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Denim – stylish, practical, timeless

Blue fabric with a history

17 October 2020 – 5 April 2021

Denim is an essential part of many people's basic wardrobe. Almost everyone owns at least one denim item. Today, however, denim is much more than just a fabric for clothing. One might think that denim and art have nothing to do with each other. Far from it. Many artists around the world have discovered denim as a material in its own right. This unique special exhibition shows the versatility and history of this popular material. It includes paintings by *The Master of the Blue Jeans* from the end of the late 17th century, jeans, denim jackets, bags, shoes, furniture and everyday objects, as well as sculptures or installations such as *The Secret Garden* by Ian Berry and the Panthers by Afran (Milan Art & Events Center).

The most widely used material in the world has a fascinating history that probably began in Italy before reaching America and its gold miners and movie stars. Have you ever wondered who invented the material from which the jeans you wear every day are produced? The story is quite captivating and there is an ongoing dispute between Italy and France about which city this hard-wearing fabric was born in. Now the most famous and most widely used material in the world, denim soon went from being a fabric for workwear to the undisputed star of contemporary fashion.

But what are jeans actually made of and where does the name come from? *De Nîmes* or rather *Gênes*? Over the years, historians have identified two fabrics outside the United States that could be the precursors of jeans: a durable fabric from the southern French city of Nîmes, from which the name *denim* is said to derive, and a cotton fabric from Genoa, Italy, which may have led to the English word *jeans* evolving from city's name as pronounced in French, *Gênes*. However, there is no historical evidence for either explanation.

It has been more than a hundred years since blue jeans were invented as practical and robust work trousers. Nobody could have imagined it back then, and certainly didn't plan for it to happen, but blue denim trousers have become a fashion item. Although they are newly styled and redesigned every year, the trousers worn by gold miners and cowboys have retained their most important features. They are comfortable and durable. But blue jeans did not just become trendy clothing, they are also considered a cult object. Because of their history, they have already served as a status symbol for a wide variety of movements. Today they are a part of the standard wardrobe of both workers and their bosses. Even heads of state, models and actors pose in front of the cameras in this comfortable leg attire. Nowadays blue jeans are available for both men and women, and for almost every occasion.

In this exhibition, which features approximately 125 objects, visitors are taken on a journey through the facets of this fascinating material. This special exhibition was created in collaboration with Ms. Liza Snook from the Virtual Shoe Museum in The Hague. We have succeeded in collecting and bringing together items on loan from various European museums, private collectors and

installations from galleries and artists all over the world. The exhibition can only be seen in this form in Basel.

Explanations and myths about the origin of this blue material

De Nîmes or rather Gênes? According to one myth, the hard-wearing fabrics for jeans originally came from the French city of Nîmes, and *Serge de Nîmes* therefore became denim for short. But even the derivation of the term *Blue Gênes* based on the colour of the material and the transport route from the port city of Genoa to America cannot be proven by historical facts. Research at the Musée de la Mode et du Costume, Paris, led to a material in Italy that was called Jean in the 16th century. It was made of cotton, linen and/or wool and originally came from Genoa. A fabric with silk and wool components known as *Serge de Nîmes* existed in France at the beginning of the 17th century. There was also another material called *Nim*, which was also partly made of wool. Both fabrics had a twill weave, but differed significantly in their composition from the later known denim made of 100 percent cotton.

Other research into the term *Serge de Nîmes* also led to the production of cloth in England at the end of the 17th century. The exact derivation of the terms *denim* and *jeans* remains unclear due to differing historical evidence and insufficient parallels, specifically concerning the composition of the material.

The secret of *The Master of the Blue Jeans*

Thanks to a loan from the Canesso Gallery, Paris, the exhibition presents a unique work of art in the history of this blue fabric from the end of the late 17th century. Mr. Maurizio Canesso acquired the first painting by this unknown master in 2004. In the sales catalogue it was described as *The Barber's Shop* from the Neapolitan School. Two years later, Mr. Canesso came across an article by Gerlinde Gruber, curator at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, about all the works of this unknown painter. His work then became known under the notname (an invented name given to an artist whose identity has been lost) of *Maestro della tela jeans (Master of the Blue Jeans)*, since his real name could not be established.

