



RALPH FASANELLA *Lest We Forget*

by Leslie Umberger
Curator of Folk and Self-taught Art

Ralph Fasanella was an agent of change. He became a tireless advocate for laborers' rights, first as a union organizer and later as an artist. Fasanella took up painting when he realized that images were not passive or inert records—they were powerfully persuasive tools. Between 1945 and his death in 1997, Fasanella used art as his weapon in an ongoing battle for social justice.

Fasanella was born in the Bronx and grew up in the working-class neighborhoods of New York City. Ralph's parents, Giuseppe (Joe) and Ginevra, were among three million Italians who immigrated to America in the early twentieth century in search of a better life. They came to New York at a time of enormous social change. Capitalism was being propelled by a seemingly endless supply of cheap immigrant labor, but confrontations would escalate as the century progressed and workers ever more rapidly became rebellious unionists.

Fasanella worked as a garment worker, truck driver, ice delivery man, union organizer, and gas station owner before he committed himself solely to painting. He had been educated only through the eighth grade and, at age thirty-one, he learned how to paint and draw much as he had learned other things in his life—through human relationships, diligent work, reading books and newspapers, and experience. Fasanella painted what he saw around him. His early works explore the rich texture of life in New York's immigrant neighborhoods: bustling tenement buildings, kids playing in the street, riders on the subway.

Fasanella's large, colorful paintings reflect the struggles of a tumultuous era. They were not meant to be rarefied works of fine art, but rather a practical means of conveying messages about right and wrong, raising consciousness, and inspiring solidarity among his working-class peers. Independently, he developed an astute, accessible, and empowering style and became known for his iconic admonition: "Lest We Forget"—an impassioned plea to remember the sacrifices of our forebears. His mother had warned him about the hazards of social amnesia; this phrase, his lifelong battle cry, was meant to strike emotional chords—targeting the bonds of family and community and the power of memory. *Ralph Fasanella: Lest We Forget* unites the artist's most powerful works in celebration of the hundredth anniversary of the artist's birth.

Early Activism

The elder Fasanellas taught their children about the costs and rewards of hard work. Joe worked as a longshoreman and later held an ice delivery route, while Ginevra raised their six children and worked in the garment industry as a sewing-machine operator. Beginning around age eight, Ralph worked alongside his father on his ice delivery route, putting in long, hard days on tough streets. Ginevra was a progressive thinker and, like many women in the needle trades, became increasingly active in promoting workers' rights. She made sure Ralph encountered people

whose lives were harder than their own and taught him the value of empathy and respect. The lasting lessons he learned from his parents were that family and community came before personal gain, that younger generations stood on the shoulders of those who came before them, and that all Americans could—and should—always fight for their rights.

While hard work was a fact of life for tenement families, kids found fun whenever and wherever possible. Rooftops, alleyways, and the streets of the neighborhood were their playgrounds. Sometimes the boys got into trouble—stealing groceries, pocketing fruit from street vendors, or taking toys or bikes that belonged to kids from wealthier blocks.¹ In spite of the values instilled in him by his parents, Ralph had a rebellious streak and his antics escalated. In 1925, Fasanella was arrested for stealing items from a home and later trying to sell them. This, and continued misdeeds in subsequent years, resulted in his being sent to the New York Catholic Protectory, where orphans and juvenile delinquents were committed. While there, he chafed against the strict discipline and developed a lasting mistrust for organized religion as well as a lifelong resentment of authority.

When Ralph was released from the Protectory four years later, life at home had changed dramatically; his childhood had evaporated. His mother had become an ardent supporter of anti-fascist causes and used their home as a meeting site. Joe's objections to his wife's increasingly strident political views and actions led to a separation and Joe moved out. After the stock market crash of 1929, millions were out of work or grappling with wage cuts, and the face of America was indelibly altered. Hitler's rise to power in 1933 confirmed the gravity of workers' concerns. Turmoil seemed an integral part of life for Ralph. Activism and fighting for change had become a strategy for surviving. As he became more self-aware, Fasanella would increasingly face a personal tug-of-war between traditional and progressive values; his desire to reconcile the value of the past and his hopes for the future would define his character and shape the recurrent themes of his painting.

