

American Denim: Blue Jeans and Their Multiple Layers of Meaning

Beverly Gordon

Blue jeans, the now-ubiquitous denim garments that almost constitute a uniform on high school and college campuses, have been an integral part of the American scene for more than one hundred years. In that time they have embodied many different messages, and functioned in different ways—as symbols of rebellion; outlets for personal creativity; emblems of up-to-date, fashionable awareness; and evidence of generational longing and insecurity. Changes in jeans styling, embellishment, and marketing are closely tied to changes in the society as a whole, and these changes serve as a subtle but accurate barometer of trends in contemporary popular culture. The jeans phenomenon merits serious attention on the part of the popular culture scholar.

The Blue Jean: The Wild West and the Farmer

Jeans first appeared in their now-familiar form in California in the second half of the nineteenth century. Levi Strauss, a Bavarian immigrant, came

Reprinted by permission from *Dress and Popular Culture*, eds. Patricia A. Cunningham and Susan Voso Lab (Bowling Green, Ohio: Popular Press, 1991), 31–45.

to San Francisco in 1850 with a supply of strong canvas cloth that he hoped to sell to people making tents and wagon covers, but when he saw the kind of hard wear the gold prospectors gave their clothes, he had it made into sturdy pants. "Levi's" were really born when Strauss switched to a heavy denim fabric a few years later. Copper rivets were added at the stress points in 1873.¹ Jeans first evolved, then, as practical rather than fashionable clothing and were associated with hard-working physical laborers, especially those from the rough and rugged West. By the early twentieth century, when Levi's competed with other brands such as Wrangler and Lee, jeans and related denimwear such as protective overalls were the modal garments for farmers. By 1902 the Sears and Roebuck catalogue offered five different denimwear styles.² Again, individuals who wore these garments were not "fashionable," they were not making a statement of any kind; they were simply choosing serviceable, affordable clothing.

The Blue Jean as Anti-Fashion: The First Association

Jeans were first adopted as a kind of anti-fashion—a conscious, pointed statement that goes against the fashion norm and says, "I am different, I am not like you"—by a group of artists in the Santa Fe area in the 1920s.³ Generally well-educated individuals of both sexes took to wearing jeans as a badge of their own group identity and special status. They were identifying themselves with the ruggedness, the directness, and the earthiness of the laborer, and were placing themselves as a part of the Western scene. They also adopted a unisex look long before it was the norm.

This group of artists continued to sport jeans in the 1930s, but something of the same impulse was also promulgated in the mainstream fashion world. Levi Strauss executives began encouraging Easterners who were taking the newly popular "dude ranch" vacations to outfit themselves with jeans or overalls, and the garments even became available for the first time in upscale New York stores. Levi Strauss ran an ad in the April 1935 *Vogue*: "true Western chic was invented by cowboys."⁴ Although the trend did not really take off at this time outside the dude ranch context, this was perhaps the first instance where fashionable consumers were encouraged to take on the aura of a particular lifestyle by wearing jeans.

The Blue Jean as War Hero: Widening the Base of Support

World War II was a turning point for blue jeans in America. Materials were scarce as resources were diverted to the war effort, but with the in-

creasing number of workers in the factories and munitions plants, great quantities of durable work clothes were needed. Jeans were declared “essential commodities,” and to serve the needs of thousands of Rosie the Riveters, the Blue Bell company came out with a special Wrangler dungaree style dubbed “the Jeanie.”⁵ Once again these were not really fashionable garments—they were work clothes. They were still used only in a particular context. Because factory war work was seen in a positive light, however, the garments were perceived as part of the patriotic, all-pitching-in spirit, and were thought of fondly. To women workers who had been used to wearing dresses and more constricting garments, they must have also seemed liberating and refreshingly comfortable. Wartime fashion was changing, also, and taking much of its detailing from the rather unfashionable wartime scene. Head wraps or turbans, originally used in the factories to keep long hair out of the machinery, became part of acceptable evening wear. Shoulder pads, originally seen in military uniforms, became an indispensable part of women’s civilian garments. Jeans were associated with a particular war-era lifestyle, and were poised somewhere in the middle on the fashion/anti-fashion continuum.

The Blue Jean Anti-Fashion: Tomboys, Bad Boys, and Bohemians

After the war, jeans were no longer just unfashionable; they came to have widespread distinct anti-fashion associations. The hard-edged, square-shouldered female styles gave way in the high-style world to the ultra-feminine and very dressy “New Look,” and the more rugged, unisex denim garments began to be associated with youth, freedom, and rebellion. Bennington College students, who were generally known as “artistic” and rather unconventional, adopted jeans as a “virtual uniform” on their Vermont campus.⁶ They too used their clothing to symbolize freedom—freedom from the norms of conventional society.