In a period of six years, Maurizio Canesso succeeded in acquiring almost the entire known work of *The Master of the Blue Jeans*. All these paintings evoke the same atmosphere. They depict interior scenes of poor but not miserable conditions. At least one figure stares at the spectator as if surprised to see him. The same applies to the painting in the exhibition. The woman in the picture looks directly at the visitors.

Like Caravaginan (based on Caravaggio, painter of the early baroque period) genre scenes, the oil paintings depict poor people, and all the paintings show at least one child. The artist's colour palette ranges from black and white and brown to gold, red and orange for flesh tones, and wisps of blue, green and orange-red, which are usually found in clothing. The backgrounds are deep brown.

Great attention is paid to clothing and pieces of fabric, which are often torn, ironed, creased, sewn in wide stripes, soiled, rolled or folded. Food or crockery can also be found in every painting.

The Maestro della tela jeans (*The Master of the Blue Jeans*) is described in art historical research as a genre painter who worked in the north of Italy from about 1675 to 1700. He possibly hailed from the region around Venice. The Italian artist, whose actual name is unknown, was given his notname based on the typical indigo blue fabric that can be seen in the clothing of his figures in all but one of his paintings. It is very reminiscent of modern blue jeans. The pictures by the *Master of the Blue Jeans* always show members of the poor classes of society. The works very much concentrate on clothing details. It was extremely unusual for a painter at that time to depict the poor population in such detail. In the painting *A Meal with a Woman and Two Children*, shown in the exhibition, the seated woman's apron is made of denim. The structure of the fabric is clearly visible on the hem and a tear on the side. Ten works by this artist are currently known.

This painting by the *Master of the Blue Jeans* casts aside existing theories of the origin of the indestructible cotton fabric. The blue of the fabric in the paintings is painted in exactly the same indigo tone that is still used for jeans today. The paintings from the end of the 17th century are attributed to the Venice region and not to the area around Genoa.

Perhaps one day, scientists will manage to find a conclusively answer to this question.

The early history of jeans

Löb Strauss was jointly responsible for laying the foundation for what would later become denim trousers. Strauss was born in 1829 in the Franconian town of Buttenheim near Bamberg, Germany, as the son of a Jewish peddler. As a small boy, he used to help his father to sell household utensils. They included fabrics and sewing accessories. This enabled Löb to gain experience for the sales profession at a very young age.

In 1848, three years after his father's death, he decided to emigrate to America with his mother and two of his sisters. Strauss initially worked in New York in the textile store that belonged to his two half-brothers, who had already built up a business in the USA two years earlier. He later travelled west towards California. He followed his commercial vocation and, like many others, caught gold rush fever. In 1853, Strauss arrived in San Francisco and opened his own textile wholesale store. He supplied many small shops with his wide range of clothing, fabrics, haberdashery and other household utensils. Three years later Strauss founded the company Levi Strauss with his two half-brothers. From then on, they jointly ran a wholesale business in textile imports from their two locations in San Francisco and New York. Thanks to his pioneering spirit, his wealth of ideas and his extensive network of contacts, Strauss was a millionaire by 1870. He also played a significant role in the upswing of America. His own production of working trousers and jeans did not start until 1873. After his death in 1902, four of his nephews continued to run the company Levi Strauss & Co. They played a significant part in the reconstruction of San Francisco after the earthquake and the major fire in the city in 1906. The company is still family-owned today.

