

Title: Let's Talk Denim.

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Denim has proved itself a fundamental textile since its inception in the early 20th century. Through the years its styles have adapted in order to fit the social and political climates of the times. However, one can't help but wonder: what happens to all the outdated denim as trends continuously change?

Denim has always been a staple. Both functional and fashionable, its malleable form and ability to adapt with pop culture has successfully established it as a prominent garment. In each decade through the 20th and 21st centuries, denim has stood out as a unique contender.

The history of the words *denim* and *jeans*, which have with time become interchangeable, is sufficiently interesting. Fashion Encyclopedia states that the term *jeans* has been in circulation since the 1600s, in which it was first used as a word to describe a rough type of textile worn by working men. The origin of the word is derived from the region in Italy where the fabric, *genes*, was produced - Genoa. Textile weavers from the Nîmes region of France sought to replicate their Italian neighbors. They conceived a durable fabric which is synonymous with blue jeans. Eventually, American manufacturers altered the name from *serge de Nîmes*, to denim.¹

The contemporary indigo dyed blue jeans we know and flaunt today were designed through the collaboration between Levi Strauss, a merchant who had the funds to invest, and Jacob Davis, a tailor with a historic idea. During the California Gold Rush, as everyone was clamoring towards the mines to find precious stone, the two saw opportunity elsewhere. Denim, they realized, would be the perfect pant to sell to all those looking to dig deep in dirt.

Two things made Strauss and Davis' denim unique. The first was Davis' design of copper rivets - which were strategically placed alongside pockets and belt loops to hold them in place (as they were common areas that tore off). The rivets were a hit among the California locals who wore denim consistently and needed it to be durable. The second was their use of indigo to dye the denim dark - a clever solution meant to hide stains.

In the beginning, they offered two pant options: the classic blue denim kind, and a pair made of a fabric known as "duck cotton" (similar to the rough canvas used for tents). The dark blue denim trumped the latter for various reasons, and the pair exclusively began to sell denim with their copper rivets. With time, the pants came to be known as jeans, or more commonly, *Levis*.

Though at first serving purely for function, the sexy, sometimes stiff, dyed cotton with time transformed itself into a fashion figure. The prominence of denim may not have thrived had it not been for the Hollywood influencers of the 50s, who wore denim to replicate the popular Western films of the 40s. As actors like Marlon Brando and Marilyn Monroe donned the look, denim became a popularized trend, and eventually, an American staple. By the 70s, the New York

¹ [Blue Jeans](#)

Times was reporting on denim and its “renaissance”, declaring that Levi Strauss had experienced a 38 percent increase in output at the start of the decade, compared to the year prior.²

Perhaps, at its core, the allure of denim lies in its versatility. Though casual, it still manages to give off an aura of put togetherness, mixed with a sense of cool which can’t be denied to the wearer. The fabric, which was built to last, also tends to age gracefully, making it sustainable before sustainability was even a *thing*. The more faded, older, and worn in, the better. “They have a psychological appeal in an era when young people are searching for fundamental truths and are repudiating the establishment” stated the New York Times in an article published in 1971. Denim, it seemed, could also be used to make a statement.³

In the 70’s it was counterculture. In the 80s, it came to be about sex appeal. In 1981, Calvin Klein, who just three years prior became the first high end designer to produce a denim diffusion line, launched an ad campaign that is still referenced today. The ad, featuring a young Brooke Shields, and a slogan that led to it being banned on ABC and CBS in New York for its supposed raunchiness, presented denim as form-fitting and sexy. When interviewed about the campaign, Klein famously remarked “Jeans are sex...The tighter they are, the better they sell.”⁴

He wasn’t wrong. Despite criticism (and maybe even because of it), sales for tight jeans shot up. Klein had successfully cemented the look of the decade. Soon, other designers like Versace and Dior followed suit and launched their own denim lines. The campaigns were similar to what Klein had done with his “My Calvins” ad: tight jeans worn by tall, skinny models. Denim, suddenly, had become iconic.

My take is that this is where things went astray. As soon as sales began to exponentially increase, denim transitioned to a different stage, one focused on glamour and sales and alternately dismissing its consequential function entirely. Through its entry into the luxury market, denim had remodeled itself into a trendy wardrobe must have, one that seemed to shape itself to the mood of the times. Fast forward through the dripped in baggy denim look of the 90s, the low rise, tight yet semi flared denim of the early aughts, the skinny, stretch-denim craze of the 2010’s, to the cropped, boot cut, and straight leg denims that have come out as the prominent styles of this decade. As I consider the styles of decades past, I can’t help but wonder - where does all the outdated denim go?

Did you know that U.S. currency is blended in a very specific cotton-blend paper? The paper has been supplied by one company, Crane, for more than a century. What made the blend unique was its use of denim scraps, which Crane bought in bulk from the garment industry. 30 percent of the cotton which Crane used once came from denim. The other 70 percent was inclusive of a mix of other textile wastes.⁵

² [Dungarees of Denim: Worn Out Look Has 'In' Appeal](#)

³ [Dungarees of Denim: Worn Out Look Has 'In' Appeal](#)

⁴ [The Story Behind Brooke Shields's Famous Calvin Klein Jeans](#)

⁵ [How tight jeans almost ruined America's money](#)

The stretchy, spandex clad denim of the previous decade disturbed this structure. Spandex has the effect of degrading the strength of fibers, and extracting it from cotton is no easy task. By the early 2000's, according to a Washington Post article published in 2013, nearly every pair of jeans produced had contained at least a small tint of stretch to them, making them worthless to Crane. As a result, the company has since had to adapt and seek alternative resources outside of the waste stream; a heavy loss for the sustainable potentials of denim.

From December 2015 - May 2016 the Museum at FIT featured an exhibition titled, Denim: Fashion's Frontier. The oldest piece of denim, a fall front style pant which dates as far back as the 1840s, served as the opening piece to the showcase. With "painstakingly applied" denim patches and an uneven dye job, the pants managed to tell a detailed story upon further inspection.

Perhaps the biggest takeaway is how each stitch and patch is meant to serve a greater purpose, predominantly to extend the lifespan of the garment for as long as possible. As a starting point, the pants helped highlight the shift in "how denim, and even clothing in general, is treated today versus 200 years ago", notes Emma McClendon, assistant curator at MIT who helped curate the exhibit. Today, denim is disposable, she remarks. But the pants on display persisted, surviving like a cat with ongoing lives. "They've been meticulously patched by hand, reworn, reused, recycled, year after year, decade after decade." ⁶

I have hope for a fitting future. If reveling in the history of denim has divulged anything, it's that trends tend to be heavily influenced by what's being discussed. Today, and for the foreseeable future, as far as the textile industry is concerned, the most important topic will be sustainability. And beyond that, re-generativity.

The jeans worn today, with their effortless blend of chicness paired with comfort, reveals that practicality and function may be making its long awaited comeback in denim. The desire to shop locally, vintage, or investing in pieces that will last for decades, including in eco-friendly specific lines, makes it feel like denim may soon experience yet another renaissance. Who knows, maybe in the wake of the conversation, we may solve other issues plaguing the denim industry - such as the heavy reliance on water during dyeing techniques and the use of bleach. But that's a topic for another time. For now, I'll tackle spring cleaning, and recycling any outdated denim I find through viable means.

⁶ [Denim: Fashion's Frontier | Circa 1840 pants](#)

