

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Jermikko Shoshannah Johnson

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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>	Johnson, Jermikko Shoshannah, 1946-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Jermikko Shoshannah Johnson,
<b>Dates:</b>	July 26, 2002
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2002
<b>Physical Description:</b>	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:14:58).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Fashion designer Jermikko Shoshannah Johnson (1948 - ) is the founder of two successful fashion design companies, Jermikko Shoshanna Johnson Originals, and JJ Hobeau. Johnson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 26, 2002, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2002_128
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Fashion designer Jermikko Shoshanna Taliaferro Johnson was born in Chicago, Illinois. Her father, Albert Johnson, was an entrepreneur and her mother, Teary Watson-Johnson, was a textile weaver. Jermikko Johnson combined the talents of both parents by starting her own fashion design business.

Johnson graduated from DuSable High School in Chicago in 1966 and went on to earn a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the School of the Art Institute in 1972. The previous year, she served as an apprentice to fashion designer Stanley Korshak, and after graduating she went to work for Eucos, Inc. in Evanston, Illinois. Fureal Ltd., in neighboring Skokie, hired Johnson in 1973. The following year, she also began teaching at Chicago State University. Traveling to Fort Worth, Texas in 1975, Johnson became a fashion designer and coordinator for Pier 1 Imports. Two years later, Johnson returned to Chicago, creating clothing for Revere Sportswear. In 1979, she began designing apparel for HJ, Inc. That same year, she founded Jermikko Shoshanna Johnson Originals. In 1987, Johnson created yet another design firm, JJ Hobeau, Inc. Her successful businesses continue to thrive today. Johnson won the State of Illinois Fashion Designer of the Year Award in 1997 and was honored as the Manufacturer of the Millennium in 1999.

Johnson started the adult education fashion design programs at Olive-Harvey College and Chicago State University. She served as a faculty adviser at the Academy of Fashion and Merchandising in 1981 and at the Ray Vogue School of Fashion Design in 1982. Johnson not only taught adults for many years, but also worked with children through the Chicago Public School program "Each One, Reach One, Teach One." Her civic activities include involvement with the Girl Scouts of America, the Apparel Industry Board, the Chicago Fashion Guild, the Chicago Fashion Exchange and the League of Black Women.

Jermikko Shoshanna Johnson was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on July 26, 2002.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Jermikko Shoshannah Johnson was conducted by Larry Crowe on July 26, 2002, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Fashion designer Jermikko Shoshannah Johnson (1948 - ) is the founder of two successful fashion design companies, Jermikko Shoshanna Johnson Originals, and JJ Hobeau.

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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:

Johnson, Jermikko Shoshannah, 1946-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Johnson, Jermikko Shoshannah, 1946- --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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## Occupations:

Fashion Designer

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

StyleMakers

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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 Jermikko Shoshannah Johnson, July 26, 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 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).

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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

Video Oral History Interview with Jermikko Shoshannah Johnson, Section A2002\_128\_001\_001, TRT: 0:31:00 ?

Jermikko Johnson describes her family background. She was born to Teary Watson and Albert Johnson in Chicago, Illinois. Johnson lived with her maternal grandmother, Julia Jamaco Watson, on Walter Scott's plantation in Tallulah, Louisiana until the age of ten. Johnson was initially raised by her grandmother, and Johnson's mother only visited every couple of years. Johnson remembers picking cotton, tending to chickens, and experiencing racial segregation in Louisiana. Her grandmother's house did not have electric lights, television, or a

refrigerator. Johnson's Aunt Hattie inspired her love of fashion and sewing. When Johnson was eight, a group of white boys nailed her leg to the ground and beat her friend to death. A year after this violent incident, Johnson and her grandmother moved to Chicago, Illinois to live with her mother, her sister, her brother-in-law, and two nieces. Her sister treated her badly due to her dark skin and made her eat dinner on the kitchen floor instead of at the table.

Video Oral History Interview with Jermikko Shoshannah Johnson, Section A2002\_128\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:00 ?