The development of jeans with Levi's

There are many stories and myths surrounding the origin and the actual provenance of jeans. Some of them tell of gold miners and the work clothes they used to wear. The overtrousers they put on over their actual trousers for protection when working are supposed to be the predecessor

of our modern jeans. But there are no historical facts to back up this theory. Several historical records, which specifically concern the Levi Strauss company, were lost in the catastrophic earthquake of 1906. The first Levi's jeans trousers were developed jointly by Löb Strauss and Jacob Davis in 1873 and were initially worn as work trousers over actual clothing. Davis, a tailor, was a Strauss customer at the time and found a solution to the frequent tearing of stressed pocket corners in the form of a copper rivet. In those days, this type of rivet was used for securing horse harnesses. Strauss and Davis became business partners and shared their knowledge and the money for the rivet patent, which they held from 1873 to 1890. In order to avoid scratching or damaging benches, saddles or the like, copper rivets were attached to the inside of the rear of the trousers from 1937 onwards. Today, most of them have rounded studs so that seat surfaces such as sofas or car seats are spared from the damage otherwise caused by pressure and friction when sitting down. The trousers' back pockets with their double decorative curved stitching became the unique and unmistakable Levi's look early on. In 1880, Strauss opened his first sewing shop in cooperation with Davis. Until then, the trousers were made from home. In 1886, the rear waistband of the trousers was decorated with the then still genuine leather rectangle bearing the Levi's emblem, the typical two draught horses.

In 1890, the famous 501® model went into production, and the five-pocket trousers with two back patch pockets were launched in 1901. The belt loops on the waistband followed in 1922, enabling the user to hold up the trousers with a belt around the waist. The original spelling *LEVI'S* existed until 1971. The current form of *Levi's* followed later.

In the beginning, Levi's trousers were available in two materials, cotton duck and denim. Due to the reduced demand for cotton duck fabrics, Strauss and Davis later concentrated exclusively on various types of denim.

The triumphant conquest of jeans through Europe

The real triumph of blue jeans began in the 1920s, by which time the two inventors had long since died. Jeans were by now prevalent as working-class trousers in America. The trousers were still dyed in the same indigo blue, the shade to which blue jeans ultimately owe their name.

The cut had likewise not changed in all these years. After all, the workers were satisfied with the comfortable fit of the trousers. Nobody made fashionable demands. The blue jeans simply had to be hard-wearing, long-lasting, and not pinch the wearer as they moved.

The requirements for jeans changed in around 1930, when the functional suspenders were replaced by the fashionable belt. As the former workers' trousers were now also worn by the youth of America, blue jeans became a symbol of rebellion. They were considered a public sign of protest against tradition and authority. Thus, the fashion history of these trendy trousers began – and has been unstoppable ever since.

The Second World War, during which many American soldiers fought on European soil, brought blue jeans to Europe. Jeans had been successfully integrated into army clothing in the United States. Although the leg garment worn by foreign soldiers, initially known in Germany as *Texashose* (Texas trousers) or *Nietenhose* (rivet trousers), did not get off to an easy start, it finally won through.

After initial resistance, the trendy trousers made their breakthrough. The first blue jeans were finally produced in Europe shortly after the end of the war, as part of the reconstruction process. The German factory by the name of L. Hermann in Künzelsau took over their production. This jeans manufacturer still exists today, although for the last 60 years, the former clothing manufacturer has been known by the name *Mustang*. The name is supposed to reflect the American lifestyle of the Wild West.

The former workers' trousers from the United States had already increased their popularity in Germany and the rest of Europe to such an extent that they became a cult symbol in various respects. To this day, jeans have not lost this cult status.

Thanks to loans from private collections, this exhibition has succeeded in showing the development of the history of jeans.

Women and jeans

As the trousers of workers and cattle herders, blue jeans were of course originally reserved for men. However, they are now an established part of ladies' wardrobes. Since women have discovered trousers for themselves, blue jeans have enjoyed ever-increasing popularity. As a comfortable leg garment worn by gold miners and workers, jeans had to withstand extensive tearing tests. Their cut and material were adapted to rough conditions.

