

## California Style Doesn't Lend Itself To Easy Definition

BY ILSE METCHEK, PRESIDENT OF THE CALIFORNIA FASHION ASSOCIATION



What is California style now? The answer is no longer as simple as jeans and a T-shirt. The state's consumers have long brandished a personal style that's as diverse as the demographics. "Anything goes" may as well be the official mantra here.

This is the birthplace of blue jeans, Barbie, the fortune cookie, martinis, hi-tech gadgetry and skateboards. And where would the modern world be without any of these inventions?

Look at the recent collections: one of the most important trends right now is the casual lifestyle. It is a rare show or magazine that didn't have a cargo pant, all going back to the whole surf-skateboard thing, the ease of the lifestyle in California. Even the entire denim business is being driven by California style.

From board shorts to red-carpet glamour to casual work wear, trends originating in California have morphed through the fashion world like a cloud.

It may come as no surprise that Californians are 39% more likely to buy workout wear than other American women, according to MediaMark Research Inc. But it's also true that 40% of them are more likely to shop for evening dresses than the rest of the nation.

The Golden State is a place where, historically, people come to invent themselves. With that comes an intellectual freedom, and a personal freedom. The cultural exchange among its population has also resulted in a fusion in not only music and food, but also style.

Fusion is no novelty here; it's a way of life. Blonde, blue-eyed surfers share landscape with the largest population of people of Chinese, Korean, Mexican and Vietnamese heritage outside of those countries.

This preoccupation with youth is because the state also boasts one of the largest teen populations, providing plenty of inspiration for the junior, denim, young contemporary and action sports apparel markets.

California's apparel industry workforce outnumbers that of New York. In ALL matters of designs, the state's role can't be ignored:

- 19 of 27 automobile companies have their creative studios here.
- In furniture design and manufacturing, Los Angeles is second only to High Point, N.C.
- The city is in the top five worldwide when it comes to designing and developing medical instruments and the state is among the leader in food design, from restaurant dining to commercial packaging.

Although there are major fashion firms, from Levi's to Gap, St. John Knits to Guess, there is no 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue marketing 'push', and, thus, New York continues to serve as this nation's fashion media capital. That hasn't stopped Tom Ford, Versace, Valentino, Escada and countless others to come here to photograph ad campaigns (thanks to the year-round sunshine and wide ranging terrains) or check out the Oscar Action.

I don't think people are looking over their shoulder as much here as they are looking in the mirror, and I mean that in a positive way. They're looking in the mirror and asking what do I stand for? What do I want? We're just a different mentality out here.

Some say the world's ongoing love affair with California lifestyle speaks to a current desire for freedom of expression. Especially in this economy, it's what young people feel they want. They find it in sportswear and street wear. It's what's comfortable to them and what fits in their budgets.

California makes perfect sense with the recent movements towards personalization in fashion, towards vintage, embellishment, and the return to the crafts movement.

California style is a metaphor for a way of living we all want. It's part of the American dream, in a way. We all secretly long to sit on the beach and watch the surf roll in and the movie stars go by. 

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