



# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Charles A. Harrison

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Charles A. Harrison
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Charles A. Harrison,
<b>Dates:</b>	July 24, 2002
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2002
<b>Physical Description:</b>	9 Betacam SP videocassettes (2:41:25).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Industrial designer Charles A. Harrison (1931 - ) is most famous for his work on the team that updated the View-Master, but he has also designed hundreds of other consumer products from hair dryers to sewing machines. He has taught industrial design classes at the University of Illinois and Columbia College Chicago. Harrison was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 24, 2002, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2002_196
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

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.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Charles A. Harrison was conducted by Larry Crowe on July 24, 2002, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 9 Betacam SP videocassettes. Industrial designer Charles A. Harrison (1931 - ) is most famous for his work on the team that updated the View-Master, but he has also designed hundreds of other consumer products from hair dryers to sewing machines. He has taught industrial design classes at the University of Illinois and Columbia College Chicago.

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## 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®.

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## 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.

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## Controlled Access Terms

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

### Persons:

Harrison, Charles, 1931-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Harrison, Charles, 1931- --Interviews

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African American Industrial designers--Interviews.

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## Organizations:

HistoryMakers (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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Sears, Roebuck and Company

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

BusinessMakers

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## 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 Charles A. Harrison, July 24, 2002. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

### Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 11/15/2011 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

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## 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.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

## Series I: Original Interview Footage, July 24, 2002

Video Oral History Interview with Charles A. Harrison, Section A2002\_196\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:30 2002/07/24

Charles Harrison was born in Shreveport, Louisiana, on September 23, 1931 to Charles and Cora Lee Harrison. His father was a teacher and their family moved around often. Harrison remembers Prairie View, Texas, as a self-sustaining town because it was home to Prairie View Agricultural and Mechanical University. He remembers the sights and smells of the grass plains, wildflowers, agricultural fields, and the downtown area. Harrison struggled with dyslexia and was not tested for it until high school so he became a strong visual learner. His older brother served in World War II, and went to the University of California Berkley for graduate studies in psychology. After graduating high school in Arizona, Harrison moved to California to live with his brother and attend the City College of San Francisco where he first studied art.

African American families--Louisiana--Shreveport.

African American fathers--Louisiana.

Prairie View (Texas).

Prairie View A & M University.

Dyslexia.

African American high school students--United States.

World War, 1939-1945--Participation, African American.

University of California, Berkeley--Students.

City College of San Francisco--Students.

African American college students--California.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles A. Harrison, Section A2002\_196\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:00 2002/07/24

Charles Harrison remembers how he loved to create and build things with his hands but he did not know how to translate it into a career until he took an aptitude test at City College of San Francisco. His dean advised him to go into industrial design, so Harrison applied to all five industrial design programs that existed in the 1950s. He was accepted to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. During school, he worked at the Episcopal Church's Randall House for Negro Boys. After graduating in 1954, Harrison's first job was designing furniture at an interior design firm on East Walton Street in Chicago, Illinois. He describes designing distinctive and stylish products that are useful to consumers. Harrison thinks some designers limit themselves by using computer programs.

City College of San Francisco--Students.

Industrial design--Study and teaching.

Art Institute of Chicago. School.

Episcopal Church--Illinois--Chicago.

Furniture design--Illionois--Chicago.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles A. Harrison, Section A2002\_196\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:50 2002/07/24

Charles Harrison explains that product design was more about style and aesthetics in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s and today products are more about functionality. He thinks the focus on functionality may be a cause of similar appearances. 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 some areas were quite 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. He married his wife Janet while working on his graduate studies back in Chicago. Harrison is grateful to Carl Bjorncrantz, Henry Glass, and Edward Klein for helping him start his industrial design career after he received his M.S. degree.

Product design--United States.

Art Institute of Chicago. School.

Draft--United States.

Military education--Cartographers.

African American drafters--Germany.

African Americans--Marriage.

African American industrial designers.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles A. Harrison, Section A2002\_196\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:40 2002/07/24

Charles Harrison recounts his experiences working for Edward Klein and Robert Podall. These small design firms required long work hours, working nights and weekends with small salaries. Carl Bjorncrantz from Sears Roebuck and Company offered Harrison work as a Sears employee instead of as a freelance consultant and he accepted the job. Harrison became the first black to be hired at Sears Roebuck as an executive in 1961. He worked at Sears for thirty-three years. He experienced some racist situations at work, but felt the Civil Rights Movement improved the work environment. He and other young black professionals created a committee to discuss rights, fair treatment, and fair promotions with employers and were successful.

Industrial designers.

Sears, Roebuck and Company--Employees.

African American executives.

Civil rights movements--United States.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles A. Harrison, Section A2002\_196\_001\_005, TRT: 0:30:10 2002/07/24

Charles Harrison held several management positions at Sears Roebuck and Company. Ironically, he ended his career at Sears as the sole industrial design manager/employee. Harrison retired in 1993 to take care of his wife who had cancer. Harrison then taught industrial design at the University of Illinois as an adjunct professor until 2002. Since then, he has been an adjunct professor for industrial design at Columbia College Chicago. He has found teaching to be very rewarding. His son, Charlie Harrison, is a composer, guitarist, and associate director of the Chicago Jazz Orchestra. Harrison hopes his legacy is making products that were easy to use, nice to look at, and reasonably priced. He would like to be remembered as somebody who helped others whenever possible.

Sears, Roebuck and Company--Employees.

African American executives.

16th Street Baptist Church Bombing, Birmingham, Ala., 1963.

Cancer--Patients.

Industrial design--Study and teaching.

Columbia College (Chicago, Ill.)--Faculty.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles A. Harrison, Section A2002\_196\_001\_006, TRT:  
0:11:15 2002/07/24

Photographs