

The Several Lives of a Collection of Rag Dump Clothing from Normandy (1900–55):

From Farm, to Dump, to Poverty Chic

BY LOU TAYLOR <https://doi.org/10.38055/FS01010>

Abstract: This material culture-based text researches the history of a collection of damaged clothing (1900–50s) once worn by farming families in Normandy and Brittany. The clothing was excavated from a textile dump in an abandoned warehouse in Normandy in 2012. This research examines the six life cycle stages of this clothing from original use, to abandonment, resurrection, and upcycling onto the extreme edges of the vintage fashion world. This text then follows the growing use of ragged clothing as design inspiration for both costly couture garments and the cheapest mass high street designs over the last thirty years or more. Carefully destroyed but brand-new and sweet-smelling denim jeans and jackets are now admired by celebrities and young high street fashion consumers around the world as fashionable commodities — worn with little regard to the health dangers faced by workers dealing with sand blasting and bleaches. The research then examines the cultural and social forces behind this interest in destroyed textiles in the world of fashion.

KEYWORDS

- damaged clothing
- upcycling
- class vacationing

This text examines a collection of ragged and damaged clothing dating from around 1900 into the 1950s, excavated from a large textile dump found in a farm barn in Normandy. Abandoned, it seems, in the mid-1950s, the dump consisted of large, bound, and compressed bales piled on top of each other and left to rot as valueless in damp, rat-infested conditions for over sixty years. In about 2010 it was discovered, purchased, and “excavated” by an architectural heritage dealer from Sussex.

This research, with its focus on women’s clothing, assesses the several lives of rag dump clothing from Normandy over a period of more than a hundred years as it has passed from one community of consumption to another. What has proved so fascinating in this object-based material culture research project has been to follow the unexpected life cycle of this clothing from birth to resurrection. No matter its condition, as Roger Silverstone has argued: “The life of an object ... gains its meanings through the various social, economic, political, and cultural environments through which it passes and its passage can ... illuminate those environments in the way that [a] flare ... can illuminate the sky.”¹.

This research will show that these clothes moved through six life stages: firstly used for field, domestic, and farm work, secondly passing to small scale “chiffoniers” — rag dealers — nicknamed “biffins,” thirdly sold on to large scale dealers — “chiffoniers-en-gros” — who stored the ragged textiles in large warehouses, fourthly to abandonment when no longer required, fifthly resurrected, cleaned, and finally launched into today’s world of “poverty chic” fashion — the sixth and final destination. In commercial terms, today this collection lies on the extreme edge of the vast global recycling and vintage fashion industries, much studied by dress historians such as Alexandra Palmer, Hazel Clark, Lucy Norris, Margaret Maynard, Karen Tranberg Hanson, Tracey Diane Cassidy, and Hannah Roe Bennet.² Finding the exact whereabouts of this dump, beyond the fact that it is in Normandy, has proved impossible due to professional competitive secrecy today amongst vintage clothing dealers.

This text therefore discusses a group of garments excavated from a Normandy rag dump in about 2010. These twentieth-century ragged clothes are of a kind rejected by museums as worthless in every way, unless of precious historical

value such as rags surviving from the clothes of Hiroshima victims or from Nazi concentration camps of World War II. This text, nonetheless, discusses three surviving groups of this rag dump clothing, to prove the falsity of this rejection. One large group belongs to Lois Davidson, a vintage textile dealer of Hove who purchased directly from the excavator. She then generously donated seven items to the University of Brighton Dress History Teaching Collection, creating the second group (we



FIGURE 1

Rats' teeth marks on the hem of a short rag dump *tablier*, Normandy, c. 1900–30, University of Brighton Dress History Teaching Collection, no. 364. 1-12. Professor Lou Taylor, photograph.

later purchased two more pieces from her — bringing our total to nine). We are thanking her now for her kind generosity.³ The third group discussed here belongs to Richard Rags and his son, Cosmo Wise, vintage textile dealers selling from a weekly stall in Spitalfields Market in the East End of London.⁴

The specific interest within these clothes lies in their survival as rare examples of worn-out rural working clothing from Normandy, c. 1900–55. Most of the garments are meticulously and heavily patched, worn, and frayed to the point where, finally, they were no longer serviceable even in the fields. Some, those hauled out from the centre of the rag dump pile, were in better condition than the ones on the edges of the dump, whose condition was worsened by chewing and eating by rats, bird droppings, the bleeding of colours, and the growth of mould as rain penetrated the storage barn (**see fig. 1**). Nonetheless, they offer us today a picture both of the reality of the working clothes worn in the Normandy countryside and of the region's rag dealing trade in the first half of the twentieth century.

