women undertaking household chores and people cultivating their food crops. Women are also seen gardening (top right). The rodeo on the right shows us the enjoyment of communal and leisure activity and the wedding scene is a sign of hope for the future.

Courtesy of Jürgen & Marta Schaffer (Germany)



## **Paz Justicia Libertad / Peace Justice Freedom**

This is a traditional arpillera made in the late 1970s with the mountains of Chile and the sun in the background. It depicts a protest by women, some of whom are clashing cymbals in front of a police car (centre foreground). Others carry leaflets under their arms about a campaign to find their missing loved ones.

The material used to create this arpillera makes it particularly poignant. The dark grey material is made from the trousers of a “disappeared” man. Likewise, the checked fabric “road” comes from a “disappeared” loved one’s shirt. *In defiance against military dictatorship that disappeared people and tried to erase all traces of their existence, the mothers often include in the tapestry a representation of the body of the missing child as a constant motif. Sometimes they sew scraps of clothing belonging to the departed onto the arpillera... [which] take the place of the loved ones and act as an enduring testimony to their existence.*

The creating of the arpilleras could also be therapeutic. As Violeta Morales wrote: *“I put all my energy into the arpillera workshop; it was sometimes the only thing that kept me balanced emotionally. There I found people who were suffering from the same thing and trying to help them sometimes helped me with my own tragedy.”* (Violeta Morales, quoted by Marjorie Agosín)

Courtesy of Alba Sanfeliu (Spain)



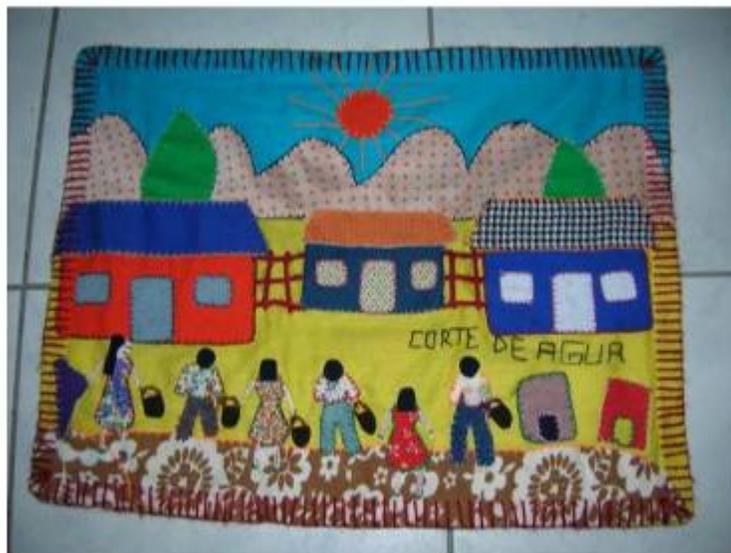
## **Corte de Agua / Water Cut**

This is a traditional arpillera with the mountains of Chile and the sky and sun colourfully depicted in the background. Is this an indication of the arpilleras' sense of courage and empowerment that underlies many of the messages in the quilts?

To stop them from protesting, the government cut off the water supply to this poor community, saying, in effect, "We don't care about you!" In order to survive, these women took their buckets to the homes of their middle-class neighbours to ask for water. Regardless of the government's water cut, not one woman went without water that day. The water they gathered from their neighbours was put into tanks to be shared by the community.

Such situations recurred often during the regime and poor women were forced to find their voice. They realized that it was not enough to write complaints to the local newspapers, which were censored against such things. Rather, they learned they must find different outlets, different ways to make their voices heard. Indeed, "women have not forgotten the empowerment they gained when they learned they could change things by taking to the streets and protesting the dictatorship, and this confidence inspires them as they face Chile's contemporary problems."

Courtesy of Traude Rebmann (Germany)



## ***Recuerdos de Guadalupe / Guadalupe's Longings***

Created by Guadalupe Ccallocunto in late 1989

This quilt was made by Guadalupe, a Peruvian woman while learning the art of the arpillera in Chile. She had gone to Chile from her home in Ayacucho, Perú, to escape death threats. She had become an active human rights activist after the disappearance of her husband. At the time there was a war between the Peruvian government and the Shining Path movement, which lasted from 1980 until 2000.

The artist did not have much fabric to work with. One day she asked her friend, the guest curator with whom she was staying in Chile, if she had any fabric scraps suitable for quilt making. Being an academic, Roberta did not have much fabric lying around, but she asked her daughters if she could have the dresses from their dolls. She put those with some old socks and tea towels into a basket, which the artist took and used when creating this arpillera.

