Fabric of Belonging

Exotic Quilts from Pakistan and India

June 27 through November 29, 2014
Most of the materials for this document were derived from either conversations with Patricia Stoddard or from her seminal publication: *Ralli Quilts—Traditional Textiles from Pakistan and India*, ISBN: 0-7643-1697-4. Dr. Stoddard lived in Pakistan for several years, during which time her husband served as military attaché to the American Embassy there. To this day, no one else has undertaken the enormous task of documenting and telling the story of the rallis of South Asia.

Dr. Stoddard owns over 400 rallis and has exhibited them many times throughout the U.S. and abroad. She discovered her first one by accident at the bottom of a pile of textiles in a handicraft store in Pakistan, as she was searching for something to cover the walls of her residence there. She paid only $12.50 for this first ralli.
The Ralli Region

• Sindh is the heart of ralli production, located in the southeastern part of Pakistan along the Indus River.

• The region is primarily rural and agricultural except for a few urban areas including the major city of Karachi. The lifestyle has been nomadic in this region since ancient times. While some people travel on land with their livestock, others live on rivers and lakes in flat-bottomed boats. These nomadic tribes often settle during certain times of the year to supplement their income as farmers, craftsmen, entertainers, or peddlers.

• The hundreds of tribes in the region vary significantly with respect to tradition and occupation—farmers, herders, landlords, merchants, entertainers, craftsmen, etc. Although modern technology can be found in urban areas, most tribes still employ the same lifestyle and utilize the same primitive tools and techniques as in ancient times.

• The two official languages of Pakistan are English and Urdu, and those of India are English and Hindi. However, there are a multitude of languages spoken among individual tribes, particularly in India where there are hundreds of native tongues spoken. The primary religions of Pakistan and India are Islam and Hinduism, respectively, and in the ralli region Muslim and Hindu families often live in the same communities and respect each other’s traditions.

• The clothing and attire of women in this part of the world indicate their tribal association, marital status, and religion. For example, unmarried women wear white bangles from wrist to elbow, but married women extend these up to their shoulders.
Old, tattered rallis are often used:
- To keep animals warm
- To be converted into a hat or cloak
- As a symbol that a beggar is in need (Patricia O. Stoddard’s *Ralli Quilts*, p. 37).

Ralli quilts are used in a variety of ways:
- As room dividers or door coverings
- As wedding presents
- As gifts for holy men
- As covers for charpoys (beds)
- As seat covers on camels’ backs
- In stacks on the floor to convey a sense of hospitality
- As baby hammocks, table covers, and storage or gift bags
- As mats or prayer rugs
- As large fans, pulled with a rope
Understanding Patricia Stoddard’s Ralli Collection—

In Her Own Words
Understanding Patricia Stoddard’s Ralli Collection—
In Her Own Words

• “I found it was very much a feature of the rural, poor, traditional people. Most well-to-do urban women were familiar with the quilts but considered them quaint and not sophisticated” (Patricia O. Stoddard’s Ralli Quilts—Traditional Textiles from Pakistan and India, p. 6).

• “The ralli is a humble craft, made of worn-out clothing and other discarded fabric. It is not usually bought or sold but made by women for use in their family” (p. 10).

• “I’m sure our arrival was quite an occasion in some of the small villages where we stopped. In one place, a woman asked, through a translator, where we were from. I answered ‘America,’ and she asked ‘What’s that?’ . . . With little transportation or knowledge of the outside, her world was only the limited area she knew” (p. 6).

• “I, a stranger, was greeted warmly by the women . . . Their flair for color is obvious in their work. They painstakingly continue the textile crafts that have been handed down for generations” (p. 7).

• “They do not use paper or any tools to make their patterns. I remember on one occasion giving a woman a pencil so she could draw a picture of a pattern she was trying to explain. She apparently had never used a pencil. . . . The ralli compositions are in the women’s minds and memories. . . (p. 7).
Understanding Patricia Stoddard’s Ralli Collection—
In Her Own Words, continued

• “I searched through reports of ancient artifacts from the civilizations that flourished in the same region of the ralli quilts over six thousand years ago. . . . I found . . . dozens of motifs that are similar on both the ancient artifacts and the rallis today” (p. 7).

