

20993878 | COMMST 491

JEANS

THE DENIM PARADOX

How did clothing made for miners and workers become a luxury and trendy item?

THE \$1000 PAIR OF JEANS

Luxury denim today
Why people pay hundreds or thousands for jeans

AVA SCHMALZ

FROM WORKWEAR TO LUXURY

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THE END OF OUR STORY





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SOURCES



History of Denim

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FROM *THE* EDITOR

This magazine was created for COMMST 491, a course that explores how clothing communicates. For this project, I decided to focus on jeans, an item of clothing that appears simple and ordinary, yet carries a complex history and many layers of social meaning. Although jeans are often seen as a practical and stylish everyday staple, their story extends far beyond their appearance.

As someone who has always loved wearing jeans, I became interested in how one piece of clothing can represent different ideas depending on the time, place, and people wearing it. Throughout history, jeans have symbolized hard work, rebellion, individuality, fashion, and cultural identity. They have been worn by miners, workers, activists, celebrities, and everyday people around the world, transforming from durable workwear into a global fashion icon. Through this magazine, I explore the hidden history behind jeans and how this seemingly basic item of clothing communicates much more than we may initially realize.

Rea Marie Schmalz



“JEANS ARE
FOREVER.”

— Yves Saint Laurent



THE DENIM PARADOX

Denim was created for practicality, not fashion. Originally worn by miners, railroad workers, and labourers, jeans were designed to withstand hard work. Today, however, luxury brands sell denim for hundreds or even thousands of dollars. Although the fabric has changed very little, its social meaning has transformed completely.

Once a symbol of the working class, jeans are now a status symbol. They are worn to express style, identity, and wealth rather than simply serving a practical purpose. Even ripped jeans, once the result of physical labour, are now intentionally distressed and sold at premium prices, with consumers paying more for clothing that appears worn.



Miners Uniform



Railroad Workers Jeans



Sold for thousands of dollars.



Jeans communicate far more than function. Their price and brand often signal status and exclusivity rather than durability or quality. A pair of jeans from a luxury designer can communicate wealth, while a nearly identical pair from a budget retailer may not. This reflects **conspicuous consumption**—the practice of purchasing expensive goods to display social status.

The denim paradox is that a garment created for labour has become a luxury fashion icon. While denim itself has remained largely the same, what it communicates has shifted dramatically, from necessity and hard work to fashion, identity, and status.





HISTORY OF JEANS

1873

A labourer's wife asks Jacob Davis to make durable work pants that won't fall apart. Davis reinforces the pants with metal rivets at stress points, such as pocket corners and the button fly.

He riveted pants become an immediate success. Davis decides to patent the idea but needs financial support, so he approaches Levi Strauss to become his business partner.

On May 20, 1873, the blue jean was officially born when Levi Strauss and Jacob Davis received a U.S. patent for reinforcing men's work pants with metal rivets.

This date is widely recognized as **the birth of the blue jean**.

The first riveted denim work pants are manufactured and sold. They are originally known as "waist overalls" or "overalls."

Made from brown duck, a sturdy cotton fabric, the first pair featured the riveted pockets, button fly and waistband patch that remain characteristic of jeans today. The first jeans were produced in two versions: indigo blue denim and brown duck.

1890

Originally worn by miners and cowboys, jeans gradually became everyday clothing worn by people of all ages, social classes and lifestyles. In the 1890s, Levi Strauss & Co. introduced the 501 Original Fit Jeans, a style that would become one of the world's best-selling garments.

1960

The term "jeans" becomes popular as Baby Boomers adopt the name for denim pants.

NOW

Blue jeans remain one of the world's most popular garments, with their origins going directly back to the first riveted pair created by Levi Strauss and Jacob Davis... **How did they become so popular?**



LEVI STRAUSS JEANS, 1875-96,
SMITHSONIAN'S NATIONAL MUSEUM OF
AMERICAN HISTORY

The very first pair of jeans.



THE UNIFORM

Jeans were originally designed around practicality, not fashion. As we know, the early versions were work trousers designed to survive physically demanding labour. Workers needed clothing that could withstand constant movement, dirt and mud, heavy tools, friction, and repeated bending and kneeling.

DENIM WAS VALUED BECAUSE IT WAS A STRONG AND DURABLE FABRIC.

The miners helped establish the reputation of jeans. During the expansion of the American West, mining was extremely physically demanding. Miners regularly damaged or tore their trousers while working. Levi Strauss sold workwear materials to businesses serving mining communities.

OF THE WORKING

THE NEED FOR STRONGER TROUSERS BECAME PARTICULARLY IMPORTANT IN MINING COMMUNITIES.

CLASS

Jacob Davis, a tailor from Nevada, progressed the pants and made them even more useful for workers. His customers included labourers who needed trousers that would not constantly fall apart. One customer's wife asked Davis to make a pair of pants for her husband that would withstand his hard labour. Davis reinforced the areas that tore the most and added copper rivets. The rivets strengthened places such as pocket corners and the base of the button fly.

THE RIVETS WERE NOT ADDED FOR THE FASHION OR DECORATION, THEY WERE AN ENGINEERING SOLUTION TO A WORKERS PROBLEM.



THE UNNAMED LABOURER WHO INSPIRED THE RIVETED JEANS

A woman came to Jacob Davis and asked him to make a pair of trousers for her husband. Her husband, a local labourer, has a pair of pants that would constantly fall apart. Davis wanted to find a way to reinforce the pants so they would survive his work. Davis added the copper rivets at the points where the pants had stress. The design proved successful enough that other workers wanted the same jeans. Davis approached Levi and they worked together to patent the riveted work-pant design on May 20th, 1873.