Her quilt portrays Perú, her home, which she desperately missed while in Chile. Women and children are occupied in traditional activities such as cooking (top left) and preparing vegetables (centre). At the bottom right some spools of thread and other needlework materials are sitting on boxes, the workshop that the artist dreamed of creating when she returned home to Perú. Not long afterwards the artist did return home. She knew that in returning she risked everything, including her life, but she simply could not bear to be away from her children and her homeland any longer. Within a few months of returning to Peru, on June 10 1990, she disappeared. Three arpilleras, including this one, are her quilting legacy.

Courtesy of Roberta Bacic (Chile/Northern Ireland)



## ¿Dónde están? / *Where are They?*

This is a very intimate arpillera. Rather than portraying an entire village or a particular scene, this portrays a single woman, sewing and hoping for justice and the return of her loved ones. Her face is partially hidden by the quilt she is sewing, representing the fact that women often buried their sorrows and put on a brave face—the face of poor women working for justice.

“¿Dónde están? Where are they?” was a common theme throughout the dictatorship and the motto of the Association of Detained Disappeared. Many people felt the loss of a loved one, whether it was because of forced exile or because they had been “disappeared.” People vanished without a trace, leaving their loved ones wondering, “Where are they?” At the bottom of this arpillera are representations of a man, a woman, and a child. All are asking, “Where are they?” Everyone is affected.

Women, in particular, suffered both physically and emotionally through the loss of their loved ones. Although most of the arpilleras are anonymous, we can feel their emotions in their work. Some also left little notes in pockets on the back of the arpilleras. One such note is extremely poignant. On it, a mother wrote, “These four vultures (referring to the four members of the military junta), you understand who they are. They took away my son but as a mother I carry him in my heart as long as I live. I will keep on struggling until I find him. I have faith in God.”

From Marjorie Agosin’s private collection (Chile/USA)



## **Aquí se Tortura / Here They Torture**

There is a traditional background for this quilt but it is significant that the sun is absent and the mountains are bleak. In fact the whole arpillera is very dark and sombre, a reflection, perhaps, of the arpillera's topic.

The creator of this piece is using her arpillera to depict her personal experience of torture. The blue cars are from Chile's secret police. In the yellow room, the creator of this arpillera is lying on the table, being tortured. Significant in the piece is the fact that the creator portrays herself alone. There were certainly others being tortured at the same time, but the arpillera does not believe she can speak for other women's experiences. Her arpillera represents her experience of torture—a very personal and very painful experience she wants others to know about.

Also significant in this arpillera is the fact that the people torturing her and the person guarding the door are all women. Chile had approximately 200 places of torture during the time of the regime. Some of those places were gender specific, while others were mixed. The fact that the creator was being tortured by women would indicate that she was being held at a torture facility for women only.

Courtesy of Gaby Franger (Germany)



**No a las Alzas / No a la Dictadura / Basta de Hambre  
No to Inflation / No to Dictatorship / Enough of Hunger**

This arpillera depicts a poor *población* (neighbourhood) protesting inflation, dictatorship, and their perpetual hunger as a result of both. With so many men “disappeared,” the women stand alone with their banner.

Note the fabric used to create the women’s dresses is all very pretty and feminine. *In their street protests these women fulfilled traditional expectations of femininity and at the same time violate them.*

Indeed, it was their femininity that allowed the arpilleras to go unnoticed for so long. Although Chile was heavily censored at the time of the dictatorship, the military ignored – for a while - the arpilleras, writing them off as insignificant, women merely playing with scraps of cloth. For eight years, women embedded their messages about the military dictatorship in these arpilleras. With the help of the church, they were sold to people around the world, effectively alerting those outside of Chile to the horrors going on within the country.

Courtesy of Fátima Miralles (Spain)



## **Nuestra Carnicería / *Our Butcher's***

The colours used for this arpillera are slightly more muted than in others. The sky is covered with clouds and the sun is absent, perhaps a reflection of the despair felt by the poor during the dictatorship. It is also interesting to note that the typical doll figures are not used in this arpillera.

The scene depicted in this arpillera is one of poor women going to the market to buy food for their families. As times are hard, the butcher does not have much to offer the women. The women do not even own bags or purses in which to carry their belongings, not that they truly need them. The women are so poor that what they can afford to buy can be carried by hand.

During the early years of the dictatorship, many factories were shut down by the military. The poor people, who relied on factory jobs to support their families, became even poorer. The closing of the factories was used by the military as a means of punishing shantytown dwellers. Yet, women found ways to respond. They shopped locally, rather than at the chain stores. They supported each other, and in that way, retained their identity and their culture.

From Marjorie Agosín's private collection (Chile/USA)



## Centro abierto / *Women at a Soup Kitchen*

This arpillera presents a bustling scene. The houses are neat and brightly coloured, and behind them one may see the sun beginning to rise over the mountains—perhaps symbolising better times to come. The yards are full of flowers, and the women in this scene are all busy at work.