• “I hope the tradition of ralli making will never disappear. With conditions of today, however, it is difficult to predict” (p. 8) [because of]:
  • Increased use of machines and other technology
  • Use of synthetic materials
  • Tribal intermarriages and new settlements in urban environments
  • Natural disasters such as drought and earthquakes
  • Political unrest

• “Every ralli quilt tells a story. . . . Examining a ralli closer can give clues to the life of the woman who made it” (p. 10).

• “If a guest is welcome to stay one or more nights, the ralli is kept at the foot of the bed. If a guest has stayed too long, the host will fold up the ralli in the presence of the guest as a signal it is time to go.”
The Process of Making Rallis
The Process of Making Rallis

• Some of the more elaborate rallis can take two years to complete and may last from three to four years of normal daily use. No quilt frames are employed, and rallis are sewn and assembled while sitting on the floor. Although scissors are often used, much of the fabric is torn rather than cut.

• Most women in rural communities know how to create rallis and are constantly on the lookout for old pieces of material from worn-out clothes or sacks that can be used to fashion their quilts. These materials are often re-dyed into traditional vibrant colors to be used in making the elaborate designs of the rallis.

• Traditional rallis are made of cotton material. More recently, however, some women prefer synthetic materials for two main reasons: synthetics are easier to pull the needle through and their colors are less likely to fade or run.

• Patterns are usually executed from memory. Illiterate peoples can often display astounding feats of memory because the oral traditions of stories, poems, songs, and scriptures are cultivated from a young age.

• Stitching the quilt top is completed entirely by hand and often by a single person during leisure times of the day. Sewing is rarely performed at night because of poor lighting. The laying of quilts and complex dowry rallis are often community activities involving several women. Green quilt backs usually indicate that the quilt has been made for a special occasion.

• The stuffing of the quilt is made up of two to ten layers of scrap material. The colder the climate, the thicker the batting. When sewing the layers together, the quilter starts on the outside and works toward the middle.
Quilting Postures

Quilters assume a variety of postures while working on their rallis. Here are three possible positions from which to quilt while seated on the ground (Patricia O. Stoddard’s *Ralli Quilts*, p. 43).
Color & Shape Symbolism
Color and Shape Symbolism

- Red—life and death, blood
  - In Hindu tradition, red is placed on the face of the dead to guarantee eternal life.
  - For Hindu weddings, henna paste is painted in elaborate designs on the hands of the couple and their relatives.
  - In Hinduism, red is a sacred color that represents the vital force within (Shakti).
- Black—earth and decay
- White—purity and the celestial
- Yellow—the sun, courage, power
- Green—new life and fecundity
- Blue—water, tranquility
- Pink—youth and love
- Pink and green together—common on Hindu rallis
- Green, blue, and turquoise—common on Muslim rallis
- Bright colors—used to deter the presence of bad spirits and the “evil eye”
- Dynamic geometric patterns—also used to repel evil
- Triangle—power, reproduction, and sharp points capable of thwarting evil
- Shiny objects—make the “evil eye” blink and thus protect against wickedness
Quilt Techniques:

Patchwork, Appliqué, and Embroidery
Patchwork

- Quilts made of small pieces of fabric either torn or cut into geometric shapes and then sewn (pieced) together
- Often influenced by patterns on ancient pottery found in the ralli regions of Pakistan and India

Appliqué

- A piece of fabric cut into any desired shapes—flowers, animals, intricate “snowflakes” — and sewn onto another piece of fabric
- Often used in combination with elaborate embroidered designs and adorned with beads, shells, mirrors, tassels, and/or sequins

Embroidery

- Use of complex, hand-sewn stitches to create elaborate patterns
- Especially favored among the Saami and Jogi (nomadic snake charmers) tribal groups, who each employ their own unique designs
This Jogi’s bag is made of **patchwork** (Patricia O. Stoddard’s *Ralli Quilts*, p. 30).

A Hindu woman takes a break from making her **patchwork** ralli (Patricia O. Stoddard’s *Ralli Quilts*, p. 10).
This woman is cutting and laying out *appliquéd* elephants onto fabric, which will become the top piece for a ralli quilt (Patricia O. Stoddard’s *Ralli Quilts*, p. 63).
Common Ralli Embroidery Stitches

These are some of the common embroidery stitches seen on ralli quilts (after Indian Glossary of Stitches, Frater, 1995, 206 and Morell, 1994, 137-140).