Sometimes this freedom was simply the prerogative of youth, and was seen as innocent and harmless. Eddie Fisher crooned *Dungaree Doll* in the late 1940s,⁷ and evoked the image of a happy-go-lucky bobby soxer, a tomboy who would eventually, in the words of another postwar era song, “trade her bobby sox for stockings.” Another type of freedom emerged in the early 1950s, however, which was seen as much more sinister. There was a group of disenfranchised individuals who could not find a place in the conformist climate of Cold War America and who reacted to it with alienation and disdain. These were the young people symbolized in Marlon Brando’s *The Wild One* and James Dean’s *Rebel Without a Cause*, the angry or confused

or simply no-good “juvenile delinquents” who at their most extreme flashed switchblades and tire irons and terrorized neighborhoods. These young people, also, wore jeans: jeans and leather jackets were the anti-fashion wardrobe that symbolically flaunted the mores of the frightened society at large. Jeans were so strongly associated with these outcasts, in fact, that a 1959 movie about an unwed teenage mother was tellingly titled *Blue Denim*.⁸ The good-versus-bad connotations were symbolized by a “dress right” campaign launched by the American Institute of Men’s and Boy’s Wear and aimed particularly at blue jeans.⁹

Associations with the Wild West actually strengthened or reinforced the anti-fashion statement that jeans made in the 1950s. This was the era of the Gray Flannel Suit and the Organization Man (A). It was a time permeated by what author Peter Beagle characterizes as “a strangled, constipated idea of a proper life.”¹⁰ It was also the era of the Hollywood and TV Western. Good and bad cowboys were sometimes differentiated by the color of their hats, but they all wore jeans. The Western simultaneously replayed the good guys/bad guys scenario of the Cold War and represented an escape from it, a foray into a still wild or “untamed” past where people did not have to fit into such carefully prescribed niches. Baby-boomers who grew up with Western heroes grew up with images of jeans, and wore them for their creative play. They wore them when they wanted to step into a fantasy world that was outside the world of piano lessons, visiting relatives, and other dutiful activities.

Anti-Fashion at Its Peak: The “Jeaning of America” and the Personalized Jean

It was in the 1960s that the “jeaning of America” occurred, and jeans took on a new role. The first signs of the shift really began in the late 1950s, when another type of rebel, the bohemian or “beatnik,” began to adopt them with black sweaters for everyday wear. Unlike the Brando/Dean “bad boy” rebel, this was a dissenter, an urban intellectual who came to an anti-fashion statement of this sort from a thought-out position about the materialistic, conformist society of the day. To wear plain jeans and dark colors was to reject the more-is-better, new-is-better mentality of the Organization Man world. According to Levi Strauss executive Alfred Sanguinetti, 1962 marked the “breakout” point in jeans sales, with sales figures doubling in just three years. They further quintupled between 1965 and 1970¹¹ (B). By 1967 the anti-fashion statement was screaming across the land, for jeans were one of the most visible symbols of the rapidly increasing numbers of

disenfranchised youth. The late 1960s were, of course, the turbulent period in which there was a marked escalation of the undeclared war in Vietnam, a war that polarized the society and led to a widespread rejection of mainstream social norms on the part of the younger generation. The youth-dominated counterculture, which was made up of the same baby-boomers who had worn jeans as play clothes and had grown up with James Dean and other such cultural icons, turned to jeans very naturally. Jeans were practical, long-lasting, and unchanging; they were the very antitheses of the mainstream "straight" world where fashion was by its very nature ever changing and quickly obsolescent. They were cheap, comfortable, and associated with physicality; they represented freedom from dutifulness, and because they were simultaneously associated with work and play, came to stand for a society where there really was no distinction between the two. As Valerie Carnes put it in a 1977 article entitled "Icons of Popular Fashion,"

Denim jeans became [in the 1960s] the ultimate no-fashion put-down style—a classless, cheap, unisex look that stood for, variously, frontier values, democracy, plain living, ecology and health, rebellion *a la* Brando or Dean, a new interest in the erotic import of the pelvis, or, as Charles Reich suggested in *The Greening of America*, a deliberate rejection of the "artificial plastic-coated look" of the affluent consumer society.¹²

Jeans may have been the common anti-fashion denominator among the young, but not all jeans were alike. Jeans wearers avoided the plastic veneer and the sameness and artificiality it represented by the very act of wearing their jeans. Jeans conformed more and more to particular body shapes as they were worn and washed (cotton denim shrinks and stretches each time it is washed and reworn). Over time jeans came to carry particular "scars"—stains, rips, frayed areas, patches—that could be associated with remembered events and experiences. A pair of jeans became intensely personal. A small hole might be left alone as a "badge" of experience, or great deliberation might go into the choice of an appropriate fabric with which to cover it. Soon, counterculture youth were *glorifying* their jeans—decorating and embellishing them, making them colorful and celebratory, and making them into visible, vocal personal statements. Silk, velvet, leather, feathers, bells, beads, rivets, sequins, paint—anything that could be applied to denim fabric was applied to someone's jeans, jeans jackets, and related accessories. Men who had never learned to sew and who under most circumstances would think of embroidery as unmanly learned the necessary stitches to work on their own clothes. The unisex garment that symbolized the alternative youth culture was an appropriate vehicle for the breakdown

of gender roles, and besides, one's jeans were too personal to trust to anyone else. By 1974 imaginatively adorned jeans were such a pervasive and interesting phenomenon that the Levi Strauss company sponsored a national "denim art" contest and was deluged with entries. Entrants repeatedly stated that they found it difficult to part with the garments long enough for them to be displayed in the exhibition; they felt they were giving up a part of themselves. "I feel most myself when I have my jeans on" was a typical comment from an entrant. Others said: "My jeans are an extension of me" and "my shorts [are] my autobiography on denim."¹³

