

The global blue jeans transformation

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The Global Blue Jeans Transformation

Blue jeans, which were first manufactured by Levi Strauss & Co. in San Francisco in 1873, revolutionized fashion. A key feature of blue jeans? The color. Blue is symbolic of their origins – pants for blue collar workers. Colored by indigo, blue masked dirt. The planet Earth is often described as the Blue Planet in reference to water, but perhaps the term could be used to describe a world wardrobe. Some speculate that in most countries on any given day, almost half the population is wearing blue jeans. This paper examines the remarkable global rise of blue jeans; how they wear and how they have come to symbolize societal shifts, culture, and politics.

Blue jeans – cool, comfortable, durable and democratic – began as workman’s pants. First manufactured by Levi Strauss & Co. in San Francisco in 1873, the riveted denim innovation revolutionized fashion. They evolved from grass-roots garments to become a cultural icon and a symbol of America, rebellion, freedom, and youth. Today, they can be seen everywhere from Parisian catwalks to local sidewalks.

An essential feature of blue jeans? Their color. Blue symbolized the origins of the pants: they were intended for blue collar workers. The color indigo masked dirt and the effects of manual labor or tough wear and tear.

The planet Earth is described as the Blue Planet not only in reference to water, but perhaps also in reference to a world wardrobe. Professors Sophie Woodward and Daniel Miller in “Global Denim” posit that in most countries on any given day, almost half the population is wearing blue jeans.¹ Blue jeans, they suggest, have become the world’s “default garment” – the most ubiquitous garment in the world.

Blue jeans are at once homogenous, worn by virtually anyone anywhere, yet simultaneously personal. They adhere to the unique contours of one’s body – the indigo wearing and fading into patterns that detail the distinctive way one lives. From the tears and pocket imprint on the 501

that Steve Jobs wore, to the washed-out patched Levi’s worn by a 1970s surfer – our blue jeans speak for us.

How did blue jeans become the global garment? Is this a simple example of commercialization? Does the technical nature of indigo dyeing play a role in this global phenomenon? Are there any notable color exceptions in the history and adaptation of blue jeans? This paper examines the evolution of blue jeans, how color in Levi’s garments has often symbolized cultural shifts in society, and the remarkable rise of global blue jeans.

Background: The Birth of Blue Jeans

Levi Strauss, an immigrant to America from Bavaria, arrived in bustling, noisy San Francisco in early March 1853 after first living several years in New York. He established a wholesale dry goods business under his own name, also serving as the West Coast representative of the family’s New York firm. His new company imported dry goods – clothing, underwear, umbrellas, handkerchiefs, bolts of fabric – and sold them to the small stores that were springing up all over California and the West. It was these stores that helped outfit the miners of the Gold Rush and, eventually, the new families that began to populate the western regions.



Witnesses
J. L. Brown
W. H. Richardson

Investor
Jacob W. Davis
per Samuel G. Curtis

UNITED STATES PATENT OFFICE.

JACOB W. DAVIS, OF RENO, NEVADA, ASSIGNOR TO HIMSELF AND LEVI STRAUSS & COMPANY, OF SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA.

IMPROVEMENT IN FASTENING POCKET-OPENINGS.

Specification forming part of Letters Patent No. 139,121, dated May 20, 1873; application filed August 9, 1872.

To all whom it may concern:

Be it known that I, JACOB W. DAVIS, of Reno, county of Washoe and State of Nevada, have invented an Improvement in Fastening Seams; and I do hereby declare the following description and accompanying drawing are sufficient to enable any person skilled in the art or science to which it most nearly appertains to make and use my said invention or improvement without further invention or experiment.

My invention relates to a fastening for pocket-openings, whereby the sewed seams are prevented from ripping or starting from frequent pressure or strain thereon; and it consists in the employment of a metal rivet, or eyelet at each edge of the pocket-opening, to prevent the ripping of the seam at those points. The rivet or eyelet is so fastened in the seam as to bind the two parts of cloth which the seam unites together, so that it shall prevent the strain or pressure from coming upon the thread with which the seam is sewed.

In order to more fully illustrate and explain my invention, reference is had to the accompanying drawing, in which my invention is represented as applied to the pockets of a pair of pants.

Figure 1 is a view of my invention as applied to pants.

