

Recession-proof designer jeans

Nicola Copping

If there is one item of clothing that seems immune to the current recession, it's jeans – and not because they were the working men's standby during the last Depression. For today's recession-proof jeans are not worn Levi's but, rather, crystal-embellished, ripped versions from Balmain, which this summer sold out from shops without – apparently – much obstacle being posed by a price tag of £2,675.



According to a recent study by the market research firm Mintel, each man, woman and child in the UK buys on average one and half new pairs of jeans a year, and Mintel predicts that the British market alone will be worth over £1.5bn in 2009. No wonder, then, that Selfridges department store is about to unveil a 30m-long "denim wall", a space covered in folded jeans which the store claims is the longest in the world; nor that Gap, to celebrate its 40th birthday in September, will launch pop-up concept stores in London, Paris and New York dedicated to limited-edition denim. The website My-Wardrobe.com is creating a new online denim boutique this month, and the designer Hussein Chalayan, a man associated more with conceptual design than everyday denim, just announced a collaboration with US denim label J Brand. Even private equity wants in: in March LA's Hudson Jeans received a \$30m investment from Fireman Capital Partners and Webster Capital.

An afternoon spent at Trilogy, a denim boutique on London's King's Road, reveals the extent of premium denim's appeal. Here customers are drawn by service that's more akin to a few hours' personal therapy than a hard day's shopping: women in search of "the one", the pair of jeans that fits their bottom and thighs perfectly, are prepared to spend time and money to find it. They nestle on velvet chairs in the private downstairs space, dipping in and out of capacious changing rooms with 10-plus pairs picked out specifically for their body type, seeking the reassurance and advice of Jill McCormick, store manager/personal shopper/agony aunt. After a little light agonising, they often leave with not just "the one" but another couple of "ones". "We have customers who come in once a week and buy jeans every time," says McCormick.

Maria Ryan, a 38-year-old London businesswoman, is a Trilogy regular. "I buy three to four jeans a year for about £160 each. I want the advice and the help and that is what I pay for." But as designer denim reaches a zenith in terms of price, would she spend more on the ultimate pair? "Would I spend £2,000? Er, no. That's about image and status – I buy for fit."

But many consumers are happy to spend much more for what they consider the best denim the market can offer. Balmain's entire summer jean collection never even made the shop floor at Browns boutique in London, such was the length of the waiting list; while in the US, the collection sold out across the whole country. In a week.



"The way runway designers have used and interpreted denim – especially at Givenchy and Balmain – has had a big impact on the denim market," says Perushka De Zoysa, contemporary and denim buying manager at Selfridges. "Denim is definitely more and more experimental in terms of cut, detail and wash."

But if premium denim brands can produce the finest denim – think finely woven, hand-sanded jeans from Rag & Bone (\$220 to \$300 a pair) or hand-painted jeans with individually branded rivets and buttons from James Jeans (£150 to £195) – why spend 10 times more on a designer version? Because, says a Balmain spokesperson, "They are almost custom-made. Jeans have reached that level of couture."

Not everyone is convinced. -Adriano Goldschmied, the man who established Diesel, Replay and Goldie and currently designs for his own label Goldsign, has his doubts: "If you are selling jeans for £1,000, you are making people think that is the best they can have at that price. Obviously, I am positive that the jeans were made with craftsmanship, a lot of hard work and the best materials, but it would still be hard to explain logically why they cost this much. On average a good quality, premium pair of denim jeans should cost between £250 and £300."

"I do buy premium denim over high street," says Louise Roe, a TV presenter and former journalist for Vogue.com. "After all, it is the one garment I wear more than any other."

Why a pricey rip needn't be a rip-off

Sometimes the blinkers that fashion insiders wear are so all-enveloping, they can make them believe in a whole load of baloney, writes Charlie Porter. Such is the case this summer with ripped jeans, a trend which couldn't be more emblematic for the folly of fashion in the face of economic crisis.

So, what price a rip? If it's Balmain, it's in the thousands – a mystery to most, even before the rips occurred. But at the more affordable end of the market, it's easier to break down the cost of a tear. Of course, for those who make denim, a rip is not something taken away from the garment – oh no. It's actually an extra bit of work that needs accounting for in the final price.

The Generic Girl style boyfriend-fit jean from Acne Jeans costs £190 without rips. With rips – 10 areas of them, to be exact – the price rises to £220. That's around £3 per tear. But why? "The process involves scraping, brushing and sand-papering. If needed, we secure the rips with hidden stitches," says Jonny Johansson, Acne's creative director.



The ripped jean causing the most stir this season is from Current/Elliott, a Los Angeles-based denim designer duo whose Boyfriend Jean has already had to be re-ordered at net-a-porter.com . Rolled at the ankle and with five patches of tearing, the jeans cost £190. The company's un-ripped stretch denim leggings cost £155, so that's around £9 a rip. "It's not about the price; rather, the emphasis placed on the quality and craftsmanship of the product. A lot of work goes into perfecting each pair of jeans," says Current/Elliott.

Most of us tried making rips in jeans in our youth (if not our adulthood). The gaping, slack result never has the air of insouciance so desired from faded clothing. So, if we've made that strange mental leap to wanting to look worn, maybe £9 a tear isn't so much of a burden after all.

Financial Times, London, Aug. 22nd 2009, Style, online.