

# Winfred Rembert, artist whose work was rooted in the Jim Crow US South, is dead at the age of 75

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7 April 2021

Winfred Rembert, the self-taught African American artist whose life story was deeply rooted in the struggle against Jim Crow segregation in the US South, died at his home in New Haven, Connecticut on March 31 at the age of 75. Rembert, who survived a near-lynching as a young man and served seven years on a Georgia chain gang, achieved a measure of recognition, in the last decade of his life, for the vivid works he created on carved and dyed leather.

Born in the tiny town of Cuthbert, Georgia, Rembert was working in the cotton fields from the time he was six years old. He did not learn to read and write until his time in prison, in the late 1960s.

At the age of 19, the young man joined a protest against segregation in nearby Americus, Georgia, the center of the well-known Americus Movement, the mass civil rights demonstrations against segregation and for the right to vote, initiated by the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1963.

The Americus Movement was part of the broader civil rights struggle that led to the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965. That same year, Rembert was arrested after he was chased by several racists as he left a protest. He stole a car in order to get away but was caught and held in jail for a year without charge. When he tried to escape, he was recaptured, and this led to the near-lynching, along with threats of castration, at the hands of a racist mob.

Rembert was not killed, but was instead sent to prison, where he spent seven years on a chain gang. It was here that he learned, with the help of another prisoner, to carve wallets out of leather. This enabled him to find an outlet for the artistic interests he had shown even as a boy.

Released from prison, he married and moved with his wife to the North, settling first in Rochester, New York, later in Bridgeport, Connecticut and finally in New Haven, the home of Yale University. The family grew, with the addition of eight children. Rembert worked as a longshoreman and handyman, among other jobs. He is survived by his wife Patsy, seven surviving children and 17 grandchildren.

Rembert did not begin to work on his art on a more ambitious scale until he was about 50. This led within a few years to the exhibition of some of his leather creations at the Yale University Art Gallery in 2000. His art work dealt with the subjects of Rembert's life: working in the cotton fields, life on the chain gang, socializing, dancing and drinking at local "juke joints."

Many of Rembert's creations, in color and subject matter, recall some of the masterpieces of the Migration Series by the world-famous Jacob Lawrence (1928-2000)—particularly those of Lawrence's famous panels that dealt with life in the Jim Crow South. Jock Reynolds, the director of the Yale University Art Gallery, has said about Rembert, "I found myself captivated by the work of an entirely self-taught artist who was unaware of the strong affinities of form, subject matter, and narrative that he shared with Hale Woodruff and other towering figures of African-American Art such as Horace Pippin, Jacob Lawrence, and Romare Bearden."

Winfred Rembert did not begin to receive the recognition he deserved until he reached the age of 65. A solo exhibition was mounted in 2010 at the Adelson Galleries in New York City, and his carved and dyed leather works began to sell for between \$15,000 and \$80,000 each. The New York show was followed by a

documentary film, *All Me: The Life and Times of Winfred Rembert* (directed by Vivian Ducat), released in 2011, which brought Rembert's story and his art to a far wider audience. Other shows of Rembert's work followed, to warm critical and popular response. There were exhibitions at the Hudson River Museum in Yonkers, outside of New York City; at the Greenville, South Carolina Art Museum; and elsewhere across the US.

The Hudson River Museum show was the first major museum exhibition of his work. As the curators put it at the time: "In more than 50 works on hand-tooled leather stretched, stained, and etched Rembert constructs scenes from the rural Southern town where he was born and raised, and peoples it with characters working the fields, joyous at church meetings, and enjoying its pool hall, jazz club, and café. His images are alive with figures and color, and dense with pattern. Some, more somber, convey the strife and grief of his own experiences of a near lynching and prison life."

The man who narrowly escaped lynching 50 years earlier was honored by his home town of Cuthbert in 2011, with the mayor proclaiming "Winfred Rembert Day." This event should be understood in its historic concreteness. It reflected in a limited but significant way the dismantling of the apartheid-like system in which Rembert and millions of others were born and came to adulthood, and the artist was deeply satisfied to return to Georgia in that fashion. The limits of the mass movement for civil rights under reformist leadership, however, meant that legal equality only revealed even more clearly the class issues of poverty and inequality, which of course could not be addressed by mayoral proclamations.

Rembert himself suggested that he understood this, when he told the *New Haven Independent* several years ago, reflecting on the respect he had won, but not changing his outlook on life: "When people think you're somebody in this world," they'll give you everything. But "when you're down and out," they won't give you a dime. "It's backwards," he said. His work conveys some of this, not self-pity, but the rough-and-tumble struggle of life, including the struggle against injustice and cruelty.

Rembert's creative output reflected, as it must, both his own artistic talent and the times in which he lived, which shaped that talent and found expression in his

striking, original and vibrant work. His achievements are testimony to the great and still largely untapped talent that exists within the working class all over the world.

In August 2021, a memoir by Rembert (as told to Erin I. Kelly), *Chasing Me to My Grave: An Artist's Memoir of the Jim Crow South*, will be released.



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