

spare Rib

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Deciding to have a baby

"Release the prisoners" - Chilean patchwork pictures

Are you a working class woman? (see page 14)

Women's liberation too sexist for Students Union

Canada - domestic workers organise... USA - battered women and the police... Accusing a doctor of sexual assault

"We have lived through much and we must explain it . . .

We must find some way to say it.

Often one keeps silent through pride, but I'm going to tell these things;
I'm not ashamed to do so because everything that has happened to me is true.

I can't keep silent because I have lived it."

Patchwork Pictures from Chile

by Guy Brett

On June 14 this year, 28 Chileans — 26 women and 2 men — entered the offices of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America in the capital city of Santiago. They were relatives of some of the "disappeared" political prisoners in Chile; they declared a hunger strike and they refused to leave until they were told the fate of these 2,000 people arrested by the military junta and then listed merely as "missing".

Because of international scrutiny and domestic resistance, the Chilean junta prefers not to openly arrest people any longer and put them in recognised prisons and camps, but to seize and torture them secretly, without naming them, without charging them. Any attempt by their families to try to trace them is met with harassment, especially by the DINA*, Chile's secret police.

The demonstrators sent an impassioned message to Kurt Waldheim, Secretary General of the United Nations, and he responded by invoking extraterritorial privilege for the mission in Santiago (i.e., that legally it was not part of Chilean territory), so the strikers could not be molested by the Chilean security forces. International response to the occupation was so great that Pinochet (the leader of the junta) was forced to agree, at least ostensibly, with two of the strikers' demands — to look into the



cases of their disappeared relatives, and not to take reprisals for the demonstration.

The picture illustrated here — a patchwork sewn of scraps of clothing fabric and wool — was made by the mother of a "disappeared" prisoner. The two people in the picture were arrested together. The four vertical strokes at the top right stand for *Los Cuatro Alamos* (alamo = poplar tree), one of the junta's prison camps. The dark square to the left stands for . . . some unknown place, the anguish of knowing nothing. "Sergio Reyes and Modesto Espinosa — where are they?"

Several hundreds of patchwork pictures like this one have been made in Chile in the last two years, despite the atmosphere of terror. It is a popular art of resistance invented by the people themselves because of an overpowering need to express the bitter experiences they are going through and to find a channel of communication to the world outside. Some of the first of these patchworks were made in the prisons, but now they are nearly all made by women (usually the wives or mothers of political prisoners) living in the shanty-towns, the poorest areas, around Santiago. They are not professional artists or artisans, and in general they have worked up and adapted a popular form of embroidery traditionally used to decorate bags and baskets. But

* Since this article went to press, the Chilean junta has announced the dissolution of the DINA and its replacement by an organisation called Central Nacional de Informaciones (National Information Centre). Despite the innocuous name, nothing has changed.



Political prisoners at the bars of the cells like caged animals in the bleak architecture of the prison. Their families in the shanty-towns have to go on with normal life, but the world is split in two.



A *comedor popular* — collective kitchen. In all the shanty-towns of Chile's cities and in many rural areas, the people have faced the problem of starvation by setting up public canteens for undernourished children. Here food is given to about 40,000 children who would otherwise have nothing to eat at all. The food is supplied as far as possible locally but often the churches have to give help too. These canteens are not only saving children from deformity through undernourishment but they also provide a focus round which their parents can meet and talk without fear.

their message can be understood anywhere in the world.

These rag pictures come out of poverty. They depict the brutalities and suffering the ordinary people have had to endure from reactionary rulers. They show them in detail. But in doing so they take none of the inhumanity, rigidity and coldness of their oppressors. They can express serious sorrow and at the same time be full of imagination and spirit. In the patchworks this comes out in the brilliant colours, and also in the witty and poetic way the scraps of patterned, mass-produced fabric have been used. Not only the subject, but the whole way they are made is like a message saying that the people will not be crushed and reduced to silence.