Ralph got his first real job at age fifteen as an errand boy for an undergarment retailer. The Fasanella siblings all pitched in to support the household. But the jobs never seemed to last, and Fasanella increasingly felt that the capitalist system was failing Americans. Art historian and Fasanella biographer Paul D'Ambrosio noted, "Fasanella saw the Depression as a tragedy caused by greed and perpetuated by the indifference of the government and the wealthy toward the working class. Like millions of Americans, he was receptive to the exhortations of activists who sought to fight, rather than endure, the economic realities of the day."²

Communist party organizers made compelling arguments for working class rights and Fasanella was among those who believed their causes were righteous. In the early 1930s, he joined the Young Communist League and educated himself with reformist literature; he attended meetings and took to marching among the hundreds of thousands in New York's annual May Day parade. In 1937, he confronted fascism overseas by joining the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, the American contingent of volunteer regiments with the International Brigade (the group organized by Communist International) who joined the political and ideological fight against Franco's Spain. Fasanella developed leadership skills there that he would call on after his return to the United States in 1938, when he became an organizer for the newly formed CIO (Committee for Industrial Organization).

Fasanella's union activities encompassed positions with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters in New Jersey, the Bookkeepers and Stenographers Union in New York, and the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America (UE). In 1942 he worked tirelessly to organize a major defense contractor in Brooklyn, the Sperry Gyroscope Company, a success that led to a number of other UE campaigns throughout New York.³ In the aftermath of World War II, the nation

became gripped by conservative fears and left-leaners were accused of being “un-American.” Social reformers were under attack and, in 1946, Fasanella found himself out of work.

A couple of years earlier, Fasanella had sought therapy for a painful sensation in his hands; he began sketching. He didn’t take this new interest seriously until an artist he met during a summer vacation in 1945 gave him encouragement. Fasanella discovered that drawing came naturally and became captivated by the excitement of making images. Fasanella explored various subjects and ideas while learning the basic mechanics of painting. He was not a stranger to art, though he had never felt much enthusiasm for museums. He began going to the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Museum of Modern Art and considering the ways in which “paint could talk.”⁴ He took to painting, believing from the time he began that art was an extension of his activism—not an activity of upper class leisure or intellectualism. As an added benefit, he could distill the memories of his life through painting and attempt to strike a balance between the dichotomies of tradition and change.

An Art of Conviction

Evolving over the course of five decades, Fasanella’s paintings embody their specific eras in both overt and subtle ways. After the late 1920s, artists had increasingly believed in the possibility of changing society through activism—not simply by what they said, stood for, or what groups they belonged to, but through their art. Artistically, Fasanella had much in common with social-realist painters such as John Sloan, Ben Shahn, Robert Gwathmey, and Honoré Sharrer. Yet his work may owe a greater debt to photographers of the era, whose imagery argued for social equality in a particularly effective way. Organizations such as The Film and Photo League were, like Fasanella, strongly leftist in their sentiments, while their projects centered on improving conditions for the lower class. They sought not to impact just the art world, but the *whole* world. As photographers such as Lewis Hine, Walker Evans, and Helen Leavitt bridged the worlds of journalism, the popular press, and fine art, they paved a path for fusing powerful commentary with widespread appeal, and they made the idea of art outside of the museum or gallery increasingly real.

Art historian Erika Doss has noted that interest in Fasanella’s work as well as Sharrer’s may have corresponded, in part, to a vogue for fifteenth-century European “primitives,” Flemish painters such as Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden, and Italians such as Fra Angelico and Piero della Francesca. But clearly, interest in Fasanella dovetailed with a rising American obsession with so-called “modern primitives,” or artists who seemed to simultaneously capture a unique and quint-essentially American spirit while simultaneously offering an antidote to the elite art world embodied in work of the abstract expressionists. Fasanella, however, rebuked assumptions that being working class and being “primitive”—or any other word used to insinuate lesser intention or execution—were one and the same. His ardent belief in equality across class and education barriers may have, in the end, cost him some popularity among those preferred to differentiate between the artistic spheres of “fine” and “folk.”

