

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Leonard Davis

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Davis, Leonard, 1953-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Leonard Davis,
Dates:	June 22, 2007 and March 31, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	10 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:29:14).
Abstract:	Fashion designer Leonard Davis (1953 -) designed for many 7th Avenue fashion houses including Willi Wear, Josephine Chaus, Liz Claiborne, Adrianna Papell, Donnkenney, QVC, Home Shopping Network, Chico's, and Tarzana International. As an avid collector of Black Americana, he authored two books and several articles on black collectables. Davis was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 22, 2007 and March 31, 2007, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_119
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Fashion designer, fashion event producer and Black Americana collector, Leonard Davis, was born on March 12, 1953 in Washington, D.C. to Jordan and Cleo Davis. He graduated from Coolidge High School in 1970 and earned his associate degree in applied science at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York in 1973. Davis then continued his education at the world famous L'Ecole de la Chambre Syndicale De La Couture Parisienne in Paris, France where he earned his "Couture Design" certificate in 1975. After working as an apprentice for Jean-Louis Sherrer in Paris, Davis returned to New York and began his designing career working for Willi Wear. On more than one occasion throughout his career, Davis was the first African American designer to head a division for companies including Adrianna Papell, Josephine Chaus, Inc. and Donnkenny. For twelve years, Davis worked developing private label products at Liz Claiborne, QVC, The Home Shopping Network (HSN), Essence by Mail and retail stores including Saks, Nordstrom, Bloomingdales, Macy's, JC Penney, Sears, Ashley Stewart and Steinmart. Davis has also worked abroad as Design Director for several International fashion houses including Mihang International, (Korean) Sage Apparel, (India) Tanzara/Plus Impact, (India). In 1990, Davis realized the necessity for an annual event to honor African Americans in the fashion industry. With the collaboration of The Fashion Institute of Technology and Fashion and Arts Xchange, Davis' vision was realized. He produced several annual events which honored black fashion pioneers including Ophelia DeVore, Naomi Sims, Andre-Leon Talley, Iman, Geoffrey Holder, Carmen De Lavallade, Wesley Tann, Helen Williams, Audrey Smaltz, Susan Taylor and Stephan Burrows. The event was hosted by Diahann Carroll and Phylicia Rashad.

In 1985, Davis began collecting Black Americana. He has published two books entitled "Black Americana Price Guide." Davis has appeared in numerous magazines and newspaper articles, and The Davis Collection has been featured on several television shows including "Antiques Road Show," "Treasures in Your Home," ABC News, and featured in Spike Lee movie "Bamboozled." Leonard Davis was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on March

31, 2007.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Leonard Davis was conducted by Adrienne Jones and Shawn Wilson on June 22, 2007 and March 31, 2007, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 10 Betacame SP videocassettes. Fashion designer Leonard Davis (1953 -) designed for many 7th Avenue fashion houses including Willi Wear, Josephine Chaus, Liz Claiborne, Adrianna Papell, Donnkenney, QVC, Home Shopping Network, Chico's, and Tarzana International. As an avid collector of Black Americana, he authored two books and several articles on black collectables.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Davis, Leonard, 1953-

Jones, Adrienne (Interviewer)

Wilson, Shawn (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Davis, Leonard, 1953- --Interviews

African American fashion designers--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Fashion Designer

HistoryMakers® Category:

StyleMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Leonard Davis, June 22, 2007 and March 31, 2007. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Leonard Davis, Section A2007_119_001_001, TRT: 0:29:49 ?

Leonard Davis was born on March 12, 1953 in Washington, D.C. to Cleo Williams Davis and Jordan Davis, Sr. His maternal great-grandfather, Gus Moody, worked on the railroad, and may have been descended from East Indian immigrants. In Natchitoches, Louisiana, Davis' maternal grandmother worked as a domestic for white families, while his great-aunt cared for his mother. Davis' mother went on to earn a home economics degree at Southern University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. In Danville, Virginia, Davis' paternal grandparents worked at the Dan River Mills, and raised ten children. His father learned the tailoring trade, and moved to Washington, D.C., where he became a valet at the Ambassador Hotel. There, he met Davis' mother, who worked as an elevator operator. During the 1950s, Davis' majority white neighborhood became primarily African American. His parents taught him about the Civil Rights Movement; but, fearing the loss of their employment, did not participate.

African American families--Washington (D.C.).

Sutton University.

African Americans--Race relations--Washington (D.C.).

