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HISTORY OF DENIM: FORMATION AND TRANSFORMATION OF A TEXTILE PHENOMENON

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ABSTRACT

Denim is one of the most significant textile materials that has influenced not only fashion but also socio-cultural processes of the 19th–21st centuries. Initially serving as a durable work fabric, denim gradually acquired the status of a global cultural symbol associated with the democratization of clothing, self-expression, and mass culture. This article examines the origins of denim, its transformation across different historical periods, and the specific features of its cultural reception.

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Introduction

1. European Origins of Denim

The etymology of the term “denim” derives from the French expression *serge de Nîmes* (“serge from Nîmes”). In the 17th century, the city of Nîmes produced a durable serge fabric distinguished by its diagonal weaving. At the same time, in Genoa, Italy, a coarse blue-dyed cotton fabric was manufactured, known as *bleu de Gênes* (“blue from Genoa”), from which the term “jeans” later originated.

Thus, the emergence of denim as a textile phenomenon is directly linked to the European textile industry of the Early Modern period.

2. Industrialization and the American Context

In the 19th century, amid industrialization and the active settlement of the western territories of the United States, there arose a demand for inexpensive and durable clothing for workers, farmers, and prospectors. In 1873, entrepreneur Levi Strauss and tailor Jacob Davis patented denim work trousers reinforced with copper rivets.

This innovation not only increased the wear resistance of clothing but also laid the foundations for the emergence of an entire industry. Jeans became an integral element of work uniforms in the United States from the late 19th to the early 20th century.

3. Denim as a Symbol of the Working Class (Early 20th Century)

In the first half of the 20th century, jeans were primarily associated with representatives of the working class. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, denim became a symbol of economy and reliability. At the same time, the fabric began to penetrate the cultural sphere: *Vogue* magazine first presented jeans in the context of fashion photography, which signaled the beginning of their social re-evaluation.

4. The Postwar Era and Youth Movements

After the Second World War, denim spread beyond the United States owing to American soldiers who wore jeans in everyday life. In the 1950s, denim acquired new meanings: cinema made it a symbol of rebellious youth (Marlon Brando in *The Wild One*, James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause*). Thus, jeans were transformed from workwear into a cultural marker of protest.

5. Cultural Expansion of the 1960s–1970s

The 1960s and 1970s were marked by the diversification of denim. Within the context of the hippie movement, jeans became a means of self-expression: they were decorated with embroidery, appliqués, and flared designs. At the same time, rock culture contributed to the strengthening of denim’s symbolic status.

A key moment was the emergence of designer jeans (Calvin Klein, Gloria Vanderbilt), which signaled the transition of denim from the realm of mass clothing to the category of a fashionable product.

6. Jeans in the USSR

The appearance of jeans in the USSR marked the beginning of the “jeans fever,” which started in 1957 with the World Festival of Youth and Students. Jeans were perceived as a symbol of Western freedom and became both an object of cult status and speculation, obtained with great difficulty and at high prices. In the 1960s, the authorities waged a campaign against speculators. During the 1970s–1980s, jeans became more accessible as they began to be officially imported, yet they remained expensive and highly desired, which led to the emergence of so-called *fartsovshchiki*.

Fartsovshchiki: The rise of unofficial trade in jeans, where they were purchased and resold at significant markups. Soviet production began only after the 1980 Moscow Olympics, although it could not compete in quality with Western counterparts. A hunt for jeans developed, with the first Soviet and imported copies appearing (for example, “Texasy,” as well as products from Poland, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Hungary,

and the GDR), but they were considered inferior to Western brands. Jeans were often brought in by foreigners or acquired through *fartsovshchiki*. Engaging in the trade of jeans could even result in prison sentences, as in the case of speculators Yan Rokotov and Vladislav Faibishenko, whose trial was held in 1961.

Jeans became a symbol of the Western way of life, freedom, and protest against the Soviet system. After the 1980 Olympics, the USSR established its own jeans production, for example at the Kalinin (Tver) garment factory.

7. The Emergence of Denim in Uzbekistan

Jeans reached Uzbekistan from the USSR through various channels: via currency tourists, sailors, diplomats, and students who brought them as part of their personal luggage. Another channel was the “shadow” market, where jeans were sold by *fartsovshchiki* (speculators) from major cities, as well as through official but extremely limited sales in specialized shops such as *Beryozka*. These shops allowed Soviet citizens with access to foreign currency or special vouchers to purchase them.

8. Globalization of Denim (1980s–1990s)

In the 1980s, denim became an object of global consumption. This period was marked by a diversification of styles (skinny, acid wash, ripped jeans), as well as the formation of a premium segment.

In the 1990s, jeans finally acquired the status of universal clothing, adopted across various subcultures: grunge (ripped models), hip-hop (baggy jeans), and also became part of the collections of leading fashion houses.

9. Contemporary Stage (2000s – 21st Century)

At the beginning of the 21st century, denim established itself as a global, universal textile phenomenon. The emergence of premium denim brands (True Religion, 7 for All Mankind) testifies to its integration into the luxury fashion segment.

The contemporary denim market is characterized simultaneously by a trend toward retrospection (revival of styles from past decades) and innovation (eco-denim, recycled cotton).

Conclusion

The history of denim demonstrates the unique evolution of a textile material from regional production in the 17th century to a global symbol of the 21st century. At different historical stages, denim embodied diverse social meanings: workwear, a symbol of frugality, a marker of rebellion, an element of subcultural identity, and ultimately, a universal object of both mass and elite fashion.

Thus, denim represents not only a textile phenomenon but also a socio-cultural one, reflecting changes in social structures and consumer culture over more than three centuries.

This article was written based on the study of various scholarly works, journal articles, and responses to direct questions from publicly available websites, as well as information from the Google application and Wikipedia.