Patricia O. Stoddard’s *Ralli Quilts*, p. 75.
Introduction

The quilts in this exhibition, known as *rallis*, are made and used by millions of people who live in the lower Indus Valley region of Pakistan and adjoining areas of India. The quilting tradition is vital to Muslim, Hindu, and nomadic women from the deserts. Sitting on the floor and without quilting frames, they create stunning quilts with thousands of minute stitches and exquisite pieced, appliquéd, and embroidered patterns that have been passed down for centuries, if not millennia.

Ubiquitous in everyday life, rallis are used for wedding ceremonies, bed coverings, floor mats, wraps, and even camel and motorcycle covers. For their owners, ralli quilts are a personal form of identification that connects them with their region and their heritage.

We are pleased to present this selection of ralli quilts from the exceptional collection of Dr. Patricia Stoddard. Stoddard, a textile expert, collected the remarkable quilts while living with her husband in Pakistan, who was a military attaché to the American Embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan. Through her passion and research, she has introduced the wonder of rallis to the world.

This exhibition is made possible by a generous gift from King and Diane Husein.
Wedding Quilt
Rahim Yar Khan, 1975
Cotton, silk, mirrors, sequins, beads, and rick-rack
• This complex ralli, make by the servant of a wealthy landowner’s family, took two years to complete.

• Consider the intricacies of appliqué work and the challenge of folding and sewing the raw edges underneath so they cannot be seen.

• Wedding quilts tend to be significantly more elaborate than quilts to be used in everyday life. Notice the single beads with attached pom poms along the edges; also the mirrors sewn into the quilt with hundreds of tiny stitches.
Opened Bag  
Lower Sindh, c.1970  
Cotton

• Rallis are ubiquitous in the everyday lives of this people as serve numerous functions (see slide 5).

• Notice the central square, which is made from “printed fabric;” that is, fabric with a design already printed on it.
I. Codes of Identity

Ralli quilts are prized as emblems of family and community that express both regional and personal identity. Their origins within Pakistan and India can be distinguished by their handcrafting and centuries-old patterns.

During the 2011 floods in the Indus River Valley, rallis were among the few cherished possessions that flood victims were able to carry with them. At least one victim chose to leave behind his government ID and take his rallis instead, considering these a more potent expression of his family ties and cultural identity.
While viewing this image, discuss how Pakistani villagers were forced to evacuate household items in a flooded area of Umerkot on September 16, 2011. Prominent household items include charpoy beds and prized ralli quilts.

Photo courtesy of Ghetty photo.
Meghwar Hindu Maker
Embroidered Block Quilt
Thar Desert, 2006
Cotton, mirrors, sequins, beads, and silver ornaments

Crafted by a highly skilled elderly woman, this was the last quilt she ever made. The exceptional quilt employs 28 different embroidery techniques.
• Considering the fact that keen eye sight diminishes with age, it seems almost miraculous that an elderly woman could have created such an intricately embroidered quilt. This ralli is all the more special because it was the last one she ever made.

• See how many of the 28 different embroidery techniques you can identify. How many of the 40 squares are the same?

• Notice the embellishments that indicate the status of the quilt, made for special rather than every day use—mirrors, sequins, beads, and silver ornaments.
Cholistan Quilt
Eastern Desert of the Punjab, c.1980
Cotton, beads, and metal discs

Rallis from Cholistan in the eastern desert of Punjab often display warm golds, reds, and burgundies. When carried on camels, the metal discs make a charming tinkling sound.
Although deserts are often extremely hot during the day, they can become quite cold at night. Consequently, those rallis used for bedding often have as many as ten layers of batting. This makes them considerably heavy—a fact that camels might not appreciate.

Ralli quilts are certainly meant to be enjoyed visually, with their bright colors and vibrant patterns. But many rallis are also designed to be appealing to the sense of hearing as well. This ralli, for example, is embellished with metal discs that create a delightful tinkling sound as the camel moves beneath the quilt.

Why do you think that bright, cheerful colors are especially valued in the desert regions of South Asia? Might it have something to do with providing a welcomed contrast to the monotony of the barren, drab desert landscape?
Quilt with Star Blocks
Rahim Yar Khan, c.1980
Cotton

Quilters from the Rahim Yar Khan area frequently use white backgrounds behind designs in red, yellow, and blue. Western quilters may recognize the star block pattern in this ralli quilt.
Bheel Quilt
Middle Sindh, c.1975
Cotton

Quilts by the Bheel community, the original inhabitants of the ralli region, typically include burgundy and olive green.
Hindu Quilt with Lotus Motif
Northern Sindh, c.1970-85
Cotton

Hindu quilters often use fabrics of pink or green, which they consider to be happy colors.
Most of the quilts in this exhibition are from Pakistan. This ralli, however, was made in India and employs a common Hindu motif—the lotus flower.

