



Gucci by Tom Ford, ensemble, denim, feathers, beads, cotton jersey, spring 1999, Italy. Photograph courtesy of Gucci.

# DENIM

## FASHION'S FRONTIER

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#### Denim: Fashion's Frontier

December 1, 2015–May 7, 2016

Organized by Emma McClendon

[exhibitions.fitnyc.edu/denim-fashions-frontier](http://exhibitions.fitnyc.edu/denim-fashions-frontier)

#DenimHistory

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Cover: Junya Watanabe, dress, repurposed blue denim jeans, spring 2002, Japan.  
Photograph by William Palmer.

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Handsewn men's work pants, blue brushed cotton and denim, circa 1840, USA.



"Play" ensemble, blue striped denim, circa 1940, USA.

Denim may be the most popular fabric in the world today. According to anthropologists Daniel Miller and Sophie Woodward, "On any given day, nearly half the world's population is in jeans." Yet decades before Levi Strauss sold his first pair of blue jeans, denim was being used to create workwear of all kinds, for both men and women. Histories of denim often disregard its use in women's wear, identifying it as a menswear textile first, originally used for pants. These histories also tend to ignore high fashion uses of the textile, treating them as peripheral. Such gendered interpretations miss the variety and breadth of denim's history.

**Denim: Fashion's Frontier** takes a wider view, shedding new light on the evolution of this durable cotton fabric. Using objects that date from the nineteenth century to the present, the exhibition juxtaposes examples of workwear with high fashion, street style with commercial garments, and menswear with women's wear, in order to explore the multifaceted history of denim clothing.

Building on the already established tradition of denim workwear, Levi Strauss & Co. (Levi's) first marketed its metal-riveted, denim pants during the nineteenth-century California Gold Rush. Patented in 1873, the Levi's model continues to dominate the market as the standard blue jean. By the start of the 20th century, denim had begun to appear in prison uniforms and naval uniforms, and then in fashionable women's wear during World War I. Denim further shed its working-class associations during the interwar years. Two distinct genres of lifestyle clothing helped link denim to the romance of the Old West and the American spirit: "Western wear" emerged parallel to the booming popularity of "cowboy" films and dude ranch vacationing, while "play clothes" were designed to outfit fashionable men and women who engaged in leisure activities.

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*"I have often said that I wish I had invented blue jeans: the most spectacular, the most practical, the most relaxed and nonchalant. They have expression, modesty, sex appeal, simplicity—all I hope for in my clothes."*

Yves Saint Laurent, 1983

With the onset of World War II, the link between denim and the American spirit went global. G.I.s abroad wore jeans when they were off duty, and denim-clad "Rosie the Riveter" became the poster girl of the home front. Simultaneously, a new market blossomed for practical-yet-fashionable clothing for the affluent housewife, which included Claire McCardell's denim "Popover" dress.

As the American middle class settled into suburbia during the 1950s, denim suddenly became controversial. The influence of films like 1955's *Rebel Without a Cause* (and the jeans worn in the movie by James Dean) caused denim to be equated with teenage rebellion and delinquency. The denim industry worked to counteract these negative connotations—by founding The Denim Council, for example—but from the 1950s on, denim's cultural identity has been dominated by countercultural and street-style associations.

This was especially true of the hippie movement of the 1960s. For the hippies, clothing was a canvas for political expression, and denim was their ubiquitous fabric. The hippies' use of denim established trends that long outlived the movement, such as bell-bottom jeans, embroidered and patched denim, and faded, pre-worn jeans.



Yves Saint Laurent, "safari" jacket, blue denim, circa 1970, France.

By the early 1970s, denim was appearing in the work of esteemed fashion designers. Yves Saint Laurent treated it as a luxury fabric, and later in the decade, European companies, such as Fiorucci, launched a craze for "Italian" and "French" jeans. These companies used sex to sell their skin-tight jeans, which were often so snug that wearers had to lie down to zip them up. During the 1980s, fashion designers continued to experiment with denim, playing with elements of the textile's heritage. For example, Ralph Lauren's 1981 "Prairie" collection fused "Western wear" details with early-1980s silhouettes. The trend for hard, European denim gave way to a demand for soft, faded jeans. This led to the popularization of finishing techniques, such as stone- and acid-washing, typified in the work of Guess and Marithé + François Girbaud.

By the end of the century, denim had emerged as a true luxury item on the runways of Gucci, Katharine Hamnett, and Gianfranco Ferré. This spawned a "premium denim" market pioneered by companies like 7 For All Mankind and Acne. In contrast, the burgeoning Japanese denim industry focused on historic details of American heritage brands such as Lee, Levi's®, and Wrangler, creating meticulous reproductions of vintage denim.

Today, contemporary designers often incorporate denim through postmodern pastiche and deconstruction, taking apart classic denim garments and putting them back together as historic homages. This approach references the textile's journey through shifting cultural associations. As Miller and Woodward suggest, "[J]eans seem to have taken on the role of expressing something about the changing world that no other clothing could achieve." This is true not only of jeans, but of denim itself, making it a powerful tool within fashion.

Emma McClendon, curator



Ralph Lauren, "Prairie" ensemble, chambray, wool, leather, and metal, 1981, USA.



Customized Levi Strauss & Co. jeans, blue denim, embroidery, leather, appliqué, beads, circa 1969, USA.