

A man with a mustache, wearing a dark jacket, is seated in a workshop, focused on sewing a piece of denim on a machine. The workshop is cluttered with various tools, spools of thread, and denim fabric. The lighting is warm and focused on the man and his work.

# THE JEAN GENIE

ESSAY BY LISELOTTE GIRARD

# THE STORY OF A DENIM LOVER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PIERRE-LOUIS POMMERY  
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**My favorite trousers are not Levi's yet Georges, the founder of Maverick Repair Jeans in Paris and a true aficionado for 501s agrees to see it for consultation. After a diagnosis, he heads for the back of his shop. Slaloming between piles of previously pampered jeans, he opens the doors of his workshop to me. At first glance, it may seem a little cramped. It contains years of archives, works, and fabrics, as well as three sewing machines, one of which is an old leather workshop reformer.**



He settles down and plunges his hand into a mound of patches from previous repairs. “Nothing is lost here; everything is used,” he says with a wink. Then, with his glasses on, he places the patch on my trousers and activates the machine, which purrs gently. To my question “Is it cotton?” Georges answers in the affirmative and offers to tell me, during the repair, the interwoven story of the jeans and of his life.

# IN COTTON

The modern story for denim begins in Genoa, where a robust fabric made of wool and silk was produced and exported, which the Rosbifs christened “Jean” (Genoa with the English accent darling). Several maritime exchanges later, the denim fabric found its way into the hands of the weavers of Nîmes, famous for their famous denim, who added cotton twill for greater flexibility and comfort. The color-neutral fabric was again exported to Genoa to be dyed indigo blue, and then, in the opposite direction, they brought the cut back home to America, the cradle of cotton.

A luxurious fabric that became so popular in Europe, it even ended up in the illustrious gardens of Versailles, no less. Here Marie-Antoinette, who still had her wits about her, dreamed of herself as a peasant in her little Trianon. It was here, in a gown made of simple cotton muslin and with no jewels, she was immortalized by her official portraitist Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun, in a painting entitled Marie Antoinette in a Chemise Dress (1783). The court was stunned by this little ol’ outfit, and the portrait caused a scandal when it was shown at the Salon de la Peinture in 1783. However, Marie being an influencer before its time, the whole of Paris and then Europe rushed to follow it: cotton was a hit, and demand exploded.

American industry at the time had a way to satisfy this astronomical demand: convert the stolen Native American lands into cotton fields and kidnap, eradicate, kill, and enslave millions of people from Africa into forced labor. Slavery quickly became an essential economic mechanism in the US. By the eve of the American Civil War, the United States supplied the vast majority of Great Britain and France’s raw cotton. The Union’s victory under Abraham Lincoln ended the war and led to the eventual abolition of slavery, however, the ordeal was not over for many. Internal migration and the forced displacement of people from the South to abolitionist states in the North and West moved millions of people in the years that followed. With

the advent of mechanized cotton picking, made manual labor largely obsolete.

Georges pauses on the pedal and thus on the thread of his story. He turns my jeans to the side in order to respect their weave. “It’s what makes the trompe-l’œil effect. It’s a trick to blend the repair into the existing garment by giving movement to the fabric,” he tells me.

It’s true that with a job like this, he could have been named Jean. But his parents decided otherwise. As a child, he grew up in the working-class Parisian neighborhood of Belleville. With a village-in-the-city feel, the neighborhood was once a place for the social protests of les Communards. Today, however, the hilly area is in the hands of craftsmen whose shops and other businesses abound. When it comes to how his upbringing looked, there is no trace of “Made in France.” Instead, it was English tweed for the whole family.

Georges’ father was a guide and brought his clothes from England to keep him warm during the long days working on the Parisian streets. It was through his father that his titillation for fashion originated and gave Georges the desire to do an apprenticeship in the workshop for a small knitting business, where he discovered weaving and industrial design. As far as jeans were concerned back then, “it’s a no-go,” explains Georges. In France at the time, jeans were still too much associated with thugs, hooligans, and the masses. However, against all odds, the mayonnaise finally took hold. In the early 1970s, the denim revolution took off in France and overnight went from shunned to snatched up! “Demand exploded, and everyone was surprised, including the denim giants. Wrangler was out of stock for six months, and American production was saturated, as it was not until the 1980s that it was exported. It was madness,” remembers Georges. “There was something electric in the air, like a turning point.”

