

Tracy Reese

Personal Information: Born on February 12, 1964, in Detroit, MI; daughter of Claud (a manager) and Pat (a dance teacher) Reese

Education: Parsons School of Design, BA, 1984.

Career: Martine Sitbon, New York, design assistant, 1984-87; started own company, 1987-89; Perry Ellis, designer, 1990; Gordon Henderson, freelance designer, 1990; Magaschoni, design director, 1990-95; designed exclusive line for The Limited, New York, 1995; Tracy Reese Meridian (became TR, Plenty, and Plenty Home), founder and designer, 1996-.

Life's Work: Tracy Reese ranks as one of the fashion industry's most successful African-American women whose realm is not relegated to the runway. In a business where few designer labels seem to make it past their fifth anniversary, Reese has two clothing lines, TR and Plenty, which have been sold at [Nordstrom](#), Saks Fifth Avenue, Bloomingdale's, and other top retailers since the mid-1990s. Her company's sales topped \$12 million in 2003, and it launched a Plenty-label home line that same year and a [footwear](#) collection the following. Reese has an [unerring](#) eye for what women will buy. "I don't want to design a [skirt](#) just because a skirt is needed to go with a particular jacket," she told Joy Duckett Cain in *Essence*. "The skirt itself has to make you want to buy it."

Reese was born in Detroit, Michigan, on February 12, 1964. Her mother, Pat, was a modern dance teacher and enrolled Reese and her two sisters in weekend enrichment classes at the city's art museum. The women in the family also liked to [sew](#) and would sometimes hold contests in which they raced to finish an outfit first. The loser had to pay for fabric, and it was here that Reese's future career direction first emerged. "Although I generally won," she joked in an interview with another *Essence* writer, Deborah Gregory, "I still spent every dime I had buying fabric."

Spent Summer in Manhattan: Reese attended Cass Technical High School, the elite public high school in the Detroit system. Students there focused on either the arts or academics and, as Reese recalled in another profile in *Essence*, "I actually thought I'd be an architect or an interior designer," she told Vanessa Bush. Cass Tech, she continued, "had a fashion-design department, and I took a couple of classes, but I didn't take it as my concentration because I thought it was kind of [flaky](#)." But Reese was encouraged by a teacher to apply for a scholarship to a summer program for high-schoolers at New York City's Parsons School of Design, one of the top U.S. colleges for future fashion-design professionals. She won a slot and enjoyed her summer experience, as well as New York City. After graduating from Cass Tech, she entered Parsons full-time.

Reese earned her design degree in 1984 and found a [terrific](#) job right away, as an apprentice to the French designer [Martine Sitbon](#) in New York City. She was assigned to Sitbon's Arlequin line, and Sitbon encouraged her talents and even allowed her to sketch designs, a [plum](#) assignment for a [novice](#). After two years on the job, Reese decided to strike out on her own, and her father Claud provided some of the start-up funds to launch her own line--a [risky](#) venture even for an experienced fashion pro. She produced two collections, both of which were well liked by store buyers, and the line was sold in stores such as Barneys New York, Bergdorf Goodman, and Ann Taylor. Reese was just 23 years old at the time. "I had the energy and the drive to run the company," she recalled in an interview with Julee Greenberg for *WWD*. "I thought I knew everything, but I learned quickly that I really didn't and knew I had to learn more about business." She could not maintain enough revenue to meet her production costs, and was forced to close her business in 1989.

A heartbroken Reese was able to land a job with Perry Ellis Portfolio thanks to Marc Jacobs, her former [schoolmate](#) at Parsons. At the time, Jacobs was the vice president of design for the Perry Ellis women's line, and working at a thriving design firm--one which also had its share of financial ups and downs--was instrumental in teaching Reese the business basics she needed to learn. She also teamed with [sportswear](#) designer Gordon Henderson, an African American who had worked for Calvin Klein before launching his own line in the mid-

1980s. Henderson, Reese has said, was an important mentor who shared much of his own experience with her about running a successful start-up line.

Ready to Try Again: In the early 1990s, Reese won a head-designer job with new label called Magaschoni. It was owned by Magtague, a Hong Kong manufacturer that produced clothes for Calvin Klein, Donna Karan, and other well-known names. She was tapped to design Magaschoni's bridge, or mid-priced line, and it was not that exciting of a job, she later confessed in the *Essence* interview with Gregory. "It was definitely not my style, but I knew this was the kind of company that could provide me with major backing of my own label," she said, and once sales hit a respectable \$4 million-mark for 1991, Magtague executives gave Reese her own label, "Tracy Reese for Magaschoni." She spent the next few years designing her collections, and even had a [showroom](#) in a building on Seventh Avenue, the center of New York's Garment District. The line had terrific sales at retailers like [Saks Fifth Avenue](#), but Reese was still determined to run her own business again [someday](#).

She stepped closer to that goal in 1995, when she struck a deal with mass retailer The Limited for her own line. That gave her some of the start-up funds for her new label, Tracy Reese Meridian, a contemporary sportswear line that was launched in the spring of 1996. She had learned much from her previous experience a decade before, but still struggled to meet production costs, and finally her lawyer introduced her to an accountant with ties to textile manufacturers in his native India. Om Batheja invested funds in Meridian, which eventually became just "Tracy Reese." They then launched a more informal, free-spirited line aimed at younger customers called Plenty. By 2002 Reese had opened a corporate showroom, and sales at her company had more than doubled over the previous year to \$12 million. Her collections, which grew to include resort and [swimwear](#) lines, were shown during New York Fashion Week, the series of events at Bryant Park tents onto which the world's fashion journalists and store buyers descend to [preview](#) the next season's looks and place store orders. Reese's designs collections earned good reviews, and have been featured on the pages of *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Lucky*.

In late 2004, Reese's company launched Plenty Home, a line of bedding, curtains, and throws that used many of the same lushly patterned Indian textiles from the original Plenty line. It seemed a natural step, she explained to *WWD's* Greenberg. "When I'm designing the line," said Reese, "I always think about how I would love to have sheets in these fabrics, curtains in these fabrics." Shoes and accessories came next, both of which were launched in the fall of 2005.

Reese lives in the Murray Hill area of Manhattan, and is one of a handful of African-American women designers to run their own label. When asked if she had ever encountered racism in the industry, she did tell *Essence* writer Teri Agins that once she had a booth at fabric trade show in Paris, and was having a hard time with the event-management people. An American colleague saw what was happening, and stepped in to help. "I don't know the exact reason they initially ignored me," Reese told Agins. "It could have been racism or maybe it was just the French way. You can spend your whole day wondering about racism, but in most cases I find it is just better to ignore it--rise above racism."