The Clothes

Men's, women's, and children's clothes survive in these three collections. The women's clothing includes underwear, such as a patched S-bend corset of about 1905–10 in the Davidson collection (**see fig. 2**), and other damaged, pink, elasticized fabric corsets from the 1930s, women's open-legged drawers in sturdy white cotton woven with narrow black stripes and patched with various other cotton fabrics, c. 1900–10, and patched black silk stockings.



FIGURE 2

Corset, in cotton and boning, c. 1905–10, badly damaged, Lois Davidson collection, with thanks. Professor Lou Taylor, photograph.

Women's outerwear includes various full-length, indigo blue, heavy cotton and linen skirts, patched and worn, a short indigo blue *tablier*,⁵ patched and rat-eaten at the hem almost to destruction (**see fig. 3**), blouses, in patched dark grey cotton with woven check pattern and long sleeves, high necks with centre-front buttons, rough blue cotton, or grey wool mix sleeveless waistcoats in varying conditions, and one complete button through dress of the 1930s⁶ of black heavy cotton with patch on patch covering the entire front (**see fig. 4**). The back of this calf-length dress, by contrast, has no patching at all, indicating that the front was worn through by the work-specific actions of the wearer. All of the mending and matching is executed with high-quality and fine stitching. Amongst the men's clothes are pairs of narrow-legged trousers in brown, grey, and blue, with large patches over the seat, knees, and legs and some dark blue, patched, ready-to-wear cotton jackets. This collection is completed by girls' dresses in patched cotton and hand-knitted socks darned with bright wool, over and over again (**see fig. 5**)



FIGURE 3

Short patched woman's outdoor wear *tablier*, Normandy, c. 1900–30, University of Brighton Dress History Teaching Collection, no. 408.05. Professor Lou Taylor, photograph.

FIGURE 4

Patched day dress, Normandy, c. 1935–45, University of Brighton Dress History Teaching Collection, no. 408.08. Professor Lou Taylor, photograph.





FIGURE 5

Socks, hand-knitted in brown wool and darned in six different shades of coloured woollen threads, University of Brighton Dress History Teaching Collection, no. 408.02. Professor Lou Taylor, photograph.

Characteristic Features

The sturdy fabric of all the women's outer garments is dark — either dark blue, black, or grey rough cotton and linen or wool and cotton mix. Some examples are woven with small repeat jacquard patterns in white. Some are roller-printed in white with tiny dots and geometric designs or small flowers — classic French fabric for elderly working women. Men's clothes are also in indigo blue or dark grey but in heavier cotton drill or denim. Above all, in every garment, it is the endlessly patient womanly patching, on top of layers of existing patches, and the patient over-darning that stays in the memory (see fig. 6).

This hand work indicates with powerful force both the financial need for this painstaking patching and the frugality of the owners — or both. In some examples, it is barely possible to see the base material at all.



FIGURE 6

Detail of patches on long waistcoat for a woman, c. 1910–30, Lois Davidson Collection, with thanks. Professor Lou Taylor, photograph.

Communities of Dress: The Six Life Stages

The starting point for research has been probing the life cycle of these clothes. Fred Davies believes that “the universe of meaning attaching to clothes, cosmetics, hairstyle and jewellery, right down to the very shape and bearing of the body itself, is highly differentiated in terms of taste, social identity and person’s access to the symbolic wares of society.” He adds significantly that fashion and dress are “the irrepressible out comings of localities, regionalisms and particular-isms of every sort.”⁷ This concept of highly specific communities of dress is exactly applicable to my story here.

Life Stage One



Using Prown’s material culture method of deduction and speculation,⁸ coupled with Kopytoff’s notion that objects have biographies and life cycles,⁹ research soon clarified that these garments were worn firstly as hard-wearing everyday clothes, either homemade or bought in markets and city stores, and then, once shabby, were used for rougher outdoor work in Normandy and parts of Brittany. There are no signs of “Sunday best” church and festival dress here whatsoever — no velvet bodices, embroidery, or fine lace coifs, such as the bonnet rond example from Bayeux of about 1910 (**see fig. 7**). There is nothing but signs of hard work and rural frugality, and hours of patient sewing and patching.

FIGURE 7

Post card, Bonnet Rond, Bayeux, about 1905–10, published by C.P.A. Bernard, Caen, Normandy. Professor Lou Taylor, photographer, author’s collection.



FIGURE 8

No. 943.2.12. with thanks for kind permission to use this image. Julien Thibaudeau, *En Bretagne, distribution des crêpes aux pauvres*, 1901, painting, Musée Bernard d'Agescie, Niort.

Mrs. Henrey, a Londoner, who, in the 1930s, bought a farm house in rural Normandy just inland from Cabourg, provides confirmation of this. She writes that in 1938, on her neighbour's farm, Louise, the short-sighted, youngest daughter, "did not work out of doors, but was the lady of the needle, making her sisters' dresses and her brothers' shirts and overalls, mending stockings and socks, sewing in the buttons."¹⁰ That was her full-time occupation.