# OF GOLD



# AND PATINA

At this point in his story, Georges turns to those who dared to go into the great unknown more than a century ago. In the middle of the 19th century, hundreds of thousands of people traveled to California in the hope of making their fortune. The race for gold nuggets led to new needs for equipment. Until then, gold miners used everyday clothes for their work, customized according to their means and

imagination. Levi Strauss understood this well. He combined one such import, tent fabrics, with the know-how of tailor Jacob Davis, combining the tough material to create big, rigid, and robust overalls in either blue or brown. Worn over clothes and whose cut met the needs of their miner customers. The beginnings of workwear had emerged.

Little by little, jeans became the typical worker’s garment. Their high, wide, strappy cut allowed greater freedom of movement and were good value for money. Although an ideal shape for gold miners and farmers, cowboys grumbled about the cut. At their request, jeans were adjusted and reinforced with leather patches at the crotch, nicknamed California pants, to avoid chafing during horseback rides. The innovations were in perpetual ebullition: folded seams, double stitching to reinforce solidity, and straps replaced by belt loops. The zenith of the idea was reached by Strauss once again with his collaborator Davis in 1873. Together, they filed a patent for copper rivet pockets to compensate for the weakness of denim fabric. The name of this little newcomer? The 501 jeans.

Georges is a big fan. Why are these his favorite jeans? He loves everything about them: the cut, the swallows, the shape. But also, the history. It’s no coincidence that his shop window is full of Levi’s. Located at the gates of the Kremlin-Bicêtre perimeter, its large colored advertising panels are reminiscent of Times Square and call out to passers-by “Don’t throw them away, fix them or sell them!” or “Recycle your blues!” Everything revolves around his motto: “Re/use, Re/pare & Re/done.” Everything is designed to last, and nothing is thrown away. And for good reason. His shop is full of labels, collages, cut-outs, piles of secretly labeled jeans, drawers full of treasures, fabric samples, and rivets. A joyful bazaar where everything is a shade of blue and where a piece of America persists.

Cling. The bell on his door rings, announcing the arrival of a new customer. I watch, amused, as the exchange ends with a “Thank you, take care of it, it’s my favorite pair of jeans.” It has to be said that there’s nothing to worry about, as Georges has been in the business for 40 years, 30 of which have been in this very shop. He explains to me that his clientele is formed by word of mouth and satisfaction with his work. “Opening a shop in le Kremlin-Bicêtre was an obvious choice,” he continues. At the time, tons of small shops sprung up in the area. It was once the headquarters of one of the biggest flea markets in Paris, Marché aux Puces de Saint-Ouen. So, it was natural that there was so much potential. So much so that he opened the first one and then a second one together with his father. They sold jeans with the brand Wrangler, initially offering to tilers whose knees were soothed by the thick fabric. The brand, which was less well

known and therefore less in demand than Levi’s and was only sold through wholesalers, agreed to work with them. In 1976, they became one of the first Wrangler distributors in le Kremlin-Bicêtre, specializing in American products like jeans, of course, as well as Mexican boots, santiags and sneakers—also being one of the first shops in the area to sell Nike. The idea was to sell jeans and shoes together because why not wear the whole of America at once?





# THE GOOD, THE BAD,

Georges likes to tell stories. Especially those of the American continent and its beginnings.

At the start of the 1940s, America tried to tell its young history through cinema. Hollywood looked to the West; the hostility of the land, the wild crossings, the poverty of the first settlers, the hope, the stories of self-made men, and the struggles of the Native American peoples. Why was the Western such a potent medium? For the conquest, the imagery of the heroic cowboy fighting against the evil Indians, explains Louis-Stéphane Ulysse, author of *Une Histoire du Western*. It represented the end of the frontier and of new, virgin spaces. That's it—we've conquered everything, seen everything. A tale that tells of a safe world where the American philosophy is built by heroes on horseback. Film director John Ford, known for his Western filmography, was one of the first to utilize the grandiose landscapes, dusty duels, fiery kisses, and smashed saloon doors of Death Valley. His favorite actor, John Wayne, wore a pair of 501s with large cuffs in the 1939 film *Stagecoach*, which would solidify their place among a cowboy's paraphernalia. Strong, resistant, and adapted to riding, the jeans protect his backside when crossing Apache territory and are an ideal travel companion.

Then, the jeans became faster and more brutish. Bumpy dirt roads were abandoned for the tarmac ones of road movies. Marlon Brando sported 501s and 6T Triumph Thunderbird in *The Wild One*, and James Dean wore an oversized leather jacket and Lee 101 Riders in *Rebel Without a Cause*. The King shakes his head in full black Levi's on his hit "Jailhouse Rock". This era of style is coded: leather to protect from the wind and falls, a pompadour, and a pair of jeans for their tight, comfortable trunk and stylish appeal. It was an electric shock. Although jeans were banned in schools, everyone wanted to dress like their idols and become rock'n'roll hooligans. George tells me denim sales quadrupled between 1957 and 1960—rock on kids. Jeans symbolize America but, above all else, a "way of life", of financial independence, abundance, and perspective.

