

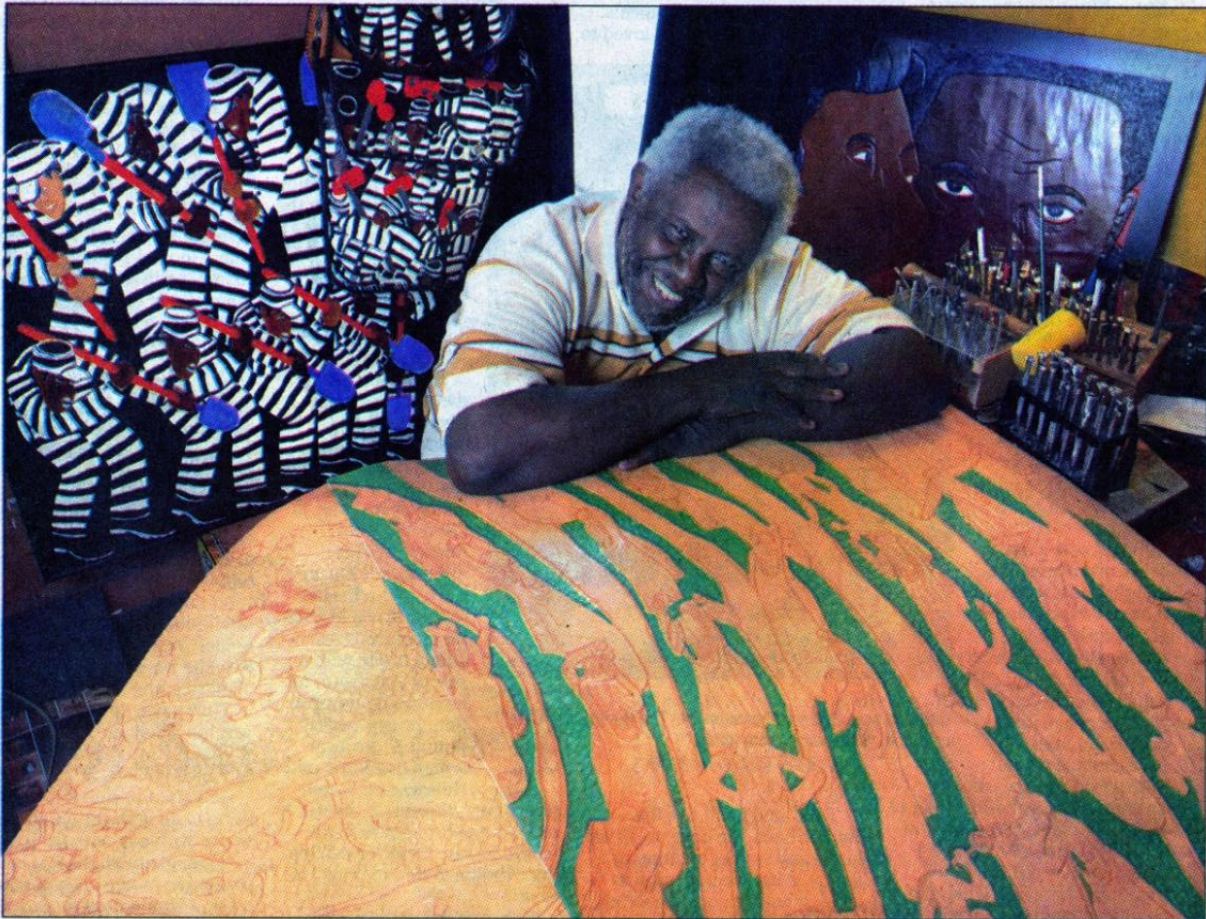
# New Haven Register

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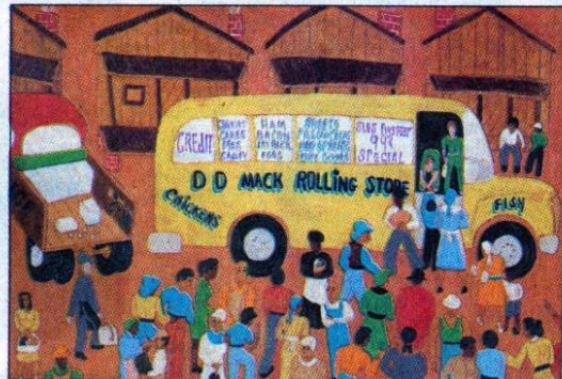