African Americans--Education--Washington (D.C.).

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka.

Video Oral History Interview with Leonard Davis, Section A2007_119_001_002, TRT: 0:30:34 ?

Leonard Davis attended Rabaut Junior High School in Washington, D.C., where singer Roberta Flack was his music teacher. He was interested in electronics at the time, and decided to attend Chamberlain Vocational High School. There, Davis was assigned to write a fashion column for the student newspaper, and began drawing outfits. When his mother saw his sketches, she encouraged his budding interest in fashion, while her friend, Pauline Elmore, taught him to sew. Davis began to create his own clothing designs, including dashikis, and held fashion shows at Gethsemane Baptist Church, where his family belonged to the congregation. During Davis' senior year, he transferred to Calvin Coolidge High School, where he was mentored by art teacher Elaine Snowden. With her guidance, he won both first and second place in a national high school art competition, and applied to art schools in New York City. In 1971, Davis matriculated at the Fashion Institute of Technology, where he first learned about the history of fashion.

African American families--Washington (D.C.).

Education, Primary--Washington (D.C.).

Education, Secondary--Washington (D.C.).

African Americans--Education--Washington (D.C.).

Art teachers--Washington (D.C.).

Fashion Institute of Technology (New York, N.Y.).

Flack, Roberta.

Video Oral History Interview with Leonard Davis, Section A2007_119_001_003, TRT: 0:30:39 ?

Leonard Davis attended the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) from 1971 to 1973, alongside designers Brian Lane and Stephen Burrows. At the time, black designers like Willi Smith and Alvin Bell were emerging at New York City's O Boutique. Davis entered FIT with basic sewing skills, and quickly learned to design and draft his own patterns. After earning his degree, Davis was admitted to study couture at the Ecole de la Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne; but, upon arriving in Paris, France, was initially turned away from the school.

He was allowed to register for classes only after offering his tuition check, and later met another African American designer who was rejected upon arrival. In Paris, Davis met many aspiring artists, including designer Patrick Kelly, who operated a clothing stand on the streets of Paris at the time. Upon completing his studies in 1977, Davis apprenticed for French designer Jean Louis Scherrer, and then returned to New York City, where he struggled to find work.

Fashion Institute of Technology (New York, N.Y.).

African American fashion designers--United States.

New York (State)--Clothing.

Fashion designers--France--Paris.

Fashion designers--New York (State).

Video Oral History Interview with Leonard Davis, Section A2007_119_001_004, TRT: 0:29:42 ?

Leonard Davis had difficulty finding housing upon his arrival in Paris, France, where he was initially turned away from the Ecole de la Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne. During his studies, he once visited his family for Christmas as a surprise, but had to ask for help to buy a return ticket. After moving back to New York City, Davis freelanced for Donna Karan's mother, Helen Faske. She recommended Davis to her wealthy friends, who referred him to designer Oleg Cassini. During the interview, Cassini took away Davis' portfolio, which he covertly gave to an artist to plagiarize; and promised Davis a position, but never contacted him again. As the African American fashion community grew, Davis met model Naomi Sims and designer Scott Barrie. He began working for Willi Smith, who partnered with French designers Laurie Mallet and Jacques Mallet and manufacturer Om Batheja to create WilliWear Ltd., a junior sportswear line. Davis describes the development of that market during the late 1970s.

African Americans--Employment.

African American fashion designers--Social conditions.

Cassini, Oleg, 1913-2006.

Fashion design--Indian.

African American fashion designers--New York (State).

Karan, Donna, 1948-.

Video Oral History Interview with Leonard Davis, Section A2007_119_001_005, TRT: 0:29:13 ?

Leonard Davis designed blouses at Adrianna Papell for five years, and more than doubled the division's sales while also facing racial discrimination. He was initially rejected from the position based on his race, and a buyer complained about his work only after learning that he was African American. Following his success at Adrianna Papell, Davis was recruited as the head designer for the blouse division at Bernard Chaus, Inc. However, the company eliminated Davis' division when one of its owners passed away. He briefly worked at Liz Claiborne, and then left to start a blouse division at the Oak Hill Sportswear Corporation, which later merged with Donnkenny, Inc. Davis worked for a few years at a number of Indian clothing companies to gain international experience, and was then hired by a Korean company. Davis talks about the frequent dismissal of black designers as tasteless or too ethnic. He also describes the development of urban wear, and the difficulties of designing for the moderate market.

African Americans--Employment.

