

GENIUS LOCI

LASZLOVSZKY 60

edited by
Dóra Mérai
and

Ágnes Drosztmér, Kyra Lyublyanovics,
Judith Rasson, Zsuzsanna Papp Reed,
András Vadas, Csilla Zatykó



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Tangible Cultural Heritage: The Early History of Blue Jeans

MARCELL SEBŐK*

An image by the Master of the Blue Jeans

Some five years ago, when I stood in front of a painting together with my students, I was literally struck by the “realism” of a beggar boy, a street urchin, looking at me (Fig. 1). The image was shown in the exhibition entitled *Caravaggio to Canaletto* in the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, in a room that contained a number of similar canvases. Besides the boy’s desperate gaze and the exhaustive details of the image, his jacket attracted my attention. Close observation of his garment revealed it as a blue jeans’ jacket.

Weeks later I visited the exhibition again to have another look at the boy (whose official tag under the image was *A Beggar Boy with a Piece of Pie*) and I also purchased the exhibition catalogue, which offered a meticulous summary on the possible painter and the possible origins of the image.¹ It turned out that art historical research cannot identify the artist, but labels him as the Master of Blue Jeans from seventeenth-century Lombardy. Since his recent discovery, a private collector has devotedly started to assemble all his available portraits, which resulted in an exhibition on “a new painter of reality in late seventeenth-century Europe” in the Galerie Canesso, Paris in 2010.²

Ever since, I still wonder about this image, but not from an art historical perspective; it is rather noteworthy to have such an accurate representation of blue jeans from the Early Modern Period, which generates a fairly simple question: How could that be? Or in other words: How could a young beggar wear blue jeans painted so realistically? Therefore, here I briefly deal with some correlations amongst the history of textiles and



► Fig. 1. *A Beggar Boy with a Piece of Pie* by the Master of the Blue Jeans. Source: *The Master of the Blue Jeans. Exhibition Catalogue* (Paris: Galerie Canesso, 2010), 37.

networks of material culture with regard to blue jeans or denim and have no intention of solving the problem of authorship.³

It seems that there is a predominant conviction, mostly in popular histories, that blue jeans belong to the classical American tradition, and were designed in the nineteenth century by the German-born Levi Strauss. As persuasive as it is, this origin story is false; although Levi Strauss was in fact an innovative businessman who made a fortune out of his invention, it had nothing to do with the origins of blue jeans.⁴

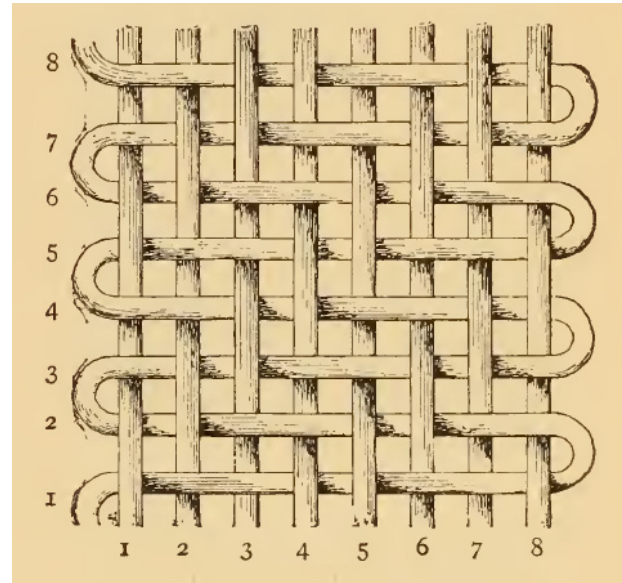
* Department of Medieval Studies, Central European University, Budapest

Three cities, three fabrics

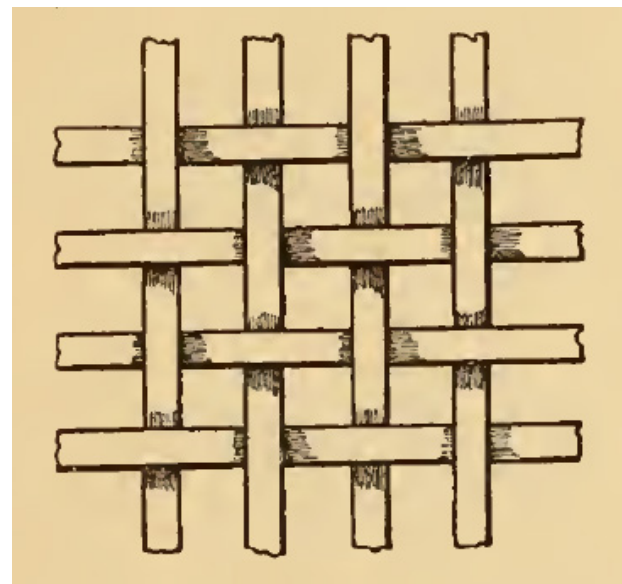
Looking into the scholarship and local histories in search of blue jeans reveals three main locations, Nîmes, France; Genoa, Italy; and Dungri, India, and consequently pinpoint three products: denim, jeans, and dungarees.