"I WISH I HAD
INVENTED
BLUE JEANS"



As jeans became more popular, they spread beyond mining. They became associated with other forms of manual labour including: railroad workers, cowboys, lumber workers, farmers, factory workers, and construction workers. Railroad workers were particularly associated with denim because their jobs involved long hours of physical labour. By the late 19th century, denim had developed a reputation as clothing for people who worked with their hands.

Jeans became more than simply durable pants. Jeans became visually associated with hard work and physical labour. The appearance of worn denim actually demonstrated a purpose... fading showed use. Stains showed work. Tears and repairs showed wear. Unlike expensive formal clothing, jeans were meant to get dirty and get used. This made them particularly suited to the working life. Workers could now wear the evidence of their hard work.

Due to the jeans becoming a physical representation of the working class, miners, railroad workers and cowboys became closely connected with denim. Although the workers did not originally wear jeans to make a statement, people started wearing jeans for the appearance of hard work. Jeans eventually moved from being clothing for workers to clothing that represented workers.

FROM WORKWEAR TO REBELLION

In the 1950s, jeans moved from being workwear to a form of youth rebellion. This move started by Hollywood through the James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). In this movie, his jeans, white t-shirt, and leather jacket became an iconic image of the rebellious teenager. Jeans changed from a symbol of work to a symbol of independence and rejection of social expectations. Some schools banished jeans because they viewed them as inappropriate.

Young people wore jeans as a rejection of authority and traditional fashion. Jeans became popular among students and activists. Jeans became a form of “anti-fashion” because they were inexpensive and rejected traditional ideas of status.



**“FOR RALPH LAUREN, DENIM IS MORE
THAN A FABRIC.””**



In the 1970s, Jeans moved from being inexpensive to becoming a fashion product. Designers began experimenting with different cuts, colours, washes and styles. Jeans could now be worn for style and status, not just practicality. Brands such as Calvin Klein, Guess and Gloria Vanderbilt helped make designer jeans popular. Calvin Klein’s jeans became especially famous for combining denim with high-fashion advertising and celebrity appeal. Designer label were often displayed prominently, turning the brand itself into part of the appeal.

In the 1980s, Jeans become a status symbol. Designer denim was marketed as sexy and fashionable. Advertising campaigns, such as the Brook Shields advertisement, helped change the perception of jeans from casual workwear to something associated with wealth, attractiveness and lifestyle. Consumers were increasingly willing to pay significantly more for jeans simply because of the brand name.

Jeans originally represented the working class and rejection of social status... designer denim turned the same garment into a status symbol. The basic jeans remained similar, but the meaning changed.



THE \$1000 PAIR OF JEANS

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PAYING FOR THE NAME

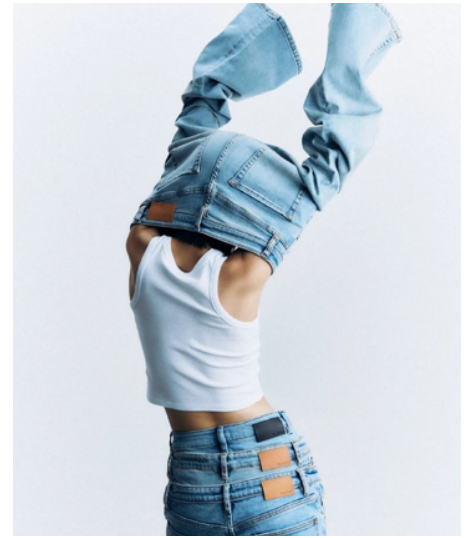
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By the late 1990s and early 2000s, some jeans were being sold for hundreds or even over \$1000. Premium denim brands used high-quality denim, specialized washes and treatments, hand finishing, detailed stitching and construction, limited production, and expensive branding and marketing. The price increasingly reflected brand value and exclusivity, not simply the cost of making the jeans.

True Religion became known for premium and expensive denim in the 2000s. Its jeans featured distinctive stitching and branding that made the label immediately recognizable. The brand helped establish jeans as luxury rather than just casual clothing. Some luxury denim brands pushed prices into the \$1000 range. At this point, consumers were paying for exclusivity.



MORE THAN JUST PANTS



Jeans have undergone a remarkable transformation. What began as durable workwear for miners, railroad workers and labourers eventually became a symbol of the working class, rebellion, youth culture, fashion and luxury. Although the physical garment has remained relatively similar, what jeans communicate has changed dramatically over time.

In the 1950s and 1960s, jeans became associated with rebellion and independence as young people adopted them to reject traditional expectations and authority. Hollywood, musicians and counterculture movements helped turn denim into a symbol of individuality. By the 1970s and 1980s, designers and celebrities transformed jeans again, introducing premium denim and turning the garment into a fashion and status symbol. Eventually, some jeans began selling for hundreds or even thousands of dollars.

This transformation demonstrates that the value of clothing is not determined solely by its material or function. A \$40 pair of jeans and a \$1,000 pair may serve the same basic purpose, yet they can communicate very different things about the person wearing them. Branding, price, celebrity influence and cultural associations can turn an ordinary garment into a symbol of wealth, taste or social status.

The history of jeans therefore demonstrates that clothing is never simply clothing. What we wear communicates our identity, our values and our place within society. Jeans may have started as something people wore because they needed durable pants, but today they can be worn to communicate almost anything. The garment stayed relatively the same; the meaning we gave it changed.



AVA MARIE SCHMALZ