



Stylish Careers

Southern Influence in High Fashion

by Sarah Wilbanks



Drawing inspiration from things he calls "as simple as the way an umbrella's fabric wraps around its handle to a group of women walking down the street in Bali," fashion designer Hilton Hollis uses the world as his muse. Born in Natchez, Mississippi, this small-town, farm-raised Southerner was first inspired by his grandmother, Irma Hollis Goolsby, who taught Hollis to sew at the tender age of eight. It was love at first needlepoint.

After attending college for both marketing and pre-law, Hollis returned to his southern roots to work in a department store. There, he was encouraged to pursue his talent. With the help of a letter of recommendation written by his boss, he was able to attend the Fashion Institute of Technology (F.I.T.) in New York. Upon graduation from F.I.T., Hollis apprenticed under John Bartlett on his women's collection for two seasons, honing his skills.

Finally, it seemed like a big break for Hilton Hollis when he formed an eveningwear company under his own name. Fate, however, had other plans. "My showroom opened on September 10, 2001," he lamented. "Of course, time was not on my side. I closed four months later." After a short spell working as a make-up artist, Hollis found himself designing more main-stream clothing for Nordstrom and Saks Fifth Avenue Private Label. Then, in 2003, he was approached by the president of Reba McEntire's clothing line, featured at Dillard's, and was hired as the line's creative director.

After two years working with the Reba line, Hollis decided to revisit his dream of having his own

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collection and launched Hilton Hollis

International in June 2005. Since then, he has never looked back. "Above all, my customers motivate me. I love to hear stories from (them) that they get tons of compliments when they wear Hilton Hollis," he said. "It makes them feel wonderful and it also helps me know which styles work with their lifestyles."

Hollis has been expanding his company and his name ever since. In 2006, he sold his designs to 14

stores; now they are in 80 stores across the U.S., generating revenue of roughly \$1 million per year. Currently expanding into Canada and Europe, Hollis would also like to start an "At Home" collection to continue with his brand-building as a lifestyle ideal.

And it's exactly that notion of lifestyle that provides Hilton Hollis with his niche. According to Hollis, "style is how the person puts his or her clothing together in a way that is unique to their personality and lifestyle [while] fashion is how a designer interprets trends for his or her customer." And what exactly is the lifestyle of the South? Hollis calls it "relaxed." He compares it to Europe, while also claiming that being from the South represents a lot of opportunities. "People find us extremely warm and giving, which is nice in any environment," he said. "The fashion world can be tough, but a slight southern drawl can open some doors that may (otherwise) be closed."

With one difficult aspect of his business overcome by the aid of a southern drawl, another demanding aspect is the amount of work that it takes. "I am

constantly designing," he said. "We work about one year in advance, so I am constantly doing research and trying to stay up-to-date on what is going on in the world around me. Everything affects fashion ... the economy, new president ... war, movies, celebrities, the arts, et cetera."

Hollis typically begins his days by responding to e-mails on his BlackBerry, which he claims to be the stylish obsession he can't live without.

"Each day for me is so different," he said. "One day, I might be at a trunk show at one of my stores. Another, I may be designing the collection, shopping for fabric in Italy or Paris, or at a museum researching a specific culture or period of art for inspiration."

A Mississippi boy, Hollis began designing high-fashion clothing in New York City because he believed in himself. And that's one piece of advice that he wants to share with individuals aspiring to become a designer: "Believe! Believe in yourself, what you do, what you design, and how you present yourself. You are your brand, so all of those things play an important role in being successful."