Mara Lavitt/Register

Winfred Rembert works on one of his leather paintings, an exhibit of which is currently at New York's Adelson Galleries. Behind is one of his chain-gang works, and left, a portrait of him and his wife, Patsy.

## CALL HIM 'ARTIST'

Winfred Rembert's first solo show in New York confirms what many already knew about his unique leather paintings



Adelson Galleries Images

As with all of Rembert's paintings, "D.D. Mack's Rolling Store," has a story. His mother's favorite thing was Mack's flour bread mix that came in 25-pound bags, which she later made into pillowcases.



By Donna Doherty  
Register Arts Editor

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**NEW HAVEN** — Winfred Rembert calls himself the only person to survive a lynching. He says his earliest memories are of being carried through rows of cotton fields as a 3-year-old in his native Cuthbert, Ga., while bouncing in his mama's cotton sack as she picked cotton for \$2.50 a day.

He remembers vividly when the judge sentenced him to 27 years in prison after his arrest during a civil rights demonstration that got out of hand, and the subsequent 8 to 10 hours a day working a chain gang.

Now those stories are the lifeblood of the self-taught New Haven artist, whose one-of-a-kind paintings, which he tools and dyes on leather, are featured in his first New York one-man show, "Winfred Rembert: Memories of My Youth," running through May 28 at the Adelson Galleries, 19 E. 82nd St. That \$2.50 a day now has substantially more zeros in the sum those paintings command.

"It seems to me I'm making a living out of the bad things that happened to me. God turned my life around and made the bad

things happening to me into something good," Rembert says.

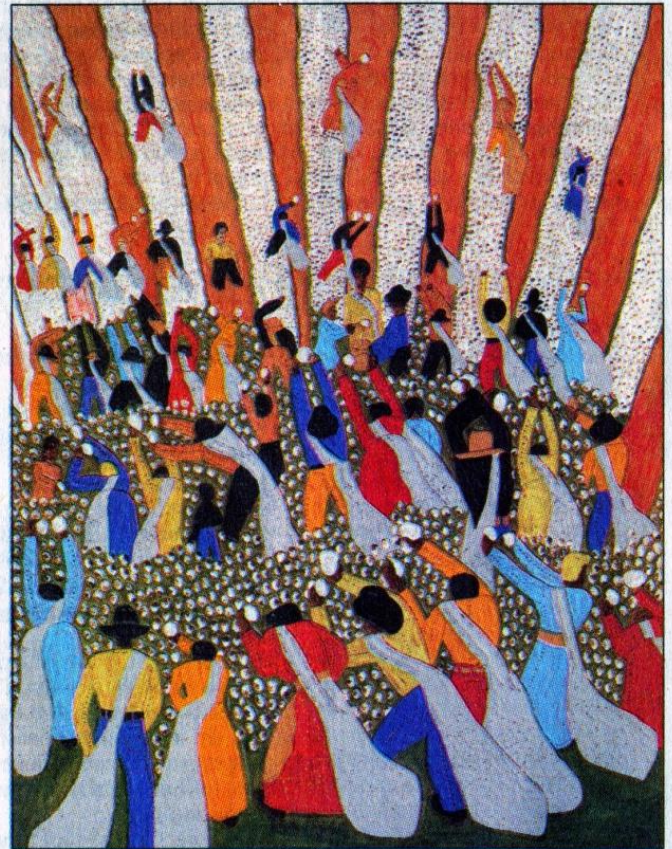
How he got to this part of the journey is the stuff of the fascinating stories he tells in those paintings and to visitors to the gallery, where he goes every Saturday, because, "I think maybe when I'm there and telling the stories, when they know the stories, they feel better when they buy something," he says. "People have a lot of questions. I tell the story about each piece."