The Blue Jean as Fashion: Absorbing the Counterculture with a Designer Label

In some ways it had by this time become almost necessary to dramatically personalize one's jeans in order to still make an anti-fashion statement. Many of the outward signs and even some of the underlying ideas of the counterculture had been adopted (some might say usurped) by the mainstream culture at large. Blue jeans in and of themselves were so well accepted in the establishment that even such political figures as New York City Mayor John Lindsay and presidential candidate Jimmy Carter were happy to be photographed wearing them. Anti-fashion had not only been absorbed by fashion, but had become part of its very essence. John Brooks, writing in *The New Yorker* in 1979, attributed the fashionable usurpation of the jeans phenomenon to the early 1970s "search for the fountain of youth,"¹⁴ but it may have been as much a sign of an underlying widespread hunger for life-affirming values in what was a confused and dark time.

Jeans and other denim garments were also seen in the early 1970s as quintessentially *American*. Jeans had been developed in the United States, of course, and had long carried associations of the American West, but once they had filtered into the international fashion scene, they came to stand for the country as a whole. In 1973 the American Fashion Critics presented a special award to Levi Strauss for "a fundamental American fashion that . . . now influences the world." Nieman Marcus also gave Levi Strauss its Distinguished Service in Fashion Award that same year¹⁵ (C). The popular press began to print rhetorical questions like "after all, what's more American than denim?"¹⁶ and in 1974 American Motors Corporation contracted with Levi Strauss to provide blue denim fabric for upholstery for its Gremlin and Hornet cars.¹⁷ The Gremlin, which was promoted as America's answer to the Volkswagen Beetle, was meant to be both upbeat and patriotic, and denim furnishings were thought to communicate both qualities.

Jeans sales continued to climb. By 1977 over 500 million pairs were sold in this country alone—more than twice the number of the total population.¹⁸

Fashion and anti-fashion came exceedingly close during this period, but there were continually two thrusts to the jeans craze. The counterculture continued to thrive and maintained and fostered a do-your-own, personalize-your-clothing vision. Numerous instruction books published between 1973 and 1977 carried a power-to-the-people message and told people how to fashion and refashion their own denim clothing. Publications with such titles as *Clothing Liberation*, *Make It in Denim*, *The Jeans Scene*, *The Jeans Book*, and *Native Funk and Flash*¹⁹ continued to advocate inexpensive and comfortable clothing that made use of worn garments and other available materials. Cast-offs and odds and ends could not only be salvaged, but creatively used.

At the same time, there was a high-fashion version of this democratic, anti-fashion trend. Couturiers who saw these creative outfits on the streets and in such legitimizing exhibitions as Wesleyan University's "Smart Ass Art" (1973) and Levi Strauss's "Denim Art" at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts (1974) moved in and produced their own high-style versions of counterculture styles. Givenchy designed an entire denim wardrobe for film star Audrey Hepburn, for example, and Giorgio outfitted Dyan Cannon and Ava Gardner.²⁰ A \$2,325 denim-lined mink jacket and mink-cuffed jeans were shown on the fashion runways in Paris in 1974, and professionally designed embroidered, sequined, and nail-studded ensembles were going for about \$500 in New York boutiques.²¹ Recycled and well-worn fabrics—hallmarks of the counterculture look—were part of this style. Giorgio's jeans outfits that sold for \$250 were made from already-used denim, for example, and designer shops in department stores like Lord and Taylor sold recycled jeans for three times the price of new ones.²²

By the late 1970s, when the baby-boomers had been largely absorbed into the work force and the responsibilities of parenting, and the counterculture vision had become diffused, the high-style fashion forces won out over the anti-fashion style. Couture denim filtered down into the ready-to-wear market. Designer labels became an obsession; "designer jeans" were "the pants in America," according to a Saks Fifth Avenue retailer. Calvin Klein, who drew attention to jeans sporting his label with an erotic advertising campaign, sold 125,000 pairs a week in 1979.²³ Designer jeans were in such demand that there was a thriving counterfeit trade, and by 1981 *Good Housekeeping* magazine ran a feature advising consumers how to make sure they were buying the "real thing"²⁴ (D).