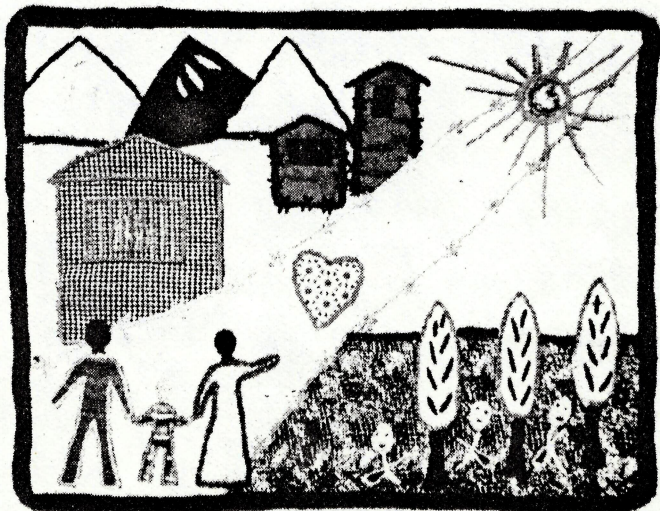
How did this movement begin?

The appearance of these patchwork pictures cannot really be separated from a very broad wave of cultural activity in Chile over more than ten years. It began before Allende came to power and continues today despite the intense efforts of the present government to crush it. It has always had a popular character. It

"In every one there are human figures, especially children, because what you see more than anything in the shanty-towns are children. What we show always has to do with people."



This apparently light-hearted circus picture is actually a detailed satire on the junta's economic policies. Bottom left: the four clowns of the ruling junta show off the vaunted *despegue economico* (economic take-off as advocated by the US reactionary economist Milton Friedman) which in fact was a dismal failure. Bottom right: the 'illusionary magic' of the promise to provide food for the people (the junta's Economics Ministry is popularly known as the Ministry of Illusions). Top left: the DINA trying to put the Chilean workers under the lash. And top right: the woman at home in the kitchen, carrying her shopping basket, is walking the tightrope of survival.



The three poplar trees always refer to the Tres Alamos prison camp, which is 'open' in the sense that the political prisoners can receive visitors. The buildings on the left are the closed prisons or the secret places where 'disappeared' prisoners are taken. A road, lined with barbed wire, leads from this bitter present, through solidarity and hope, to the future.

"The colours are always chosen for contrast. Often they are not exactly as we want because we lack materials, but we always try to do it that way. I use darker colours when it's winter or I'm showing something sad . . . then everything is grey and cloudy. When the weather is good we put the sun and more lively colours. If the subject is happy, we make the colours of the people very beautiful."

has been linked with a movement of masses of people against the conditions, physical and mental, of "underdevelopment". Many popular art forms sprang up in Chile during the Popular Unity period, although they had little time to develop: the New Song Movement, street and field theatre, mural painting, publishing of popular educational books and magazines which reached enormous readerships for a Third World country, new-style comics, the revitalisation of handicrafts which were languishing, and so on.

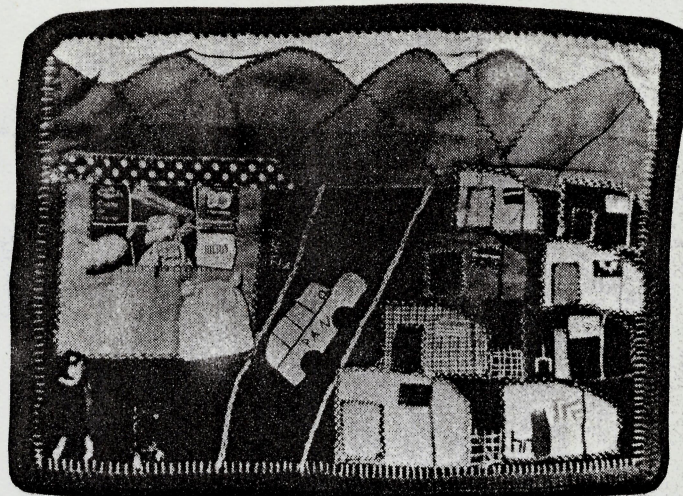
Among these crafts was one of making pictures from different coloured wools, which was specially admired and encouraged by the poet Pablo Neruda and by the folksinger and painter Violetta Para. This peasant art is the nearest antecedent to the present-day patchworks, but really the patchwork-makers have no formal tradition to draw on and express themselves in a direct and child-like way.

The strength of the cultural movement is clear from the way, under the extreme persecution of the right-wing junta, it has adapted itself and survived in new forms. People in Britain will have noticed how Chileans in exile have got together to form new music and theatre groups. Poems, plays, pieces of metal- and wood-carving have found their way here even from inside Chilean prisons.