Using established methods of comparing surviving dress to paintings and photography of the period,¹¹ in this case genre paintings of Normandy and Brittany farm workers, finding comparisons has been easy. The 1870–1930 sentimental, often romanticized, genre painting of men and women toiling in the Normandy and Brittany countryside, where patched working clothes abound, include work by Jules Breton, Julien Dupré, Julien Thibaudeau, the American Daniel Ridgway-Knight, Leon Lhermitte, and the English painters Sydney Curnow Vosper and Lucien Simon, for example. All of them stress the dark or faded



FIGURE 9

Woman's skirt in indigo-dyed, heavily patched fabric with waistband in beige-coloured cotton, Lois Davidson Collection, with thanks. Professor Lou Taylor, photograph.

blue clothes, with large patches exactly like our examples from the rag dump. Thibaudeau's 1901 painting *En Bretagne, distribution de crepes aux pauvres* (Musée Bernard d'Agesci, Niort)¹² has a perfect example, which shows a group of poor men and women receiving charity, in the form of large pancakes, handed out at the doorway of a large house (see fig. 8). One old woman pictured wears a long, patched, indigo blue skirt, with a beige waistband, closely similar to one owned by Lois Davidson (see fig. 9)

Moving on to period photography as a comparative source,¹³ and again conscious of sentimentalizing, use of faux garments, and stage backdrops in much late nineteenth-century studio-based rural photography, there are nonetheless many photographs from this period of Normandy and Brittany farmers that do provide useful garment comparisons. By the early twentieth century, whole series of postcards were photographed, printed, and sold to tourists. Some highlighted "best" and festival dress, with an emphasis on the famous Normandy and Brittany lace coifs, whilst others show local "characters" — old men in their loose *blousons bleu*, patchy trousers, and heavy clogs, often carrying geese or herding cows, or elderly women sitting in doorways or spinning. Examples from one such group entitled *Normandie Pittoresque* are used here, produced by the Normandy family publishing company Le Goubey, who made such series from 1904. One, of about 1910 from Saint-Pierre-Eglise, in the Manche region, shows two country women, one elderly and one young. The caption reads "*Tcheu nous, chest la rue sans bout, as-tu fini r'commenche...*" (see fig. 10). The young woman, wearing large wooden clogs, is carrying a milk pail on her shoulders and wears a high-collared, long-sleeved blouse¹⁴ similar to the one found in our Teaching Collection (see fig. 11). Her older companion wears a bodice with an attached skirt with a blouse beneath. The shabbiness and patching on her long skirt are clearly visible. As well, in the centre of the dump some more fashionable clothes were found — high-necked striped silk blouses for example, some now owned by Richard Rags — that are very like one worn by a young girl wearing her best dress and boater hat, and selling eggs at Coutances market in Basse-Normandie in about 1910 (see fig. 12). This example, of which there fewer than the cotton blouses, shows that the influence of urban fashions was already well-established amongst younger women in Normandy by the early twentieth century.



FIGURE 10

Post card, Saint-Pierre-Eglise from the *Normandie Pittoresque* series no. 2071, Le Goubey, c. 1910. Professor Lou Taylor, photograph, author's collection.

FIGURE 11

Cotton blouse with patches, Normandy c. 1920, from the rag dump, University of Brighton Dress History Teaching Collection, no. 408.07. Professor Lou Taylor, photograph.





FIGURE 12

Post card, Coutances egg market, c. 1905–10. Professor Lou Taylor, photograph, author's collection.

Men's clothes are equally seen in genre paintings and photography, which compare with rag dump garments owned both by Lois Davidson and Richard Rags — classic heavy blue working cotton jackets and sometimes loose *blouson bleu* smocks.¹⁵ The Musée de Bretagne owns a very similar *veste de travail*, from Rennes dating to about 1945.¹⁶ Richard Rags also sells, for £300 each, a few examples of the famous smock-like Normandy and Brittany *blouson bleu* overalls — though whether they come from the same rag dump is unknown. His rails more often carry patched, faded blue working men's jackets from the rag dump, but carefully not identified as such (see fig. 13).

With these matching images in place, it seems safe to confirm that these clothes were once worn by rural families in Normandy and parts of Brittany.



FIGURE 13

Rail of rag dump men's jackets, Richard Rags' stall, Spitalfields market, East End of London. Professor Lou Taylor, 2016, photograph.

Life Stage Two: *Biffin* Value

Once worn to their lives' end, these garments were bartered to small-scale, impoverished, local chiffoniers — *biffins* — (*pillhaouer* in Brittany) who travelled on foot from farm to farm and street to street, leading donkeys or even dog carts, bartering clothes for cheap ceramic decorative plates, "*assiette du chiffonier*," or cheap glass ware. At this point, the function of these clothes lay only in their bartering value. Their role as garments worn on the human body would normally have ended here.