Designer jeans were often based on anti-fashion prototypes (both Calvin

Klein and Oscar de la Renta are known to have sent photographers out into the streets of New York to document what people were wearing),²⁵ but they tended to be subtle: they did not, in the early Reagan era, generally sport embroidered patches and tattered fringe. Often nearly indistinguishable (except by the small designer label sewn on the back pocket), they offered ostentatious but restrained snob appeal. Jeans were no longer the “great American equalizer” (E). Homemade and recycled garments did not have a place in the less democratic age—or rather, they had a place, but it was back with the poor and have-nots. Designer jeans were made to fit and flatter the body, but they were made to be long-lasting and uniform rather than to age and change with the individual. In 1984 several fabric manufacturers came out with new polyester/denim blends that were intended to stretch with the body and keep their shape. The Sydeco company introduced “Forever Blue,” a new fade-resistant jeans fabric that was designed to “look new longer.”²⁶

The Blue Jean as Fashion: Prepackaged Experience

The Aged Jean

It seems fitting to begin the most recent chapter of the jeans saga in 1985, with the story of the “Authentic Stone.” This was a product developed by Marshall Banks, who got the idea when he discovered a small piece of pumice stone in the pocket of his newly purchased jeans. Banks learned that the stone was accidentally left behind from the “stone washing”—the preconditioning process—that the jeans had been subjected to. Small pieces of pumice, which is an abrasive material, had been added to a pre-market washing order to soften the garment (F). As the earlier description of innovative 1984 jeans fabrics makes clear, stone-washing and other preconditioning treatments were not yet *de rigueur*. Banks stated, presumably with his tongue in his cheek, that he hoped to appeal to the “do-it-yourselfer” with his Authentic [pumice] Stone packaged in its own “bed of denim.” He felt his product blended “the whole 60s look with a status connotation”; it was a symbolic prepackaging of experience, a fashionable way of referring to the anti-fashion of the past. One hundred thousand Authentic Stones had been sold to leading department stores by 1986.²⁷

The 1960s anti-fashion style had indeed been a look of well-used, lived-in jeans. The Vietnam years were enormously intense—every day brought the promise of incredible revelation of impending apocalypse—and experience was highly charged (G). The jeans one wore were part of the experi-

ence; they were faithful companions, they had been there. Even if they weren't heavily decorated, they were "encrusted" with memories,²⁸ and held the accumulated charge (H). Small wonder that aged, faded, tattered jeans were treasured: they were not only comfortable, but were far richer and more meaningful than those that were new and unmarked.

The best jeans were those that had aged naturally, over the course of time and experience, but there were numerous homegrown or do-it-yourself methods to speed up the aging process in order to look presentable. Folk wisdom suggested the best way to soften and shape one's jeans was to repeatedly get them wet and wear them until they dried. This could be done by soaking in the bathtub, but the sun and saltwater of the ocean beach environment was much preferred (I). New jeans were also home-treated by rubbing sandpaper and pumice stones across the fabric, by burying them, or by adding washing soda or bleach to a tubful of water.²⁹ The bleach treatment was controversial, largely because it weakened the fabric in the wrong places and made it look bleached rather than worn.³⁰

The faded look was commercially imitated in a prebleached fabric for the first time in 1969, presumably inspired by the sun-bleached denims seen on the Riviera, and the look was popular in France.³¹ Some very high-priced customized jeans were prefaded; items taken to "Robbie's Stud and Rhinestone Shop," an establishment that serviced fashion-conscious celebrities in Los Angeles, for example, were sent to a denim fading lab before the studding process began.³² A few American laundry companies developed fading treatments in 1973 and jeans manufacturers like H. D. Lee contracted with them for several thousand faded garments,³³ but bleached fabrics were still not the norm. More and more "prewashed" denims were on the market by the late 1970s, but the phenomenon crept in slowly. A 1981 *Mademoiselle* fashion column spoke of the "new, faded look," but disparaged it for its extra costliness. Readers were advised to use inexpensive commercial color removers or fading products on their jeans if they liked the look of prewashed fabric.³⁴

The prewashed look was characteristic of jeans manufactured by Guess, a company started in 1981, interestingly enough, by four brothers who had emigrated to the United States from France. Guess jeans achieved their well-worn look through a stonewashing process that took up to twelve hours, and by 1986 the company was already having trouble finding laundrerers with whom they could subcontract, as the treatments were breaking even the strongest washing machines.³⁵ Guess products, though expensive, began "flying off department store shelves" almost as soon as they were stocked,³⁶ and Guess captured a significant piece of the youth market by the mid-1980s. Other companies quickly found ways to emulate the pre-

washed look. *Rolling Stone* magazine proclaimed in May 1986 that the "best jeans available" were triple bleached and double stonewashed,³⁷ but the sentiment was still by no means universally accepted. One commentator writing in *Esquire* protested that hastening the aging process was a form of "faddish dishonesty." "To wear jeans is to create a life mold of oneself in denim," he exclaimed; preworn jeans are not a reflection of the "person within."³⁸ Numerous "upscale" American designers were using denim in their new lines, but were concentrating on less casual items such as dresses and coats, and aging treatments were not part of their design process.³⁹

The Guess prototype and its "worn to death" look (J) continued to permeate the retail denim market, however, and it effectively dominated the 1987–88 fashion season. With fierce competition for the many dollars spent on jeans and other denim items (more than thirteen pairs of jeans were sold every second in 1986),⁴⁰ it was not surprising that novelty would be at a premium, but there was another, more fundamental reason that such products caught on. The 1980s crop of worn and faded-looking denimwear provided its primarily young customers with a costume that had *lived*. It carried a feeling or ambience, an illusion of experience. It, even more seriously than the Authentic Stone, represented a prepackaged kind of experience that was risk-free (K).

