

# Finding Inspiration in RALLI QUILTS

Patricia Stoddard

Between Pakistan and India, vibrant colors are found in the heart of the otherwise subdued Thar Desert. The color comes from the bright clothes of the people, as well as from the quilts they sleep with every night. These traditional quilts are called *rallis* and are made and used by millions of people who live in southeastern Pakistan, mainly the province of Sindh, and in western India.

## Traditional Use

Ralli quilts are truly part of the daily life of the people in the Thar Desert region. People of many different communities, occupations, languages, and cultures use *rallis*. They sleep on short-legged wooden cots called *charpoys* on which a *ralli* is draped. More *rallis* cover the person depending on the coldness of the night. When *rallis* become old or ragged, they become padding for animal saddles or have

other work-related uses. Smaller size square *rallis* are used as cloths to put down on the ground to serve food, or are folded and sewn into an envelope shape to hold clothing or other items.

## Three Styles

There are three styles of *ralli* quilting: patchwork, appliqué, and embroidery. Patchwork is based on colored fabric cut into geometric shapes and stitched

together. Some of the designs are similar to what is seen in American quilts. Most are symmetrical and very carefully stitched.

Appliqué designs are made from cut fabric sewn to another cloth. Some of the most popular designs are made from pieces of fabric folded and cut, similar to how one would make a paper snowflake. The cut appliqué is placed on a backing fabric (sometimes with the help of some flour glue) and the edges are carefully sewn under to hold it in place.

Embroidered quilts use embellishment as a method for holding the quilts together. It is customary to use colored thread (often on a black or dark background fabric) for the stitching, creating wonderful patterns of color and shape. These are often embellished with mirrors, sequins, pompoms, or tassels on the corners or edges.

## Color

The cloth used in the quilt is traditionally cotton, recycled from worn clothing and hand-dyed to the desired colors. Thus, *rallis* are generally

made from strong-hued solid colors rather than patterned fabric. A common color scheme is based on the traditional natural dye palette: white, black, red, yellow, dark green, blue, and purple. This is called *satrangi*, or seven colors.

## Construction and Culture

The sewing together of the top of the quilt is usually the work of one woman, but the sewing of the layers is done by a group of three or four women. The quilting is especially festive when the quilt is for a marriage—accompanied by singing and stories. There are also legends, folk songs, and sayings about *rallis*. In some areas, the wealth of a family is measured by how many *rallis* they own. Recently, in the areas affected by the floods of August 2010, women are selling *ralli* quilts to provide some income for their families.

Women who make *rallis* are taught textile work from childhood by their mothers or other women. From the age of twelve, the quilters sharpen their minds by memo-

rizing the patterns and processes of *ralli* making.

Some quilts have qualities and colors that identify them with specific groups of people, and others are symbols of how the cultural groups have shared ideas over hundreds of years. Ancient motifs used in *ralli* quilts are similar to symbols used in local civilizations that flourished 5,000 years ago. Scholars see the *rallis* as the true folk art of the region.

## A Source of Inspiration

There are many ways to draw inspiration from *rallis*. Some schools have made actual quilts, while others have used construction paper instead of cloth. Either can be hung on a wall or displayed in your school's hallway.

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## WEB LINK

[www.ralliquilt.com](http://www.ralliquilt.com)



## Ralli Quilts at the Folk Art Market

The Santa Fe Folk Art Market has featured *ralli* quilts since the first market eight years ago. Starting in 2006, the featured *rallis* have been made by Lila Handicrafts, a cooperative of quilters from outside Tehsil Diplo in the Tharparker Desert of Sindh, Pakistan. This isolated community has used the profits to support a village primary school. The women have named their school the "Santa Fe Desert School" in honor of the support from the Folk Art Market. Examples of their work can be seen on [ralliquilt.com](http://ralliquilt.com) or at the market.