# AND THE UGLY



It all started with Lieslote's e-mail telling us about her transcendent trip to Georges's shop to get her jeans repaired. We loved her enthusiasm for the story and were immediately sold, and she got started! I'm proud that we combined the interview and the history of denim in one text.

# EYES RIVETED WEST

In addition to selling them in the shop, Georges began repairing and buying back jeans in the 1980s. In order to make a name for himself in the alteration and transformation business, it was important he had the right machines. So, bingo—he had the idea of looking for his own in leather goods workshops. The strength of their thick canvas is ideal for stitching and creating something out of

the ordinary. "The challenge is to always perfect your technique, so you have to look at life with a slow attitude because that's how you learn best,"

Georges explains. In the beginning, he got his hands on his own jeans by restoring them as an alternative to throwing old ones away when they became too worn out. This was the beginning of the thrift shop—putting the jeans back on the market to reduce waste, giving them a new lease on life while respecting the principle of the product's solidity.

Wear is sublime. It is an identity card for the jeans but also for the person who wears them. It defines the number of years spent together, the personality, and the experience because wear sticks to the skin, and the jeans are shaped on the body of the person who wears them. It is important to bring them back to life without altering these precious scars, to value the know-how and the fact of wearing something out of the ordinary.

Whether peeled, ripped, faded, long or short, jeans quickly became a fashion darling for generations of young people—no matter their martyrdom. One place they were not so welcome, however, is on the eastern side of Berlin, as told by Rebecca Menze in her book *Jeans in der DDR*. There, wearing jeans was an affront. A symbol of liberal, imperialist America, jeans were far removed from the communist ideas of the German Democratic Republic, where consumption was seen as a symbolic social distinction. It was East German politician Erich Honecker who banned jeans while in charge of security at the Central Committee of the East German Communist Party. While in this post, he posted signs at the entrances of establishments barring Nierenhosen, or "rivet trousers," as the very utterance of the words "denim" or "jeans" was strictly verboten.

With the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, the rules in the East became stricter: parcels coming from the West were controlled and jeans were confiscated. Young people on the fringes of society saw jeans as a way of taking a stand and opposing the regime and would not let themselves be put down. Jeans came to them in other ways.

They were either sewn themselves on the family machine or were obtained by going further East, towards Poland or Hungary, where one could find black markets for blue, and contraband American clothes were more readily available. Levi's were so in demand they could cost as much as rent. Georges remembers these young people, often dressed in all leather, who came to buy a few pairs of jeans under the table to bring back in secret. Driven completely crazy by the exfiltration of jeans, a large jeans factory was set up at the VEB Templiner Bekleidungswerke in Templin to put an end to the problem in the late 1970s. From then on, East Germany produced its own American look-alikes. The jeans brands were called Wisent, Boxer, or Shanty. The cuts were voted on by the party and changed every five years, making the GDR's jeans look old-fashioned, with their eyes set on the West. By 1978, local production was insufficient. The DDR had ruined itself with production lines and washing machines, yet American jeans were still pouring into the country. Enrich was forced to authorize the arrival of a million Levi's while investing in his own production and, at the same time, lifting the restrictions on imports. It was a failure. On November 9, 1989, the wall fell, and the jeans rose. It was the end of an ideology and the beginning of the freedom to wear.

# TAKING THE FOLD

Despite changing trends in the world of denim, Maverick, Georges' shop, remained one of the most popular and biggest retailers of the time. In order to make a living from his passion, Georges says "You have to ride the waves; I'm a very good surfer." In 1993, the jeans imported from the USA were new and raw. Boring. To stand out from the crowd and bring a bit of fun to the wear, Georges entrusted his pieces to the local dry cleaner, who took the risk of acid-washing the jeans in his establishment. Although the trend was new for the



90s, Georges was one of the first to experiment with the wash back in the 1970s. “No one was doing that at the time. Raw was the norm, and brands only knew that shade” he tells me. In order to get that aged look that makes one heart skip a beat, he set up a collaboration with a dry cleaner, rue de l’Échiquier, who agreed to take the risk of washing Georges’ raw jeans in his machines.