The actual intense and heady experiences of the counterculture Vietnam generation are not available to today's youth. "Free love" and easy sexuality have been tainted by the terrifying fear of AIDS, and optimistic faith in expanded consciousness through mind-altering drugs has been destroyed by the specter of crack and other lethal substances. The world no longer seems full of unending promise. It is no longer possible to take to the road with the certainty that there will be "brothers" who will provide places to stay along the way; this is the age of the homeless, and people avert their eyes. The realities of child abuse, incest, alcoholism, and family violence are ever more evident. There is no groundswell of passionate feeling to tap into, no clear vision of a better future. Unlike the children of the 1960s, then, the children of the 1980s are cautious and rightfully afraid. I maintain that they have taken to the washed-out tattered garments because they *imply* experience, adventure, and drama, and offer a vicarious (though not really conscious) experience of it. These clothes provide the security of the most up-to-date fashion, but the fashion itself alludes to the anti-fashion of an earlier time, and plays upon a longing for the (counter) culture that produced it.

Distressed Denim

The terms used to describe the new denimwear are quite telling. Denim is now subjected not only to stones, but to acid; it is "abused," "distressed,"

"sabotaged" and "blasted"; it has been "washed out." It is also cold and frigid: it is "frosted," "frozen out," and "iced"; and "glacier" or "polar-washed." At first these terms seemed reminiscent of the words used in the Vietnam era for the drug experience (stoned, wasted, wiped out), but in reality they have a much harder, more anguished edge. One was stoned or wiped out from an abundance of experience, now one has simply weathered the storm ("Storm Riders," and "White Lightning" are two contemporary jeans styles). Today's "Get Used" fashions echo the underlying desperation of the age.

Descriptive labels that come with this aged denimwear try to be comforting. "This garment is made to look used and soft," one states. "It is broken in just for you." Customers are reassured that the jeans are "inspired by the faded, comfortable character" of well-worn clothing, or by the "comfortable good looks and free-wheeling spirit of aviators and prairie hands." This is "authentic apparel," state the labels; these garments are "like three years old." The underlying message is that the world out there is a tough one, but the clothing has been through it and has already taken it. It is protective, for it acts as a foil and absorbs the shock so its owner doesn't have to. It is soothing: "worn denim is man's best friend" (L).

The 1988 season denimwear also borrowed from the free-spirited, make-your-own, recycle-it trend of the mid-1970s. Couturiers were beginning to show this look in about 1989, but now increasing numbers of ready-to-wear garments are designed to look as if they were made from several pairs of cut-up and reused jeans. There are waistband details tucked into bodices or turned upside-down on the bottom of jackets; there are odd pockets and belt loops sewn in at jaunty diagonal angles. Contrasting color patches, particularly in mattress ticking prints, are also evident.

Sadly, all these trendy looks are mere facades. Prewashed jeans are not really made "just for" anyone; they hold no one's individual contours. Jackets may have extra waistbands and added pockets or patches, but they do not have the free-spirited spontaneity and freshness of the make-your-own era. Much of the tattered quality of contemporary denimwear also looks contrived and unnatural. *Wear and tear that develops during consecutive hours of laundering does not necessarily occur in areas that would be naturally stressed or worn, and sewn-in fringed selvages look too regular to be real.* When a whole line of jackets even bears a "rip" in the same place and the rip is always outlined with rows of stitches, the point is exceedingly forced. These clothes may first allude to another era, and may offer the illusion of experience and comfort, but illusions are all they offer. They are in reality prepackaged, just like the Authentic Stone. They set up a facade for their wearers, a facade that makes them seem larger than they may be

able to be. The look has struck a responsive chord, for it speaks to a yearning on the part of the young jeans customer, a yearning for a time when the world was not just tough, but exciting, and full of promise and imminent discovery.