Nîmes, a city in the Occitanie region of southern France between Montpellier and Avignon, provided homes for a number of families involved in the silk industry from the Middle Ages onwards. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Andrés were one of the prominent Protestant families in Nîmes who established trading posts all over the world. Joseph André operated his business and built his fortune in the silk industry and commercialization of *Serge de Nîmes* (silk of Nîmes), the famous “de Nîmes” – or denim. This fabric, made of wool and silk beginning in the sixteenth century, was used to make fustians (cords or corduroy) and casaquins (a robe worn as a jacket for informal wear) for local people. The wool came from sheep rearing and the silk from the *magnaneries* (Occitan silkworm houses), silk farms in the Cévennes Mountains. Silk and wool were later replaced by the less expensive cotton, imported from Africa and Asia. Following the withdrawal of the Edict of Nantes by Louis XIV in 1685 (a decree protecting Protestants in the region), the André family had to go into exile. They found refuge in Genoa at one of the important trading posts.

There seems to be agreement about the etymology of “denim,” since it derives from the city name. Denim was a solid cotton textile and proved to be strong and adaptable thanks to the twill stitch (Fig. 2), which produces a diagonal pattern. Diagonally woven (twill) cloth was sturdier and draped better than tabby (simple) weaves (Fig. 3), therefore they were in greater demand for both clothing and bedding. The textile industry in Nîmes also produced a particularly sturdy woolen fabric with a twill weave, which did well on the market. This led to product diversification and the city’s merchants began to export abroad, particularly to the flourishing English market.⁵ Thus, besides the ecclesiastical politics against Protestants, logical economic reasons fostered the expansion of textile products. Sales points were opened in two key cities, Cadiz and Genoa,



► Fig. 2. A diagram of twill weaving. Source: Emanuel Anthony Posselt, *Technology of Textile Design* (London, S. Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1889), 9, Fig.1



► Fig. 3. A diagram of plain or tabby weaving. Source: Posselt, *Technology of Textile Design*, 17, Fig 31.

in order to serve foreign markets, and Genoa was the departure point for goods destined for North America and the Levant.

According to some sources, from the fifteenth century on denim competed with fustian, a fabric produced in the village of Chieri, Province of Turin, which was transported to Genoa for export or used to produce sail bags and canvas. This type of thread was the first used for manufacturing work trousers, the predecessors of blue jeans. Genoese fustian was a medium quality fabric compared to that from Milan or Naples⁶

and had a reasonable cost, which led to Genoa's name being linked to a world-famous product for a long time. As for the name, and again, etymology: our use of the word "jeans" comes from the French word for Genoa: Gênes. Without going into further in-depth details of textile history, one can say that the story of jeans covers those of two fabrics and a garment. By definition, jeans are a cotton twill of a single color, recognizable by its oblique thread structure. Denim is also a cotton twill, but is particularized by indigo blue warp threads and unbleached weft threads. This explains the gradual fading proper to the aging of the fabric. By the seventeenth century in Europe, and by the end of the eighteenth century—when textile manufacturing was about to begin in North America, in Baltimore, for instance—the two words, *jeans* and *denim* did not overlap, but coexisted at the same time. Jeans was a fabric used for work clothes in general, while denim was coarser, considered to be of higher quality, and was used for over-garments such as overalls.⁷ Indigo denim, in which the warp thread is dyed while the weft thread is left white, became the most common denim. And looking at the beggar boy's jacket, we can see, as a result of the warp-faced twill weaving, that the outer surface of his cloth is dominated by blue warp threads and the other side is dominated by almost white (overused) weft threads.