The first patchworks after the Coup in 1973 were made to denounce the junta and expose their crimes. It is hard to be sure exactly how it began, but most likely women political prisoners inside the jails and camps saw first the possibility of using an apparently innocuous form like the patchwork — so homely and "innocent" — as a means of protest. The movement quickly spread wider and wider. Patchwork-making became one of the forms of work organised in the shanty-towns to combat the massive unemployment produced by the junta's economic policies. Some of these workshops are organised by the people themselves and some by the Catholic Church, which in Chile has become increasingly opposed to the military government. Patchwork-making, like laundering and sewing, produces a minimal income for women to buy some sort of food and medicines for their children. At first they were sold inside Chile, now abroad as well at solidarity meetings and events.

Because people's survival depends on them, these workshops are carefully organised. Production has to be rationalised. They usually consist of not more than 20 women. A treasurer distributes the money obtained from sales. On the whole, money goes to the person whose work is sold; but everyone puts 10% into a common fund to be used for buying materials and for emergencies. The number of patchworks produced has to be controlled. Usually one person makes one a week, but "women in a bad situation are allowed to make more patchworks than others". At a weekly meeting the new patchworks are looked over and discussed by women in the group and generally judged against the following criteria: that they should be well-finished; that the forms should be well-composed; that the subject should be truthful, and really "say something".

In fact in the details of these pictures — sometimes disguised and "coded" because of censorship — is contained a whole chronicle of the lives of Chilean workers today, their problems,



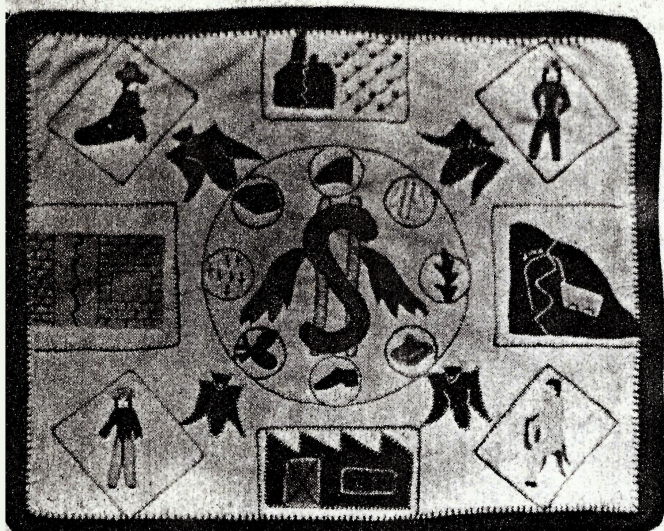
The people of the shanty-towns can't afford to buy the food in the shops. *No se fia* — No credit. The woman with the child is covering her face with her hands. Before the military coup small shops like this extended weekly credit. Each person had a notebook in which their purchases were written down and the account was settled at the end of the week, after payday.

all the things that affect them most. You see the day of the Coup, the troops running wild in the streets; you see the prisons, especially from the point of view of women visiting their men, or trying to find out where they've been taken. You see all the problems of the shanty-town: the *comedors* (collective kitchens organised to feed the children); a woman going from house to house asking the neighbours to look after her child while she searches for work; children selling sweets along the main roads in order to survive; searching the dustbins at night for scraps of food; the cemetery crowded with family names. When the artists try to synthesise or sum up the situation, two definite tendencies appear. One is the religious explanation. Suffering is shown as a modern Way of the Cross; or, for example, a flock of sheep is shown attacked by an eagle. This is the style of lamentation. The other is the analysis of society and of class, the militant style. An example of this kind is the diagram-patchwork showing the dollar hovering over the Chilean economy. On the whole, there are few pictures which do not contain, in some segment, in some detail, an element of hope.