A is the side seam in a pair of pants, drawers or other article of wearing apparel, which terminates at the pockets; and *b b* represent the rivets at each edge of the pocket opening. The seams are usually ripped or started by the placing of the hands in the pockets and

the consequent pressure or strain upon them. To strengthen this part I employ a rivet, eyelet, or other equivalent metal stud, *b*, which I pass through a hole at the end of the seam, so as to bind the two parts of cloth together, and then head it down upon both sides so as to firmly unite the two parts. When rivets which already have one head are used, it is only necessary to head the opposite end, and a washer can be interposed, if desired, in the usual way. By this means I avoid a large amount of trouble in mending portions of seams which are subjected to constant strain.

I am aware that rivets have been used for securing seams in shoes, as shown in the patents to Geo. Houghton, No. 64,015, April 23, 1867, and to L. K. Washburn, No. 123,313, January 30, 1872; and hence I do not claim, broadly, fastening of seams by means of rivets.

Having thus described my invention, what I claim as new, and desire to secure by Letters Patent, is—

As a new article of manufacture, a pair of pantaloons having the pocket-openings secured at each edge by means of rivets, substantially in the manner described and shown, whereby the seams at the points named are prevented from ripping, as set forth.

In witness whereof I hereunto set my hand and seal.

JACOB W. DAVIS. [L. S.]

Witnesses:
JAMES C. HACKMAN,
W. BRIDGMAN.



1 Patent #139,121 for riveted pants from the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, May 20, 1873. This date is considered the “birthday” of blue jeans.

One of Levi’s many customers was a man named Jacob Davis, a tailor in Reno, Nevada. One day the wife of a local laborer asked Davis to make a pair of pants for her husband that wouldn’t fall apart. Jacob tried to think of a way to strengthen his trousers, and one day he hit upon the idea of putting metal rivets at points of strain, such as the pocket corners and the base of the button fly. These riveted pants were an instant hit. Davis decided to take out a patent on the process, but needed a business partner. He wrote to Levi Strauss to suggest that the two men hold the patent together. Levi Strauss agreed to Davis’s proposal. The two men received patent #139,121 from the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office on May 20, 1873. At Levi Strauss & Co., we thus consider May 20, 1873, the “birthday” of blue jeans.

Levi Strauss invited Jacob Davis to San Francisco to set up a factory to manufacture what would become the world’s first blue jeans. These riveted denim pants were made for working men – from miners and cowboys, to railroad engineers and carpenters.

The humble origin of the blue jeans is one probable aspect of their worldwide acceptance. Unlike many modern consumer goods – from cars to cell phones, which began as luxury items that became affordable enough for the masses – blue jeans began as grass-roots garments. They originated with those on the lowest rung of the economic ladder

of society and worked their way up. They became the clothing choice for many people looking for affordable, unpretentious, democratic clothing that was appealing because of its working-class origins.

Technical Factors in the Globalization of Blue Jeans

The technical nature of indigo dyeing may also play a role in the globalization of blue jeans. The blue color of denim is created from an indigo dye. According to some experts, indigo has probably seen longer continuous use than any other dye – thousands of years.² One reason for this is that indigo-bearing plants grew indigenously “over wide geographic areas, the dye was used by many cultural groups at very early dates.”³

In addition, researchers discovered in 2016 that indigo had been used 2000 years longer than previously believed. The “Washington Post”⁴ and “National Geographic” reported that indigo-dyed fabric, long faded, had been found in Peru from “long before the pyramids were built”. This indigo dyeing tradition around the world at such an early date may explain part of the popularity of blue jeans since, historically, blue garments have been worn for thousands of years in locations across the globe.

Furthermore, the transition to synthetic indigo in production reflects the same shift to synthetics in denim dyeing. Synthetic indigo is chemically identical to natural indigo (indigo-tin) and was first synthesized by Adolph von Bayer in 1880. By 1897, improved production methods allowed for commercial competition with the natural product. Synthetic indigo had almost completely replaced the natural product by 1920.⁵

The shift from natural indigo dyes to synthetic indigo occurred in tandem with a shift in denim sourcing at Levi Strauss & Co. Since there were no denim mills in San Francisco in the 1870s when waist overalls (the early name for blue jeans) were first manufactured, denim dyed with natural plant indigo was sourced from Manchester, New Hampshire, where the American textile factory had developed. The "Amoskeag Mill" provided the company's denim for about 50 years. By 1915, however, Levi Strauss & Co. began making a portion of its products using denim from "Cone Mills" in North Carolina. By the 1920s, when the shift to synthetic indigo was virtually complete, the company turned to Cone Mills for the denim for all of its 501 jeans.