- The lotus is a type of water lily that symbolizes the seat of the gods and eternal renewal in Hinduism.
- Because the lotus arises from muddy waters and rests gently on the surface, it reminds Hindu worshippers that although they are in the world (the muddy waters), they should try to rise above it by purifying their lives.
- The eight petals of the lotus represent the cardinal directions of the compass and the harmony of the cosmos.

Notice there are two patterns of borders used in this ralli that can also be seen in several other quilts in this exhibition:
- The square-on-point border
- The scalloped border
Sleeping under the Stars

The bed displayed here is called a charpoy. Made of a wooden frame around woven and knotted ropes, it is seen throughout India and Pakistan. Charpoys are typically used outdoors with ralli quilts for bedding.

• It is customary to leave ralli quilts lying open on charpoys for guests who will be spending the night. However, if guests were to see the rallis folded in their presence, they would know it is time to leave the company of their friends and resume their journey.

• Dr. Stoddard indicates that many ralli makers, when determining which patterns and embellishments they will use, make the following pronouncement: “I like to think about how it might look under the stars.” More than 20 million people sleep under ralli quilts each night in this part of the world.
Notice how the charpoy is turned upside down on the camel, with the legs of the bed being used to hold cooking pots (Patricia O. Stoddard’s *Ralli Quilts*, p. 26).
Hindu children are sitting on a patchwork ralli quilt, with their wooden sleeping cot beneath them (Patricia O. Stoddard’s *Ralli Quilts*, p. 3).
Hindu Wedding Quilt
Mirpurkhas, c.1985
Cotton, mirrors, and sequins

The wedding ralli displayed here on a *Charpoy* sparkles in the night as light reflects from the sequins and mirrors that embellish it.
• Occasionally the wedding quilt is used only to stand on during the ceremony while vows are exchanged; then it is packed away.

• You can you tell that this ralli quilt was made for a special occasion by its elaborate embroidery and the embellishment of sequins and mirrors.

• Ralli quilt makers use mirrors as an element of their design because mirrors add interest as they sparkle in the sun and reflect the star light at night. Furthermore, mirrors cause the “evil eye” to blink and thus serve as a deterrent against evil.

• The combination of pink and green is a favorite among Hindu quilters.

• Can you find the hurmutch embroidery stitch on this quilt?
Game Board Quilt
Lower Sindh, c.1985
Cotton

• To play this game, small pebbles are used as markers, while the quilt itself becomes the game board.

• What Western game does this look like? Checkers, perhaps?
Pillow Case
Thar Desert, c.1950-60
Cotton, mirrors, and shells

Pillow cases made from quilted fabric are used to protect special articles of clothing, which become the filling for the pillows.

• In a nomadic society, an item often serves multiple purposes in order to conserve space while traveling, as in this instance.
A shawl tied to this charpoy creates a comfortable hammock for a small child (Patricia O. Stoddard’s *Ralli Quilts*, p. 33).
Quilt Stack next to the Bed
Rallis are often seen piled in stacks on the floor in South Asian homes (Patricia O. Stoddard’s *Ralli Quilts*, p. 34).
Ajrak and Other Fabrics
Block Quilt with Flowers
Baluchistan, c.1995
Cotton, mirrors, and sequins

Because of the cooler temperatures in this mountainous region, the quilts are filled with a thick cotton batting.
Ajrak Quilt Back  
Lower Sindh, c. 1975  
Cotton

This quilt back employs traditional block-printed fabric. The well-known Ajrak Chaamp print design used here requires sixteen steps and much skill to produce. Ajrak prints typically use blue (indigo) and red (matter root) dyes, as in this example.
Imitation Ajrak Quilt
Thatta, c.1998
Cotton

The large red rectangles of appliquéd design in this quilt are patterned in imitation of Ajrak prints, important indicators of identity for people in the ralli quilt region.
Tradition of Survival
Simple Cooperative Quilt
Lower Sindh, c.2006
Cotton
“New Pattern” Cooperative Quilt
Thar Desert, c.2008
Cotton, yarn, and beads

In recent years, some communities have formed cooperatives for the making of quilts to support their faltering economies. This quilt is an example of a ralli made for sale by the cooperative, Lila Handicrafts.
Although most ralli quilts are made by rural and nomadic peoples for their own private use, some are being made to sell. In the more rugged, less developed regions, consider the various reasons that women in a Pakistani or Indian community might work together to sell their quilts to supplement the earnings of their family:

- Poor economic times
- Droughts
- Floods
- Wars
- Illness
Utilitarian Pieces of Culture
Camel Cover
Upper Sindh
Mid-20th century or earlier
Cotton, felt, and mirrors

Camels play a vital role in the lives of rural people and are often decorated by clipping their fur into intricate designs and covering them with beautiful textiles.