Today's women's jeans are still hard-wearing, robust and durable, while also meeting female requirements. Women who fall in love with denim trousers do not have to wear men's clothing, but can find the right blue jeans to suit every figure and almost every occasion.

In the 1930s, jeans started to appeal to women as well. This was when the *Levi's Lady L* model became popular with female riders as durable trousers. In everyday life, however, women wearing jeans were still frowned upon. It wasn't until the 1950s that self-confident women began to wear unisex jeans, as they no longer wanted to limit themselves to skirts and dresses. In 1954 Marilyn Monroe was the first woman on screen to slip on this characteristic garment for a Hollywood movie.

Jeans styles were available for women in Germany in as early as 1953. The first women's jeans were referred to as girls' camping trousers. As was customary at the time, the stylish ladies' trousers had their zipper on the side. They were produced at the German jeans factory L. Hermann, or Mustang. In contrast to the first ladies' jeans in America, the German version was not reserved for the ladies of the wealthy upper class, but was affordable for every woman.

This practical and sporty garment has been accompanying the fashion world for over 140 years. And there's no end in sight. On the contrary, practically every haute couture show includes a piece of denim.

Levi's 501, the cult jeans

There is certainly only one garment in the whole world that has victoriously survived over 140 years of fashion among rich and poor, big and small, skinny and plus sizes: Levi's 501 jeans.

Despite the great variety of styles with different washes, different fits and various styling options, the mother of all blue jeans still exists. As these are the trousers that launched jeans as a fashion

item, they deserve a special mention. Their cut is neither excessively wide nor too tight. This makes them equally as suitable for men and women.

Even though the model did not have its registration number in 1873 when it was first created, it is the oldest style of jeans in the world. The Levi's 501's cut may have changed little over the years, but its intrinsic value has increased with every decade. What was once invented as a pair of solid, simple work trousers has become a cult object around the world. Even after more than a century, the progenitor of all jeans is still among the hottest blue jeans in the world.

In 1890, Levi Strauss & Co. introduced registration numbers for their trouser styles. These work trousers made of cotton with the straight cut and the concealed button facing were given the number 501. A number that stands for timeless fashion, rebellion, emancipation and a piece of cultural history.

While these practical trousers were initially only popular and highly coveted in the United States, they began their triumphant advance in Europe during and after the Second World War. American soldiers wore Levi's 501 jeans even when they were far away from home, which attracted the attention of British and German soldiers in particular due to their robust yet comfortable style.

After the war, television and cinema helped to increase the popularity of blue jeans. Famous actors wore the trousers in films which soon became cult movies. This is also how Levi's 501 achieved its cult status, which it has maintained to this day.

Hollywood star Marlon Brando, who made men's jeans a status symbol for rebellious youth in his film *The Wild One*, is partly responsible for their world fame. James Dean also wore Levi's 501 jeans in his films. Marilyn Monroe gave a touch of sex appeal to original jeans when she became the first woman to wear a pair in the western *A River of No Return*. At the same time, men's jeans now stood for the independence of women. In the 1960s, jeans became the symbol of the peace movement and in the 1970s, they were the icon of the gay movement.

In the 1980s, these cult trousers were almost a trademark of Steve Jobs, the co-founder of Apple. Levi's 501 jeans have not only survived every fleeting trend, but as an exceptional garment could easily become a reflection of the latest tendencies. Barack Obama utilized these cult trousers as part of his election campaign in 2008. During his first election campaign, the future president of the United States stood before his voters in a pair of Levi's 501 jeans.

Denim production

The material that starts out as cotton in a field must undergo numerous processes and steps before you can buy ready-to-wear jeans in a shop. Different machines are used and a lot of manpower is required. Besides the familiar raw material, various auxiliary materials are also needed. It is an elaborate technique that has long since ceased to take place in one country and in one place, but is spread over many stations in several countries.

Aided by globalization, the trousers are planned and designed in the country where the label is based. However, production has been moved to a place where labour is cheaper. And the raw material is again imported from another country. By the time the jeans are ready for sale on the boutique shelf, they have already been imported and exported several times over.