Life Stage Three: *Chiffonnier en Gros*

The *biffins* sold their hoards on to the large-scale wholesale rag dealers, *chiffonniers-en-gros*, who would store vast quantities of unsorted old clothes and textiles in storage warehouses and barns. This was a vast and lucrative trade, because the rags formed the basis of two long established and once vital industries across Normandy and Brittany — paper making and woollen textiles. Ownership of the garments thus passed entirely out of the hands of Normandy farming and sea-faring families into the competitive commercial world of professional waste collection. For the *chiffonniers en gros*, the rags held very real commercial value. Interest lay in selling the clothes, still unsorted, for pulping in Normandy and Brittany paper and textile mills. Martin O'Brien writes that: "The primary raw material for paper manufacture, until its displacement by wood pulp, was rags. Rags were necessary to paper manufacture because the latter consists in bonding together cellulose fibre — and cotton and linen rags provided an excellent source of good length ... fibres for making paper."¹⁷

Life Stage Four: Transformation into Industrial Paper and Textile Pulp

The Normandy and Brittany paper mills made use of the fast-running rivers in narrow rural valleys to turn their water wheels. Yannick Lecherbonnier cites references for such mills dating back to the late sixteenth century in Le Perche in Basse-Normandie.¹⁸ Philippe Dupré writes that by 1723 in the valley of l'Orbiquet alone there were twenty-seven mills driven by water wheels.¹⁹ Such mills made every quality of paper, from fine drawing quality to paper for letters, maps to playing cards. Normandy was indeed famous for its high-quality paper manufacturing. By the early eighteenth century Tim Barrett, using an illustration from

Diderot's *Encyclopedie*, 1751–65, notes that collected rags were used on a large scale, first skilfully sorted by hand for quality by women and girls working in large sheds who removed buttons and pins and tore or cut garments down in size. The rags were then retted in still water (rotted through a natural fermentation and softening process) and were then bleached at certain stages of the process. Barrett confirms that "the sensitive use of retting is a crucial reason for the unique look, feel, and handle of many of the best early book papers." The next step was stamping by wooden hammering machines for many hours to produce a pulp that was bleached, dried, and rolled into paper.²⁰ From the 1850s onward, steam power introduced into large factories threatened the small rural paper mills, which closed down steadily. As Lecherbonnier discusses, a modern factory called Abadie was opened in 1866 at Thiel-sur-Huisne, in Orne, Perche, and was famous for making cigarette papers through more modern manufacturing processes; but by the 1950s its business was declining, and this factory, too, closed in 1975.²¹ Thus, the demand for rags for paper making went into an ever-growing decline after World War II.

Significantly for this research, there was a new demand for wool waste in around 1875 for the making of shoddy textiles in Normandy. This also evolved into industrial scales of manufacturing. Whilst the tradition of wool weaving was ancient in the Vallée de l'Orbiquet, for example, an industrial method re-using wool, silk, or cotton fabric waste, introduced from England, was practiced in the Lisieux region by the late nineteenth century, producing a wool fabric — *Renaissance*. This was either woven on its own or mixed with pure wool and new cotton. The resulting cloth was of a lesser quality, but was cheaper than pure woollen fabrics.²²

Both the paper making and wool weaving industries continued to close down steadily in the second half of the twentieth century.

Stage Five: Unwanted Detritus (c. 1955–2010)

By the 1950s, as both paper and textile mills closed in large numbers, the market for rags collapsed. Our Normandy dump must have been abandoned around this time, leaving the clothes to rot because they were no longer of any commercial value to anyone. It is clear that the clothes in our dump never even reached a paper or textile factory warehouse for recycling and were evidently still unsorted, because, as already discussed, the pile still contained elasticized corsets with their suspenders intact and blouses, dresses, and trousers with buttons, all of which would have been removed at the sorting stage.

By the 1950s, this dump of clothes was not even economically worth the effort and cost of its removal. The garments became unwanted industrial detritus. Their only function at this stage was as food for farm rats.

Life Stage Six: Resurrection and Transformation into “Poverty Chic Fashions”

Some sixty years later, our particular dump was discovered and rights to excavate it purchased from the farmer by an English architectural heritage collector and dealer from Sussex in about 2010. Doubtless, he was looking in Normandy *brocantes* and farms around 2010 for, amongst other items, “shabby chic” furniture, ceramics, and textiles to sell at his large second-hand warehouse. These are popular as interior decoration in English cafés, pubs, and some homes, certainly in the South of England. Lois Davidson remembered that the farming family “allowed the dealers to purchase the contents of the barn and return back every so often to sort and clear more. It was all stored in heaps and large bales that were both filthy and rat infested, so it was apparently a lot of dirty, very hard work to go through it and salvage whatever they could!”²³

The key point here is that the potential commercial value of these ragged clothes was spotted by English dealers and upcycling soon began to raise the clothing’s commercial value — not in France, but in England.

