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: Leonard Davis

Title: The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Leonard Davis,


Physical Description: 10 Betacam SP videocassettes (4:31:14).

Abstract: Fashion designer Leonard Davis (1953 - ) has 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. He is also an avid collector of Black Americana, and is the author of two books and several articles on black collectables. Davis was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 31, 2007, June 22, 2007, in New York, New York, New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.

Identification: A2007_119

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 Chamber 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 Donnkenney. 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, Bloomindales, 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 Diahhann Carroll and Phyllicia
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.

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Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Leonard Davis was conducted by Shawn Wilson and Adrienne Jones on March 31, 2007, June 22, 2007, in New York, New York, New York, New York, and was recorded on 10 Betacam SP videocassettes. Fashion designer Leonard Davis (1953 - ) has 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. He is also an avid collector of Black Americana, and is the author of 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

Wilson, Shawn Jones, Adrienne (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)
Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Leonard Davis--Interviews

African American fashion designers--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

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 8/24/2011 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

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, March 31, 2007, June 22, 2007
Video Oral History Interview with Leonard Davis, Section A2007_119_001_001, TRT: 0:29:49 2007/03/31

Leonard Davis discusses his family history. His mother, Cleo Davis, attended Sutton University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana and later moved to Washington, D.C. to work with the war department. His father, Jordan Davis, worked at a cleaners in Virginia, where he acquired an interest for tailoring, and later moved to Washington, D.C. where he met Cleo. Davis talks about the tailoring business in the 1930s and reflects on his father’s tailoring profession. At that time, tailors were considered to be skilled labor and African Americans were forced to settle as valet workers, which only repaired suits and assisted the tailor. Davis describes growing up in Washington, D.C. in the early 1950s, a time period of white flight. He talks about attending school in Washington, D.C. and emphasized that despite the Brown v. Board of Education court decision, his environment remained segregated. Davis shares his first experience with racism.

African American families--Washington (D.C.)
Sutton University
African Americans--Race relations--Washington (D.C.)
African American 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 2007/03/31

Leonard Davis shares his school experiences at King Elementary School and Rabough Junior High School in Washington, D.C. Roberta Flack was his 8th grade teacher and remembers her being very strict about music. After junior high, he decided to attend Chamberlain, a vocational school, in Washington, D.C. to focus on electronics. While there, he joined the school newspaper and created a fashion column titled “L & L’s Fashions.” His mother, Cleo, saw one of his dress drawings and had it made. During the early 1960s, she purchased him a sewing machine and introduced him to friends, who were involved in fashion. During his senior year of high school, he decided to transfer to Coolidge High School where his art teacher, Ms. Snowden, encouraged him to pursue his fashion career at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York. Davis enrolled at the school in 1971 and discusses his experiences.

African American families--Washington (D.C.)
Education (Primary)--Washington (D.C.)
Education (Secondary)--Washington (D.C.)
African American 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 2007/03/31

Leonard Davis discusses the large amount diversity at the Fashion Institute of Technology and talks about emerging African American fashion designers. He recalls a consortium of mostly black designers, which allowed African
American designers to cultivate their production and fashion skills. Davis describes the disco-era and how fashion affected the club scene in New York. He talks about Wesley Tann, the first African American designer on 7th Avenue. After obtaining his associates degree from Fashion Institute of Technology, Davis decided to pursue couture fashion and obtain his license at the Union of the Couture Houses in Paris. When he arrived at the school, they told him he was not on the list and they tried to turn him away. They eventually allowed him in the couture school. Davis was the first black student at the school, but he became home sick and decided to return home to New York.

