Overview of the Collection

Repository: The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com

Creator: Thomas, Reginald, 1957-2018

Title: The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Reginald Thomas,

Dates: July 27, 2004

Bulk Dates: 2004

Physical Description: 5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:14:56).

Abstract: Fashion designer Reginald Thomas (1957 - 2018 ) was the creator of Reginald Designs. As a key figure in the Chicago fashion scene, he was known for incorporating African themes into his influential designs. Thomas was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 27, 2004, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.

Identification: A2004_111

Language: The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Fashion designer Reginald Thomas was born in Lake Wales, Florida, on October 21, 1957. As a child, Thomas enjoyed drawing, especially the faces of women. In kindergarten, he was often punished because he would draw rather than do his lessons. Following the deaths of his mother at age five and his father when he was nine, Thomas was sent to Chicago to live with his oldest sister, and there his artistic talents blossomed.

With his sister’s approval, Thomas would often find clothes that had been thrown
away by others, and he would refashion them into new articles of clothing as presents. At thirteen, he was given a sewing machine for Christmas, and he spent long hours sewing in the closet of his home. While in high school, Thomas designed prom dresses for his classmates. After high school, Thomas attended Northern Illinois University, hoping to become a special education teacher, but following a successful fashion show, he transferred to the Art Institute of Chicago. There, he held his second show, and sold his collection to Chicago boutique Fiorucci. Thomas graduated from the Art Institute in 1983, and the following year, his signature line, Reginald Designs, was born.

Since then, Thomas has been a key figure in the Chicago fashion scene, consistently taking part in the Red Hot Chicago! fashion show. His designs are known for their clean lines, flowing fabrics, interchangeable pieces and comfort, and he takes pride in ensuring that his work is available to all, regardless of size or physical handicap. Thomas credits much of his success to encouragement from family and friends, including Joan and George Johnson and Leigh Jones.

Thomas passed away on June 25, 2018.

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**Scope and Content**

This life oral history interview with Reginald Thomas was conducted by Larry Crowe on July 27, 2004, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Fashion designer Reginald Thomas (1957 - 2018) was the creator of Reginald Designs. As a key figure in the Chicago fashion scene, he was known for incorporating African themes into his influential designs.

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**Restrictions**

**Restrictions on Access**

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

Controlled Access Terms

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

Persons:

Thomas, Reginald, 1957-2018
Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)
Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Thomas, Reginald, 1957-2018--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**


**Processing Information**

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 2/5/2020 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**
Thomas recounts living the simple life in an African American poor working class neighborhood. He drew all of the time, as if on autopilot. People even put him in the "special department" because he wouldn't stop drawing. He may have been influenced by the grooming rules of the 1950's and 1960's, such as women always having a hat, purse and gloves. Other than this "drawing thing" he was an inquisitive, somewhat unruly, but basically normal kid. Although he heard stories about crosses being burned on lawns, the main effect of segregation in his life was the separate water fountains and not being able to eat in certain restaurants. His mother took him to a sanctified church every Sunday, but he was not a fan of all the tambourines and later became a Lutheran to avoid the noise. He talks about the Southern eating schedule - the three "full meals" and how his close-knit community was centered around church, eating and the community. There was no room for trouble because your mother would hear about it in twenty minutes! He noticed the clothing people wore in church and was always a meticulous dresser, but he didn't know he was interested in designing clothing until the age of 10. Thomas talks about some of his dressing style as a kid. Also recounts the "doll story" about how he used to change the clothes of his sisters' dolls.

