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American Denim: A New Folk Art

Peter S. Beagle

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A charming, historically-important, and well-produced book from 1975 that highlights the work of about 50 denim artists. The concept is simple: these men and women took denim garments and changed them. There's a wide range of techniques here: applique, embroidery and other needlepoint techniques, distressing, intergration of other fabrics, painting, studding. The intentions of the artists here are varied. Some of them are coming straight out of the hippie "I drew on my dirty jeans" school. Others are clearly fabric artists interested in seeing how they can transform garments into something new. Some of them are fashion designers, looking to take street wear to a fashion-conscious and upscale place. And some are just pure folk artists -- "I wanted to have two naked chicks with pubic hair on my jacket so I made this." Whatever their intentions, the work exhibited in this book is remarkable. And every stereotype you might have in your head about the mid-70's being a stylistic nadir will be challenged by the groovy stuff here. Applique jeans with flowers and butterflies aren't automatically a joke. They can be an object of great beauty. Almost all color photography with many detail shots and a few fold-out pages. Interspersed are b&w photos of famous people looking famous in denim (the usual suspects like Peter Fonda and Olivia Newton-John are here as well as Marlene Dietrich and Frank Sinatra wearing a truly horrendous bell-bottomed number.) Interspersed through the book is the essay by Peter Beagle which is a free-flowing and personal reflection on the spirit of the time, the fashionable past, crafting, the history of the Levi brand, life in a post-1960's realities, and how he really, really liked fur when he was a kid. Really.

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