During the regime, women did not have the luxury of giving in to their sorrow or despair. *Poor women in the shantytowns were the main victims of the new regime. Thousands of them became the only providers for their homes, as their husbands, father, and sons disappeared or roamed the country looking for menial jobs.* Even though their loved ones were lost or suffering, women were still responsible for providing for their families and themselves.

This arpillera depicts a soup kitchen. With so many people out of jobs and so many families missing husbands and sons (note that there are no men in this piece), soup kitchens became important sources of sustenance for the poor and a way of meeting with others who had suffered similarly. It became a part of daily life, just as sweeping, shopping, and doing the laundry.

From Marjorie Agosín's private collection (Chile/USA)



## **Exilio / Exile (Women at the Airport)**

The scene depicted in this arpillera is interesting because, while it contains elements of a traditional arpillera, it is set in an airport rather than the traditional Chilean village. Still, one may note the traditional backdrop of the mountains and sky.

This is a busy scene. In the foreground, women are carrying their suitcases, preparing to leave the country. During the dictatorship, forced exile was a recurrent theme. Countless people were forced to leave Chile. Others fled for their lives and for the sake of their loved ones. Others in this scene have come to say goodbye to those who are leaving. The women carry suitcases in one hand, in their other hand they carry handkerchiefs, waving goodbye to their family and their country.

This piece is sad, but it is also challenging. In the midst of the women with suitcases are two people holding a banner which says, "For the Right to Live in Our Homeland. No to Exile!" Though they are sad to see their loved ones go, they are still defiant. They want to be heard.

From Marjorie Agosín's private collection (Chile/USA)



## Homenaje a los caídos / *Homage to the fallen Ones*

In this sombre traditional arpillera there is no sun in the sky and the hills are made in one flat colour. Black material dominates the foreground. In the background, poor villagers use wires to tap into the main power supply. Racked with poverty, these villagers cannot afford to pay for their electricity.

The road in this poor neighbourhood is lined with candles, lit in remembrance of those who have disappeared. The central figure in this arpillera carries pages campaigning against torture. The women on the road are lying down as part of the protest, while others carry a banner bearing the words, "Homage to the fallen ones."

This arpillera gives voice to the sorrow and loss felt by so many. *...this work utilises the feminine by articulating the most intimate gestures, such as the long hours of dedication to manual work in order to create textiles that, from the universal and feminine perspectives, tell a story of the war, horror, and violence created by men.*

Courtesy of Fátima Miralles (Spain)



## La Cueca Sola / *They Dance Alone*

La Cueca Sola is a very poignant piece in this exhibition. The traditional Chilean dance, La Cueca, is danced in pairs—an important fact considering the dance is meant to represent the different emotions and stages of romance.

In La Cueca Sola, though, the women dance alone. Their husbands, sons, brothers, or lovers have been disappeared or exiled, so they continue the dance, wearing the image of their loved ones over their hearts. “The dance represents a denunciation of a society that makes the bodies of victims of political violence disappear, denying them a proper burial and silencing their mourners. Through *la cueca sola*, the dancers tell a story with their solitary feet, the story of the mutilated body of a loved one. Through their movements and the guitar music, the women also recreate the pleasure of dancing with the missing person.”

La Cueca Sola has become a powerful story. The women prove to the world that their dance, their culture, cannot be stopped by military action. “By dancing the national dance of Chile alone, the women begin to emerge as historical beings with an identity of their own.” Their courage and determination has inspired people all over the world, including musician Sting, whose song has been covered by many other artists including Joan Baez and Holly Near.

From Marjorie Agosin’s private collection (Chile/USA)



## **Exilio II / Exile II (Woman mourning those who have been exiled)**

As in many other quilts a woman is here depicted mourning alone. The image is cold with a dark sky, snow-capped peaks and beyond a darkened city. The outline of the woman has big tears in her eye. In the right corner is a plane going over the mountains to exile. The woman is longing for the return of her beloved. This pain and sorrow is what fuelled the entire arpillera movement. During the Pinochet regime countless people were disappeared, executed or forced into exile. Families were broken, and loved ones went missing without warning or explanation. Women began speaking out against the disappearance of loved ones, and to that voice was added more voices protesting the economic situation, the torture, and the lack of justice. Through all the protesting, though, one longing remained predominant—the longing that some day families would be reunited or properly remembered.