In sum, the ubiquitous nature of indigo plants and their very early use in garment dye make the historical construction of blue work pants commonplace and it likely contributed to the acceptance of blue jeans across the globe. At the same time, the shift to synthetic dye occurred just as Levi Strauss & Co. moved its denim sourcing to a new supplier in the southern United States, Cone Mills.

Color as Cultural Express: Blue Jeans & the 1960s Rise of Youth Culture

Along with technology, culture has played a role historically in color preferences for clothing including the proliferation of blue jeans in the twentieth century. The rise of youth culture in the 1960s is a prime example of how pop culture influenced blue jeans wear. Thanks to movies like "The Wild One" (1953) with Marlon Brando, blue jeans began to be associated with rebels and juvenile delinquents. In the movie, Brando is the head of a motorcycle gang who dresses in Levi's 501 jeans and a white t-shirt, terrorizing communities. Many towns across America lived in genuine fear of blue jeans wearing motorcycle marauders and other rebellious youth. These "bad boys" challenged the authority and the status quo through clothes that set them apart from their parents and the older generation. Blue jeans-clad James Dean in "Rebel Without a Cause" (1955) and similar movies cemented blue jeans as the uniform of the rebel.

Schools hoping to prevent rebellious behavior among students often banned blue jeans in the 1950s. Parents, following suit, frequently forbade their children from dressing in them. One way students got around these prohibitions was to bleach their blue jeans to turn them white. This way, students could beat the rules and still wear cool clothes with a simple color fix. By 1962, Levi Strauss & Co. took the work out of making jeans acceptable by offering White Levi's to a new and younger generation of fans: blue jeans without the blue. White Levi's were one of the first

products that the company used to attract youth when it shifted its marketing away from cowboys and the rodeo and began focusing on teens and students. The company produced posters of teens in White Levi's at the beach with surf boards. The California-feel print ads became so popular that youth wrote to Levi Strauss & Co. requesting copies to pin up on their bedroom walls.

The popularity of blue jeans grew exponentially in the late 1960s thanks in large part to radio advertisements. Music became a method of connecting with the younger generation, and the company hired bands, like rising San Francisco counterculture group Jefferson Airplane, to record advertisements. In their track "White Levi's", Airplane promoted white jeans, blue jeans, and a new rainbow of other pant colors (ten in total). "White Levi's come in black, blushing bravo blue, I love you"; Jefferson Airplane lead singer Grace Slick crooned. "Cactus, faded blue and white, crushing loden, sand, burnt olive, whiskey, clay at the end of the day". A photograph from the "Los Angeles Times" in 1967 captured the spirit of the era and the common clothing. Youth dressed in blue denim jeans, vests, and tops are gathered outdoors on a sunny day dancing at Griffith Park. In the center of the group, one shirtless young man wears beads and a pair of White Levi's.⁶

While Levi Strauss & Co. sold White Levi's in an array of colors, it was the blue jeans that eventually won out. One proof of the growing general acceptance of blue jeans came from the company's own advertising. In 1967, Levi Strauss & Co. swapped the word "overalls" for "jeans", the word teenagers everywhere were calling the riveted blue denim pants, in an advertisement for model 505 Levi's. By 1969, the younger generation was rocking outdoors at Woodstock with hundreds dressed in blue jeans.

Blue Jeans as a Canvas for Self-Expression

Clothing is a form of self-expression. In the 1960s and 70s, blue jeans became a canvas for colorful creativity for youth. Teenager Doug Hansen, for example, transformed a pair of Levi's 501 jeans after moving to California from Maryland in 1970.⁷ He lamented having missed the Summer of Love in San Francisco by a few years. He fought off his regret by setting to work on a pair of Levi's that would capture the Hippie spirit, but also giving him an outlet for his budding artwork as a graphic illustrator. "Someone was selling the jeans, probably an honest farm laborer, at Cherry Auction Flea Market in Fresno, California", said Doug. "They were worn to within an inch of their life". As soon as he started wearing the Levi's, they began splitting at the knees. He repaired them with iron-on patches at about the time that he enrolled at Fresno State University where he studied through 1974.

Doug patched his jeans, taking fabric swatches from his home, his girlfriend Susan, and his grandmother's 1950s vintage ties. He layered the fabrics on top of the denim and finished it with a zig zag stitch up and down the legs. The pants got another colorful applique – his name in bright green and black. In addition to the new hues and patching,

Doug turned his 501 jeans into bell bottoms by splitting the side seam and inserting a denim triangle.

