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FASHION DIARY; Out-Levi-ing Levi Strauss

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A SHORT walk from the Ueno train station, near a hill where a doomed band of loyalists to the Tokugawa Shogunate once made a fierce and celebrated last stand against imperial Meiji forces, is a destination sacred to another breed of die-hards: devotees of the Japanese denim cult.

At first glance, Hinoya Plus Mart is not much of a shrine. Open at the front, tucked beneath an overpass, and with its wares floating from rails hung above a cobbled sidewalk, it looks like the kind of place where big news might be a sale on three-packs of tube socks.

But aficionados are not put off by Hinoya's low-rent aura, or by the dry-goods shops and fish markets that stretch for blocks around. Initiates know that beyond the wall of fluttering pant legs lies a trove of bluejeans produced by niche Japanese labels in the kind of ultradesirable limited editions that recall Richard Serra lithographs or Red Shoulder chardonnay. There is even a kind of daffy ineffable poetry in the labels' names: Skull or Skinny or Oni or Dubble Works or Samurai or Sugar Cane.

Well into the era of so-called premium denim, bluejeans priced at \$200 and more, there are those who find the notion of artisanal jeans an affront not just to the wallet (the average pair of jeans sold in America costs about \$20, according to Marshall Cohen, of the market research group NPD) but also to the memory of Levi Strauss. After all, his legendary 1873 design was for a pair of unkillable, hard-wearing work trousers intended to outfit miners bound for the ore-rich hills and sloughs and streams of the California gold rush. That, of course, was an age when premium value was set on mass- and not microproduction, a time before the market inverted itself and transformed everyday stuff like coffee or photographs into artificial rarities.

This capricious evolution of taste has given rise to things like the jeans bar, a novelty five years back and now a fixture at any self-respecting specialty store. Yet it is still common enough to spend a Goldilocks afternoon sampling the wares at Barneys New York, moving from low-rise to boot-cut to relaxed-fit to straight-leg jeans, only to come away in frustration without finding anything that suits. This is at least partly because the \$13 billion denim industry was hijacked by fashion somewhere along the line, and the simple unadorned beauty of old-fashioned bluejeans was lost.

Old-fashioned is a term used affectionately to refer to Levi's crowning achievement, the button-fly 501s manufactured in what devotees refer to as the Golden Age of Levi's, a period bracketed between the Second World War and the Summer of Love.

Heavyweight, board-stiff until worn in, best bought a size or two large and then shrunk to fit, 501s are unambiguously the model for the finest of the new Japanese denims, which flatter the originals so religiously that Levi Strauss & Company filed a complaint in San Francisco Federal Court in January, claiming that five Japanese brands had infringed on proprietary details of its jeans like the vertical tab on the rear pocket, the signature V-shaped stitching on the pocket, and the familiar logo of two horses attempting to tug apart a pair of jeans.

"These are the most recognized apparel symbols in the world and are the company's most valuable asset," said E. J. Bernacki, a spokesman for Levi's, which also focused its complaint on retailers who sell the offending products, places like the denim specialists Self Edge in San Francisco and Blue in Green in SoHo, in New York.

Before the recent complaint, one could find Sugar Cane jeans at Self Edge, which Details magazine named the best denim store in America, in editions reproducing Levi's from what are considered the landmark years: 1944, 1955, 1966.

"We were sued," said Kiya Babzani, the proprietor of Self Edge, a Mission District boutique that is truly missionary in its pursuit of denim enlightenment. What you will not find there are Levi's own reissues of its old designs, sold under the premium Levi's Vintage label. "Theirs is not nearly as close a reproduction of what a 501 was like in 1947 as Sugar Cane's version is," Mr. Babzani said. Only Sugar Cane's \$450 copies of the 1955 Levi's use original Scovill zippers bought from dealers in vintage stock.

Like all the best Japanese denim products, Sugar Cane jeans are sewn from cotton woven on narrow shuttle looms, in cloth weights heftier than that of most commercial fabric, and dyed using highly guarded formulas that result in saturated indigo that calls to mind the depths of a bottle of Parker's blue ink.

While jeans made of selvedge denim (the term refers to the uncut edges of woven fabric) have been a minor obsession here since at least the 1980s, their cult status in America is a more recent phenomenon. Barely a handful of United States retailers stock labels like Sugar Cane, Flat Head or Iron Heart and none can compete with Hinoya Plus Mart in terms of the range and the obscurity of the jeans it sells. (Including, at this writing, the reproductions that offended Levi's.)

"Japanese denim is always about extreme individuality," explained Long Nguyen, the editor of Flaunt, the independent American style magazine. An early adopter of the Japanese denim trend, Mr. Nguyen was wearing limited-edition Evisu jeans almost a decade ago, long before hip-hop artists started shelling out \$800 a pair for styles that are produced for a season and then retired.

"The cachet is finding very limited quantities and styles," said Mr. Nguyen, who has lately forsaken Evisu for jeans by Yoropiko or RMC, a company founded in 2002 as Red Monkey Jeans by a Hong Kong designer, Martin Ksohoh (then known as Martin Yat Ming), to manufacture American-style trousers using elaborate Japanese techniques. That the rear pockets on RMC jeans, ornamented by unique Japanese woodblock prints, practically shout "limited edition" may help explain why it is that they routinely sell out at stores like Lane Crawford in Hong Kong and to customers like Mr. Nguyen and the rapper Jay-Z, who are not sticker-shocked when faced with a \$2,500 price tag.

It isn't Mr. Ksohoh's baroque designs, though, that lure the faithful to Hinoya Plus Mart. It is brands whose low-key, nearly anonymous styling is in line with the antilabel ethos William Gibson made a centerpiece of his 2003 novel, "Pattern Recognition." The protagonist of that book was so averse to labels that she wore generic clothing from shops like Muji -- the Japanese chain whose stock is assiduously generic and whose name translates literally as "no name."

"It goes back to the original Levi's idea," said Mr. Babzani of Self Edge. "The idea is that you're wearing something of the utmost quality and construction" and yet which somehow looks generic and, in the best way, invisible.

Like minimalism in architecture, anonymity in clothing does not come cheap: reproductions of Levi's Vintage classics produced by Sugar Cane cost as much as \$300 in the United States -- if you can find them -- and they are not much less expensive in Japan.

Still, "we're selling a lot of Sugar Cane right now," claimed Koji Miura, Hinoya's owner, referring in particular to that label's imitations of slightly 1940s Levi's, cut slightly high in the waist and full in the leg; and lean 501s that were stylish at about the time that American forces were bombing Cambodia; and also to a very late '60s variant of stovepipe jeans that were, upon a time, a uniform of a bygone genus, the gay clone.

"Look at how beautiful these button-fly 501s from 1966 are," said Mr. Miura, holding up a pair of Sugar Cane jeans. And they were. Aware that the Japanese version of the homegrown product is far finer than anything similar now being made in America, one hardly minded spending \$250 for a version of something that could have been bought for \$20, an eon or so ago.