

Arpilleras: Art Production to Shape Consumption
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Summary by Grace Kneller

The first arpilleras were made during the beginning of Augusto Pinochet's military dictatorship, and they are brightly colored patchwork pictures. They were used as a way to communicate political violence and repression with whatever materials people could find on hand. Aymar Ccopacatty, a native of Peru, presented the history of arpilleras, who makes them, how they're made, who sells them, who buys them, arpilleras today, and how they shaped consumption.

Arpilleras means burlap and is used as a backing material to create a vibrant cloth collage speaking out about political repression. The individuals that make arpilleras were predominantly women's groups that shared common experiences with political violence under the dictatorship of Pinochet. Many of these women were grieving from losing loved ones. Arpilleras are made with simple recycled materials which are sewn into a burlap backing. There are many techniques used to create them, and many were made from the clothes of lost ones which added to the impact of the artwork. They were sold by groups which had been driven underground because of the political nature of the protest images. There was an invisible network of people who supported this movement, and it only continued to grow. A growing emphasis on human rights and democracy encouraged empathetic individuals to buy these in support of the movement against the dictatorship. The women creating them saw these as a way to express emotional pain and make a small household income. Arpilleras were very unique in that the consumers were not shaping the product; instead, the work shaped the demand. Solidarity art became a movement and arpilleras fit perfectly within it.

Today, with the return of most of Latin America to democracy, the secrecy of the arpilleras groups is gone. Consumers now control production, but one thing that didn't change was the economic benefit to the producers of the product. People now are becoming very creative with arpilleras and they have come a long way from their humble beginnings.

