

Meeting Chilean arpilleras

Voices of solidarity speak to us when looking into the history of this collection of arpilleras that reside in Oshima Hakko Museum and others that live in Japan and around and beyond.

Arpilleras (pronounced "ar-pee-air-ahs") are three-dimensional appliquéd textiles from Latin America, originating as a Chilean folk craft. From the first, pieces of strong hessian fabric (called 'arpillera' in Spanish) were used as the backing and that word became the name for this particular type of tapestry. The images are done using scraps of materials, threads and a needle and all is hand sewn. Violeta Parra, the well-known Chilean folk singer made arpilleras at a time she could not sing and brought them to Paris in the late 1960s; they showed scenes of Chilean history and also illustrated characters. 'Bordadoras de Isla Negra' also influenced the arpilleristas as they stitched in bright colours bucolic scenes of their peasant lives.

In the context of systematic human rights violations under the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile between 11 September 1973 and March 1990, this style of sewing developed into an act of political subversion and a way to raise international awareness of the violence and repression. Their influence is now threaded through arpilleras produced in other countries of Latin America, Africa and Europe.

The Japanese Committee for Solidarity with the People of Chile was established in February 1974 and dissolved in April 1991. It started to buy, promote and commercialize arpilleras in 1988. The ones presently on exhibit at this museum belong to those times. Professor Masaaki Takahashi, who owns a personal collection, has written about this. He is a source of memory for this collection and the solidarity project. In 2009, many years after the committee ceased its activity, Professor Takahashi donated these arpilleras to Oshima Hakko Museum.

Through the simple activity of sewing, women, whether working individually or as a group, remember, bear witness to, resist and denounce the atrocities they have lived. Thus their sewing, a traditional domestic activity, becomes a powerful act of resistance, testimony and a mechanism for spreading that message of resistance worldwide.

In the foreword to *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love: The Arpillera Movement in Chile 1974 – 1994* by Marjorie Agosín (1996), Isabel Allende says: "With leftovers of fabric and simple stitches, the women embroidered what could not be told in words, and thus the arpilleras became a powerful form of political resistance." Marjorie Agosín herself says: "The arpilleras flourished in

the midst of a silent nation, and from the inner patios of churches and poor neighbourhoods, stories made of cloth and yarn narrated what was forbidden."

The simple act of appreciating and buying these pieces also had a powerful effect. The Japanese Committee for Solidarity was not alone, and many other groups from different parts of the world, also connected to the arpilleristas and supported their work. Their motivation was sometimes political and ideological as in Japan, sometimes humanitarian and sometimes religious. But in all cases these voices of solidarity stood beside the women to remember, bear witness, to resist and denounce the atrocities. It is also important to say that the arpilleras were a means of economic survival for the arpilleristas and played an important role in strengthening and empowering the women and building global opposition to the Pinochet regime.

Arpilleras often also have a 'relief' quality for the makers while powerfully connecting the issues they portray to the viewers and inviting them to respond and express their own concerns. The scrap material and stitching, which create the simple, clear lines and forms of the figures and motifs -- often three-dimensional -- allow the viewer to comprehend and appreciate the determination of these Latin American sewer artists and lets the women feel that they have a voice which empowers them.

This exhibition features arpilleras in their politicised form. Perhaps it is the surprisingly complex depth of emotion articulated by an apparently simple visual style that makes the appeal of the arpilleras strong and their language universal.

I invite you to respond to this exhibit with your mind and your heart, and perhaps with stitches of your own; at this time when we mark 40 years since the military cup d'état.

Roberta Bacic
Chilean Curator of arpilleras
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Roberta Bacic(left) and Tomoko Sakai