Refusing to focus on anything other than the success of his crusade, Fasanella was agreeable to enormously diverse settings for showing his paintings. He was more than comfortable putting them on view in union halls and meeting rooms, knowing that this was where his target audience would really see them. Yet he hoped to make a living from his work too, and sought sales where he could. In 1947 he enjoyed a solo exhibition at New York’s American Contemporary Art (A.C.A.) Gallery, which was known for showing progressive work by such artists as Philip Evergood, Jacob Lawrence, and William Gropper. The painter Ad Reinhardt, who was a fellow CIO member, wrote the preface

to the small exhibition catalogue and praised Fasanella for his “purpose,” “playfulness,” and “intensity.”⁵ Several additional gallery exhibitions enjoyed critical praise, yet his work failed to take off with any particular sector.

Fasanella refused to leave New York City in the post–World War II era when many city dwellers moved to the suburbs. As newly prosperous families fled the city in search of the “American dream,” they exchanged a close knit life of stickball and city streets for an alienating “heaven” of swing-sets and manicured lawns.

Fasanella, sobered by his experience at the Catholic Protectory, believed that the promise of happiness in both heaven and the suburbs was an illusion. *Pie in the Sky* (1947) and *Sam’s Dream* (1948) were among the paintings he made on this subject, the latter a direct response to his brother’s decision to leave the Bronx for what Ralph believed was a vapid existence in suburbia. *Pie in the Sky* drew from a popular working class song that promised a better life in heaven. Above a depiction of New York’s Lower East Side tenements—rough but vibrant—he conflated saccharine depictions of life in heaven and in the suburbs.

In 1948 he began a series exploring the unresolved feelings he had for his father; the *Iceman Crucified* series would encapsulate his most powerful and poignant artistic themes. His father—Joe the Iceman—is cast and recast as the crucified Christ figure to explore ideas of suffering and sacrifice, memory and personal growth. He was inspired by Pietro di Donato’s novel, *Christ in Concrete*, in which a bricklayer is killed at work; his sacrifices (and, by extension, those of all laborers) are related to those of Jesus. The series was a turning point for Fasanella. His artistic vision broke free from the confines of realism and his imagery became deeply personal. Fasanella explained, “It gave me the right to use symbols of people. I could make an iceman on a cross. Anything I wanted to identify with struggle I could make into Christ.”⁶

Iceman Crucified #1 (1948) is stark and visually magnetic. It confronts the viewer with a clear representation of a blue-shirted working man in a receding tenement hallway. His palms are nailed into the cross with ice picks. An oppressive pair of ice tongs displaces the crown of thorns; the tools of his trade are the devices of torture. *Iceman Crucified #3 (Passing of an Iceman)* (1956) ruminates not on Joe Fasanella’s actual death but on his retreat to Italy in 1954, a symbolic death for Ralph, who may have guessed he would never see his father again. As the artist grapples with the conflicting emotions his father inspires in him, his imagery takes flight. The neighborhood watches as the crucified Iceman is lowered back to the ground, hovering over a chalk drawing in the street that reads, “Joe the Iceman is Dead, No Game Today.”⁷

Iceman Crucified #4 (1958) was the final work in and pinnacle of the series. In it Fasanella joins old and new worlds, marrying nostalgia and celebration. The Christ figure has emerged as a looming, heroic icon, serene and full of grace. The traditional INRI is replaced with the phrase that came to be equated with the artist himself: “Lest We Forget” —a clear message to remember who we are and where we come from.