Thus started a process of transformation, as some of the clothes were carefully infused with an entirely new cultural value — that of “vintage” garments.

They are now commercially admired for their rough, rural, frayed characteristics by fashion and textile designers,²⁴ for example, seeking inspiration for young, streetwise styles. Firstly, of course, those garments with viable commercial possibilities had to be sanitized — probably through hot washing in modern washing machines and scenting with a great deal of fabric conditioner to remove filth, rat viruses, bird droppings, germs, and rag dump stench. Once sold on to the vintage clothes circuits, internationally, and to design studios, these specific garments once again became of commercial interest. Work by Alexandra Palmer and Hazel Clark, already cited here, has identified the many layers of the vintage fashion market.

Brighton, in Sussex, is a seaside city famed for its countercultural vibes and its many quirky charity and independent vintage clothing outlets. These offer a perfect study of the upcycling process of damaged denim jeans and jackets and the retailing of bogus, brand-new “vintage denim” clothing. In July 2015, at one of Brighton’s many charity shops in the rundown London Road area, second-hand, worn, blue jeans with holed-knees were being offered for under £1. At the stylish, countercultural *Wolf & Gypsy Vintage* boutique around the corner on trendy Sydney Street, similar shredded jeans were selling for £45. In the same street in August 2016, newly-distressed denim jackets were on sale for £10 each (**see fig. 14**). *Wolf & Gypsy Vintage*’s second-hand worn, French denim jackets cost £50. In 2015, this little shop, named as one of Britain’s best vintage shops by *Company* magazine, was also selling white, cotton drill, full-length overalls discarded from a chemistry laboratory — stained, spattered, discreetly holed, laundered, and ironed — also for £50. It is within this circuit and price range that some of the rag dump clothes are now to be found.



FIGURE 14

Newly-distressed denim jackets on sale in Sydney Street, Brighton for £10. Professor Lou Taylor, 2016, photograph.

Two purchasers from our rag dump were Richard Rags and his son Cosmo Wise, who bought the third collection discussed in this text straight from the barn in Normandy. They own a large warehouse in Hackney, East London full of vintage clothes, including many rag dump clothing — blouses for £30, skirts, men’s trousers, and denim jackets, £100, sold alongside examples of Japanese *boro sashiko* (see fig. 15). The very best examples of these finely-stitched, indigo-printed Japanese cotton clothes and coverings, patch worked and worn through, have now been elevated into the realm of fine art and can sell for high prices in art galleries.²⁵ Richard Rags sells less costly examples of these from his large stall in Spitalfields market, alongside rag dump clothes. He sells to actors and countercultural youth, who flock to this part of London.²⁶ He also sells at huge vintage markets in Boston and Los Angeles.²⁷ It is bitterly ironic that, today, although the ragged contents of his Spitalfields vintage stall might be recognizably similar, Richard Rags’ customers could not be more different to those buying and selling in the very same streets 150 years ago. East London was, from the mid-nineteenth century, famously the home for the vast, hugely impoverished Jewish immigrant community, in the second-hand clothes dealing trade.²⁸

Today, as the great wealth of the City of London in the form of new glass sky scrapers takes over the old streets with new French patisseries, costly shoe shops, and bespoke tailoring retailers, the second-hand clothes' customers are no longer the poor of London but young, edgy, largely international, and middle class.

FIGURE 15

**Denim jacket from rag dump, Richard Rags' stall Spitalfields Market, London for £100.
Professor Lou Taylor, 2016, photograph.**



There is a long history of the appropriation of working clothes for use as countercultural sartorial statements by middle class artists and intellectuals, who wore their own versions of the clothes of their working class muses and heroes. In England, we can cite William Morris, who would have seen farmers in their jackets and smocks on his tour of Brittany and Normandy in the summer of 1856. With his friend, the artist Edward Burne-Jones and other companions, they studied churches and cathedrals in Rouen, Caudebec-en-Caux, Yvetot, Caen, and Coutances.²⁹ The artist Augustus John, at the turn of the twentieth century, was famous for his fascination with Romani life and his open-toed sandals, gold earrings, and huge, shaggy hat.³⁰ This bohemian dress interest never faded, and was constant throughout the 1930s and revived with gusto in the 1960s. By the late 1960s, we had raggedy hippy clothes via California and by the late 1980s and 1990s, commercialized vintage and grunge garments marketed at an international level. The style has not left the catwalk since.