Why transform his blue jeans? "My appearance was important", Doug explained. Blue jeans became the clothing canvas to fashion his unique image.

Blue Jeans as Political Expression

Another factor contributing to the globalization of blue jeans is their symbolism as garments of political expression. During World War II, many American soldiers wore Levi's 501s and other blue jeans overseas when they were not dressed in uniform. For many people living in Europe and Asia, World War II was their first time seeing blue jeans. Levi Strauss & Co. began exporting Levi's 501 jeans abroad after the war and also sold them on military bases. Following the war, blue jeans took on new political meaning. They came to represent America, freedom, and independence.

At the height of the Cold War, the United States and Soviet Union signed an agreement to increase cultural contacts to ease tensions, and blue jeans were selected as one element of the exchange. Both nations agreed to host exhibitions from the other country. The United States Information Agency coordinated the American National Exhibition which was sent to Moscow. Vice President Richard Nixon opened the exhibition on July 25, 1959. Included in the display of American culture, science, and technology was a booth created by Levi Strauss & Co. filled with 501 jeans and Western-themed advertising.



2 XX Waist Overalls (about 1879).

Although blue jeans were frowned upon by Soviet officials as symbols of decadence and western imperialism, the products on display had to be replaced almost daily due to their popularity. As described in a September 1959 press release by the international press service R&F Features, "Eager Soviet visitors handled – and occasionally helped themselves to – display samples of the all-American denim pants."

Levi's jeans were a forbidden, but coveted, capitalist item in the Soviet Union for the next thirty years. A 1984 "Christian Science Monitor" article described the demand for 501 jeans that helped to fuel a black market, "It is not unusual to enter a subway car and see the majority of men and women – and 80 to 90 percent of the young generation – wearing blue jeans. Of those wearing American brands, Levi's seem to be the most in evidence..."⁸ During a 2016 visit to Moscow, I met a young man named Dmitri who proudly told me, "Dad bought his first 501s on the black market in the 1970s".⁹ Youth celebrating the end of the Cold War gathered in droves wearing blue jeans as the Berlin Wall fell in 1989. Photographs capturing the spectacle depict hundreds of jeans-clad youth atop the wall.

Stories about the political symbolism of blue jeans also exist today. In her autobiography "In Order to Live: A North Korean Girl's Journey to Freedom", Yeonmi Park describes how the government forbade blue jeans because they were considered a symbol of American decadence. Before her escape, Park believed that being free meant "being able to wear jeans and watch whatever movies I wanted without worrying about being arrested."¹⁰ In "The American Experience: The Amish", a Public Broadcasting Station (PBS) special in 2015, an Amish man who finally left his Pennsylvania community after seven prior attempts, describes the first thing he did – buy blue jeans and a t-shirt.¹¹

Blue Jeans: Uniform Yet Distinctive

Choosing blue jeans as a way of dressing to fit into society is another unique aspect of jeans – their homogeneity, or uniformity. Blue jeans have become so ubiquitous that they are the perfect clothing choice if one hopes to blend in with others. Yet the unique way that the denim wears gives each pair of blue jeans distinction and individuality. Wear patterns on a blue jeans are expressive. They indicate the lifestyle, habits, and movements of the wearer and form naturally based on the body of the wearer – how they sit, bend, how often they rub their thighs.

One reason for this is the nature of denim. Denim threads are dyed blue through a process called rope or long chain dyeing. In this process, the blue dye only penetrates the outermost layers of the thread. The core of the thread is left white. As you wash or wear your denim, the blue starts to wear off, increasingly exposing the white core underneath.

Other differences in blue jeans relate to the way each has been customized or adapted by the wearer. Several examples in the Levi Strauss & Co. Archives illustrate individual differences. "Spur Bites" (1890) was worn by a

cowboy. The hems are torn up by spurs, the right thigh – where the cowboy likely held his reins – has a large patch, and the back seat has several patches where the cowboy was sitting in the saddle. “Commodore” (1940), recovered from a mining area in southwest Colorado, has a shadow imprint of a pair of chaps visible on the jeans. The waistband is deep blue suggesting that the jeans were probably worn with a belt, and the hem shows a fold line where the pants were cuffed. Our “Surfer Jeans” (1970s) are sun-bleached and covered with patches, a scrapbook indicating the locations where they were worn like Hawaii or Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. Finally, “Steve Jobs’ 501s” (1980s) have a square outline in the right back pocket where the edges of his wallet (in the years before the iPod or iPhone) have rubbed off the blue color. There are also buttons sewn into the waistband to accommodate suspenders.