• Unlike most quilts in this exhibition, which have been made from manufactured dyes, the camel cover fabric was dyed from traditional madder root (red) and indigo (blue).
• Why do you think camels play such a vital role in the lives of these nomadic people? Consider the nature of a nomadic lifestyle, as families and tribes move from one location to another to find suitable land for grazing their herds.

• Here are some fun facts about camels that explain the multiple reasons they are particularly well-suited to living in the desert regions of Pakistan and India:
  o They live an average of 40 to 50 years and weigh over 2,000 pounds. (The dromedaries usually don’t exceed 1,300 pounds.)
  o Camels can run up to 40 miles per hour for short periods of time.
  o Contrary to popular opinion, camels do not store water in their humps. However, they can drink enormous amounts at a time—up to 53 gallons in less than five minutes.
  o To conserve water, water vapor gets trapped in a camel’s nostrils and is then re-absorbed by the body.
  o Their leathery mouths enable them to chew thorny desert foliage, and their long eyelashes keep the desert sands out of their eyes. Their nostrils can also close completely during a sand storm.
  o Camels’ broad feet keep them from sinking into the desert sand.
Prayer Rug
Rahim Yar Khan, c.2000
Cotton

Made in the manner of ralli quilts, this rug is intended for use by Muslims during prayer. In the Islamic tradition, the notched portion of the rug points toward the holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia.

• In Western quilt tradition, the tiny points of fabric along the outer borders are known as “prairie points.”
In many religions, praying is often accompanied by special objects, specific locations, movements, chants, or other rituals.

- For example, in Judaism, a prayer shawl (*tallit*) covers the head, while the rocking and swaying motion of the body—a sign of devotion—helps the person focus all of his/her attention on God.

- In Catholicism, beads called *rosaries* are used to help the person praying remember certain sequences of prayers and contemplate their meanings.

- Hindus reserve special places in their homes for worshipping their gods as they chant from the Vedas, their ancient, sacred Sanskrit writings.

- In Islam, a prayer rug—like the one seen here—has the capacity to make any location a clean place from which to kneel and pray to Allah, always facing Mecca, the holiest city for Muslims.
Child’s Quilt
Rahim Yar Khan, c.1950-70
Cotton with silver discs

In ralli tradition, a child’s quilt (rilka) never contains the color black.
• This quilt alternates between squares of patchwork and squares of appliqué. How do the various patterns remain the same throughout? How do they differ? Consider how the principles of artistic composition—repetition, variation, and contrast—are masterfully employed in this quilt.

• How can you tell that this quilt was made for a child? Its size? The bright primary colors? The fact that it’s devoid of black?

• Bright colors and sharp geometric shapes are universally employed in ralli quilts because they are thought to have the power to thwart evil.
Ralli Quilt Bag
Lower Sindh, mid-20th century
Cotton, silk, mirrors, and shells

In South Asian culture, such a bag might be used for a variety of purposes:

• To place gifts in, as with a dowry bag
• A place for a snake charmer (jogi) to carry his snake
• To transport a prayer rug or sacred texts
• To use like a purse
Block Quilt with Tasseled Border
Thar Desert, c.2000
Cotton, mirrors, sequins, beads, and pom poms
Floral Quilt
Middle Sindh, c.1980
Cotton

• Examine the composition of this quilt, particularly the repetition of shapes, colors, and patterns that serve to unify the whole.

• Which of the designs do you think may have been derived from patterns in nature?
II. Enduring Tradition

The region where ralli quilts are made has been inhabited for about 5,000 years. Ancient civilizations flourished in this area, which includes the lower Indus River Valley. Among the archaeological remains discovered in the Indus Valley and Baluchistan are tombs and pieces of ancient pottery with some of the same patterns found in ralli quilts today.
Triangle-Pattern Quilt
Middle Sindh, c.1970
Cotton
• What geometric shape unifies this composition? Find the various forms and sizes of the triangles used. Remember, the evil eye is deterred by the sharp points of the triangle.