By the early 1990s, poverty chic reached the levels of couture design with Marc Jacob's Spring 1993 "grunge collection" for Perry Ellis and XULY.Bët couture designs in Paris 1992, to name just two. Designers embraced rag dump and Japanese farmers' worn out *boro sashiko* style, and this trickled into high-end, ready-to-wear collections. One example, seen by the author at an impossibly trendy boutique at 127 Brick Lane, featured exquisite patching on indigo cotton trousers by Yohji Yamamoto, selling in July 2015 for £2350. That summer, Philipp Plein's bleached jeans sold at £1018. Comme des Garçons' long patched indigo coat for men was selling in August 2016 for £1940. Ralph Lauren's "Dust Bowl" Spring 2010 Collection launched in New York Fashion Week in September 2009 and has bought the company lasting success. Program notes clarified that his inspiration was "the character of the American Worker" who toiled through the Great Depression. His Polo Repaired Denim Overall for women retailed at £245 in 2015, with a vertical frayed slash exposing the right knee of the wearer, as featured in his 2009 collection.³¹

Of course, the one characteristic that all of these “designer” garments share is that their distressed and torn condition is entirely faux. There are of course, no actual rats’ teeth marks, no actual dirt, no actual fraying caused by manual labour. The hard work involved is that of their makers in workshops or factories all over the world.

The danger to workers’ health lies in the noxious chemicals used in bleaching patches and sandblasting to create distressed surfaces, which leads to lung silicosis.³² Thus danger remains actual, though some progress has been made. Armani, Levis, Gucci, and other leading companies no longer use these methods following years of agitation by the Clean Clothes Campaign.³³ However, in 2015 Jack Crone noted in *MailOnline* that, still, “workers in China use controversial methods linked to dozens of deaths to make jeans for Abercrombie and Fitch and American Eagle.”³⁴ Thus this distressed fad rolls on, encouraged further by celebrity use. Defined in 1989 by Grant McCracken as “any individual who enjoys public recognition and who uses this recognition on behalf of a consumer good by appearing with it”³⁵ in public, celebrities have encouraged emulative consumption of newly damaged garments. Multimillionaire celebrities, including Brad Pitt and Johnny Depp, have played their part here, photographed by the paparazzi in artificially ragged garments.

To find fashionable poverty chic today in England, and remembering that these clothes are always faux distressed, we can turn to mass high street styles. From 2015 to 2017, examples have been everywhere. In 2016, H&M grey jeans with modestly holed knees cost £30 and Primark seriously distressed shorts sold

for £10 (see fig. 16), to name but two. One mass online fashion company, Pretty Little Things, was selling no less than forty-eight different styles of skinny, holed and distressed cotton, poverty-chic jeans in blue, black, and white, each for £28 in August 2016. Styles veered from the modest Kendall Black Knee Rip Mom Jean, with two discreet little rips on both knees, to the Skylare Mid Wash Linear Rip Low Rise Boyfriend Jean, the most extreme style, with eighteen horizontal frayed slashes down the entire length of both legs, revealing more skin than fabric. These styles have become ubiquitous (see fig. 17, fig. 18, fig. 19, and fig. 20).



FIGURE 16

New distressed shorts for women, £10, Primark, Brighton.
Professor Lou Taylor, 2015, photograph.

FIGURE 17
Ripped jeans' knees. Professor Lou
Taylor, photograph.



The vogue continued in 2018 with even more extremes of destruction, holing, and slashing. Interestingly, the summer of 2017 witnessed young men taking up the look as well, including the British racing car driver Lewis Hamilton, known for his cutting edge sartorial elegance off track. He appeared on a popular UK TV chat show in October 2017 wearing a smart, trendy, tailored jacket and designer jeans neatly cut with large holes in the knees. Finally, following the engagement of Meghan Markle to Prince Harry in November 2017, somehow inevitably, an image on her own style website shows her, too, relaxing at home with a ragged hole in one knee of her jeans.³⁶



FIGURE 18

Ripped jeans' knees, Brighton. Professor Lou Taylor, 2018, photograph.



FIGURE 19

Ripped jeans' knees, Brighton. Professor Lou Taylor, 2018, photograph.



FIGURE 20

Ripped jeans' knees, Brighton. Professor Lou Taylor, 2018, photograph.

Conclusion: Masquerade and “Class Vacationing”

The six life stages of our rag dump clothes began within hard working farming families in Normandy and Brittany in the 1900–55 period. The carefully sewn patches on the clothes they bartered with to the *biffins* were clearly present before abandonment in the barn, reflecting the necessity, the practicality, the patience and the frugality of the women who made or bought and repaired these clothes constantly. When new, these clothes represented personal and community values of decency and respectability, a peer group everyday style, as defined by Davies, and, even when seriously patched up, they still held real value as utilitarian work clothes.