That blue jeans are at once homogenous – worn by virtually anyone anywhere – and simultaneously personal, given the way they wear or are customized, is yet another factor in their successful globalization.

Cultural Significance of Blue Jeans

The cultural impact of blue jeans has been widely recognized. In 1964, a pair of Levi’s 501 blue jeans was added to the permanent collection of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., in recognition of their significance to American clothing. In the 1970s, Levi Strauss & Co. received the most prestigious award in the American fashion industry, a Coty Award. FIT Museum Curator Emma McClendon explained, “The Coty Awards were the most prestigious awards in the American fashion industry, similar to the CFDA awards that are given out today. Levi’s won a Coty Award in 1971 for international fashion influence. This is really noteworthy because Coty Awards were given to high fashion designers. The fact that they gave an award to Levi’s signaled a huge shift in the industry”.¹² The shift? A growing global garment trend for blue jeans.

“Time” magazine recognized the revolutionary impact of the 501 blue jeans on the fashion world at the turn of the millennium. In 2000, “Time” named the 501 jeans the “fashion item of the 20th century”, beating the miniskirt and the little black dress – a remarkable feat for a denim riveted work pant.

Recently the Museum of Modern Art in New York City identified the original blue jeans, Levi’s 501 jeans, as one of 111 fashion objects that have made a significant impact on history. Their first fashion exhibition in decades, “Items: Is Fashion Modern?” even placed the 501 blue jeans on the top of their list.

Conclusion

The global rise of blue jeans is remarkable. As theorized by Woodward and Miller in their book “Global Denim”, in most countries on any given day, almost half the population is wearing blue jeans.¹³ In essence, they have become the world’s “default garment” – the most ubiquitous attire in the world.

The popularity and general acceptance of blue jeans across the globe may be a result of multiple factors: the technical nature of indigo dye; the cultural role that blue jeans have played in society; the political symbolism of blue jeans; the way blue jeans wear over time and through use; and the individual customization or adaptation of blue jeans. All play a role in their successful globalization.

The impact of blue jeans on the world wardrobe has been recognized by the Smithsonian Institution, “Time” magazine, and most recently by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York.

But perhaps songwriter Neil Diamond captured it best when he wrote of the emotions that have inspired an indigo-dyed blue planet: “I’d much rather be, forever in blue jeans”. ■

Related article in the Ferrum archives:

««Hallo hier Perlon!» Über die Bewährungsproben eines neuen Textilfaserstoffes in den 1950er- und 1960er-Jahren» by Viola Hofmann in Ferrum 89/2017:
Künstliche Stoffe: Die synthetische Umformung der Welt



About the author

Tracey Panek



Tracey Panek is the Historian for Levi Strauss & Co. She manages the day-to-day workings of the Levi Strauss & Co. Archives as a key corporate asset, answering historical questions, assisting designers, brand managers, executives, and other employees whose work requires historical materials in the archives. She is a regular contributor to "Unzipped", the company's blog, writing about company history, vintage Levi's® garments, and behind the scenes and archives highlights. Tracey is the media spokesperson for Levi Strauss & Co. heritage. Prior to joining LS&Co., Tracey spent 14 years as Historian and Archivist at AAA Northern California, Nevada & Utah where she managed a corporate history program for the 100+ year old company. She began her corporate history career at AirTouch Communications – today Verizon and Vodafone –, a San Francisco based company that launched cellular service at the Los Angeles Olympics in 1984.

Levi Strauss & Co. San Francisco, USA
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Picture credits

1-2 Levi Strauss & Co. Archives

Annotations

- 1 Daniel Miller, Sophie Woodward: *Global Denim*. Oxford 2011, p. 1.
- 2 Jim N. Liles: *The Art and Craft of Natural Dyeing. Traditional Recipes for Modern Use*. Knoxville 1990, p. 53.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Rachel Feltman: *The "Blue" for Your Blue Jeans Was First Made 200 Years Ago in Peru*. In: *The Washington Post* (September 16, 2016).
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- 6 Los Angeles Times Photographic Archive [Collection 1429]. Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.
- 7 Doug Hansen (who donated a pair of 501s to the Levi Strauss & Co. Archives) is a Professor in the Department of Art and Design at Fresno State University.
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