Ralph married Eva Lazorek in 1950. This decade saw Fasanella’s work increase in scale and complexity and the paintings he made were among his strongest. He became adept at fusing his memories and personal experiences with the social and political messages he wanted to send. The era was fraught with Cold War tensions and Fasanella was consumed by powerful current events. In 1951, Ethel and Julius Rosenberg were convicted of treason, although many Americans doubted their guilt. They were put to death by electric chair in 1953, becoming the only American civilians to be executed for espionage-related activity during the Cold War.

Fasanella was among the strident believers convinced that the FBI had made scapegoats of the couple in an attempt to flush out other left-leaning activists, but the Rosenbergs never named anyone else in their testimony. *Garden Party* (1954) confronts what Fasanella felt was a wrongful death; it would be the first of many paintings in which he used the couple as symbols of injustice and protest.

Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy's aggressive pursuit of communists trampled individual rights; many of those accused of being "anti-American" lost their jobs or had their livelihoods sabotaged. Artists, actors, writers, and musicians were among the most highly persecuted; the Hollywood Blacklist first appeared in the *Hollywood Reporter* in 1946 and named known or suspected Communist agents and sympathizers—who immediately became unemployable. In his 1953 play, *The Crucible*, Arthur Miller allegorically equated McCarthyism and the Red Scare hysteria with the infamous 1692 witch trials and executions of Salem, Massachusetts. Fasanella joined with Miller when he depicted the Rosenbergs side by side in a fiery pit. Taking a satirical tone, Fasanella situates the scene against the dome of the U.S. Capitol—an icon of democracy and freedom—while those protesting and celebrating the conviction clash at the fore.

Amid the tensions of the Cold War, Fasanella was blacklisted for his leftist leanings. For some years he had been envisioning an epic work that brought the life-pulse of his beloved home ground to life. *New York City* (1957) is a monumental celebration of Fasanella's city—its cadence, culture, architecture, and people. Queens and Long Island mark the horizon, as the Queensboro Bridge brings the viewer into the teeming heart of the city. Fasanella based the foreground on the uptown neighborhood where he lived at the time, condensing a roughly hundred-block area along Broadway between 59th and 155th streets. By distorting scale to suit his needs and taking inspiration from the heightened perspectives of Brooklyn's elevated subways, Fasanella was able to capture both skyline and street scene. This painting was an attempt to sidestep overt political subjects, yet Fasanella still characteristically captured and celebrated the spirit of the masses.

In the late 1950s support for McCarthyism waned. High courts began to reverse the false convictions and the anxieties associated with expressing liberal opinions became less acute. Fasanella responded to the easing of tensions by addressing subjects still weighing on his mind and beginning to explore civil rights issues and an increasingly strong counterculture movement.

Fasanella still carried resentment from the Cold War era and he sounded a rallying cry with two works *The Rosenberg's: Grey Day* and *McCarthy Press*. His goal was not to make martyrs out of the Rosenbergs, but rather to illuminate the injustice of their death. Laden with symbolism and dark imagery, both paintings are dominated by a large, central letter "A," a reference to the atomic bomb and the intense paranoia that dominated the era. Each letter is crowned with a devilish totem—an ominous specter, looming large. In *Grey Day*, the Rosenbergs sit together awaiting their horrific ordeal: death by electric chair. Their children play nearby, while coldhearted officials seal their fates. *McCarthy Press* is an even darker composition, set after the execution. A crane lowers the Rosenbergs' coffins into the ground, while icons of democracy loom against a blood-red sky.

Only months after Fasanella completed his works on the Rosenbergs, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas. Fasanella became obsessed with the news coverage and believed conservative forces were responsible. *American Tragedy* (1964) situates Kennedy against a symbolic backdrop that amalgamates the American civil rights movement and the capitalist industrialization of the South.

