

Arpillera

November 8, 2008 to February 8, 2009

At first glance, these bright textiles look like joyful representations of life in Chile. The colourful fabrics and embroidery suggest holiday souvenirs. However, if you look closely, these images are evidence of a much darker side of Chilean life. They are among the thousands of *arpilleras* (applied textiles of Latin America) made by women whose family members had disappeared under General Pinochet's government.

Women were encouraged by the Catholic Church to create these textiles both as a source of income and as an outlet for their grief. Religious organizations provided materials to make the *arpilleras*, and then purchased them to sell outside Chile. The churches used the profits to buy materials for more *arpilleras* and to fund social outreach programs.

As international attention on Chile's political situation grew increasingly critical, the government made it illegal to own or publicly show *arpilleras*. Nonetheless, many *arpilleras* were successfully smuggled abroad, including the ones you see here. The women had discovered a powerful way to share what was happening in their country, their neighbourhoods and their families with the rest of the world.

The textiles in the *Arpilleras* exhibition reflect the lives of the women who made them. These women endured poverty, food shortages, government brutality, unemployment, police raids and many other hardships. Because the *arpilleras* depict everyday life, they testify to what was happening to ordinary people under the government of General Pinochet.

The women and their work became the voice of opposition to the military government. Although these women had no interest in gaining political power, their public displays of grief, constant visits to detention centres and jails, and unwavering determination to share their stories put them at the forefront of public resistance. The *arpilleras* came to represent not only the stories of the women who made them, but the story of Chile itself.

Mario Allende assisted the Royal Alberta Museum in acquiring this remarkable collection of *arpilleras* in 1989. Mario is a Chilean exile who came to Canada in 1976 after a period of political imprisonment.

In 1985, he formed the group *Barco de Papel* (Boat of Paper). The group smuggled *arpilleras* out of Chile to draw attention to the country's declining political situation. Mario describes the *arpilleras* as written images of Chilean history – a history that should never be forgotten.