• Can you imagine how difficult and laborious the appliqué work would be in creating these hundreds of triangles?

• Among these 15 squares, are any two the same? Is there a specific pattern in the way they are laid out? Note that it is customary for ralli quilt patterns to be laid out on diagonal grids. In artistic composition, diagonal lines convey the most movement and dynamism as compared with horizontal or vertical lines. These nomadic quilt makers seem to intuitively recognize this fact as they attempt to create their vibrant, energy-filled quilt designs.
Pot from Pirak, Baluchistan (1800 – 800 BCE)

The detailed geometric patterns on this pot are characteristic of similar designs found in ralli quilts today. Notice the blocks of design, square-on-point patterns, and dividing bands of geometric shapes similar to those used in the ralli quilts seen in this exhibition.

Photo courtesy of the Islamabad Museum.
“Ohio Star” Quilt
Tando Jam, c.1985
Cotton and beads

- See if you can find any of the same patterns here as in the image of the pot to the left of the quilt.
Hourglass Quilt
Badin, mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century
Cotton
• Ralli quilt makers are constantly on the lookout for old pieces of material from worn-out clothes or sacks that can be used to make their quilts. These cast-off materials are often re-dyed into vibrant colors before being recycled as material for the quilts.

• Can you find the skull and crossbones of the original fertilizer bag peeking through the dyed fabric?
Outlined Cross Quilt
Lower Sindh, c.1975
Cotton

Anciently, this pattern was often used for official seals.
• This pattern is especially well suited for use as an official seal. The geometric square/cross within square/cross could be easily crafted into a seal and readily identified.

• Notice the juxtaposition of complimentary colors in this quilt. Complimentary colors are directly opposite on the color wheel and serve to intensify each other when placed in close proximity. Without having formally studied color theory, these quilters intuitively know how to create vibrant color combinations.
“Log Cabin” Quilt
Lower Sindh, mid-20th century
Cotton
Cross-and-Square Quilt
Badin, c.1985
Cotton and yarn
Flower Block Quilt
Badin, c.1970
Cotton
Ten-Block Quilt
Northern Sindh, c.1975
Cotton and synthetic fabrics

This quilt is attributed to the Sayyed family. Because of strict marriage traditions in this prominent Muslim family, some women are denied the opportunity to marry. Consequently, their supreme creative outlet consists of making these quilts.
Many Muslim and Hindu customs surrounding women may seem alien to Westerners:

• For example, the prominent Sayyed Muslim family—which traces its lineage back to Mohammed—insists that a woman marry only her first cousin. If she has no first cousin, she is denied the opportunity to marry anyone. This first-cousin rule does not apply to men.

• The custom of purdah is sometimes practiced—the tradition of excluding females to prevent men from seeing them. In this way, a woman may have no social or economic activity outside of her home. If she needs to venture out, she is completely covered with a burqa so that even her eyes are concealed.

• If not in seclusion, women can often be seen walking behind men, not alongside of them.
Rare Bread-Basket Quilt
Mirpurkhas, mid-20th century
Cotton and mirrors
• This pattern, which looks like a basket when viewed from above, is rarely used today. The design in the rectangles surrounding each basket can be found on ancient Indus Valley pots. The pink and green color combination points to its Hindu village origins.

• Notice the tear on the left side of this quilt. If you peek inside it, you can see that the quilt batting is made of multiple layers of fabric, usually from three to ten layers thick.

• Also note on the right-hand border that the quilter patched in two pieces of burgundy material that do not match the rest of the quilt. Perhaps there were tears in the fabric that needed to be patched, and the original quilt material was no longer available. Aesthetics seem to be of less concern than practicality and functionality.
Flower Garden Quilt
Badin, mid-20th century
Cotton
Pinwheel Block Quilt
Lower Sindh, c.1980
Cotton

- Notice how easy it is to detect the overall pattern of the quilt from a distance, but how the scheme becomes jumbled and chaotic up close—much like an impressionistic painting.

