

Arpilleras

Art of Chile

Rebecca Hinson

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Dedicated to Georgette Phillips
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Library of Congress Control Number: 2020912649
Edited by Richard Lederer & John Robuck
History Consultant: Marjorie Agosin
Rebecca Hinson Publishing
Lake Worth Beach, Florida
Printed in the United States of America
ISBN 978-1-947623-37-8

ARTISTS Cover, 2-23, Colección del Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos; 24, Álvaro Hoppe.

SOURCES Jacqueline Adams, *Art Against Dictatorship*; Marjorie Agosin, *Tapestries of hope, threads of love*; Pamela Constable & Arturo Valenzuela, *A Nation of Enemies*; Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos, *Arpilleras*; Gonzalo Leiva Quijada, *Álvaro Hoppe - el ojo en la historia*; Steve J. Stern, *Battling for Hearts and Minds*; Steve J. Stern, *Remembering Pinochet's Chile*.



Between 1973 and 1989, groups of Chilean women used needle, thread, and scraps of cloth to record their experiences during the repressive dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. Secretly exported by the thousands, their arpilleras (embroidered fabric appliques on stiff fabric) denounced human rights abuses, unemployment, and poverty. For seventeen years they told stories which the censored media could not, letting the world know what was really happening in Chile. Buyers purchased works to provide income for the women and to express their support for the pro-democracy struggle. Arpilleras became a symbol of the international movement to return Chile back to democracy.



In an effort to help the working class, democratically elected socialist President Salvador Allende had nationalized copper mines, taken over factories and banks, and reformed land rights. Inflation rose over three hundred percent. Shopkeepers went on strike. Upper-middle-class housewives banged pots as they marched to protest food shortages. Violence broke out in the streets.

On September 11, 1973, military leaders demanded Allende's surrender. He refused. After the President's farewell radio address, combat jets bombed La Moneda, Chile's government palace. When the military stormed inside, the President was dead. That night, a four-man military junta swore itself into power.



General Augusto Pinochet of the Army became president of the junta formed with Admiral Jose Toribio Merino of the Navy, General Gustavo Leigh of the Air Force, and General Cesar Mendoza of the Carabineros (national police). The junta dismissed Congress and took over their legislative role. They declared the country an emergency zone, restricting civilian rights. They censored the press, set curfews, banned political parties and unions, and warned that anyone who resisted would be “executed on the spot.” They were determined to remake society, root out socialism, and squash resistance violently.



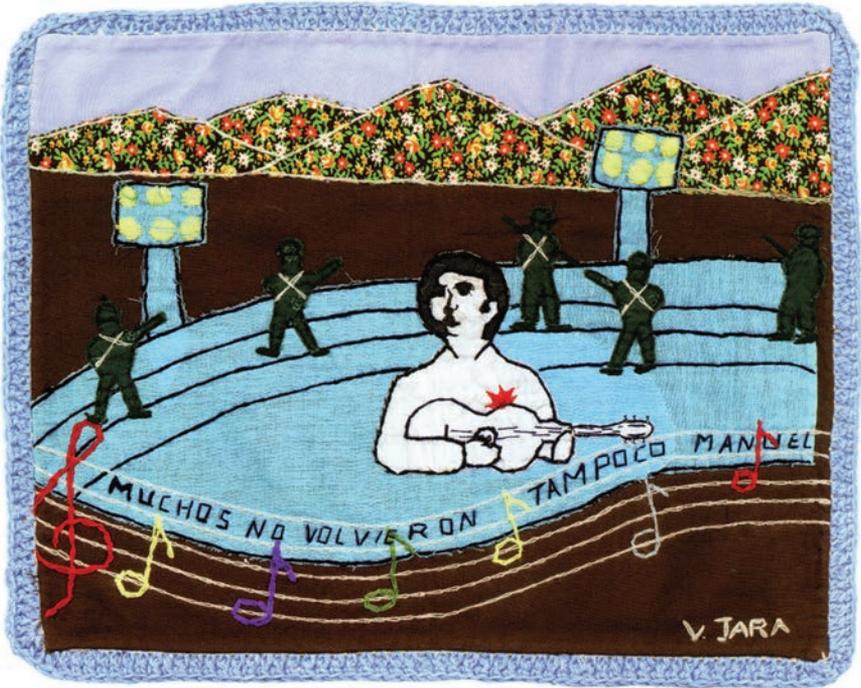
Pinochet demanded the removal of government officials. He said, “That whole pile of pigs there . . . all that filth that was going to ruin the country . . . they must be seized and up, into the plane, without clothes, with whatever they have, out!” Many exiled socialists left on flights during the first days of the dictatorship. Two hundred thousand citizens were forced to leave Chile.

For several days after the coup, militants from the Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR) tried to stop the military with rifles and machine guns, but the majority of Chileans had not resisted.



Most working-class shantytowns had been built by socialist migrants and laborers. In these neighborhoods soldiers patrolled the streets, sometimes shooting people out past curfew. Soldiers, carabineros, and secret police (DINA) raided homes, searching for defamatory materials and guns, arresting thousands of suspects. Arpilleras with political content had to be hidden whenever they were not being worked on.

In the days after the coup, seven thousand Allende supporters, Popular Unity and MIR members, and workers believed to have taken over factories and estates were taken to the National Stadium for interrogation, torture, or execution.

