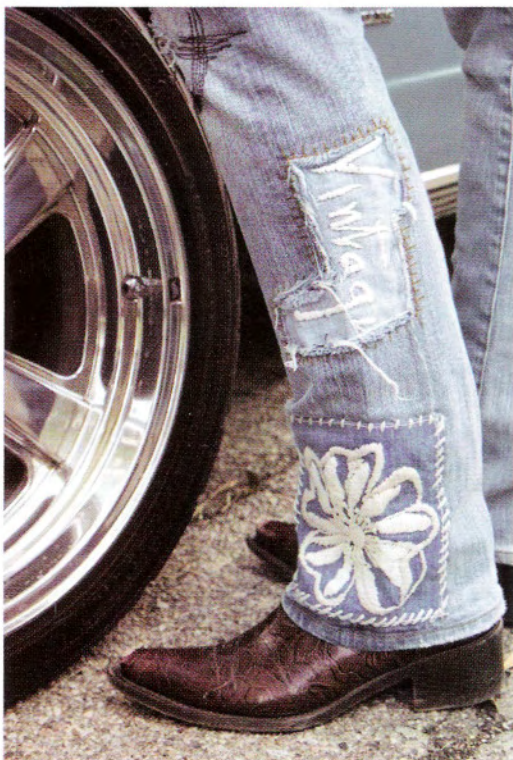


jean pool

Today's trendiest denim is beat up, then dressed up.

Levi Strauss probably never could have envisioned his signature workmen's blue jeans drenched in today's glamorous bling. Once, only Strauss' famous copper rivets adorned the back pockets of jeans everywhere. But today's denim designers are piling on the jewels, colored zippers, studs and other hardware, embellishing jeans with elaborate embroidery and patchwork fabrics. The resulting designs are more like works of art than worker's uniforms.

Adorned details have turned up in recent seasons, but the trend continues to be hot through Spring 2006. Seven For All Mankind adds flash to back pockets with pink- and copper-colored Swarovski crystals, while Juicy Couture's denim line layers on the rhinestones and embroidery. But perhaps the biggest news comes from two Los Angeles-based designers, Antik Denim and Vintage Rebel, companies that specialize in antique washes with hand-designed pockets and seams.



Vintage Rebel's Spring/Summer collection



Antik's Spring/Summer collection

French designers Alexandre Caugant and Philippe Naouri are the brains behind Antik Denim, the celebrity "It" jeans of the moment. This super-chic line gives a nod to the early American cowboy with embroidered Western designs on low-slung back pockets, alongside leather accents and whipstitching trim. "It's Santa Fe chic," says Caugant of the dozen styles named for old and new pop culture icons (for women, there's the classic five-pocket Monroe and the flare-leg Fawcett; for men, there's the Western McQueen or patchwork Hendrix). A favorite of Jennifer Lopez, Kate Hudson, Nicole Kidman and Jessica Simpson, Antik jeans are made from high-end Japanese fabric and distressed to look decades old. The time-consuming hand detail results in a steep price tag of \$275-\$400 per pair. "Our influence is a mix of high-end fashion and vintage," says Naouri, who favors dressing up Antik jeans with a Chanel jacket and Gucci shoes.

Goa designer Jessie Johnson recently launched the company's new denim line, Vintage Rebel, inspired by a mix of Western, ethnic and '70s biker designs. Two of her favorites from the new collection, available in June: a beat-up light wash adorned with fabric patches and white embroidery, and a pair with bright Mexican patchwork peeking through rips in the front leg. "It's the look of the '70s," says Johnson, a French-Canadian artist-turned-designer whose embroidered pieces for Goa have been spotted on Eva Longoria and Beyoncé. "The ethnic/Western vibe is going to be good for at least another year, for sure." One of Johnson's Vintage Rebel jeans (\$69-\$110) can take a full week to produce, given the embroidery, hardware detail, washings and perfectly placed patches. "It's got to look like the jeans have been repaired through the years," she says. As for the rumor of a return to high-waisted jeans of the past, Johnson isn't buying it. "That's the part I'm not going to take from the '70s." **JUDITH COOKIS RUBENS**