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Robert Fishko, *Director*

WINFRED REMBERT
(1945-2021)

Jeff's Café & Pool Room and Zeb's Shoe Shine, 1998

dye on carved and tooled leather

22 x 28 inches

signed middle right "Winfred Rembert"

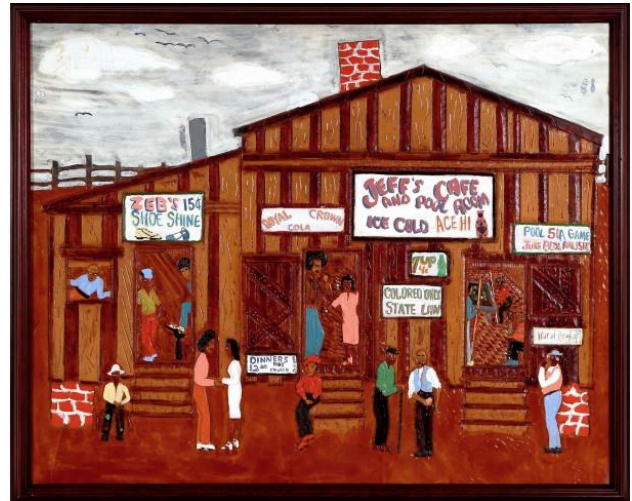
Provenance

The Artist

M. Lee Stone Fine Prints, San Jose, CA

Private Collection, Michigan

Private Collection, Rye, New York



Reference

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, p. 48, Illustrated and p. 281, Listed. (Related Works Shown: *Jeff's Shoe Shine*, 2010, 27 ¾ x 29 ½, p. 72, Illustrated and p. 282, Listed and *Hamilton Avenue*, 1999, 21 x 27 ¾, p. 70-71, Illustrated and p. 282, Listed.)

Note

In the Pulitzer Prize winning autobiography, *Chasing me to my Grave: An Artist's Memoir of the Jim Crow South*, Winfred Rembert tells the story when he was about thirteen years old and ran away from home. He left his great-aunt, "Mama," and the cotton fields for an area of downtown Cuthbert, Georgia known as Hamilton Avenue. Winfred was young and alone, often sleeping in the cemetery which he says, "If you have nowhere to go and nowhere to sleep, sleeping on a headstone is a good sleep." ¹

During this time Winfred made friends with a kid his age called "Duck" who brought him to the places on Hamilton Avenue. It was here that he was introduced to Jeff, the owner of Jeff's Café & Pool Room and Zeb's Shoe Shine down the street. Jeff took to Winfred right away and offered him work running the poolroom and a bed to sleep in.

Winfred describes his newly found employment away from the hard labor of the fields:

“Back on Hamilton Avenue, down the street from his pool hall, Jeff also owned a shoeshine parlor, which was very good. I used to go in there and shine. We had a good business of shining shoes, and Jeff would give you a percentage of what you made. On Sunday Morning, people would get their shoes shined because they were going to church. Having your shoes shined on Sunday morning, in Jeff’s shoeshine parlor, was a big thing in Cuthbert, Georgia.

One Sunday morning this White man came in and kicked this Black guy all over the place...and the Black man didn’t fight back...The White man kicked and beat the Black man all the way out of the shoeshine parlor, and even though the place was *packed* with Blacks, not one person helped him.”ⁱⁱ

Incidences like this were common and particularly frustrating for Winfred as a youth. The feeling of helplessness in witnessing such an event stuck with him:

“I carried that with me...I learned: stay in your place and you’re safer. You won’t get into trouble. I’d like to think some of the older guys should have helped him, but when you jump into something like that, you have to think about the aftermath...Would the White man go and get a lot more White Folks and come back and tear up the place?...White folks did whatever they wanted to do. People looked at you as if you were *nothing*.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Winfred Rembert was born in 1945 in Americus, Georgia, 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 and for the next seven years of his life he 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.

ⁱ 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, p. 42

ⁱⁱ Ibid. p. 73

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid. p. 74