The likable Rembert is a soft-spoken man who is amazed by his good fortune, and is quick to credit those who have made all this possible, not the least of whom is his beloved wife, Patsy; his friend Philip McBlain and his wife, Sharon, of McBlain Books, who first displayed his work at the Whitney Avenue bookstore, sold his first piece and bought his tools.

"I gave that painting to him as a gift," Rembert exclaims, "but when he showed me the \$800 check ... Well, the rest is history."

He mentions Litchfield's Peter Tillou of Peter Tillou Works of Art, and Jock Reynolds, director of the Yale University Art Gallery, who, "after I ambushed him" at a breakfast to support artists and

See Artist, D2



In the catalog notes on "Cotton Field Rows," which shows how daunting the job of picking cotton was, Rembert writes, "When you start down a cotton row picking and looked up, you couldn't see the end."

# Artist: Rembert mulling offers to tour with his exhibit

Continued from D1

unfurled one of his pieces to show him, gave Rembert his first exhibition in 2000, right next to the renowned artist Hale Woodruff.

Rembert and Tillou met at a Waterbury school seven years ago. Tillou not only has shepherded Rembert's works to the public, including this Adelson collaboration, to provide an annual income, but also "is responsible for my family living in this house," says Rembert.

Warren Adelson, writing in the stunning catalog for the exhibit (along with Reynolds and Tillou), says the decision to show the collection was "apolitical." It was all about "artistic merit."

"Winfred's natural sense of composition, delightful color harmony and incisive (literally) use of line qualify him as a fine and natural artist ...." Adelson writes.

At 65, when most people are thinking retirement, a whole new world has opened up for the Newhallville father of eight, who says, "I can say I'm an artist. I can say I'm somebody. I've come through life tough, not knowing when the next meal was coming from, and it seems like to me all of that is totally behind me. Seems like I may be able to make a living from my artwork."

That artwork is sitting in a gallery which handles such artists as Andrew and Jamie Wyeth, Mary Cassatt, John Singer Sargent, Georgie O'Keefe.

Adelson has divided the show of some 50 works into sections: Working, Playing, Prison and Living, the works brilliantly hued in primary colors Rembert fastidiously paints in the same order each time: red, blue, green, black.

They have an African feel and a Haitian feel, and while some have called it folk art, it's not a term Rembert relishes.

"I don't think I'm a folk artist. Folk artists don't care about definition," he says firmly.

The first thing you notice when you pull up to the Remberts' house is the creaky front porch, which sags as you step across it. Patsy is waiting at the door. She's the one, who when the family was in crisis in 1996, after Rembert was injured and could no longer work as a longshoreman or heavy machine operator, literally jumped up from the table and said, "I know, I know, I know. Put those sto-

ries on leather. Those people you're talking about. Do the stories on leather."

She was referring to Rembert's storytelling over family meals, stories, he says, his kids loved to

with Patsy supporting them as best she could as a schoolbus driver.

It's a painstaking process, from transferring the paper sketches onto the water-doused leather, to the intricate tooling and final painting by brush with leather dye.

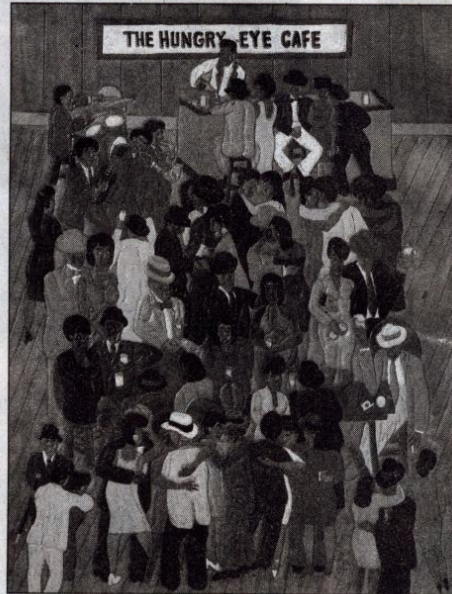
"You can't make a mistake, or you're done," he says, noting that it's tedious on the eyes, especially for a diabetic like Rembert, though Patsy keeps close tabs on his meds and makes sure he doesn't overtax himself.

