

## Who was ... Charles Harrison?

**Charles Hamilton Houston: industrial designer**

**Born: 1931 in Shreveport, LA**

**Died: 2018 in Santa Clarita, CA**

Charles Harrison's father taught industrial arts, first at Southern University in Baton Rouge, LA, then at Prairie View A&M University in Prairie View, TX, then at the Phoenix Union Colored High School in Phoenix, AZ. Mr. Harrison graduated from George Washington Carver High School, an all-Black school in Phoenix that closed after the 1954 US Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* ended legal segregation in public schools. The school is now the [George Washington Carver Museum and Cultural Center](#), with the mission of honoring "African American Heritage, Arts & Culture."



### 7 things to know about Charles Harrison

1. He received a Bachelor of Fine Art from the School of the Art Institute in Chicago in 1954 and a Master of Science in Art Education from the Illinois Institute of Technology, Institute of Design in 1963.
2. During his career, he worked on the design of more than 750 everyday items, including toasters, stoves, stereos, riding lawn mowers, sewing machines, portable hair dryers, Craftsman (Sears brand name) power tools, and see-through measuring cups.
3. His most well-known project was the 1958 redesign of the View Master. Originally designed in 1939, the View Master was a cumbersome device that was used mostly by photographers. Mr. Harrison and his team, then working for the Robert Podall and Associates design firm, made it lighter, more durable, and easier to use; perfect for children. It quickly became a big hit in the toy market. And it remains a popular toy today.
4. He was dyslexic. Because of this, he emphasized designs that were simple and intuitive to use; without instructions, if possible. This was a prominent feature of the View Master and of all his designs.
5. In 1961, he was the first Black executive hired at Sears, Roebuck and Company. This came years after interviewing at Sears and being rejected because of an unwritten company policy that barred hiring Black executives. He stayed with Sears until his retirement in 1993, eventually becoming the chief product designer.
6. After leaving Sears, Mr. Harrison taught design at the University of Illinois and at Columbia College in Chicago, mentoring students of color as part of his teaching.



7. The project that was his personal favorite was the plastic garbage can. Previous garbage cans were made of galvanized steel. They were heavy, expensive to produce, and awkward and noisy in use. Mr. Harrison's design was lighter, less expensive to produce, and easier to store and ship because its tapered shape allowed multiple cans to be nested.



### Honors and awards

- 2000: Mr. Harrison's work was featured in the "The World of a Product Designer: Charles Harrison" exhibit at the Carver Museum and Cultural Center, in Phoenix.
- 2006: Mr. Harrison was awarded the [Lifetime Distinguished Service Award](#) by the Industrial Designers Society of America. The award is intended to recognize individuals who have "made a valuable contribution over the course of a career to the industrial design profession."
- 2007: Mr. Harrison's work was featured, along with other Black product designers, at the "Designs for Life: Black Creativity" exhibit at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago.
- 2008: Mr. Harrison was awarded the [Lifetime Achievement National Award](#) by Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution. During the awards gala, Mr. Harrison was introduced by Martha Stewart, who said that she had learned to sew on a Sears sewing machine designed by Mr. Harrison and two co-workers.
- 2009: Mr. Harrison was awarded an honorary doctorate from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.
- 2014: The University of Illinois School of Design and Project Osmosis established the [UIC Osmosis Charles Harrison Scholarship](#). The scholarship is designed to "bridge creative excellence identified in Osmosis minority youth programs with mentorship and financial support for college level design studies."

### To learn more about Charles Harrison

The person is the same. But these short biographies highlight different details in Mr. Harrison's life and work.

- Theodora Aidoo (2020). [How Charles Harrison became a prolific and pioneering African-American designer](#). *Face2Face Africa*.
- Megan Gambino (2009), [Intelligent Designer](#). *Smithsonian*, vol. 39, no. 10, p. 22.
- Charles Harrison (2005). *A life's design: The life and work of industrial designer Charles Harrison*. Chicago, Ibis Design, Inc.
- Michelle Parnett-Dwyer (2021). [Charles Harrison: The Black industrial designer who revamped View-Master](#). *The Strong Museum of Play*.

- Katherine Q. Seelye (2018). [Charles Harrison, 87, designer who reshaped the View-Master, dies](#). *The New York Times*.
- [Charles “Chuck” Harrison](#) (2022). Wikipedia.