Though the arpilleras often appear women-centred, it is the lack of men that is the cause of their creation. The women who created these arpilleras were not necessarily feminists, though some of them were. Though they frequently presented strong faces to the world, they still mourned the loss of their loved ones. *Iris tells me that her husband disappeared when she was expecting a son. They talk about the fact that they have lost their sexuality, that they aren't interested in dressing up, or going out to parties. These women will mourn forever. All that remains is the collective trauma of a generation that never knew their fathers and that grew in a divided country.*

From Marjorie Agosín's private collection (Chile/USA)



## **Algo que Celebrar: Vacaciones en Nuestra Comunidad** ***Something to Celebrate: Holiday in a Poor Neighbourhood***

Remembering who you are and where you come from is important to the people of Chile. In this arpillera, a popular folk singer, Violeta Parra, is depicted on the side of a building. Though she died shortly before 1973, the beginning of Pinochet's dictatorship, her music represents the folk-lore and culture of Chile, something that the people struggled to maintain during the military's rule. Violeta Parra is known all over the world by her song: "Gracias a la Vida" (Thanks to Life).

This arpillera depicts a time of joy and playfulness as children play in the open and adults go about their normal duties. Note the Nativity scene at the bottom of this arpillera, which lets us know that it is Xmas time, thus summer in Chile. The Nativity is performed by children, which is common all around the country.

*The arpillera unites the vast traditions of artists who sing, inform, paint and weave hope. Retelling history from the voice of the dispossessed is to rewrite history and envision a better future.*

From Marjorie Agosin's private collection (Chile/USA)



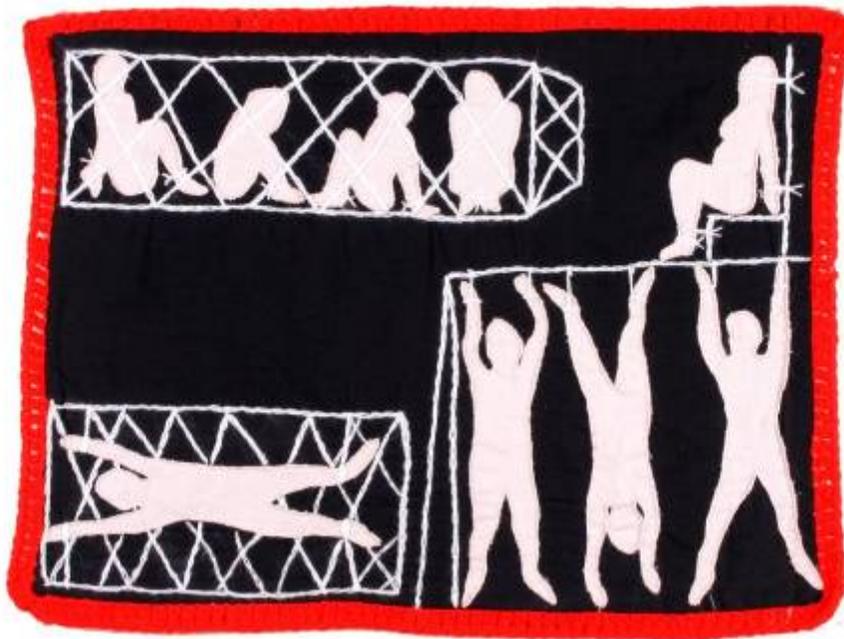
## **Sala de torturas / Chamber of Torture**

This is one of the most visually startling pieces in the collection. Set against a simple black background, this arpillera speaks unapologetically about Chile's history of torture.

Torture is a difficult subject. According to the Valech Report, thousands of people were subjected to some form of torture during Pinochet's regime. 35 868 approached the Commission. Out of this group, 27255 people were officially registered as victims of torture.

This arpillera shows people being tortured. It graphically depicts the experience lived by survivors. It shows these people in a dehumanized way, their features are not recognizable and signals this inhuman experience as not only lived by single individuals, but by significant groups of people. It is striking to notice in the woman who made this *arpillera* her willingness to talk about the past and to deny oblivion, constants that reappear both in conversations and arpilleras.

From Marjorie Agosín's private collection (Chile/USA)



## **Nuestra vida en Chile / Our life in Chile**

Created by Elena Cerón Sandoval in Santiago de Chile 2007

This is an example of the type of arpillera being made today to be sold as a means of earning a living. It is a traditional design with the snow-capped Chilean mountains and the sun in the background and gives us a more colourful and productive picture of village life. However, there are still no men shown in the quilt.

In the left foreground is the market with women selling vegetables and bread. Carts are used to transport goods because few people own cars. Women are shown tending animals and birds, picking fruit, weaving, washing clothes, collecting firewood and carrying water.

The artist used to produce political arpilleras from the late 1970s. It is interesting to note how this later work uses different material - acrylic backing rather than the traditional Hessian because of commercial concerns. It is disappointing too that Elena has not been offered opportunities to share her skills and experience in workshops or with schoolchildren.

Courtesy of Roberta Bacic (Chile/Northern Ireland)