- Look carefully at the variations in color, indicating that the pieces of fabric were hand dyed.
III. Regional Traditions

The region that is home to ralli quilts includes the southeastern quarter of Pakistan and parts of western India. Here some 20 million people sleep outdoors each night under handmade ralli quilts. Regional variations make some quilts so distinctive that one can identify the area of production with a single glance.
Ralli quilts from Lower Sindh are considered classic examples. They are easily recognized by their bold geometrics, organic applique designs, and the *satrangi* scheme of seven colors: black, white, red, yellow or orange, dark green, dark blue, and purple. Many have appliquéd borders with red interlocking circles of fabric over a white background. Other borders are decorated with a saw-tooth shape topped with a small fabric or embroidered square.
Classic Quilt
Badin, c.1970
Cotton

This appealing diagonal pinwheel design from Lower Sindh is perhaps the best known of all ralli patterns.
• This pinwheel design is considered to be the quintessential ralli pattern. The stunning combination of orange, white, and black on a diagonally-based grid make it especially vibrant.

• Notice the extreme attention to even the smallest detail; for example, the saw-tooth border with a tiny square at its apex.
Dowry Quilt
Badin, mid-20th century
Cotton, sequins, and mirrors

• Notice the intricacy of this appliqué work embellished by embroidery. The rows of stitching, which are extremely even, are less than 1/8 of an inch apart.

• What objects in nature may have inspired the designs in this quilt?

• Notice the dramatic way the mirrors and sequins sparkle in the light.
Geometric shapes appear in rallis throughout Sindh, particularly in everyday quilts. Those from the Thar Desert are especially renowned for their dramatic patterns. Some are confident and bold in color and design, while others suggest movement through the diagonal arrangement of patterns and the use of triangles.

Thar Desert
Living in the Thar Desert

As you view the two quilts from this region, consider the characteristics of the Thar Desert as described below. Note that the creation of these vibrant quilts adds color to the otherwise monochromatic palette of desert life.

This region is extremely isolated and characterized by the following:

• Small communities
• Unpaved roads
• Desert foliage with huge sand dunes
• Few modern conveniences
  o Mud floors
  o Water drawn from deep wells
• Frequent drought
• Infrequent schooling for boys only
• Women who have rarely, if ever, traveled beyond their immediate village

(Patricia O. Stoddard’s Ralli Quilts, p. 19).
Kinetic Geometric Quilt
Thar Desert, c.1970
Cotton
Quilters of Rahim Yar Khan, an area to the north of Sindh in the province of Punjab, create rallis with a square-on-point border surrounding applique squares that alternate with nine-patch geometric squares. They characteristically have orange or yellow-orange fabric on the back and white on the front.

Rahim Yar Khan
Star-Pattern Quilt
Rahim Yar Khan, c. 1985
Cotton and tassels

(This happens to be the MOA designer’s favorite quilt. And the MOA registrar’s favorite block on this quilt is the one indicated with the cross shape on it.)
Nine-Patch and Appliqué Quilt
Rahim Yar Khan, c.1985
Cotton and felt circles

The typical quilts of Rahim Yar Khan have a geometric nine-patch block alternating with a fine-lined appliqué block. Another distinctive feature is the orange back, in contrast with the typical green backs of other ralli regions.
Having developed a more refined sensibility in viewing these ralli quilts, see if you can identify and articulate the various characteristics and techniques employed, such as:

- The nine-squares of pieced blocks alternating with various appliqué blocks
- The square-on-point border
- The scalloped border so often seen on ralli quilts
- The pom poms with bead embellishments surrounding the outside of the quilt
The states of Gujarat and Rajasthan lie on the eastern edge of the ralli region. Quilts from this area display a unique mixture of ralli design and Indian tradition. Printed or block-printed fabrics are often used in their production.
Safiya-Bai Hussain
Indian Patchwork Quilt
Dhamadka, India, c.1983
Mixed fabrics

• Because of the way the three quilts are hung in this gallery, you can see the backs of them as well. The material on the backs of rallis is often pieced, then dyed all the same color for the sake of consistency. The color used for quilt backs is often dark green.
Rallis made in Saami are famous for their rows and rows of decorative embroidery stitches in multiple colors. A pastoral nomadic group, the Saami travel with their animals through a vast region of deserts for most of the year. They “meet” in Badin, lower Sindh for weddings and special occasions and move west across the Makran coast to Iran to trade, returning east across the deserts to India.
Bharat (Heavy) Quilt
Lower Sindh, c.1985
Cotton
Concentric-Square Quilt
Lower Sindh, c.1980
Cotton
What do these two Saami quilts have in common? Although they follow the same general pattern—row after row of embroidery in concentric squares—they appear very different because of the colors used. Saami quilt makers attempt to include so much embroidery in their rallis that none of the background material can be seen.

