
GREEN IS THE NEW BLUE

EUROPEAN DENIM BRANDS REFUSE TO SACRIFICE SUSTAINABILITY FOR STYLE, WHILE U.S. LABELS ARE LAGGING.

BY LINDSAY MCGREGOR

Once upon a time, no one did denim like the “Big Three” American brands Levi’s, Lee and Wrangler. Indeed, denim collectors are so eager to own a pair of perfectly broken-in blue jeans that vintage 501s from the ‘50s have been known to sell for as much as \$8,000 on eBay. But while high- and low-end stores alike are stocked today with faded, frayed, distressed and ripped jean styles, the cost of recreating that lived-in look for less is a lot higher than their price tags reveal.

Try these stats on for size: The average pair of jeans requires more than 2,500 gallons of water to produce, from cotton field to factory to consumer. That’s the same as flushing the toilet nearly 400 times. In addition, the denim finishing process can involve double-digit dyeing vats, several chemical-intensive washes and massive amounts of energy. Now consider that two billion pairs of jeans are produced worldwide every year, mainly in Asia, and it’s difficult to deny that the denim industry is wreaking havoc on planet Earth.

But let’s not forget the damage that denim can also do to factory workers. A 2010 University of Vermont report on Levi Strauss & Co. found that the cheapest synthetic indigo dyes on the market are sulfur-based, presenting a threat to both human health and the environment. Additional chemicals used in denim production include sodium hydroxide (highly corrosive), sodium hydrosulfite (causes water pollution), benzidine (linked to bladder cancer) and formaldehyde (a known human carcinogen). Sandblasting, a cheap and quick technique used to make distressed denim, also puts workers at risk for silicosis, a lung disease caused by breathing in bits of silica dust.

A few big names have started to take steps in the right direction. Levi’s recently open-sourced its water-saving Water<Less process, G-Star has incorporated oceanic plastic waste into its collection and many major brands have banned

sandblasting from their supply chains. But it’s smaller labels that are leading the way—and somewhat unsurprisingly, they’re mainly out of Europe. In fact, when ethical fashion organization Project Just released its guide of Just Approved denim brands last year, Patagonia was the only U.S. brand that made the top four. The others: Kings of Indigo and Mud Jeans, both from the Netherlands, and Nudie Jeans of Sweden.

“Europe is currently leading sustainable fashion developments,” confirmed Soo-Rae Hong, who founded Seattle-based Source Denim with a mission to eliminate harmful chemicals from the dyeing process. “When I look for solutions and brands that are working to make a more positive impact on the environmental, social and labor practices of our clothing, I look to companies in the UK, Sweden, Denmark and France.”

Even European fast-fashion brands H&M and Zara—both largely to blame for creating the current culture of cheap, disposable clothing—have started to clean up their acts. H&M launched a worldwide garment-collecting initiative in 2013, urging customers to recycle their unwanted clothes to help create a closed loop for fashion. It also produces Conscious, a clothing collection made from sustainable materials. Meanwhile, Zara launched a sustainable line called Join Life last September that’s less trend-driven than the rest of its offering and made using Tencel, recycled wool and organic cotton.

So what’s holding U.S. brands back from adopting more sustainable business practices? Cost is often the culprit: working with environmentally-friendly fabrics, low-impact dyes and washes and socially responsible factories tends to be more expensive than the alternative. Or so they say.

“But the reality is that all along the supply chain there are companies finding ways to grow

their sustainability, reduce their environmental and social impact and offer ever-better options to brands and retailers—and not impacting price in any significant way,” said Andrew Olah, chief executive of Olah Inc. and founder of the Kingpins shows. “The biggest barrier preventing brands from becoming more sustainable is ignorance of what their options are, what the latest developments are and how to implement them. Or the true will to do it.”

Lucy Robinson, social media manager for ethical British brand Monkee Genes, noted that while the move to sustainability does take time and money, the decision should be based on what’s right. Quoting the brand’s founder Philip Wildbore, she added, “Profit above respect is man at his ignorant best.”

“Price should not be leading your company,” agreed Peter Schuitema, co-owner of Kuyichi, a Dutch brand that introduced the denim industry’s first-ever pair of organic jeans in 2001. “For Kuyichi, it’s not our goal to get the cheapest thing; our goal is to get the most beautiful thing which is correct from A to Z. Most companies, their first question is ‘What will it cost to produce here?’ and then they keep barking about the price. Sustainability is something that should be in your roots, in your genes, as a company.”