Selling the Image

Photographs used in magazine advertisements for this denim clothing support the thesis developed above. Jeans manufacturers take it for granted at this point that their product is desirable, but they struggle to create memorable images that prospective customers will identify with. Consequently, the photographs do not feature the garments as much as create a mood or tell a story. The stories are dreamy and "mythic"⁴¹ (M) and full of implications. Sometimes they imply a free and uninhibited sexuality—Calvin Klein ads featuring photographs by Bruce Weber consist of ambiguous images such as one woman surrounded by four men, two of whom are shirtless, or an odd tangle of bodies on the grass. Guess advertisements often include unbuttoned and unbuckled garments, and glimpses of lacy underwear beneath. A recent Jordache ad was headlined, "I Can't Get No Satisfaction," and simulated a young man's internal monologue: "I don't know what's with you girls. . . . Your body says yes but your lips say no . . . but you, Sandy, you're not like the rest. You wouldn't play with my head. . . ." The story had a happy ending, for in the next frame Sandy and the young man are entwined together, and he is peering soulfully into her denim jacket. Even where there is no explicit sexuality, there is a sensual undertone. Characters in Guess ads are always positioned suggestively, leaning, stretching, or slouching with studied ease.

Many of the vignettes include references to the adventurous past of the blue jean. There are couples leaning on motorcycles (Calvin Klein) and men in black leather gloves (Guess); rugged rodeo riders or free-wheeling Western characters with bolo ties or bandana neckerchiefs (Guess, Levi's); and even a young girl with a head kerchief that looks as if she just stepped off the wagon train (Guess). There are aviators and wavy-haired workers from the World War II era (Work Force—the Gap), and sullen bohemian-types dressed in black (Calvin Klein).

The characters in these advertisements are uniformly young and attractive, but they rarely seem full of vitality, joy, or optimism. Often, they face completely away from the camera or have their faces totally or partially obscured by unkempt long hair (itself a reference to the 1960s) or by shadow. Where faces are visible, expressions tend to be enigmatic: dreamy or thoughtful, perhaps, or petulant, sad, or weary. This enigmatic quality is

quite anonymous, and suitably enough it allows potential customers to project themselves into the scene and become one of the characters. The scenes hint, in a rather desultory way, of experience and adventure, and imply that the worn garments the characters wear will bring that experience within the reach of even the most unadventurous or inexperienced teenager.

Blue jeans and related denim garments have, in sum, come to stand not just for the Wild West or the rugged laborer or the hardworking farmer—they have become an integral part of the whole American (and perhaps the worldwide) scene. They have been bleached, ripped, washed with acid, washed with stones, patched, cut up, decorated, distressed, and “worn to death,” but they are resilient, and seem to always be able to return in yet another guise and take on yet another layer of meaning. They have at different times seemed matter-of-fact and part of the scenery, and at other times have called out for notice and attention. They have served as symbols of the culture at large and of subsets of that culture, and of rebellious, outspoken counterculture groups; they have been fashionable, unfashionable, and hallmarks of anti-fashion. They have embodied many of the longings, beliefs, and realities of the generations that have worn them. We must watch and try to understand them as they continue to evolve.

Notes

1. Elaine Ratner, “Levi’s,” *Dress* 1 (1975), 1–2; Robert Shea, “Yesterday’s Leggings Are Today’s Fashion Craze,” *Today’s Health* (March 1975), 31; John Brooks, “Annals of Business: A Friendly Product,” *New Yorker* (November 12, 1979), 64–65.
2. Becky Rupp, “In Praise of Bluejeans: The Denimization of America,” *Blair Ketchum’s Country Journal* (December 1985), 83.
3. Brooks, 58.
4. Ibid.; John Berendt, “Blue Jeans,” *Esquire* (September 1986), 24.
5. Brooks, 71; Carin C. Quinn, “The Jeaning of America—and the World,” *American Heritage* (April 1978), 19; Shea, 31.
6. Brooks, 58.
7. Sharon Rosenberg and Joan Wiener Bordow, *The Denim Book* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1978), xi.
8. Shea, 30.
9. Brooks, 72.
10. Peter Beagle, *American Denim: A New Folk Art* (New York: Abrams, 1975), 14.