Jermikko Johnson recalls her traumatic childhood. Johnson was sent to live with her grandmother in Tallulah, Louisiana because she was an unplanned late in life pregnancy, and her mother later told her that she did not want a dark-skinned child. Her older sister, who was light-skinned and married to a white doctor, treated Johnson with disdain which led to her using skin tone lightening products. Johnson met her father for the first time in Chicago, Illinois at the age of ten. Her father rarely visited and died when she was fifteen. Her brother-in-law's physical abuse and the negative way that her mother and sister treated her caused Johnson great suffering. In order to cope with this trauma, Johnson became self-reliant and motivated to achieve. Johnson attended Forestville Elementary and Coleman Elementary until she was hospitalized for nearly two years with tuberculosis. She then attended Spalding School, a public school for the handicapped, and graduated from DuSable High School in Chicago, Illinois in 1966. Although a guidance counselor discouraged her, Johnson aspired to be a clothing designer and manufacturer.

Video Oral History Interview with Jermikko Shoshannah Johnson, Section A2002\_128\_001\_003, TRT: 0:30:15 ?

Jermikko Johnson talks about her education and early career. As a teenager, she worked as a popcorn girl at the Regal Theater. Johnson was adopted by her godmother, Sylvia Taylor, when she was thirteen years old and converted to Judaism. She continued to attend Liberty Baptist Church and recalls meeting Martin Luther King, Jr. while singing in the church choir. Johnson graduated from DuSable High School in Chicago in 1966. Based on encouragement from her boss at Bell Telephone Company, Johnson took her designs to Nena Ivon at Saks Fifth Avenue on Chicago's Michigan Avenue who told her to enroll at the Art Institute of Chicago. Johnson took out a bank loan for the first semester and received several scholarships to pay for the rest of her education there. Her mentor, Mrs. McCormick taught her about high fashion and how to cut fur. Johnson served as an apprentice to fashion designer Stanley Korshak and earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the Art Institute of Chicago in 1972. After her college graduation, she went to work for Eucos, Inc. in Evanston, Illinois and Fureal Ltd., in neighboring Skokie in 1973.

Video Oral History Interview with Jermikko Shoshannah Johnson, Section A2002\_128\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:50 ?

Jermikko Johnson talks about her career as a fashion designer and owning her own business. Johnson's big break came when she designed a gown for television host Terry Murphy to wear to the Chicago Emmys. While shopping at a boutique for a blouse, the salesperson admired the pants Johnson had designed. The shop immediately ordered five pairs of pants. Johnson was able to purchase the fabric using an advance from Terry Murphy. She collected orders from other shops in the neighborhood. Johnson worked as a dresser for James Whitmore and received local media attention for her designs. Working out of her small studio apartment, Johnson hired her first employee to keep up with demand. As her fashion design career grew, Johnson faced racial discrimination from buyers

who did not want to be associated with a black designer as well as fabric wholesalers who did not trust an African American businesswoman. In order to navigate this bigotry, Johnson hired a white sales representative, Lynn Goldblatt Durocher, to represent her designs in upscale, white stores.

Video Oral History Interview with Jermikko Shoshannah Johnson, Section A2002\_128\_001\_005, TRT: 0:30:30 ?

Jermikko Johnson explains how race affected her career in fashion. In the early years, she hid the fact that had her own company by creating pseudonyms for different roles including company president. However, her identity became public when “Women’s Wear Daily” featured her on the cover. When some customers found out that she was running the company, they were embarrassed by how they had treated her. She was hurt by the lack of support from the African American community when she won Designer of the Year in 1997. She attributes this to the lack of black presence in the fashion industry. She hopes that the black community will be more supportive in the future. Johnson reflects upon how her relationship with her mother improved later in life. Johnson concludes by explaining the origin behind her product line JJ Hobeaux.

Video Oral History Interview with Jermikko Shoshannah Johnson, Section A2002\_128\_001\_006, TRT: 0:31:27 ?

Jermikko Johnson talks about meeting her mentor, African American fashion agency owner, Eleanor Morris at a coffee shop. Although racial barriers prevented Morris, who operated her agency in the 1930s and 1940s, from having a career in broadcasting, she told Johnson stories about meeting famous people like Clark Gable, Kim Novak, and Martin Luther King, Jr. In addition to Morris, Johnson counts [HM] Merri Dee, [HM] Reverend Johnnie Coleman, her adopted mother, and her birth mother as the most influential people in her life. In addition to her fashion design company JJ Hobeaux, Johnson works in theater and television. She also is a sculptor, painter, textile weaver, glass blower, and interior designer. Johnson invented a birdcage cover that was inspired by her bird, Feathers. Johnson reflects upon her legacy and concludes by narrating her photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Jermikko Shoshannah Johnson, Section A2002\_128\_001\_007, TRT: 0:10:56 ?

Jermikko Johnson narrates her photographs.