This complex composition charts Fasanella's views about the assassination and its ties to the moral and economic underpinnings of American political and social mores. The left and lower right

sections of the canvas portray symbolic civil rights events, including the March on Washington and the Birmingham riots. Central to the image is a figure fusing the tropes of businessman, cowboy, Klansman, and southern gentleman—inspired by both conservative senator Barry Goldwater and Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, who assumed presidential office after Kennedy’s death. The power-hungry figure rides roughshod over Kennedy’s casket, while an adjacent scene shows Kennedy and his motorcade heading into an ominous tunnel. “I caught the painting right away. I called it *The Tunnel of Lies*. I had Kennedy going into the tunnel and the American Legion and Barry Goldwater coming out of it,” the painter explained.⁸

In the mid-1960s, Fasanella’s life underwent significant changes. In response to the needs of his growing family, they moved to Ardsley, New York.⁹ A few years earlier, the family had moved from Manhattan to the Bronx, where Ralph had become the co-owner of a gas station. He was reluctant to leave Manhattan, but Eva was resolute. The move to the suburbs meant a commute to the gas station and the departure from the city thwarted the artist’s creativity for a time.

Fasanella had found the zeitgeist of the civil rights era vital and inspiring; the unity of non-violent protest and civil resistance fused ideals he had spent his life advocating. But as the anti-establishment counterculture movement grew increasingly visible and vociferous, tensions increased between Ralph’s generation and younger Americans, who had different ideas about what comprised the American dream. By 1965, statistics showed that half the population was under the age of twenty-five.¹⁰ Society changed rapidly in response to youthful taste and demands, fueled by the meteoric rise of television and the popular press. Fasanella’s views typified those on the older end of the generation gap, for whom the shared hardships of the Depression and World War II were indelible. He found the attitudes, assumptions, and actions of the baby boomers, known for defying convention, to be ungrateful, arrogant, and self-centered.

Fasanella became increasingly disheartened by the actions of the counterculture, but his objections drove him again to make powerful images. *Modern Times* (1966) proposes a futuristic urban scene in which an impersonal and technological society has displaced traditions of compassion and community. Fasanella completed this work following Pope Paul VI’s 1965 visit to Yankee Stadium, and employs the iconography of baseball to symbolize America’s secular religion—for him a more honest and unifying instrument for social cohesion than sectarian religion. In this painting he contrasts humanistic subjects such as the papal visit, images of workers, protesters, strikers, and returning soldiers with the detached, intellectual side of society—the worlds of science, technology, and fine arts. Fasanella felt the elitist art world had pigeonholed him as “primitive and stupid.” He ardently believed that art didn’t have to be aloof or conceptual; it was a tool to be wielded like a hammer.

This idea may have been inspired, at least in part, by the legendary folk singer Pete Seeger, who first publicly performed his famous song “If I Had a Hammer” in 1949 in New York at a testimonial dinner for leaders of the Communist Party of America and, like fellow folk singer Woody Guthrie (who had emblazoned his guitar with the words: “This Machine Kills Fascists”), had become widely known for using his art as a weapon. Seeger, who, like Fasanella, would be blacklisted for his Communist ties and later convicted for contempt of Congress when he refused to name his associations or answer questions that violated his civil rights, became legendary for his style of gentle rebellion and his savvy ways of reaching the masses through simple, strong, and direct songs meant, not as testaments of personal artistry or skill, but as tools of unity. A closer parallel to Fasanella’s way of thinking about his art may not exist, and indeed the two men became good friends.¹¹

Around this time, Fasanella began to think about issues more broadly than he had earlier, and he set about making images with themes that were less specific and more overarching. He also began to call upon stories told to him by his mother. In a powerful work from 1972, he touches once again on the Iceman series, but this time the central figure is Ginevra; this work is both a personal tribute to her and an account of the matriarch's inestimable sacrifices.

Seated at the center of a table reminiscent of the scene in Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* (1972), Ginevra Fasanella, a maternal icon, looks at us with tired eyes that express the cumulative exhaustion of child rearing, housekeeping, and laboring in the garment industry. Her family surrounds her and the table is laid with food common in Italian-American homes. At the right appears a nod to the sacrifices of Joe Fasanella, again as the crucified Iceman, but Ginevra herself is crucified in the center of the image, symbolizing the great endurance her life has required.

