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Can Andy Warhol lend Levi's the right kind of cool?

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By Cristina Rouvalis, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Can a dead avant-garde artist add cachet to an old comfy pair of jeans? Levi Strauss & Co. hopes so.

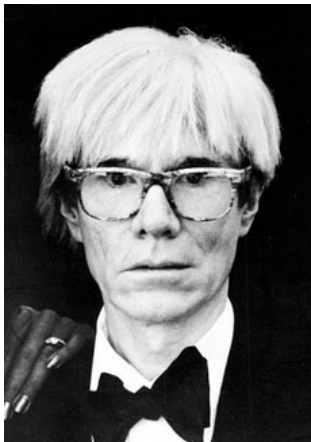
The blue jeans giant is tapping Andy Warhol to sell \$150 to \$250 jeans and other sportswear embellished with dollar signs, Marilyn Monroe, Mao and other imagery.

The “Warhol Factory X Levi’s” are an attempt to lure away young consumers who think nothing of dropping a cool \$200 on a pair of Diesel, Frankie B. and Joe’s Jeans. Through its licensing agreement with the Andy Warhol Foundation, the status-symbol jeans and tops will be in high-end stores in the spring. As far as posthumous endorsements go, this one isn’t really a stretch.

Warhol wore Levi’s. In 1984, the Pittsburgh native, who shook up the modern art world with his paintings of mass-produced products and celebrities, did a series on a man in Levi’s, the insignia stamped on top.

Opinions vary on whether Warhol and Levi’s are a good fit today. Levi’s have been the original jeans ever since Bavarian immigrant Levi Strauss invented riveted denim pants in 1873 for Gold Rush laborers, but the company has lost ground to competitors during the last decade.

“It is a great thing -- someone whose art was about American products and mass production and Levi’s being one of the most etched American things,” said Thomas Sokolowski, director of The Andy Warhol Museum on the North Side. Eighteen years after his death, Warhol appeals to young people, he said.



Andy Warhol
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“He was always young,” Sokolowski said of the artist who had a nose job and predicted the plastic surgery craze. “He was the hope everyone

had of being eternally young.”

“It’s not as though a 17-year-old is going to know about Campbell’s soup cans and Marilyn Monroe,” said Peter Sealey, marketing professor at the University of California at Berkeley. But he thinks young people will respond to old iconic imagery in the same way they plaster James Dean posters in their dorm rooms.

Others aren’t so sure Andy Warhol’s eternal hipness is going to rub off on denim.

“Levi’s is a great brand that consumers buy despite the marketing,” said Irma Zandl, principal of the Zandl Group, a New York agency that tracks trends. “If they stopped trying so hard to be cool, they actually might be more successful.”

The new Warhol clothes will debut for retail buyers at a trade show in Las Vegas tomorrow. One line, the Silver Lux Collection, plays off of Warhol’s silver factory, his artist studio covered in tin foil and silver paint. The silver jeans will have silver threads and the Levi’s logo in silver, said Michael Hermann, director of licensing for the Andy Warhol Foundation for Visual Arts. The interior will be lined with Warhol images that can be seen when you fold up the cuff. “It is very subtle,” he said.

Another pair of jeans is more outlandish. Distressed and splattered with paint, it has dollar signs on them, an image Warhol used in his paintings. “The jeans emulate the sense of irony in the paintings,” Hermann said.

Shirts will have Warhol images of dollar signs, skulls, silver embellishments, celebrities and, mirroring one of his last works, the Last Supper on camouflage. His quotes, including “Fashion wasn’t what you wore anymore. It was the whole reason for going” will be written on some of the tops, which will cost everything from \$80 up to \$300 for cashmere ones.

Would Warhol have worn these clothes? “I would never purport to know what he liked,” Hermann said. “One thing about Andy Warhol, he was a very complicated guy.”

But consumers in their 20s and 30s are lapping up super-premium jeans, undeterred by prices that can go \$200 and much higher. With embroidered pockets, distressed fabric and rhinestone detailing, it is a profitable but fickle market. “It’s crazy,” said Jamie Rohm, owner of Zipper Blues in Mt. Lebanon. “Jeans I used to get for \$110 are \$170.”

But she gets very few complaints about price, and has people coming in asking for the \$184 Blue Cult butt lifter and other high priced brands. But she draws the line at \$300 to \$400 jeans, which she doesn’t think would fly in suburban Pittsburgh.

“Everyone is doing premium denim,” Rohm said. “Celebrities like Puff Daddy and Posh Spice. It is getting to be like too much. Where is the exclusivity in it now? It is like, ‘What’s new? What’s new?’ Before something can be the next big thing, they are out.”

But Rohm thinks it is smart for Levi’s to enter the fray with an assist from Andy Warhol. “You expect them to keep up. With a brand like Levi’s, you are the jeans of the world.”

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