The cultural meanings of such working clothes, today, alter entirely once copied and sold. It needs again to be stressed that fashionable, poverty-chic clothes are always faux distressed and faux dirtied. Some specific rag dump clothes have been sanitized just enough to be worn by edgy, young, non-conformists shopping in Spitalfields market, but rag dump clothes will never be sanitized enough to be worn in the world of conventional fashion, whether by millionaires or shoppers at Primark.

Original rag dump and *boro sashiko* clothing, as Richard Rags confirmed to the author, are also bought by young designers and design studios for “inspiration.” At this point the original class and community values, once so fundamental within the creation of patches and darning and worn out, sweating raggedness, are lost almost entirely. The stains, repairs, and shreds become abstract aesthetic sources for design creativity. This is, however, not a case of cross cultural appropriation, described by Jennifer Ayres as “fundamentally about race, privilege and power.”³⁷ It is about class appropriation, firstly by avant-garde art and design-educated creators working within elite fashion design circles who are reinterpreting rural poverty through their twentieth- to twenty-first-century fashion designer eyes, well-aware of current street styles. Robin Healy describes this interest as a “fascination with the aesthetics of decay ... seeking the patina of the worn and discarded.”³⁸

By 1992, Martin Margiela had taken this concept to an entirely different level in his exhibition at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam where, mounted on Stockman stands, he destroyed eighteen of his own deconstructed designs from previous collections, with the help of a microbiologist. The eighteen garments were scientifically saturated with a substance to encourage mould growth and then sprayed with a variety of spores. Placed outdoors behind large glass windows and looking into the gallery, they were left for several months as the spores sprouted into different coloured and textured moulds. The levels of mottled decay grew and grew, until, in Caroline Evans's words: "Many of the garments looked like old clothes disinterred from a rust trunk, hung up to air, spotted with mildew and mold" — much indeed like the Normandy rag dump clothes. Indeed, Evans drew parallels with garments scavenged by nineteenth-century rag pickers living out their lives at the very bottom of the social scale. Yet Margiela's elite, unwearable garments achieved their costly raggedness through a profoundly different process than rag dump rotting over sixty years. Their rotted appearance was the result of an avant-garde fusion of philosophical ideas and "fashion, art and science." Understanding that Margiela's eighteen garments were never designed to be worn, Evans concluded that the "use of mold ... chimes with more modern metaphors of replication, contagion and simulation that permeates everyday life in the late twentieth century — the computer virus, the cyborg and the decentered subject."³⁹ Twenty years later, these ideas remain in place and are indeed heightened. The fascination for artificially ragged clothing has escalated as shown here into a global, vastly lucrative commercial fashion phenomenon. This, and Margiela's expensively rotted garments, are a million miles away as cultural forms from the clothes and lives of the

Normandy families. Their clothes were made ragged and patched through sheer hard labour, frugality, and poverty, whilst the natural rot resulted from sixty years burial as unwanted detritus.

Why do the really rich, followed by everyday shoppers, wear, and continue to wear, ragged jeans? The style continues with evermore areas of naked thigh exposed through larger and larger holes, sometimes modestly covered with patterned leggings beneath.

It would seem that the style continues because it remains transgressive, a shocking and attention seeking departure from the normal clean-cut, new, carefully made garments usually worn. The holes and shreds remain a mark of fashion edginess — even though so commonly seen today.

Poverty chic garments are now commonly found in otherwise undistressed wardrobes of clothes. In 2002, Karen Bettez Halnon astutely defined this international fashion as a process of “adopting superficial and temporary identities ... a type of class vacationing.” Buying “poor chic,” she believes, is “a class distinguishing activity that controls against fears of declining into poverty by consuming it as a short, safe, socially distanced and sanitized experience with commodified poverty.” It is also a public identity games playing — “a superficial pretence of poverty.”⁴²

From 2015 to 2018, the passion for shredded jeans has exploded. Worn now both by men and women, jeans have been sliced vertically the length of the thigh or calf, large square holes have been cut from knees and legs, and jackets, too, have been shredded and holed.

There is one more story to add here. At Amazon Fashion Week in Tokyo, on the 18th of October, 2017, the Spring/Summer 2018 collection of the brand Thibaut reached the absolute logical shock end of all these developments — a model wearing “jeans” that consisted of nothing more than the strips of denim bearing the seam stitching: waistband, side seams, pockets and hems, with no fabric between, “leaving just a thong-like foundation underneath.”⁴⁰ This is beyond “class vacationing.” It is a knowing, ironic parody reflecting on the logic of fashion cycles that carry trends to their ultimate logical style end. This masquerading through fashion is an amusement that is indeed, and has always been, one of the motivating style forces of the fashion world. It is a long, long way from the working clothes of the past, worn by Normandy farming or rural Japanese families or worn as a result of Dust Bowl poverty. Halnon concludes, as do I, that poverty chic “fads and fashions,” such as those described above, make “stylish or recreational ‘fun’ out of poverty.”⁴¹