Of course, the weaving of the fabric cannot start directly after the cotton harvest. First, the cotton threads of different lengths must be spun into one long cotton yarn. When the white natural yarn is finally finished and wound up, it is not yet ready to be woven. In contrast to the usual procedure, the weaving thread is dyed instead of the finished trousers. This is what gives jeans their typical look.

Denim is unique in that the weft thread is white, in other words, processed in its natural state. The warp thread on the other hand is dyed indigo blue. If the finished fabric was dyed blue rather than the yarn, jeans would be uniformly blue. This special process gives denim fabric its iconic look.

The next step after weaving the fabric is to sew the trousers. In order to make this as economical as possible, most modern jeans manufacturers have moved this production step to poor countries where labour is cheap. It goes without saying that today, trousers are no longer made by one seamstress at a time. Instead, many seamstresses share the work between them.

If jeans were still simple, hard-wearing worker trousers, they could go on sale after this step. But because these cult trousers are becoming more and more fashionable nowadays, an extra finishing step is added. The different prints, washes, styles and patterns are specifically integrated at this stage.

Jeans and the environment

Since the production of these eternally trendy trousers is still quite costly, even today, efforts are being made to produce the internationally popular trousers in a more environmentally friendly and socially acceptable way. Nowadays, women's and men's jeans can be purchased as fair trade articles, as mass products off the peg or as unique designer pieces.

Modern denim production is one of the most chemical- and water-intensive sectors in the fashion industry. Faced with the pressure to minimize costs whilst maintaining the processes that give denim the styles designers and consumers want, it is not easy to eliminate these effects.

Conventional denim production can be toxic. This begins with the cultivation of the cotton used to make jeans. Artificial fertilizers, pesticides and other environmental toxins are often used in large quantities to improve the harvest. Ten percent of the pesticides used each year ends up in cotton fields, for example. It takes 10,000 liters of water to produce just one kilogram of cotton.

Chemicals are also used to finish the jeans. After the manufacturing process, these chemicals are discharged unfiltered into the environment and end up in groundwater. That is why the production of many jeans brands does not take place within Europe, but in countries where the laws for nature conservation are not as strict. The workers in the factories not only handle large quantities of pollutants, in many cases they do so badly or without any protection whatsoever. As in other areas of the textile industry, workers usually receive wages that are far from fair. It often doesn't matter whether you choose no-name jeans in a bargain market or expensive brand jeans in a designer shop. These unequal products partly come from similar production lines.

What is different about fair and organic jeans? In order to produce sustainable and fair cotton, more pest-resistant types of cotton are used, and cultivation is moved to more suitable growing regions. As a result, 60 to 80 percent of the pesticides normally used can be reduced and 70

percent of the water consumption can be saved. As for the cotton in organic jeans, environmental protection begins with the seeds. They are neither genetically manipulated nor chemically treated. Furthermore, the *organic* label on jeans means that no pesticides are used for the cultivation of the cotton. Instead, pests are controlled with natural scent attractants and the fields are kept free of weeds with a hoe rather than with sprays. Chemicals are also avoided as far as possible in the further production of organic jeans, for example through environmentally friendly dyeing, through natural methods of colour retention or through finishing with gentle laser technology. This also saves a lot of water, since no toxic chemicals have to be rinsed out. In the case of fairly produced jeans, manufacturers pay attention to fair wages and reasonable working hours. Child labour, which is otherwise a frequent problem, is not tolerated in fair production. Many of the jeans produced in this way are made in Europe. They do not necessarily have to be more expensive than conventional versions.

For the sake of the environment, it would be desirable to extend the life of jeans. Garments should therefore be washed as rarely as possible. When washing, it also helps to turn the jeans inside out, rinse them by hand with cold water and dry them in the fresh air. If the jeans smell a little, but are actually not dirty at all, they should simply be hung up in the bathroom while showering, so that the steam removes the odors, or alternatively be placed in the freezer for a few hours. This last tip comes from Levi's boss Chip Bergh himself.

