

# Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Charles A. Harrison

PERSON

Harrison, Charles, 1931-

**Alternative Names:** Harrison, Charles; Charles A. Harrison

**Life Dates:** September 23, 1931-

**Place of Birth:** Shreveport, Louisiana

**Residence:** Evanston, Illinois

**Occupations:** Industrial Designer

## Biographical Note

Industrial designer Charles Harrison was born on September 23, 1931, in Shreveport, Louisiana to Charles and Cora Lee Harrison. His father was a teacher and their family often moved around. Harrison grew up on the campuses of Southern University and Prairie View A&M University. He spent his summers wandering through the campuses' experimental farms, chemistry laboratories and woodshops. After graduating from high school in Arizona, Harrison moved to California to live with his older brother and attend the City College of San Francisco where he first studied art.

In 1954, Harrison graduated with his B.F.A. degree from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. After receiving his B.F.A degree from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Harrison was drafted into the military. The Army trained him to be a cartographer and he was sent to remap West Germany since the city was completely different after World War II. He remembers being the only black draftsman in the topographic unit. Harrison went to graduate school to get out of the military early. The School of the Art Institute of Chicago created a master level industrial design program just for Harrison. He married his wife Janet during his graduate studies in Chicago. Harrison held various design jobs with Carl Bjorncrantz, Henry Glass, and Edward Klein after he received his M.S. degree. At Robert Podall Associates, Harrison was on the team that redesigned the View-Master toy in 1959. In 1961, he was hired by Sears Roebuck & Company, where Harrison designed heavy plastic trash cans with snap-lock lids and hundreds of other consumer products, including hair dryers, toasters, stereos, lawn mowers and sewing machines. Harrison worked at Sears for thirty-two years, rising to the position of design department manager.

Since retiring from Sears Roebuck and Company in 1993, Harrison has taught

industrial design at the University of Illinois and Columbia College Chicago. He volunteered with the Evanston Arts Council and served as a senior adviser for the Organization of Black Designers. In 2000, his design work was featured in an exhibit "The World of a Product Designer: Charles Harrison" at his former high school, Phoenix Union Colored High School, now the Carver Museum and Cultural Center. In 2008, Harrison received the lifetime achievement award from the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum at the Smithsonian Institution.

Charles Harrison was interviewed by The History Makers on July 24, 2002.

## Related Entries

**Smith, Ophelia** [GRANDCHILDOf]  
Grandmother (M)

**Smith, James** [GRANDCHILDOf]  
Grandfather (M)

**Harrison, Lilly** [GRANDCHILDOf]  
Grandmother (P)

**Harrison, Cora Lee Smith** [CHILDOf]  
Mother

**Harrison, Charles** [CHILDOf]  
Father

**Harrison, Charles** [CHILDOf]  
Father

**Harrison, Cora L.** [CHILDOf]  
Mother

**Harrison, Lawrence** [SIBLINGOf]  
Brother

**George Washington Carver High School** [STUDENTOf]  
[from ? to 1948]

diploma

**San Francisco City College** [STUDENTOf]  
[from ? to ?]

**School of the Art Institute of Chicago** [STUDENTOf]  
[from ? to 1954]

B.F.A.

**Illinois Institute of Technology** [STUDENTOf]  
[from ? to 1963]

M.F.A.

**Phoenix Union Colored High School** [STUDENTOf]  
[from ? to ?]

**E. Klein and Associates (Chicago)** [EMPLOYEEOf]

[from 1956 to 1959]

**Staff designer**

**Podall Associates (Chicago)** [EMPLOYEEOf]

[from 1959 to 1961]

**Staff designer**

**Sears Roebuck and Company** [EMPLOYEEOf]

[from 1961 to 1993]

**Manager, head designer**

**University of Illinois at Chicago** [EMPLOYEEOf]

[from 1993 to 2002]

**Professor**