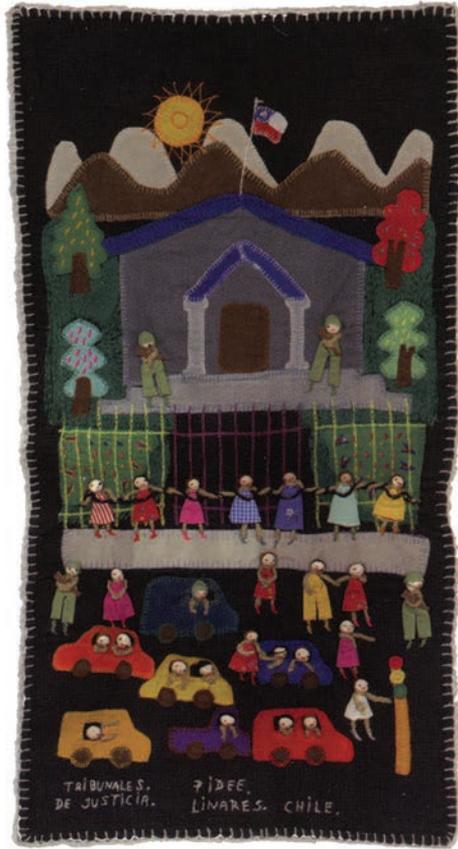


In the stadium singer-songwriter, Víctor Jara, was tortured. After breaking his fingers, the officers mockingly asked if he could play and sing for them. Instead he led other prisoners in song, before he was beaten and executed.

Like Manuel in Jara's song "Te Recuerdo Amanda," thousands of detainees were never to return home. The song went, "I remember you, Amanda . . . running to the factory; where Manuel was working . . . you were going to meet him. Who went away to the mountains; who never harmed anyone . . . and in five minutes was destroyed; the siren blows; time to return to work; many did not return; among them Manuel."



Under the state of emergency, the Constitution, which preserved human rights, was suspended. The Supreme Court shrank from its duty to uphold the Constitution. The junta created laws expanding their emergency powers. Prisoners could be held for five days without charge. Thousands were held for interrogation. Of those who were arrested, most were tortured. Rather than answer to charges in civilian courts, suspects were prosecuted before a military tribunal. A reign of terror by an authoritarian state had begun.



Over three thousand citizens were killed or taken away by authorities and never seen again (“the disappeared”). Government agents were persuaded that they must root out the cancer of socialism. Pinochet said, “If you have gangrene in an arm, you have to cut it off, right?”

Chaining themselves together, relatives of the exiled, disappeared, executed, and imprisoned launched street protests in front of buildings like the Government Palace and held hunger strikes. They wanted the world to know what was happening to their loved ones.

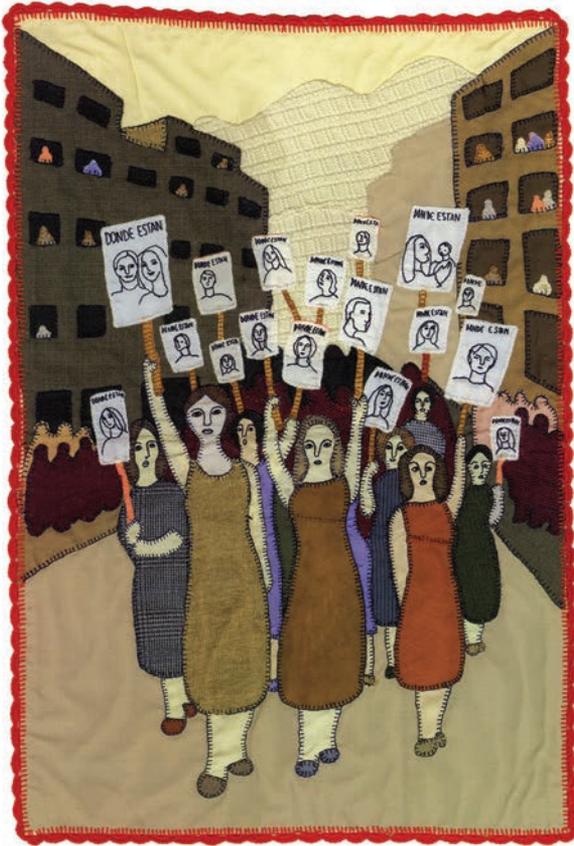


In torture centers like Villa Grimaldi and concentration camps like Pisagua, political prisoners were interrogated and tortured by DINA, which vowed to remove every socialist thought from Chilean society. With husbands imprisoned, wives looked for ways to provide for their children. Many joined arpillera groups to earn money for their family's survival.



From a population of ten million, an estimated four hundred thousand citizens were tortured. Military commanders instilled fear and hatred in their troops, convincing them that the socialists were enemies who had plotted to destroy them and the Chilean way of life.

In secret prisons suspects endured electric shock, exposure to blinding light or deafening noise, suspension of the body by the wrists or ankles, repeated dunking in filthy water, cigarette burns, and sleep deprivation. Prisoners were forced to watch their wives being tortured or listen to recordings of their children screaming.



Relatives of the disappeared met each other as they searched for family members in police stations, army barracks, morgues, courts, prisons, and government offices. The Group of Relatives of Disappeared Detainees (AFDD) held protests outside courts and churches. They carried sticks with photos of the disappeared during demonstrations. Many Chileans did not believe these alleged kidnappings could have happened. Others hated the socialists so much, they just didn't care.