

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Amsale Aberra

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Aberra, Amsale, 1954-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Amsale Aberra,
Dates:	June 17, 2014
Bulk Dates:	2014
Physical Description:	7 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:26:22).
Abstract:	Fashion designer Amsale Aberra (1954 - 2018) was the cofounder, co-CEO, and creative director of the Amsale Design Group, which included the Amsale, Christos and Kenneth Pool wedding gown labels. Aberra was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 17, 2014, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2014_162
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Fashion designer Amsale Aberra was born on March 1, 1954 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Her father, Aberra Moltot, was an Ethiopian diplomat and government minister; her mother, Tsadale Assamnew, a homemaker. In 1973, Aberra moved to Poultney, Vermont to study commercial art at Green Mountain College. She then moved to Boston, Massachusetts, where she attended Boston State College (now known as the University of Massachusetts Boston) and received her B.A. degree in political science in 1981. She went on to earn her A.A. degree from the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City in 1982.

Upon graduation, Aberra was hired as a design assistant for Harve Benard, Ltd. Then, in 1985, when she was unable to find an elegant and understated gown for her own wedding, she founded the bridal gown company Amsale Aberra, Inc. As her business grew, and Amsale gowns began to sell in boutiques and upscale department stores such as Saks Fifth Avenue and Neiman Marcus, she purchased two other wedding design lines, Christos and Kenneth Pool. In 1996, Aberra opened the Amsale flagship salon on New York's Madison Avenue, and a year later, she launched the Amsale Evening Couture Collection. Aberra serves as co-founder, co-chief executive officer, and creative director of The Amsale Group, which includes the Amsale, Christos and Kenneth Pool labels.

Aberra's wedding gowns have appeared in many films including *Runaway Bride*, *Analyze This*, *American Wedding*, *27 Dresses*, *When in Rome*, and *The Hangover*, and on television shows such as *Grey's Anatomy*, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and *The View*. She has also dressed numerous celebrities, including Halle Berry, Julia Roberts, Selma Blair, Salma Hayek, Katherine Heigl, Kristen Bell, Katy Perry, Ariana Grande and Hilaria Thomas.

Aberra is a member of the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA) and a trustee of the Fashion Institute of Technology. She has also served on the international advisory board of the Ethiopian Children's Fund, and was twice included on *Ebony* magazine's "Power 150" list of the 150 most influential African Americans.

Aberra and her husband, Neil Brown, live in Manhattan, New York City. They have one daughter, singer-

songwriter Rachel Brown.

Amsale Aberra was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on June 17, 2014.

Aberra passed away on April 1, 2018.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Amsale Aberra was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on June 17, 2014, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 7 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Fashion designer Amsale Aberra (1954 - 2018) was the cofounder, co-CEO, and creative director of the Amsale Design Group, which included the Amsale, Christos and Kenneth Pool wedding gown labels.

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:

Aberra, Amsale, 1954-

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

Aberra, Amsale, 1954---Interviews

African Americans--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

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Amsale Aberra, June 17, 2014. 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).

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

Video Oral History Interview with Amsale Aberra, Section A2014_162_001_001, TRT: 1:30:52 ?
Amsale Aberra was born on March 1, 1954 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia to Tsadale Assamnew. She met her biological father only once, and was raised by her

mother and stepfather, Aberra Moltot, instead. Aberra's stepfather served as the principal of the Menelik II School in Addis Ababa, where Aberra completed her primary and secondary education. Many of her teachers were immigrants from South Asia or Peace Corps members from Great Britain and the United States. At this point, Aberra talks about her relationship with her paternal half-siblings. With the help of her half-sister, Aster Yilma, Aberra obtained a student visa to study at Green Mountain College, a junior college for women in Poultney, Vermont. In 1974, the Ethiopian Civil War began, and Aberra's stepfather was imprisoned because of his connection to the ousted Emperor Haile Selassie. Aberra was unable to afford her college tuition or return to Ethiopia. Instead, she joined a community of young Ethiopian refugees in Boston, Massachusetts.

Video Oral History Interview with Amsale Aberra, Section A2014_162_001_002, TRT: 2:30:09 ?

Amsale Aberra learned to sew in Ethiopia, and continued making her own clothes as an adult in Boston, Massachusetts. There, she lived in a community of Ethiopian student refugees during the early years of the Ethiopian Civil War. She worked at a cafe in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and met her future husband, Neil Brown, who was a student at Harvard Law School. During this time, Aberra's mother, Tsadale Assamnew, was banned from leaving Ethiopia because of her marriage to political prisoner Aberra Moltot. However, her mother persuaded an official to make an exception, and visited Boston for the first time in 1978. Three years later, Aberra graduated from Boston State College with a bachelor's degree in political science. She moved to New York City, where she received an associate's degree in fashion design from the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT). Then, Aberra worked for two years at Harve Benard, Ltd. She briefly returned to Ethiopia after her stepfather was released from prison.

