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Robert Fishko, *Director*

**WINFRED REMBERT**  
(1945-2021)

*Winfred Rembert and Class of 1959*, 1999

dye on carved and tooled leather

22 ½ x 32 ½ inches

signed and titled middle right: “*Winfred Rembert and / Class of 1959*”



**Provenance**

The Artist

M. Lee Stone Fine Prints, San Jose, CA

Patricia and Donald Oresman Collection, New York, New York

Private Collection, Michigan (acquired directly from the above)

Private Collection, Rye, New York (acquired directly from the above)

**Note**

Living on a cotton plantation in Georgia with his family as a child, Winfred Rembert received almost no schooling. In the Pulitzer Prize winning autobiography, *Chasing me to my Grave: An Artist's Memoir of the Jim Crow South*, Winfred Rembert recalls, “I managed to go to school one or two times a week. I had to walk there, and it was four miles away. One day the plantation owner came and told Mama, ‘Lillian, it’s time for him to start picking cotton. He don’t need to go to no school. He need to learn how to work and plow the mule.’” Mama said, “Yes, sir,” because she was intimidated by White People. The White folks were really holding her in place. Later, when she got off the plantation and moved into town, her attitude changed a little bit. She wasn’t as afraid as she had been, and she could speak out on things, like about how Black people could get out of the slavery-like situation of Jim Crow by going to college...

After that I didn’t go to school so much. And when I did go, I was so far behind, I didn’t know a thing. Still, I tried to learn. I had a teacher named Miss Prather. She felt my need. Miss Prather was the greatest. “*Winfred*, you’re just the greatest artist. And I want you to do my bulletin board. I want you to draw a picture of every kid in the class. She knew I could draw because when she was walking around in class teaching, and everybody was doing their work, I was drawing...because I wasn’t learning. I had nothing else to do. I didn’t know what she was talking about. So I would just sit there and draw...Sometimes

she asked me to put wood in the stove, to give me something to do. She never embarrassed me... Miss Prather tried to teach me things, but I couldn't hold it. I was too far behind. I just couldn't learn it.”<sup>1</sup>

*Winfred Rembert and Class of 1959*, was acquired by Donald & Patricia Oresman of New York. Patricia Oresman was a social worker who studied Emily Dickinson and Donald Oresman was a lawyer and businessman who also sat on the boards of the Library Company in Philadelphia, the Larchmont Library, the Morgan Library and the New Criterion. About their impressive 550-piece art collection, *The New York Times* wrote that the Oresman's lives were devoted to literature and art and that, “each work of art depicted the quite solitude of reading.”

Winfred Rembert was born in 1945 in Americus, Georgia. Brought up by his great-aunt “Mama,” Rembert spent his childhood as a fieldworker during the Jim Crow era of the American South. Influenced by the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement as a teenager, Rembert attended a peaceful protest in 1965 and was attacked by white antagonists. He fled the assailants by stealing a car, leading to his arrest for theft. Rembert spent two years incarcerated while awaiting charges before escaping from jail in 1967. He was caught, placed in the trunk of a police car and released to an angry white mob. Surviving the ensuing lynching, Rembert was thrown in jail for the next seven years of his life and was transferred to multiple penitentiaries within the Georgia prison system, enduring taxing physical labor while working on various chain gangs. The harrowing experience would later prove central to the narrative of his extraordinary art.

Rembert learned how to tool and craft leather from a fellow prisoner, a technique he would use to share his story with the world. Following his release from prison in 1974, Rembert married Patsy Gammage and the couple eventually settled in New Haven, Connecticut where they raised a family. At the age of fifty-one, with his wife's encouragement, Rembert began a full-time artistic practice. Combining his mastery of leather working with his skilled draftsmanship, he built a unique body of autobiographical paintings and continued to make art for nearly twenty-five years, before his death in 2021 at the age of seventy-five.

Rembert's work is represented in numerous permanent collections across the country including Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR; High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA; Legacy Museum, Equal Justice Initiative, Montgomery, AL; Lucas Museum of Narrative Art, Los Angeles, CA; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT; and Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT.

Winfred Rembert was granted solo museum exhibitions at the Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, OH (2018); The Muskegon Museum of Arts, MI (2017); Catamount Arts, St. Johnsbury, VT (2016); New Haven Museum, CT (2015); Danforth Art Museum, Framingham, MA (2013); Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Montgomery, AL (2013); the Flint Institute of the Arts, Flint, MI (2013); the Citadelle Art Foundation, Canadian, TX (2012); the Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, NY (2012); Greenville County Museum of Art, Greenville, SC (2012); and alongside Hale Woodruff at Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT (2000).

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<sup>1</sup>Rembert, Winfred and Erin I. Kelly, *Chasing Me to My Grave: An Artist's Memoir of the Jim Crow South*, Bloomsbury Publishing Inc., New York, NY, 2021, pp. 30-33.