

A New Master of Work and Play

Jock Reynolds, The Henry J. Heinz II Director, Yale University Art Gallery

I first met Winfred Rembert utterly by chance at a breakfast meeting in New Haven during the spring of 2000. A group of civic business leaders and politicians had invited me, as the director of the Yale University Art Gallery, to discuss the issue of artists' housing and workspace within our community, an invitation I gladly accepted. Looking out across The Graduate Club's formal dining room that morning, I only noticed two people who immediately appeared as though they might be artists. One I knew; the other I didn't, but he had intrigued me earlier when I noticed him walking in with what appeared to be a rolled canvas or tube of drawings under his arm. Later, once my talk was concluded and some questions answered, the man I had noticed — a very large, middle-aged African-American — retrieved his roll, tucked it under his arm, and approached me from across the room. His face broke into a big smile as he grew nearer and said in a booming voice, "Hello. My name is Winfred Rembert. I have something I am working on I want to show you." A closer look at his rolled bundle revealed it to be a large section of cowhide, the kind of thick tanned leather from which cobblers cut pieces when resoling shoes.

I had a hunch I might be in for a treat, so Winfred and I retired to the Club's bar, where he unfurled his leather roll across its countertop. And there, before my eyes, was an intricately hand-tooled and richly-colored panoply of human figures and buildings that comprised *Colored Folks Corner*. Winfred told me the title of this work referenced a specific place in the tiny rural town of Cuthbert, Georgia, where he had been born and raised. And although the painting rendered in vivid shoe dyes was not yet completed, I could instantly see that it was evolving into a very striking composition and that its maker possessed real talent.

I told Winfred I liked the work very much and wanted to see others, thinking immediately to myself how amazingly his art paralleled that of Hale Woodruff [fig. 1], the great mid-twentieth-century African-American artist and professor who had enjoyed a long and important creative tenure at what is now Clark Atlanta University in Atlanta, Georgia. Like Rembert, Woodruff had also chronicled rural life in Georgia with a compelling series of paintings and graphic works that richly documented field work, church services, musical events, vernacular architecture, acts of overt racism, and much more. Coincidentally, the Yale University Art Gallery had just purchased a fine array of Woodruff's linocuts for its permanent collection.



figure 1

Hale Woodruff (1900-1980), *Trusty on a Mule*, From the *Atlanta Period Portfolio*, 1931-46, printed 1996, Linocut, 19 x 15 ½ inches, 48.3 x 39.4 cm
Yale University Art Gallery, Janet and Simeon Braguin Fund

figure 2

Winfred Rembert, *The Lynching; After the Lynching; The Burial*, 1999, Dye on carved and tooled leather, each panel 35 x 33 inches, 88.9 x 83.8 cm
Yale University Art Gallery, Everett V. Meeks, B.A. 1901, Fund

So this is how 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. As I was able to speak further with Winfred and view an array of his artworks, then quietly being shown and stored at McBlain's Antiquarian Bookstore in Hamden, Connecticut, I found him to be very eager to learn more about the traditions of American folk, modern, and contemporary art in which his creative expressions deserved to find a place.

And hence in early 2000, the Yale University Art Gallery organized an exhibition of Winfred Rembert's work that was presented side by side with that of Hale Woodruff's. During the exhibition, the Gallery also invited Winfred to directly engage students from Yale University and New Haven's public schools, who flocked to his gallery talks with an enthusiasm that soon gained him a reputation as an inspired teacher and mentor to many young people. Happily, the critical reviews of Winfred's work were also very positive, and soon almost all of the major works he had created to date were purchased by local collectors.

The Yale Art Gallery acquired his large triptych entitled *The Lynching, After the Lynching, The Burial*, 1999 [fig. 2], which depicts his childhood memory of one of the last lynchings that occurred in Cuthbert, Georgia, a fate he himself narrowly escaped. As a young man, Winfred was stirred to rebellion by the American Civil Rights Movement, and he ended up in prison, doing hard time on a chain gang and learning how to tool and craft leather from other prisoners. It was only much later in his life, at the urging of his devoted wife Patsy, that he began to visually depict the amazing circumstances and stories of his life on leather — which led him to strike out on the creative path that has led him to where he is today.

The path forward became difficult for Winfred once more in 2002, when a series of chronic health issues landed him in the hospital and not only put his life and work in jeopardy, but also placed the financial welfare of his wife and eight children at extreme risk. To the rescue came Litchfield gallerist and collector Peter Tillou, who had become a good friend of Winfred's, and for the last eight years has provided him with an annual income that has enabled Winfred to amply



support his family and continue his creative work. It is this partnership — one now extended to a collaboration with the Adelson Galleries of New York — that is finally giving Winfred Rembert’s art the much broader exposure in the art world that it so richly deserves.

Most of the paintings in this exhibition — whose subjects still depict strong memories drawn from Winfred’s early life in Georgia — have never been shown before. Many of the most recent ones are now filled with denser patterns of swirling colors and shapes that imbue them with visual lyricism strongly akin to music and dance, vehicles for human expression that have long been a sustaining presence in African-American field work, religious services, juke joints, freedom marches, and more. In *Cotton Field Rows*, 2009 [plate 13], a crew of cotton workers is seen surging into a harvest-ready field, their tote sacks at the ready, and about to pick the field clean. As they sway and surge into their work together, the only sign of prospective respite from the hot sun and day’s work ahead is the presence of a pail of drinking water seen in the center of the painting. In *Chain Gang (All Me)*, 2004 [plate 25], another of his most recent paintings, Winfred tightly packs together a brotherhood of sledgehammer-wielding convicts. As these prisoners break up an endless supply of quarried rock, their labor becomes fully musical, with the rhythm of the black and white uniform stripes becoming piano keys and the working hammers, the patterns a skillful drummer would lay down.

Less oppressive moments of life — in fact fully joyous ones — are evident in *Baptism*, 2003 [plate 35] and *The Five Blind Boys*, 2009 [plate 24], in which the long practiced traditions of African-American “call and response” are portrayed in song and physical movement. Winfred also heightens these expressions through the attire he has given to his joyous participants. The billowing white church robes worn by the celebrants in *Baptism* might be seen as angels’ wings. In *The Five Blind Boys*, the band’s conked black hair, black shades, white shirts, black bowties, and blue and red sharply-striped suits and shoes become as visually rhythmic and cubistically rich as any passage I’ve ever beheld in a great Jacob Lawrence painting. The band’s audience is also with it body and soul, clearly enjoying an evening when the hardships of work and life can be set aside a while. These four new paintings are just a handful of many others you will take pleasure in seeing throughout this exhibition, one that all those who know Winfred Rembert are so pleased to see taking place.