Students of textile history tend to forget about another important part of the whole story: a denim predecessor known as *dungaree*, which was produced in India for hundreds of years. The word originates from the Hindi word *dungri* referring to a type of coarse and sturdy cloth. The word also goes back to Dongari Kapar at Bombay, where the rough cloth first got its name and its indigo color.⁸ According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word *dungaree* entered English with the meaning of indigo-blue sailors' trousers in the early seventeenth century, and the first element of the name of Donagari Killa ("hill fort"), is "the name of a fortification and the adjacent port near Mumbai, from which the cloth was originally traded."⁹ The entry also reflects the regular production of trousers and to the Portuguese sailors who purchased increasing amounts: wide-legged, blue-dyed, and hard-wearing dungarees. Simultaneously, sailors in the Genoese navy and Genoese stevedores –

both working on the docks of Genoa and the neighboring areas of southern France – also wore jeans or denim or dungarees.¹⁰ It should also be stressed that all the indigo needed for dyeing came from indigo plantations in India until the late nineteenth century.

Blue

Indigo (and its cultivation) was long known in India and it was traded from the fourth century BC. There is evidence for indigo manufacturing and commerce from Dioscorides and Marco Polo.¹¹ Indigo was praised for its medicinal qualities by Pliny the Elder and documented in Genoa as early as 1140. From the second part of the sixteenth century it spread throughout Europe because of intensified trade with the Middle and Far East.¹² Spain and Italy were the first two countries to accept the new product and Genoa's merchants were ready to use their entrepreneurial skills for successful distribution.¹³

Considering these processes and influences, along with noting that blue-colored cloth was commonly used for working class clothing all over Europe, we can also see blue—either as reflection of reality or at least as an apparent consequence of socio-economic changes—in seventeenth-century painting (such as in Italian *veduta* (panoramas) or genre scene paintings or scenes from Flanders) of individuals and groups of lower-middle-class figures. The beggar boy in the definitely oversized blue jeans jacket demonstrates all of these, although the jacket's specific provenance is still uncertain.¹⁴

Notes

¹ Zsuzsanna Dobos, Dóra Sallay, and Ágota Varda, eds., *Caravaggio to Canaletto. The Glory of Italian Baroque and Rococo Painting* (Budapest: Szépművészeti Múzeum, 2013), 338–339.

² Véronique Damian, ed., *The Master of the Blue Jeans. A New Painter of Reality in Late 17th Century Europe* (Paris: Galerie Canesso, 2010). The exhibition was curated by Gerlinde Gruber.

³ Art historian Gerlinde Gruber has dealt with the painter several times without solving the question of authorship; her latest article is: Gerlinde Gruber, "An Anonymous Master Known as the Master of the Blue Jeans: A Painter of Reality in Lombardy," in *The Master of the Blue Jeans*, 10–15.

⁴ An essay attempting to clarify the historical background from the perspective of Levi Strauss has been written by Lynn Downey, "A Short History of Denim," accessed Oc-

- tober 19, 2018, <https://www.levistrauss.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/A-Short-History-of-Denim2.pdf>.
- ⁵ Marzia Cataldi Gallo, “The Master of the Blue Jeans and the Mystique of Blue,” in *The Master of the Blue Jeans*, Catalogue, 23.
- ⁶ Maureen Fennell Mazzaoui, *The Italian Cotton Industry in the Later Middle Ages, 1100-1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 154–161.
- ⁷ Marie-Sophie Carron de la Carrière, Pascale Gorguet-Bal-lesteros, Catherine Join-Dieterle, and Nicole Pellegrin, *Histoires du jeans de 1750 à 1994* (Paris: Musée de la Mode et du Costume – Palais Galliera, 1994), 25–38.
- ⁸ There is but one short essay on this aspect: “Story of Denim Blue Jeans across the Eras,” accessed October 19, 2018. <https://cmes.uchicago.edu/sites/cmes.uchicago.edu/files/uploads/Global/New%20Story%20of%20Jeans.pdf>.
- ⁹ “dungaree,” Oxford English Dictionary, accessed October 19, 2018. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/58477?redirectedFrom=dungaree&>.
- ¹⁰ Michael C. Howard, *Transnationalism and Society: An Introduction* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Comp. Inc., 2011), 235.
- ¹¹ Asiaticus, “The Rise and Fall of the Indigo Industry in India,” *The Economic Journal* 22, no. 86 (1912): 237–247. (It was published by Wiley on behalf of the Royal Economic Society.)
- ¹² Michel Pastoureau, *Blue: The History of a Color* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 150.
- ¹³ Cataldi Gallo, “The Master of the Blue Jeans,” 24–25.
- ¹⁴ “Their [the clothes’] provenance may be traced to clothes handed down from one family member to another, or to use items received as gifts from some benefactor or the parish, although it is more plausible to consider the used clothing market, or theft as their source.” Cataldi Gallo, “The Master of the Blue Jeans,” 26.