11. Brooks, 73-74.
12. Valerie Carnes, "Icons of Popular Fashion" in *Icons of America*, eds. Ray N. Browne and Marshall Fishwick (Bowling Green, Ohio: Popular Press, 1978), 237.
13. Beagle, 14, 73.
14. Brooks, 60.
15. Carnes, 236.
16. "Do it up Denim!" *Mademoiselle* (February 1978), 142.
17. Barbara Fehr, *Yankee Denim Dandies* (Blue Earth, Minn.: Piper Press, 1974), 73.
18. Brooks, 58.
19. Eve Harlow, *The Jeans Scene* (New York: Drake, 1973); Alexandra Jocopetti, *Native Funk and Flash* (San Francisco: Scrimshaw Press, 1974); Jann Johnson, *The Jeans Book* (New York: Ballantine Press, 1972); Sharon Rosenberg and Joan Wiener Bordow, *The Denim Book* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1978); Hazel Todhunter, *Make It in Denim* (New York: Taplinger, 1977); Laura Torbet, *Clothing Liberation: Or Out of the Closet and Into the Streets* (New York: Ballantine Press, 1973).
20. Fehr, 55, 66; Shea, 29.
21. Fehr, 27, 45.
22. *Ibid.*, 46.
23. Jacqueline McCord, "Blue Jean Country," *New York Times Magazine* (April 29, 1979), 115.
24. *Good Housekeeping* (April 1981), 202.
25. Carnes, 235-36.
26. "Institute Report: Denim Update," *Good Housekeeping* (September 1984), 124.
27. "A Six Dollar Stone Wash," *Newsweek* (September 22, 1986), 77.
28. Fehr, 11.
29. Beagle, 39-40; Fehr, 62-64.
30. Todhunter, 26-27.
31. Carnes, 235; McCord, 115.
32. Fehr, 55.
33. Fehr, 64; Herbert Koshetz, "Laundry Offers New Way to Age Jeans," *New York Times* (August 7, 1973), 47.
34. "Denims: Here's How to Buy the Best and Fade Them Fast," *Mademoiselle* (August 1981), 258.
35. Steve Ginsburg, "Despite a Feud, Marcianos Make Guesswork Pay," *Women's Wear Daily* (November 25, 1986), 4-5.
36. Gary Slutsker, "The Smoking Bun," *Forbes* 25 (March 1985), 210.
37. Laurie Schecter, "Red-Hot Blues," *Rolling Stone* (May 8, 1986), 67-71.

38. Berendt, 25.
39. Wendy Goodman, "Upscale Blues," *New York* 10 (February 1986), 48–51; "Designing the Blues," *New York* 17 (November 1986), 78–79; Ruth La Ferla, "Singing the Blues," *New York Times Magazine* (July 13, 1986), Section 6, 60; "Denim Rides Again," *Life* (September 1986), 76–78.
40. "Denim Rides Again," 76.
41. Jenet Conant, "Sexy Does It," *Newsweek* (September 15, 1986), 64.

Appendix

A. See Douglas A. Russell, *Costume History and Style* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1983), 48, for a discussion of the gray flannel suit imagery. The movie by that name came out in 1957. See also William Hollingsworth Whyte, *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1956).

B. John Brooks reports that the Levi Strauss company commissioned a survey in 1965 that indicated most people still associated the jeans with farmers, but the turning point in the popular association must have occurred very shortly thereafter.

C. Alison Lurie in her *The Language of Clothes* (New York: Random House, 1981) attributed the popularity of Levi's in Europe to the belief among European teens that "the power and virtue of America" was contained in the jeans, and would rub off on anyone who wore them.

D. Counterfeiting of jeans had actually begun some time before this date, with the bulk of the bogus products going overseas. Thirty-five thousand pairs of forged Levi's and Wrangler jeans were confiscated in West Germany in 1977. See "West Germany: A Booming Market in Counterfeit Jeans," *Business Week* (August 8, 1977): 38–39.

E. This epithet (and a similar one, the "great common denominator") had been bandied about considerably in the late 1960s and early 1970s. See Barbara Fehr, *Yankee Denim Dandies* (Blue Earth, Minn.: Piper Press, 1974), 35, and Robert Shea, "Yesterday's Leggings Are Today's Fashion Craze," *Today's Health* (March 1975): 29.

F. Barbara Fehr in her *Yankee Denim Dandies* claims that the original derivation of the phrase "stone wash" comes from a preindustrial era when garments were softened by a long exposure to running water. The garments were buried in streams, she says, and held down by rocks or stones. I have been unable to confirm this explanation, and rather suspect it is more likely related to the fact that fabric was long cleaned by rubbing over stones in the stream beds.

G. I speak from memory.

H. The thesis that clothing and other objects can hold a psychic charge has been developed at length by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton in *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). Although this feeling about jeans was probably at its strongest in the Vietnam era when the jeans were still symbolic of counterculture beliefs, it has clearly not died out. In 1985 sculptor Bob Edlund offered to preserve the spirit of one's jeans forever by "freezing" them in characteristic poses with several coats of fiberglass resin. Edlund said he came up with this idea because jeans "are the hardest things in the world to part with." He even planned to coat children's overalls in this manner, much in the spirit of bronzed baby shoes. See "For a Mere \$1,250, Sculptor Bob Edlund Will See To It That Your Jeans Never Wear Out," *People* (November 11, 1985), 79.

I. John Brooks in "Annals of Business: A Friendly Product," *New Yorker* (November 12, 1979), 80, claims he was given this advice when he bought his first pair of jeans in 1979; jeans "connoisseurs" had the benefit of years of experience when they told him what to do. Peter Beagle also discusses this process at length in *American Denim: A New Folk Art* (New York: Abrams, 1975), 39-40.

J. This was the actual phrase used by *Rolling Stone* fashion editor Laurie Schecter in *Rolling Stone* (May 8, 1986), 68.

K. It is somewhat outside the parameters of the jeans story, but another type of fashion that caught on in the mid-1980s was the safari-look, made up primarily of cotton khaki garments. The look was spurred on by such popular movies as the *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *Out of Africa*, but it was first marketed by an innovative company named Banana Republic. When it was a new company, Banana Republic bought up lots of used army and safari clothing and restyled them for its customers. These safari-type clothes also provided a safe fantasy—a vicarious sense of adventure.