Notes

1. See Roger Silverstone, "The Medium is the Museum: On Objects and Logics in Times and Spaces."

2. See Margaret Maynard, *Dress and Globalisation*; Alexandra Palmer and Hazel Clark, *Vintage Whores and Vintage Virgins: Second Hand Fashion in the Twenty-first Century*; Karen Tranberg Hansen, *Salaula: The World of Second Hand Clothing and Zambia*; and Tracy Diane Cassidy and Hannah Rose Bennett, "The Rise of Fashion and the Vintage Consumer."

3. See Lois Davidson's web site at *Morgaine Le Fey Vintage Textiles*, <http://morgaine-le-fey.co.uk/>.

4. Conversations with the author, Spitalfields Market, Whitechapel, London, July 2015.

5. University of Brighton Dress History Teaching Collection, no. 408.05.

6. Ibid. no 408.08.

7. Davies 9 and 205.

8. Prown 7.

9. Kopytoff 66-7.

10. Henrey 33.

11. See Taylor, Chapter 5.

12. Lethuillier 133.

13. See Taylor, Chapter 6.

14. University of Brighton Dress History Teaching Collection, no. 408.07.

15. "At Richard and Cosmo Wise's Shop," *Spitalfields Life*, 28 Oct. 2011.

16. Veste de Travail, c. 1945 (no 994.47.1 Musée de Bretagne), in Lethuillier 154.

17. O'Brien 58.

18. Lecherbonnier 256.

19. Dupré 210.

20. See Timothy Barrett et al., "Background, European Paper Making Techniques 1300–1900."

21. Lecherbonnier 260 and 269.

22. Dupré 225.

23. E-mail from Lois Davidson to the author, 30th January, 2015.

24. The author first saw the rag dump clothes at a small meeting of young fashion/textile designers and vintage clothes collectors-dealers in Brighton in 2013, gathered to see the Lois Davison Collection as a design source. With thanks to Susan Bishop for the invitation to attend. Lois Davidson trades under the name of "Morgaine Le Fey, Antique Textile."

25. Kimonoboy's Japanese Folk Textiles web site, based in Japan, sells vintage *boro sashiko* jackets at prices from \$700-\$2500. <https://www.kimonoboy.com/>. Accessed 16 Feb. 2018.

26. Conversations with the author, Spitalfields Market, Whitechapel, London, July 2015.

27. "At Richard and Cosmo Wise's Shop."

28. See Mendelshon, Chapter 1.

29. MacCarthy 93.

30. See Francesca Cuojati, "Into Gypsydom: Augustus John's Provence."

31. "Calvin Klein, Tommy Hilfiger and Ralph Lauren Embrace American to Close Fashion Week," *NY Daily News*, 18 Sept. 2009.

32. Matthews David 215-217.

33. "Armani Bans Sandblasted Jeans," *Clean Clothes Campaign*, 14 Sept. 2011.

34. "Secret footage shows how factory workers in China use controversial methods linked to dozens of deaths to make jeans for Abercrombie and Fitch and American Eagle Outfitters," *MailOnline*, 14 Mar. 2015.

35. See Grant McCracken 310, "Who Is the Celebrity Endorser? Cultural Foundations of the Endorsement Process."

36. *Meghan's Mirror*, <http://meghansmirror.com/>.

37. Ayres 152.

38. Healey 263.

39. See Caroline Evans 79 and 81, "The Golden Dustman: A Critical Evaluation of the Work of Martin Margiela and A Review of Martin Margiela: Exhibition (9/4/1615)."

40. "Breaking News – Thibaut 'Thong Jeans' Have No Fabric, Just Seams," *US Femail*, 18 Oct. 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LdiZCfEFqsw>. With thanks to Marie McLoughlin.

41. Bettez Halnon 501 and 513.

42. Bettez Halnon 513-14.

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Author Biography



Lou Taylor

UNIVERSITY
OF BRIGHTON

Lou Taylor is Professor Emerita in Dress History at the University of Brighton.

She is the author of *Mourning Dress: A Costume and Social History*, Routledge, 1983, reprinted by Taylor and Francis, 2012, *The Study of Dress History*, 2004, *Establishing Dress History*, 2004, both by Manchester University Press and co-author of *London Society and Fashion, 1905–25: the Wardrobe of Heather Firbank* with co-authors Cassie Davis-Strodder and Jenny Lister, V&A Publishing, 2015. Forthcoming in 2018 for Bloomsbury Press, *Paris Fashion and World War Two: Global Diffusion and Nazi Control*, co-edited with Marie McLoughlin.

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