Thomas went to kindergarten in a church and went to Lake Wales Elementary, a new facility, but was pulled out when his mother died. Then he came to Chicago around 1966. He talks about his parents' deaths and recounts the problems getting medical care for African Americans back then. Oldest sister Nadine Williams had already made a life for herself in Chicago and brought her siblings there after the death of their mother. Talks about the culture shock of moving to the South Shore neighborhood of Chicago; encountering city living and racism. Thomas went to Myra Bradwell Elementary School, which was
white except for him and two other students. Once he adjusted to it, he found the beach, boutiques and other aspects of living in the South Shore to be "great." Thomas describes the predominantly Jewish neighborhood which was formerly a WASP neighborhood, and fondly recalls the Jeffery and Hamilton movie theaters. Talks about the controversy and racism surrounding the South Shore Country Club, which is now the South Shore Cultural Center. Thomas relates what the neighborhood was like in the 1930s and during the Jazz Age. The neighborhood stayed white for the first two or three years he lived there, but then it became black. Thomas talks about his personal style in the late 1960s and early 1970s and how he used to buy clothing with his allowance because his family had a more conservative style of dress. Thomas gives his take on European fashions versus American casual dress, and talks about straight hair in the black community. Thomas was affected by the black power movement to the extent that he wore long black braids. When he was taking a class at the Field Museum, tourists used to take pictures of him. As far as school was concerned, his continued interest in art made teachers think he had learning problems, but his sister Nadine never believed it and never tried to stop him from making his art. Her husband Oscar was the "token black man" so they had to go to lots of galas and parties, which limited Thomas' social life. Thomas talks more about Oscar's projects and connections, and feeling ashamed about the family's wealth. Thomas felt pressure to have a profession rather than be an artist. Attended South Shore High School, where his art teacher Mrs. Coffrey nurtured his talents. He began doing a lot of photography, sometimes semi-nude, and took classes at the Art Institute. Won the Kodak Award for a semi-nude portrait. Thomas was a participant in the Counseling Help and Assistance Necessary for College Education (CHANCE) Program on account of his low grades. Went to Northern Illinois University, which he considered to be a springboard. He started making clothes and "dressing" girls when he was in college to earn money. After about a year (and making good money) Thomas decided to go to art school at the Art Institute.
Thomas recounts how he first learned how to sew, which was basically self-taught. He had his first fashion show at Northern Illinois University without ever seeing a trade fashion show -- and without his family knowing that he knew how to sew! The clothing was predominantly knits, since he liked the challenge of working with them, and "just sexy clothes." Talks about his sense of style being influenced by the gangster movies his brother-in-law loved to watch. Thomas transferred to the Art Institute of Chicago after two years at Northern. He describes what a free-spirited place it was and what the learning environment was like -- one that inspired creativity. His teacher Kay-Karol Mapp taught him shape and theory, a method of making clothes without patterns which was used by slaves to make clothing. Thomas talks about the fashion shows at the Art Institute. He met fashion designer Eunice Johnson numerous times and she was instrumental in getting his family to approve of his interest. Thomas designed a garment a handicapped person could wear, which was carried by several boutiques by the time he graduated. He claims to be the "deadly D's" - he can cut, sew and design, he can do it all, he says. He says the most important thing he learned was how to schmooze and says that his teachers did not really teach the business end of fashion. Thomas finishes at the Art Institute in 1983 and starts running a business out of his basement, before moving it to Haymarket Square. He asks his brother-in-law for help managing his business. Talks about the 1983 Harold Washington campaign and how Washington helped Chicago designers. He also talks about moving out into his own loft and growing the business. His brother-in-law thought on a large scale and grew it too quickly, so when he died of a heart attack two years later the business was deep in debt. Thomas says this was the turning point in his life. He reorganizes and downsizes the business, gets the help of his family, and withstands offers to buy the company. He focuses on the Midwest market, begins doing plus-sizes, and works on "bread and butter clothing" rather than high fashion. He does this simple,
rather than high fashion. He does this simple, uncontroversial clothing from 1989 until 2004. Reflects on how to weather the economic hills and valleys of the fashion industry.

Video Oral History Interview with Reginald Thomas, Section A2004_111_001_004, TRT: 0:29:10 2004/07/27

Thomas talks about how he manufactures his ready-to-wear clothes and the fact that he does a lot of the work himself. He is a master cutter and he often cuts the clothing without using a pattern, which is unusual in the industry. He describes the different types of clothes he designs: for different budgets and different occasions, so he doesn't get limited with doing only one thing. He also talks about his color palette, which is on the conservative side. He discusses innovations in color and material. Thomas talks about being an American designer. He discusses garment sizing and how American is a "nation of large people." Thomas talks about his African American clientele and the change from having separate work, church, and party clothes to having clothes that can work for several different functions. After some conversation about leather clothing, he claims to be the "knit king" rather than a "leather guy." Thomas discusses fashion history, compares American fashion with European fashion, and explains why African American fashion has a unique place in the design world. He talks about the business end of being a fashion designer. Thomas also talks about some of his famous clientele and shares an example of one of his most controversial designs. Talks about how women feel in his clothing.

Video Oral History Interview with Reginald Thomas, Section A2004_111_001_005, TRT: 0:18:30 2004/07/27

Fashion designer Reginald Thomas reflects on his artistic gifts, his life, his family, and his career. Thomas counts himself as fortunate to have been able to make a living from his art, and reflects on his mother and father, who never got to see his success. He talks about his niece, who has joined in the family business and started her own jewelry business.