L. These adjectives and statements were all taken from labels on denimwear found in a variety of department stores in Madison, Wisconsin, in February 1988.

M. There are even some jeans advertisements that are framed and titled, like slice-of-life or art photographs. *Seventeen* magazine carried an ad for Jeanjer denimwear in September 1986, for example, that featured a snapshot-like image of a sensual girl in jeans and a denim jacket, outlined in black and clearly set off against the page. It was captioned "'Desert Blues,' 1986."

- ¹² These adjectives and statements were all copied from labels on denimwear found in a variety of department stores in Madison, Wisconsin in February, 1988.
- ¹³ There are even some jeans advertisements that are framed and titled, like slice-of-life or art photographs. *Seventeen* magazine carried an ad for Jeanjer denimwear in September, 1986, for example, that featured a snapshot-like image of a sensual girl in jeans and a denim jacket, outlined in black and clearly set off against the page. It was captioned, "Desert Blues", 1986."

Works Cited

- Beagle, Peter. *American Denim: A New Folk Art*. (Presented by Richard M. Owens and Tony Lane) New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1975.
- Berendt, John. "Blue Jeans," *Esquire* September 1986: 24-6.
- Brooks John. "Annals of Business: A Friendly Product," *New Yorker* 12 November 1979: 58-80.
- Carnes, Valerie. "Icons of Popular Fashion," *Icons of America*, Ray N. Browne and Marshall Fishwick, eds. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1978: 228-240.
- Conant, Jenner. "Sexy Does It," *Newsweek* 15 September 1986: 64.
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly and Eugene Rochberg-Halton. *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
- "Denim Rides Again," *Life* September 1986. 76-8.
- "Denims: Here's How to Buy the Best and Fade Them Fast." *Mademoiselle* August 1981: 258.
- "Designing the Blues," *New York* 17 November 1986: 78-9.
- "Do it up Denim!" *Mademoiselle* February 1978: 140-44.
- Fehr, Barbara. *Yankee Denim Dandies*. Blue Earth, Minn.: Piper Press, 1974.
- "For a Mere \$1,250, Sculptor Bob Edlund Will See to it that Your Jeans Never Wear Out," *People* 11 November 1985: 79.
- Ginsburg, Steve. "Despite a Feud, Marcianos Make Guesswork Pay," *Women's Wear Daily* 25 November 1986: 4-5.
- Good Housekeeping* April 1981: 202.
- Goodman, Wendy. "Upscale Blues," *New York* 10 February 1986: 48-51.
- Harlow, Eve. *The Jeans Scene*. New York: Drake, 1973.
- "Institute Report: Denim Update," *Good Housekeeping* September 1984: 124.

- Jacopetti, Alexandra. *Native Funk and Flash*. San Francisco: Scrimshaw Press, 1974.
- Johnson, Jann. *The Jeans Book*. New York: Ballantine Press, 1972.
- Koshetz, Herbert. "Laundry Offers New Way to Age Jeans," *New York Times* 7 August, 1973: 47.
- La Ferla, Ruth. "Singing the Blues," *New York Times Magazine*, 13 July 1986, Section 6: 60.
- Lurie, Alison. *The Language of Clothes*. New York: Random House, 1981.
- McCord, Jacqueline. "Blue Jean Country," *New York Times Magazine*, 29 April 1979: 115.
- Quinn, Carin C. "The Jeaning of America—and the World." *American Heritage* April 1978: 14–21.
- Ratner, Elaine, "Levi's," *Dress* 1 (1975): 1–5.
- Riesman, David. *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1953.
- Rosenberg, Sharon and Joan Wiener Bordow. *The Denim Book*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1978.
- Rosenberg, Sharon and Joan Wiener. *The Illustrated Hassle-Free Make Your Own Clothes Book*. San Francisco: Straight Arrow Press, 1971.
- Rupp, Becky. "In Praise of Bluejeans: The Denimization of America," *Blair Ketchum's Country Journal* December 1985: 82–6.
- Russell, Douglas A. *Costume History and Style*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1983.
- Schecter, Laurie. "Red-Hot Blues," *Rolling Stone* 8 May 1986: 67–71.
- Shea, Robert. "Yesterday's Leggings Are Today's Fashion Craze." *Today's Health* March 1975: 29.
- "A Six Dollar Stone Wash," *Newsweek* 22 September 1986: 77.
- Slutsker, Gary. "The Smoking Bun," *Forbes* 25 March 1985: 210.
- Todhunter, Hazel. *Make it in Denim*. New York: Taplinger, 1977.
- Torbet, Laura. *Clothing Liberation: Or Out of the Closet and Into the Streets*. New York: Ballantine Press. 1973.
- "West Germany: A Booming Market in Counterfeit Jeans," *Business Week* 8 August 1977: 37–38.