Yet today, four years after the deadly Rana Plaza garment factory collapse that killed 1,137 people, it’s still low-cost countries that churn out most of the world’s apparel. In February, the Netherlands-based Centre for Research on Multinational Corporations (Somo) released a report that claimed children as young as 14 worked a six-day week in Myanmar, earning half the legal minimum wage, to make clothes for New Look and H&M.

Moreover, another recent survey titled “Dangerous Delays on Worker Safety” alleged

that members of the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety, including Gap Inc., Target, VF Corp., Hudson's Bay Company and Walmart, were failing to fulfill their commitments to make supplier factories safe. According to the survey, 62 percent of garment factories were still lack working fire exits and fire alarm systems, while nearly half had major structural issues.

"In the case of laundries the problem is about investment," Olah pointed out. "Old factories don't wish to invest in new equipment. It's like people riding around on horses in 1932 saying the cost of cars is excessive, or typewriter users afraid of a personal computer cost in 1987."

"The mills are taking measures to cut down on the number of steps in the production process as well as trying to limit the consumption of natural resources," shared Ebru Debbag, director of sales, marketing and product development for Turkish denim manufacturer Orta Anadolu, whose clients include Guess, Jack & Jones and Mavi. "We at Orta are trying to reduce our off-standard production and contribute to the value-added approach. We are also designing sustainable processes in finishing."

Hong explained that Source Denim's proprietary production process, developed in partnership with a mill in Italy, is what weighs heaviest on the brand's coffers. But this process uses an all-natural material that cuts the amount of chemicals in a pair of blue jeans in half and uses 60 percent less water and 40 percent less energy than ordinary denim production.

"The standard at our denim mill is high and we work to prevent cross contamination, which means that every yard of our denim is going to be at least two times more expensive than denim you could get from mass producers elsewhere," she said. "But if you feel our denim, it is a high quality, premium raw denim that matches the look and feel of other premium raw denim on the market. If anything, it's an even better customer experience because our colors are richer and the dyes don't rub off, thanks to our special all-natural dye-fixing treatment."

Kuyichi jeans are made mostly from organic cotton grown and handpicked in Turkey and Kyrgyzstan, recycled cotton and recycled polyester from discarded water bottles. Even the patches on its jeans are made from recycled paper instead of leather and the brand is aiming for a completely closed-loop system.

"Sometimes it's difficult to control the whole line but we are always looking to find the right thing and to do the right thing," Schuitema said.

Patagonia relaunched its denim collection in 2015 after retooling the entire production process of its jeans alongside an advertising campaign that declared, "Denim is filthy business." But by using low-impact dye and manufacturing processes, 100 percent pesticide-free organic cotton and Fair Trade-certified sewing practices, the company cut water consumption by 84 percent, reduced energy use by nearly a third and produced 25 percent less carbon dioxide.

"The apparel industry, especially fast fashion, does nothing to educate consumers about the true cost of manufacturing clothes and the impact on both the environment and the people who work in the supply chain," said Helena Barbour, Patagonia's senior director of global sportswear. "Change will come slowly as consumers learn

more about the stories behind their clothes—from the few brands having this discussion, from activists and the media—and an economic imperative for change grows."

But it's not just consumers that aren't aware of the gory details. Oftentimes people involved in the industry are just as oblivious.

"When I worked in the fashion industry previously, I started to realize that I was part of a system that created cheap junk that would be worn once or twice and then discarded," said Noor Zaka, who designed for Zac Posen, Tahari and Ellen Tracy before founding Noorism in 2015, an upcycle brand that takes apart old jeans and turns them into new pieces. "I started researching the current process of making denim with the intention of educating my own customer and was actually very shocked personally to find out it was so much worse than I thought. U.S. brands could do a lot more to educate the consumer about this."

And frankly, it's going to take a lot more than

H&M's latest recycling campaign or Conscious collection to change things—but it's a start.

"Companies either have an overall corporate sustainable initiative for their entire company or not," Olah said, pointing to Patagonia and Eileen Fisher as beacons of change. "It's not about one collection of 'green' garments. It's either all of them or nothing. You either believe in sustainability or you fake it. That's the reality."

But Source Denim's Hong views limited-edition ethical collections as a necessary evil for some companies looking to test the market to see if it's ready for a full-on launch of sustainable apparel.

"So it's on the customer to show these brands that this is something they prioritize and demand," she said. "Companies are at the whim of their customers, so if they know something is important to them, they will act on it. And the type of leverage and power these larger companies have can really make a huge difference." 🍷