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 2007/03/31

Leonard Davis discusses his experiences in Paris and his difficulties finding a place to stay. He also discusses returning to New York and the hardships his couture certificate caused during the hiring process. Davis recalls meeting Donna Karan’s mother, Richie, who offered him a job opportunity. When Richie described him to her friends, she explicitly mentioned that he was black and being passed along to meet Ole Cassini. Davis explains that the opportunity was a dead end endeavor after they stole his designs. He shares his involvement with the Willie Wear Company and talks about using cotton rich fabrics that came out of India because of the kinds of clothes Davis designed. He remembers traveling to India and the culture shock he experienced. When discussing his overall experiences with Willie Wear, Davis remarks that he learned how to survive in the fashion business and how to get and keep a job.

African Americans--Employment
African American fashion designers--Social conditions
Cassini, Oleg, 1913-2006
Fashion design--Indian
African American fashion designers--New York
Karan, Donna, 1948-

Video Oral History Interview with Leonard Davis, Section A2007_119_001_005, TRT: 0:29:13 2007/03/31

Leonard Davis discusses his career in the fashion industry. After working for Willie Wear, he landed an interview with Adrianna Papell, but did not receive a timely response. A year later, he was hired by the owner of the company, Henry Berkman. At the age of thirty-two, Davis became the head designer of the blouse division at House of Chouce. When Bernard Chouce, the co-owner, dies from an aneurysm, the business operations were streamlined and Davis’ division was closed. Davis talks about his life of travel after working briefly working for Liz Claiborne. He ventured to India, Korea, Indonesia, China and later the Philippines, all for work. Davis discusses African American philosophy in fashion design and describes the racism that goes on in the fashion world.

African Americans--Employment
Liz Claiborne Inc.
African American fashion designers--Social conditions
Leonard Davis discusses the number of African American fashion designers with their names on the label and talks about the changing method of business in the fashion world. Davis has joined several black fashion organizations including Fashion Outreach and the Fashion and Arts Exchange. He lists pioneers in black fashion including Geoffrey Holder for costume design, Ophelia Devore, and Audrey Smaltz. He also details the notion of “ethnicity” within the realm of clothing and explains that “ethnic,” is a code for unique and argues it does not exist if there is a white face on the product. Davis believes the term needs to be re-appropriated in order to not make it culturally negative. He continues to explain that he serves as a beacon of hope for people within the fashion industry and a testament to the fact that people within the fashion world can have a consistent job.

Leonard Davis discusses his inspiration to begin collecting African American memorabilia. He describes the first apartment he purchased in 1989 and his desire to fill the home with nice décor, especially African American art. The first piece of African American art that Davis purchased was a blackface Aunt Jemima cookie jar and he shares the history behind the figure. He discusses the image of Aunt Jemima noting that the mammy figure was seen as the epitome representation of good cooking. Davis talks about expanding his collection to include toys, segregation signs and tobacco humidor. He also conveys the psychological implications of these images on black people in the 1940s and how blacks realized that they were not in control of their image and pushed to change it. This was a period of significance in history because blacks collectively came together to reclaim their image in a larger society.

Leonard Davis discusses black hair care products in the early 1900s, beginning with Madam C.J. Walker and her hair care products and hair etiquette classes. He talks about Josephine Baker and the pomade she developed called “Baker Fix.” Davis describes the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture of the New York Public Library System as a large repository of black Americana and emphasizes the importance of oral history. Davis talks about the significance of products, putting black faces on white products, the effects on consumption and the evolution of Aunt Jemima's face over the years. After the NAACP demanded that blacks reclaim control of their own image, companies began trying to update the image of African Americans. Davis shares his collections of Wheaties cereal boxes with famous African Americans gracing
the covers including Michael Jackson and Vanessa Williams.
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: 0:28:03 2007/06/22

Leonard Davis shares his personal collection of black Americana artifacts including black face piggy banks, newspaper advertisements, and a photograph of the original Coon Chicken Inn with a menu and other products from the restaurant. Leonard Davis shares and narrates personal photographs and of black Americana.
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 2007/06/22

Leonard Davis shares and narrates personal photographs and of black Americana.
African Americans--Collectibles
African Americans in popular culture--United States