The paintings are the stories of life in Georgia as a boy in the cotton fields, as a young man cutting the rug, at family events, on the chain gang, at Cat Odom's Cafe, romancing Patsy.

Rembert's journey started with his harrowing arrest in 1964. He recounts how, after a tussle with a sheriff and a gun, following a demonstration, he escaped by jumping into a car which had keys in it. He was caught four

hours later, thrown in the trunk of a car and brought to a site where he saw three ropes hanging, "designed for hanging," he says.

He heard one of the men say something about wanting "my private parts." He was stabbed and strung up by his feet in



Adelson Galleries

Rembert says he liked the colors at "The Hungry Eye Cafe" so much, "I still wear them today."

hear.

"Patsy and I still live like Southerners. We have breakfast, lunch and supper together as a family. After we had our first child, when he got old enough, I started telling the stories," he says of Patsy's epiphany.

"There's no place in the world like Cuthbert, Ga.," he says, a

wide smile lighting up his face in his cramped studio, where the more than 100 tools he uses are lined up like sentries on the drawing table, the smell of leather as fragrant as a luxury-car interior.

"That place is like a small Hollywood. It has so many characters and interesting people you can do stories about. So many characters and juke joints and restaurants. One of my favorite characters is Poppa Screwball, and I haven't even done a painting of him yet."

He started painting full-time,



Bryan Avigne Photography

Patsy and Winfred Rembert celebrate at the April opening of his first solo show at New York's Adelson Galleries.

what he thinks was ultimately a scare tactic. Once he was cut down, he was tossed into jail, still bleeding. He remained there for a year until what he calls "his kangaroo court," where he was sentenced.

What did he think when he heard 27 years?

"I thought I was dreaming. I couldn't believe he was actually

## IF YOU GO

The exhibit "Winfred Rembert: Memoirs of My Youth" will run through May 28 at the Adelson Galleries, 19 E. 82nd St., New York, N.Y., between Madison and Fifth avenues, near the Metropolitan Museum of Art; 212-439-6800, adelsongalleries.com. Gallery hours are 9:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Monday-Friday and 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturdays through May 22. Rembert is normally at the gallery on Saturdays.

giving me 27 years, but it was true. I looked around the courtroom, and there was no one else there except the judge and the sheriff and what looked like a few lawyers, but no one there for me."

Rembert admits that as a 20-year-old hothead, he wasn't a model prisoner, "but with a 27-year sentence, you can't see your way out of that."

By day, he labored on the chain gang. By evening and on weekends, he watched a fellow prisoner across the way carving leather billfolds. It stuck in his mind.

It took him almost three years on the chain gang to become a model prisoner. And then one day, the warden came and said, "You're going home in 10 days. ... They gave me \$40, a suit that was too small and a ticket to Cuthbert," says Rembert, his sentence finished at 7 years.

He's still not sure if it had anything to do with the letters he wrote everyday with the gang.

"I'd explain what I was in prison for. When we went out to work, I would drop the letter on the ground, and hope someone would pick it up. I wrote to Rep. Ronald Dellums from California. He was on the cover of every magazine I picked up. When working, people would throw out magazines. I addressed the letters to him. I don't know if he got them, and he says he can't remember."

It was a world far removed from the opening of his show he and his family attended on April 6, a day he calls "the most fantastic thing that ever happened to me."

Those life lessons have not been not lost on Rembert.

"I go to speak at a lot of schools, and what I really like is the feedback I get from the kids," he says, noting that he's never been asked to speak at a New Haven school. "I don't talk to them about art. I talk to them about life, where their head is. One day I got a letter that said, 'After hearing you, I changed my life.' Hearing that makes tears come to my eyes, especially after that guy who looked at me who said I'd never be anything."

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