

FORT GANSEVOORT

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ART; A Lifetime Patiently Etched Into Leather

Chris King – December 24, 2000

ONE of Winfred Rembert's most striking works of art includes a self-portrait. Like all of his art, it is a massive piece of leather tooled and dyed with such skill that it looks, at a glance, like a painting. On the leather, a group of black men in zebra-striped prison uniforms works in a field, one with his head down.

"That's me on the chain gang down in Georgia," he said. "See, I didn't want nobody taking my picture."

How did a Southern convict shielding his face from tourist cameras become a Connecticut artist showing his work at the Yale University Art Gallery? It is the story of a remarkable self-transformation.

Mr. Rembert was born out of wedlock in Americus, Ga. in 1945 and raised by his mother's aunt, Lilian Rembert, in Cuthbert, Ga. "Mama," as he called his great aunt, worked picking cotton, shaking peanuts and pulling corn. Mr. Rembert grew up following her down the rows, chasing snakes out of the stacks of drying peanuts, before joining her in the fields full time after dropping out of school in 1959.

He ran afoul of the law in 1967. According to Mr. Rembert, he stole a car while fleeing for his life during a race riot in Americus. Caught and jailed for that theft, he fought back when a deputy sheriff entered his cell to knock him around. He won the fight, took the sheriff's gun and fled. When he was recaptured, he spent a long night in a police vehicle and was then driven to a remote area where he saw three trees with nooses.

His feet were noosed, and he was strung up.

"All I could see were feet," he remembered. "And I saw a pair of wingtip shoes walk into the crowd." The man with the wingtip shoes said that the captive should have been killed at night -- it was morning by then -- so they released him.

This moment of salvation was followed by another unlikely act of grace during his incarceration: Rembert met his wife, Patsy, at the Turnip County Public Work Camp in Ashburn, Ga. While fixing a bridge with the work gang, he saw a woman hanging clothes on a line and declared, "There's my wife." The warden at Ashburn encouraged the men to keep girlfriends because it made them less likely to escape, so Mr. Rembert was allowed to court the woman and did indeed marry her when he got out of prison in 1974.

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On the work gang he also observed "this old guy making leather billfolds and carving this beautiful flower on them." Mr. Rembert learned the techniques and continued to make wallets once he was released.

In 1975, Mr. Rembert moved his family to Bridgeport, where he worked as a longshoreman, and then to New Haven in 1984. By then he had quit making billfolds because they were not selling. Just a few years ago his wife said, "Why don't you take your history and put it on the leather instead?"

He presented his first piece as a Christmas gift to a friend, Phil McBlain, in 1997. Mr. McBlain is an antiquarian book dealer who specializes in African-American literature, and when a customer offered to buy the piece, Mr. McBlain got the artist's approval, made the sale and gave him the money. "Then," Mr. McBlain remembers, "we arranged for some dyes and leather and tools, and Winfred was off and running."

Mr. Rembert's first break came through his own initiative. In the late spring of 1999 he heard about a breakfast meeting in downtown New Haven to discuss housing issues concerning local artists. "So," Mr. McBlain said, laughing, "he crashed it with one of his pictures rolled up under his arm." Jock Reynolds, the director of the Yale University Art Gallery, was there. The piece Mr. Rembert showed him inspired the gallery director to visit Mr. McBlain's shop in Hamden, where the artist stores his finished pieces.

"Winfred is entirely self-taught, but he has this remarkably sophisticated sense of imagery and color and composition," Mr. Reynolds said. "The work cried out to be shown."

The Yale gallery had recently purchased some prints by Hale Woodruff that also depict rural Georgia, and Mr. Reynolds perceived "an incredible affinity" between the two bodies of work. A show pairing the artists was arranged at the gallery.

"Southern Exposure: Works by Winfred Rembert and Hale Woodruff" closed on Dec. 17, but three pieces that form a series on lynching have now entered the gallery's permanent collection. Mr. Rembert has made other sales and received "an enormous number of phone calls," many of them from agents.

For now, he is holding back and making more art. He works deep into the night in his tiny home studio, carving and shaping pieces of leather 8 by 10 feet with 60 different tools, and then dyeing them. It takes him about a month to finish one piece. One mistake and the piece is ruined, because you can't retool leather or dye it twice. On the leather, he brings to life episodes of pain -- giving birth in the cotton fields, working on the chain gang -- as well as pleasure -- playing baseball with a doll's head (because they had no ball), shooting pool.

The lynch mob may be a distant memory, but hardship is not. Mr. Rembert is disabled from injuries incurred while working on the docks, and his wife drives a school bus. The Remberts have eight children, four of them still living at home.

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"For me to get this done, this artwork, I would never have dreamed of happening," Mr. Rembert said, and thought of his most intimate source of inspiration. "Mama didn't dream of nothing. She had nothing to look forward to."

Lilian Rembert, the woman who raised him, died in 1978.

"Mama knew nothing but work, work, work in the field," he said. "Survival. A lot of decisions that I face now, I think: What would she say? But I'm in a different position, so when I try to think what she would have done, I don't know. I'm in a totally different world."