The top of her cross bears the initials W.H.S., for "We Have Suffered," and Fasanella's recurring admonition "Lest We Forget" appears on the building's pediment. A palette of bright colors draws viewers into a scene where every bit of imagery holds symbolic detail. The painting offers a powerful crossroads of themes: family, struggle, endurance, gratitude.

The tide finally turned for Fasanella in the early 1970s, after twenty-five years of showing his paintings in union halls, churches, and various small venues. He caught the attention of folk art scholar Frederick Fried, who helped Fasanella get a promotional agent who, in turn, set about making Fasanella known. Fasanella soon became a phenomenon in New York, appearing on the cover of *New York* magazine in 1972, with the caption: "This man pumps gas in the Bronx for a living. He may also be the best primitive painter since Grandma Moses."¹² The article and a simultaneous exhibition at the American Foundation of Automation and Employment (Automation House) resulted in a period of fantastic success; the transition from obscurity to celebrity was instantaneous.

Fasanella sold the gas station and turned to painting—as well as the various demands of success—full time. In 1973 he was given a solo exhibition at the Xerox Corporation's Exhibit Center in Rochester; the forty-seven paintings shown there attested to Fasanella's enduring vision, and the first biography of the artist was published that same year by Alfred A. Knopf.¹³ The book fueled further acclaim for Fasanella and prompted an exhibition at the Coe Kerr Gallery on East 82nd Street, known for its stable of successful artists, including Andrew Wyeth. West Coast art critic Alfred Frankenstein wrote an introduction to the catalogue that distinguished Fasanella from other so-called folk artists in a number of ways, arguing that he was—although untrained—an artist who had devoted decades of toil to a developing creative vision.

Within a couple years, however, the celebrity faded. The Nixon presidency and life in the suburbs were subjects Fasanella explored, but with limited zeal. Looking for a large, meaningful project on which to focus, Fasanella began to think about how he could historicize and keep alive the monumental efforts of the working class in the first half of the twentieth century.

In 1975, Fasanella focused on the historic 1912 Bread and Roses strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts. In this two-month battle, twenty thousand immigrant workers challenged textile mill owners over fair pay and working conditions; their strike changed the course of American labor rights. Fasanella moved temporarily to Lawrence and spent three years there, reading, sketching, and talking to the surviving strikers and their families. He studied the mill machinery at the Merrimack Valley Textile Museum, making detailed sketches and notes. Fasanella's research and his efforts to connect living family members with the documented efforts of their forebears made a tremendous and lasting impact on the community and his project culminated in a series of eighteen

major paintings. Throughout the series, his imagery is confrontational and resolute, the themes of organized resistance and martyrdom ever present.

In 1978, Fasanella's series on the strike went on view at the Lawrence Public Library and was viewed by thousands. D'Ambrosio underscored the lasting importance of these works:

*In pursuing and executing the Lawrence paintings as a grand historical epic Fasanella acknowledged one of the most traditional tenets of art history—the primacy of history paintings—while challenging the canon of American history. His contribution to history painting in the 1970s can best be judged in the context of revisionist social history of that time. Although he acknowledged the traditional notion of history painting as the noblest artistic pursuit, he challenged the pictorial conventions of historical art and provoked the historical canon to include working class and immigrant heritage.*¹⁴

The Lawrence series brought Fasanella enduring acclaim. In the 1980s and 1990s, Fasanella largely painted scenes that refined familiar subjects, such as urban neighborhoods, baseball, and labor strikes. His wife organized a major exhibition of his work in 1985 that succeeded in bringing his art to museum audiences. As Fasanella's declining health compromised his ability to execute the large-scale works that had once consumed him, he worked with labor organizer Ron Carver to increase the public exposure of his work through the Public Domain project, a grassroots campaign initiated in 1989 with the aim of purchasing works out of private collections and donating them to institutions or municipalities—a story unto itself, told by Carver in "The Public Domain Story."¹⁵