When we envision quilters working, we generally think of a large frame set up in a person’s sewing room, where the individual periodically goes to quilt when time permits. But the Saami people are constantly on the move as they search for suitable grazing areas for their flocks—marking a path from Iran to India and back again. So how is the process of making ralli quilts different from that of the Western world?

- No frames are used, and quilting is performed on reed mats while sitting on the ground in different crouching positions.
- Since the patterns are executed entirely from memory, a running stitch is often sewn down the middle of the quilt as a reference point for the complex design.
- Quilting must occur during daylight hours because there is no bright light source after dark.
- Once completed, a quilt is never washed but simply shaken to dislodge the dirt and desert sands.
Black and Red Quilt
Lower Sindh, c.1950
Cotton
The communities of Middle Sindh are culturally diverse. Quilts produced here incorporate features from both the south and the north. The rallis display a blending of fine applique and patchwork features from many traditions.
“Flying Pizza” Quilt
Middle Sindh, c.1970
Cotton

Although this quilt represents vegetation from the Middle Sindh region, one can imaginatively envision this design as a pizza pie with orbiting slices.
Lassi (Simple) Quilt
Umerkot, c.1990
Cotton

Block by block, traditional rallis take many months, even years, to produce. However, sometimes as a statement of personal identity, women sew together their favorite printed fabrics to expedite the process.

• Although this quilt is made up of a variety of mismatched swatches of fabric, how has the quilter managed to unify the composition?

• What techniques are employed in this quilt? Can you find any sections of embroidery?
The states of Gujarat and Rajasthan lie on the eastern edge of the ralli region. Quilts from this area display a unique mixture of ralli design and Indian tradition. Printed or block-printed fabrics are often used in their production.
Mutava Quilt
Kutch, India, 1998
Mixed fabrics and mirrors

- Stylistically, Indian ralls can often be identified by three distinguishing features:
  - Multiple borders that act as frames
  - A large medallion center of embroidered design
  - The frequent use of block-printed fabrics
- Because some synthetic fabrics were used in this ralli, notice that the surface texture appears bumpier.
Safiya-Bai Hussain
Quilt with Block-Printed Fabrics
Dhamadka, India, c.1990
Cotton
The unique style of Northern Sindh rallis features fine appliqué work and highly ornate embellishments. Unique to quilts in this area is the fine-lined stepped square design used in woven carpets from central Asia. Quilts made for special occasions are adorned with small circular mirrors throughout, tassels along the outside edges, and a distinctive interlacing embroidery stitch called hurmutch.

Upper Sindh
Intricate Appliqué Quilt
Upper Sindh, c.1985
Cotton, beads, and yarn
Hurmutch and Appliqué Quilt
Upper Sindh, c.1985
Cotton, beads, and metal discs

The unique hurmutch embroidery stitch, seen in the white blocks of this ralli, is unique to the region. A young girl’s marriage worthiness is determined, to some degree, by her mastery of this intricate, interlacing stitch.
• The unique hurmutch embroidery stitch, seen in the white blocks of this ralli, is unique to the region. Often, a prospective bride is required to send an embroidery “sampler,” including the difficult hurmutch stitch, to her mother-in-law for approval before marrying into the family.

• The cross-like border around the edge of the quilt is a common shape used in rallis. Although it looks to us like a Byzantine cross, in this part of the world it represents the shape of the implement used to churn milk into butter.

• Consider this quilt in terms of design, composition, and technique.
Lotus Quilt
Khairpur, c.1990
Cotton

In contrast to the highly decorated quilts for which this region is renowned, this everyday quilt has a simple, yet bold pattern.
Conclusion

• Please consider taking the time to go back through the exhibition with your heightened sensibilities and more complete understanding of these ralli quilts—both of the processes involved and the people who made them.

• In conclusion, consider the degree to which the making of ralli quilts is a richly rewarding experience for these South Asian women—it may very well be their most creative daily enterprise. Also reflect upon the ubiquitous nature of ralli quilts in the lives of these people—that rallis are a salient aspect of their individual and tribal identity.

• Please visit the adjoining “Ralli Room,” where you can read about Pakistani and Indian culture and textile arts and also create your own ralli quilt patterns out of blocks.