Denim and art

Some people think that the two probably have nothing to do with each other. Others have been waiting for this combination for a very long time and are now finally rewarded. There is a fusion of art and fashion quite often in fashion, especially in haute couture. It is not unusual to see real works of art walking the catwalk during a fashion week. It is also clear from the catwalk creations that denim is not about extreme garments or haute couture dresses. The character of denim can never be ignored or passed over. It is always visible. All the great designers such as Dolce & Gabbana, Tommy Hilfiger and even Dior are now part of this trend. But denim also goes far beyond fashion.

In the exhibition you can see some installations and art objects made of this fascinating and versatile material. Artists from all over the world have discovered denim for themselves. Recycling and upcycling are often the point of focus. This is because the production of this material is extremely harmful to the environment. But there are also poetic approaches such as Ian Berry's *The Secret Garden* or impressive sculptures such as the Panthers by Afran (Milan Art & Events Center). You will find things that are surprising, dreamy and bizarre in this exhibition. But they all have one thing in common: denim is the basic material.

Indigo – the dye for jeans

Indigo is a deep blue, crystalline organic-chemical compound. This pigment has a high level of colour strength and is not easily soluble in water. Indigo is one of the oldest and best-known pigments and was already used in prehistoric times for dyeing textiles. In the past, indigo was obtained from plant sources such as the leaves of woad or the indigo plant. From 1865 onwards, Adolf von Baeyer carried out a series of studies in which he developed various synthesis methods

for indigo and determined its chemical structure. He received the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 1905 for his work on dye chemistry.

As industrial synthesis processes developed towards the end of the 19th century, the large-scale and thus cost-effective production of indigo began, whereupon the market for natural indigo collapsed. Today, tens of thousands of tons of indigo are synthetically produced each year and mainly used to dye denim cotton fabrics for the production of blue jeans.

In 2011, denim dyeing consumed more than 95 percent of the approximately 50,000 tons of synthetic indigo produced annually. This makes it one of the most widely used pigments for textile dyeing, which serves to dye over one billion blue jeans a year.

Today, research into indigo production and usage focuses on the development of low-water dyeing processes or electrochemical reduction to Leucoindigo and the use of water as a solvent for the synthesis and recrystallization of indigo. Indigo is one of the most widespread and frequently used colourants, and has been since ancient times.

Children's booklet, workshop and competition

Our young visitors have the opportunity to explore the exhibition with our Professor *Jeansly* and an accompanying booklet. The somewhat absent-minded professor asks questions about denim, the artists or the objects on display. Don't worry, you don't have to be a scientist to find the solutions. All you need are open eyes, a little patience and perhaps the help of a grown-up sometimes.

Adults and children from the age of six can *decorate* their individual jeans sports bag in our workshops as part of the special exhibition. Who owns such a unique bag? Probably only very few people. But that can soon change. Just come along and join in. Different denim fabrics in various colors and with imaginative prints, rivets, buttons, butterflies and much more are provided free of charge. No registration is required.

In line with the motto of this special exhibition *Denim —stylish, practical, timeless*, in our competition we are looking for the most unique denim masterpiece. The jeans sports bag will be available free of charge at the Spielzeug Welten Museum Basel from 17 October 2020. All the bags will be displayed in our shop windows for judging in January 2021.

Facts & Figures

Opening hours

Museum, Tuesday to Sunday from 10 to 18

Museum, in December, daily from 10 to 18

Ristorante La Sosta and Boutique, daily from 9.30 to 18

The Swiss Museum Pass and the Museum-PASS are valid for the *Spielzeug Welten Museum Basel*.

Admission

CHF 7.00/5.00

Children up to 16 years of age are free when accompanied by an adult.

No additional charge for the special exhibition.

The building is accessible by wheelchair.

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