Video Oral History Interview with Amsale Aberra, Section A2014_162_001_003, TRT: 3:31:28 ?

Amsale Aberra worked as a design assistant in the New York City office of Harve Benard, Ltd. until 1986. Around that time, Aberra was planning her wedding to Neil Brown. She was dissatisfied with the ornate style of wedding dresses in the 1980s, and designed a simple gown for the ceremony. Through this experience, Aberra was inspired to become a bridal wear designer. She created a line of six samples, and placed a full-page advertisement for custom designs in Modern Bride magazine. Shortly afterwards, Aberra began receiving orders from fashion editors at major publications like Cosmopolitan and The New York Times, who were frustrated by the bridal styles of the time. She received further publicity after being commissioned to create a dress for Catherine Hepburn's niece. During this time, Aberra became pregnant with her daughter, Rachel Brown. She continued to solicit clients during her pregnancy, and her daughter was born in 1987. Aberra also describes the process of creating a sample garment.

Video Oral History Interview with Amsale Aberra, Section A2014_162_001_004, TRT: 4:28:52 ?

Amsale Aberra's bridal wear company, Amsale Aberra, Inc., initially specialized in custom gowns and bridesmaid dresses for the New York City market. Aberra sold her first ready to wear collection to Kleinfeld Bridal, and maintained an exclusive contract with them for a short time. She went on to design collections for Neiman Marcus and Saks Fifth Avenue. Aberra continued to receive custom clients in her loft workspace, and hosted fashion shows on the grounds of her apartment complex. With the help of Lillian Caldwell from Modern Bride magazine, Aberra hired Peter Schiffman as her director of sales. He advised Aberra to focus on ready to wear dresses with the option of custom tailoring. She went on to design three ready to wear lines: Amsale, which featured her

signature sleek dresses; Kenneth Pool, which offered elaborate, beaded gowns; and Christos, which featured soft, romantic styles. Aberra opened the flagship Amsale Salon in New York City in 1996, and expanded the store in 2001.

Video Oral History Interview with Amsale Aberra, Section A2014_162_001_005, TRT: 5:29:27 ?

Amsale Aberra's husband, Neil Brown, left his position at Home Box Office, Inc. (HBO) to become the CEO of Amsale Aberra, Inc. in the 1990s. Around that time, Aberra opened her flagship bridal boutique, the Amsale Salon, on Madison Avenue in New York City. The interior was designed by architects Steve Blatz and Charles Pruitt, and underwent an expansion project in 2001. In addition to her signature simple bridal dresses, Aberra designed elaborate wedding gowns for the Kenneth Pool and Christos collections, including the iconic blue sash gown. She also created a line of eveningwear for mothers of the bride. Aberra designed dresses for film and television, and collaborated with the styling teams on 'Gray's Anatomy,' 'Runaway Bride' and 'Analyze This.' She later created the modestly priced Nouvelle Amsale line in response to changes in the wedding industry, including the introduction of mass market bridal shops like David's Bridal, Inc.

Video Oral History Interview with Amsale Aberra, Section A2014_162_001_006, TRT: 6:28:37 ?

Amsale Aberra served as the creative director of the Christos brand before purchasing the company from Christos Yiannakou upon his retirement. Aberra was a guest judge for a wedding challenge on 'Project Runway,' where she met contestant Austin Scarlett. Aberra later hired him as the director of the Kenneth Pool collection. In 2007, Aberra was profiled as a successful working mother on 'The Oprah Winfrey Show.' Her daughter, Rachel Brown, also appeared on the show, where she modeled Aberra's dresses. Aberra was hired by the Lincoln Motor Company to design an advertisement for the Lincoln MKX. Her dresses also appeared in multiple episodes of 'Gray's Anatomy.' Additionally, Aberra had a large celebrity clientele, which included Katherine Heigl, Halle Berry, Selma Blair, Lucy Liu, Lisa Kudrow, Vivica A. Fox and Kim Basinger. In 2009, she joined the Fashion Institute of Technology's board of trustees. Her mother, Tsadale Assamnew, passed away in Ethiopia in 2010.

Video Oral History Interview with Amsale Aberra, Section A2014_162_001_007, TRT: 7:26:57 ?

Amsale Aberra was the founder and creative director of the Amsale Design Group. Hoping to expand beyond the bridal market, she selected Denise Seegal to serve as the group's CEO. Aberra talks about her interest in ready to wear designs, and her upcoming lines of midrange bridal and bridesmaid dresses. In 2011, the 'Amsale Girls' reality television show premiered under the direction of Aberra's husband, former HBO executive Neil Brown. The show focused on Aberra and her staff of bridal consultants at the Amsale Salon in New York City. In 2012, Aberra designed a custom wedding gown for Hilaria Thomas Baldwin. At this point in the interview, Aberra describes her design process and signature style. She reflects upon her legacy, and concludes the interview by sharing a message to Ethiopian immigrants.