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## Digging Deep Into Denim's History

The exhibit 'Denim: Fashion's Frontier' includes everything from work wear to prison togs to haute couture



Installation view of 'Denim: Fashion's Frontier' at the Museum at FIT. PHOTO: THE MUSEUM AT FIT

By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

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The history of our lives—work, play, rebellion, style, sex—is encoded in our jeans.

That is the premise of an exhibit at the Fashion Institute of Technology called “Denim: Fashion’s Frontier,” which surveys the rise of the ever-familiar fabric from 1840 to the present, paying tribute to a textile that everyone knows but few pause to appreciate.

Beginning with a pair of faded work jeans found in an abandoned mine, the exhibition, on view through early May, follows denim’s course through surprisingly expansive sartorial terrain. From its origins as durable work wear, popular among laborers and especially patrons of Levi Strauss & Co. shortly after the California Gold Rush, denim developed over the decades through fits of functionality and high fashion. Along the

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picked up an ever-changing array of cultural associations.

“Every street-style movement has had its way of wearing denim,” said Emma McClendon, organizer of the exhibition and assistant curator of costume for the Museum at FIT, who walked a Wall Street Journal reporter through the show.

“Keep in mind, we’re a little nuts,” joked Jeffrey Silberman, chairman of the textile development and marketing department at FIT, who consulted on the stroll. Most people buy a pair of jeans and don’t think much about it, Mr. Silberman said. But for the fashion cognoscenti, there is a story behind every step of the denim-making process and ways that jeans have been perceived over the years.

The tour began at the end, with a pair of recent jeans by the Japanese brand Kapital that are revered by “denim heads” for their unusual weave and color created by layers of fermented charcoal dye painted on with a brush. (Their cost at a Soho boutique: \$375.)

From more than a century earlier, a woman’s jacket from 1850 belies the perception that denim began as a textile exclusively for rugged working men, said Ms. McClendon, while an all-denim prisoner uniform from 1913 was selected to show the fabric’s place in the American jail system at the time.

A section with sporty shorts and even a two-piece denim swim suit show how the material proved integral to the emergence of “play clothes” in the ’30s and ’40s, when Americans warmed up to a culture of leisure and more casual suburban wear.

Then, in the ’50s, denim took on countercultural connotations, as displayed by a



Men's work pants, denim and brushed cotton, c. 1840, USA PHOTO: THE MUSEUM AT FIT

mannequin emulating Marlon Brando's jeans-and-leather-jacket look from the 1953 film "The Wild One."

"They thought it transformed normal teenagers into hooligans," Ms. McClendon said of denim's reputation afterward. "Denim was actually banned from a number of school districts."

It also worked its way into the romance of Hollywood Westerns. Then it swerved again in the '60s when hippies took up denim as a uniform after buying it en masse at Army/Navy surplus stores as a way to bypass consumer

culture and subvert military symbols.

The bell-bottom style popular at the time, embodied in hippie jeans on display with patches galore, derived from old sailors' pants with wide cuffs that were easy to roll. That look became a staple as denim moved into the realm of high fashion in the '70s.

"The flares for each leg measure 28 inches—absolutely colossal!" Ms. McClendon said, pointing out an upmarket 1970 denim-and-silk suit by Sara Shelburne, one of the designers—along with Yves Saint Laurent—who helped make denim a runway standard then.



18th-century/1960s-inspired ensemble with light-blue denim redingote and micro- mini skirt embroidered with large floral border design, silk crepe-de-chine camisole and boned corset in contrasting pale and deep-pink floral prints *PHOTO: THE MUSEUM AT FIT*

Sex entered the picture in the '70s too, as evidenced by a monitor showing old Calvin Klein and Jordache TV commercials and mannequins outfitted with high-waisted jeans prized for their “tight, tight fit,” Ms. McClendon said.

In the '80s, denim went through the wringer with the introduction of acid-washed looks and faux fading.

“This was the era when they were trying anything they could get their hands on to make it look distressed, all kinds of chemicals and stone washes,” Mr. Silberman said. He pointed at examples by Guess and Marithé + François Girbaud while noting the



Jumpsuit, denim, 1942-45, USA PHOTO: THE MUSEUM AT FIT

environmental damage done by the denim industry at the time.

“Now it’s going into a whole new era where we have lasers doing what stone washing could do and all kinds of new techniques,” he said.

“The funny thing about jeans is that they function in so many different ways for different people,” said Andrew Chen, a partner at Self Edge, a small string of high-end denim boutiques, including a shop on the Lower East Side. The firm commissioned a video on display in the show, showing looms at work in a rare old-fashioned denim mill still operating in North Carolina.

“When you buy jeans, you’re given a blank slate,” Mr. Chen said. “A year or two down the

line, when you look at a faded pair, you did the work to make them look the way they do.”

The exhibition makes space for enduring work of the kind.

“With so many styles, we only recognize and understand them when they become a huge phenomenon,” Ms. McClendon said. “But they have to do with communities and consumer psychology—how they start to spread and how they flower is what makes clothing so fascinating.”