He is not, however, the only one to experiment with the blues. George met two fashion designers, Marithé and François Girbaud, in the Western House shop dedicated to the USA lifestyle in Saint Tropez. The pair are themselves huge fans of America with a capital A. With them, “it’s the 4th of July every day” says curator Sylvie Marot on the Radio France podcast Nos années jeans. This shared passion began when they imported American jeans for their “Western House” shop. To compensate for tightness on the thighs that made them difficult to put on, they imagined ready-to-wear jeans that were adapted to the body. They would be softened, washed, and washed again by hand in the laundries of Saint-Germain-Des-Prés before being taken for experimentation at the laboratory in Belleville. To imitate the look of a pair of aged jeans, they treat them with the stone washing technique: running volcanic stones in a washing machine at full speed to relax a tough pair of jeans. At once, artists, engineers, and mad inventors, they worked on new ways to produce, build, and patinate jeans.

They also invented the whitewash, a laser patina that gives an aged look to the fabric without using a drop of water. The creation is infinite as the patina is computer controlled, allowing for infinite shapes and patterns. Throughout their careers, the two fashion creatures have been committed to uniting the plural history of jeans into a universal manifesto. Their obsession even has a name: Girbaud Jeanologia. Cuts and materials are constantly rethought to be as comfortable and stylish as possible.

Worn everywhere, by everyone, and in every circumstance, this trailblazing movement takes on its full meaning in an advertisement for their wares directed by the legendary Jean-Luc Godard in 1987. A close translation of Godard’s words, “Not to make jeans like the Americans” means to rethink the shape and material of jeans, giving them comfort and an inventive, embodied cut. Jeans can now exist for their presence and panache and not through the prism of their functionality alone.

# ALL SEAMS

The love of denim extends globally, and for the denim-obsessed, Japanese denim is prized. Renowned for its natural dye, a living and vibrant testimony of Japanese craftsmanship. During the Second World War, packs of civilian clothes and food were sent to American GIs stationed in the island nation. As a thank you to those soldiers for their service to their country and to bring some comfort to the American citizen with a symbolic object of the country, Levi’s were shipped to American army bases. Not only was this a symbolic gesture to the boys abroad, but it was also a stroke of international publicity genius too. In the decades that came after, the first Japanese cloth began appearing, with the first batches coming to prominence around 1972. Its weave was narrow and thick, reminiscent of the Golden Age that ushered in the first truly iconic cuts of jeans. The sublime craftsmanship and the compact twill of Japanese jeans—what more is there to say? Their most distinctive feature, however, is a colored border that can be seen on the selvedge and the hem. Western brands like A.P.C. or Acne have made their name by working only with Japanese fabric. Japanese denim has had such a tremendous impact that Christopher Bastin, former creative director of Gant, once said in an interview in 2020 for Le Figaro that “Anyone who wants to make a real American jeans today has to go to Japan”.



The rising sun shines through the windows of the Maverick Repair Jeans, allowing Georges to put his good *étoile* to work. The tailors of Belleville and le Sentier have long since disappeared, and consumerism is gradually erasing similar small operations. Yet, his shop is still there. With his trusty sewing machine and craftsman’s know-how, he repairs wear and tear, holes, and scraps. But Georges does much more than that. He gives those who step through his door a beautiful history lesson. He tells the story of the legendary stock, the secrets of twill, and the 90 centimeters-wide fabric, drawing attention to the sublime details of a pocket, the magic of a lapel, and the weft that

triggers a movement on the still trousers. In the present, Georges insists on its link with the future. “I believe that the present and the near future of our society are in flux. There is a desire to consume better, in a more sustainable and aware way, to read beyond the label, to listen to the stories of real people, and to understand what a purchase means and its environmental price. This is why I conceived the jeans project in my workshop, out of love for the product but also to promote local know-how and also to put forward an everyday product that should no longer be perceived as disposable. Repairing but also buying back, educating, these are the pillars of my shop.”

He passes on what he knows, but few know as much as he does. He repairs with knowledge, and even if he doesn’t speak English well, he whispers in the ear of the jeans. He always pampers with his family, first with his father and then with his wife Caroline, who embroiders sashiko, a Japanese embroidery technique that recovers and sublimates a freshly repaired scar. After 40 years of work and repairs and a witness to profound change, as of 2022, he has begun producing his very own line of jeans from his workshop. Using only the best of denim—a raw Japanese selvedge fabric in 14oz, which will be sublimated with time, a red border that defines the curve of the legs, a “chain stitch” hem to one’s leg length. A cherry on top, a leather patch reads “RJ,” the initials of his funny shop, where the threads of time and life intertwine infinitely.

Thank you, Georges, for taking care of my favorite jeans.

# THE BIG BLUE





“Repairing, buying back and educating, these are the pillars of my shop.”





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