Liz Claiborne Inc.

African American fashion designers--Social conditions.

African Americans--Race relations.

Video Oral History Interview with Leonard Davis, Section A2007_119_001_006, TRT: 0:22:37 ?

Leonard Davis was employed by Tanzara International, Inc. at the time of the interview. Based in India, the company produced clothes for its own line, as well as retailers like Chicos and the Avenue Stores, LLC. Davis was a member of Fashion Outreach and the Fashion and Art Exchange, and organized celebrations to honor African American pioneers in the fashion industry. He names Audrey Smaltz, manager of the Ebony Fashion Fair; Vogue magazine editor Andre Leon Talley; Wesley Tann, the first black business owner on Seventh Avenue; and costume designer Geoffrey Holder as a few such pioneers. Davis talks about the negative connotation of the term ethnic in the fashion industry, and black designers' experiences of racial discrimination. He also describes the Black Fashion Museum in New York City, and the importance of preserving African American fashion history. Davis describes the lessons he learned over the course of his career, his advice to aspiring designers of color and his parents' support for his career.

African American fashion designers.

Fashion--Social aspects--United States.

African Americans--Clothing--United States.

Video Oral History Interview with Leonard Davis, Section A2007_119_002_007, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Leonard Davis bought his first apartment in New York City in 1989. He hoped to decorate his home with African American art, and began collecting black Americana objects. Davis explains that the rarity of African American images in Americana increases the value of his collection, and shares the history of figures such as Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben and Rastus in American advertising. Davis began his collection with the purchase of a rare Aunt Jemima cookie jar manufactured by the Weller Pottery company. He successfully obtained all six pieces, including a syrup pourer. Davis explains that his collection included depictions of African American stereotypes, which were once widely used by manufacturers. While his collection offended some visitors, Davis hoped to educate his guests about the history of NAACP boycotts of such items. From the 1940s, activists forced companies to decrease their use of racist imagery, leading to changes in the branding of products like Negro Head Tomatoes and Darlie toothpaste.

African Americans--Collectibles.

Jemima, Aunt.

African Americans in popular culture--United States.

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

African Americans--Race relations--United States.

Video Oral History Interview with Leonard Davis, Section A2007_119_002_008, TRT: 0:30:01 ?

Leonard Davis began collecting black Americana in 1989. He describes African American hair care items in his collection, including products from Madam C.J. Walker's beauty line. Davis talks about the educational value of physical artifacts, the growing interest in African American family histories and the importance of preserving family documents. Davis explains that companies often excluded African Americans from advertisements because of the threat of losing white customers, and describes how a white boycott forced the Rheingold Beer company to revoke its sponsorship of Nat King Cole's television show. Similarly, Davis shares a cereal box featuring Vanessa Williams, the first African American Miss America pageant winner, which was never distributed to

retailers due to white backlash. Davis also describes how pressure from advocacy groups has led to improvements in African American advertising images, including depictions of Aunt Jemima, since the 1960s.

Hairdressing of Blacks.

Walker, C. J., Madam, 1867-1919.

Baker, Josephine, 1906-1975.

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

African Americans--Collectibles.

African Americans in popular culture--United States.

Jemima, Aunt.

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Video Oral History Interview with Leonard Davis, Section A2007_119_002_009, TRT: 0:26:03 ?

Leonard Davis collected black Americana artifacts, including products created by African Americans, like his objects from Madam C.J. Walker's School of Beauty Culture; and objects with racist depictions of black face figures. Davis shares a collection of artifacts from the Coon Chicken Inn, a restaurant that operated on the West Coast until the 1950s, and talks about the offensive logo on the restaurant's dishes and tableware. Davis also shares his collection of piggybanks shaped like African American figures, and explains that a later line of these banks were called Greedy Nigger Banks. Davis talks about how offensive brand names changed over time, and displays a container of Nigger Hair Smoking Tobacco, which was later renamed Bigger Hair Smoking Tobacco. Davis describes his collection of Aunt Jemima products, which included the original image of Nancy Green as Aunt Jemima, the offensive caricatures in the Weller Pottery tableware set and the modified Aunt Jemima depicted in the 1950s and 1960s.

African Americans--Collectibles.

African Americans in popular culture--United States.

Video Oral History Interview with Leonard Davis, Section A2007_119_002_010, TRT: 0:11:16 ?

Leonard Davis narrates his photographs.

African Americans--Collectibles.

African Americans in popular culture--United States.