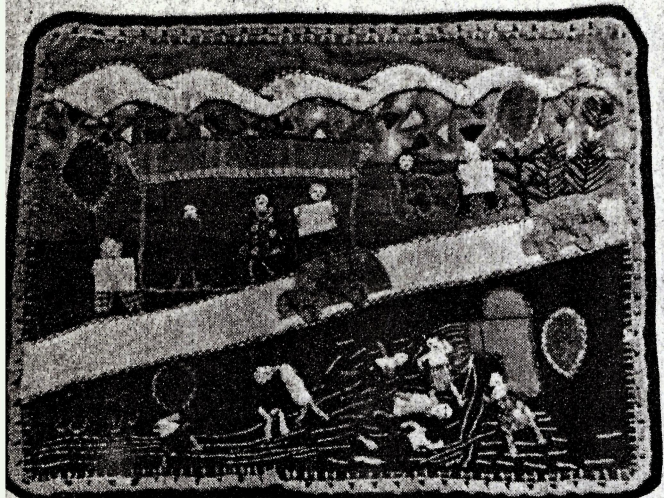
I mentioned before the "childlike" style of these pictures. The development of modern art has made people in Western countries receptive to the appeal of naivety in art. We have followed painters like Picasso and Klee as they adopted in their own work the spontaneous styles of untrained people, or of artists outside European traditions. This in turn has stimulated a market in which naive art has become a commodity, a fixed category which cannot be allowed to change. To look at the Chilean pictures from that point of view would be patronising and wrong. Their technique is what it is because of circumstances. To get to grips with reality, to go into it deeper, they have every reason to develop their expression. And in fact already certain details which might appear merely charming and naive (for example, the "farmyard" scene in the patchwork of the circus we have illustrated) are deliberate disguises for references to real people and places in Chile which cannot be openly shown. As well as this, the pictures contain many elements which are not dependent on a "primitive" mode of expression, indications of a popular, democratic art and attitude to life which can be found in any nation and can be expressed in any number of ways.

Even in the most elementary compositions there are still details which are given great exactness: for example, how manual work is done; "machines" which make life easier (e.g. the gas burners under the cauldrons of soup in the *comedores*); the playfulness of children; and always as a background, in any number of colours, the Andes, the magnificent mountains which surround the city of Santiago and stretch like a backbone through the whole of Chile.

It could be called a matter of dignity, of one's conception of oneself as a human being, which leads the people making these patchworks, however bitter the subject, to use all the art they know, to bring out the hidden qualities and beauty in the thrown-



The US dollar lording it over the workers and production of Chile. Chile's main products appear in the small circles around the centre (e.g. copper, shoes, textiles, foodstuffs, etc.). On the edge are figures of workers; factories, fields and mines disrupted and closed by the junta's policies. The four members of the junta appear as sinister bats.



The life of the children in Chile today. The road seems to split their life in two. Below they play in the water from a fire hydrant, and, above, they struggle to survive by selling sweets to the occupants of buses and cars along the Avenida Matta, one of Santiago's busiest streets.

way scraps of material:

"Apart from all this, it's a great joy that people consider that we are making art, that we are artists in this. For us, as housewives, we've never been, or dreamt of being, artists or working in that sort of thing. In this there's some compensation for all that's happened. It gives us more strength to go on, to go on struggling to live. God willing, we'll be able to make them better very day."

The shanty-town itself has a double character. The poverty of the houses is not glossed over, the single crude lavatory of the whole settlement is shown, even that it's full of flies. But other details are included with pride: a table and chairs inside each house, flowers, the electric street lamps and their cables. And there are always people. The way the shanty-town is depicted carries the message that the people must advance step by step from the real situation they are in, and that their advance must be a common one that all benefit from.

There is no rhetoric in these pictures, and very rarely is an expression isolated and carried to extremes. All the undertones and incidentals in the patchworks give an impression of tremendous reserves of strength, of a kind of balance and resilience in the people, in the face of the worst the authorities can do. □

"We don't have money or anything else. We have to go out and collect the scraps of material around the factories. That's how we make them and afterwards people buy them ... Each time we make them better. It has to be like that because we live from them, it's the only way we have to survive, otherwise nothing at all would come to the house."



The four black birds are the four hated members of the military junta.



At night in the shanty-towns mothers are searching the dustbins for food. 70% of children in Chile today are undernourished.

Guy Brett would like to thank those who lent patchworks to be photographed, and the many people who gave him information for this article. He hopes Chilean friends will point out any inaccuracies or misunderstandings of interpretation.

An exhibition of the patchworks opens on October 26 at Third Eye Centre, Sauchiehall Street, Glasgow 1, and in London later in the autumn.

Full colour postcards of the patchworks are available from Chile Committee for Human Rights, 1 Cambridge Terrace, London NW1. Price 10p each or £1.10 for 12, enclose s.a.e.