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Denim: Fashion’s Frontier
December 1, 2015–May 7, 2016
Organized by Emma McClendon
exhibitions.fitnyc.edu/denim-fashion’s-frontier
#DenimHistory
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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 twentieth 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 denim emerged for practical-yet-fashionable clothing during 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 “Roose 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 Elvis 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—to counteract these negative connotations—by 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.

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