Through Carver's passion and dedication, some of Fasanella's most important works became available to the audience that meant the most to the artist—the American public. Carver's model entailed identifying communities and institutions where certain paintings would have significant impact. He subsequently worked with institution leaders, teachers, and other members of the local community to raise awareness, enthusiasm, and financial support. Carver was a compelling advocate, and the project's board members included such notable public figures as Ed Asner, Ossie Davis, Ronnie Gilbert, Doris Kearns Goodwin, Olga Hirshhorn, Eleanor Holmes Norton, Pete Seeger (who would later sing at Ralph's memorial service), and Studs Terkel. Public Domain would place more than twenty major works in public collections. Among their major successes were two acquisitions: *Lawrence 1912—The Bread and Roses Strike* for the Lawrence Heritage State Park Visitor's Center, and *Family Supper*, which was donated to the Ellis Island Immigration Museum in 1991.

In 2013 Doss wrote, "Fasanella believed that a nation founded on aspirations of liberty, freedom, and collective social progress should, in fact, live up to those ambitions; similarly, he didn't sugarcoat how the nation had seemingly failed, or fallen behind."¹⁶ Certainly Fasanella had a knack for cutting straight to the heart of any injustice in his images. His paintings functioned as memorial tributes, didactic tools, and rallying cries; they made palpable his vision of a better society. Though Fasanella was not born on Labor Day, he celebrated that date as his birthday, proud to align his own life with the identities and histories of the working class. The era that shaped Ralph Fasanella and the work that he, in turn, produced may similarly inspire younger generations to look to the past for models, to take inspiration from those who went before us and proved, time and again, that the common folk had real power when they subverted complacency and acted collectively.

Lest We Forget

Notes

- 1 Paul S. D'Ambrosio, *Ralph Fasanella's America*, (Cooperstown, New York: Fenimore Art Museum, 2001), 22. Published in conjunction with the exhibition *Ralph Fasanella's America*, April 1–December 21, 2001 at the Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, New York. This essay owes inestimably to D'Ambrosio's in-depth research on Fasanella and this history of the artist's life and work.
- 2 D'Ambrosio, 28.
- 3 Erika Doss, "Ralph Fasanella's More Perfect Union: Art, Labor, and Politics in Post-World War II America, in the exhibition catalogue *Ralph Fasanella: A More Perfect Union* (New York: Andrew Edlin Gallery, May 11–June 22, 2013), 7.
- 4 D'Ambrosio, 44.
- 5 Ad Reinhardt, "Preface," *Paintings by Ralph Fasanella*, exhibition catalogue (New York: A.C.A Gallery, 1947).
- 6 Ralph Fasanella in D'Ambrosio, 56.
- 7 Paul D'Ambrosio has surmised that Fasanella may have added this inscription after Joe Fasanella died in 1961, since he was still living at the time this painting was made. It is also possible, however, that the inscription, for Ralph, was symbolic, and made when his father returned to Italy, relinquishing his immigrant's dream of a better life in America.
- 8 Ralph Fasanella in D'Ambrosio, 92. The painting he first called *The Tunnel of Lies* was retitled *American Tragedy* upon its completion.
- 9 Daughter Gina was born in 1958; son Marcantonio (Marc) was born in 1964.
- 10 David Farber, *The Sixties Chronicle*. Legacy Publishing (Lincolnwood, Illinois: Publications International, Inc., 2004) 16.
- 11 According to the artist's friend Ron Carver and his son Marc Fasanella, the friendship of Ralph Fasanella and Pete Seeger can be reliably dated to 1966, the year of the first Clearwater Festival, which Ralph and Eva would thereafter attend annually. It is likely, however, that it began as early as the late 1940s, when the folk group, The Weavers, began performing in Greenwich Village. Fasanella was known to be friends with Ronnie Gilbert, a member of the group, as was Seeger. Conversation with the author, March 28, 2014.
- 12 Nicholas Pileggi, "Portrait of the Artist as a Garage Attendant in the Bronx" *New York* (5: October 30, 1972), cover and 37–45.
- 13 Patrick Wilson, *Fasanella's City* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973). The second major publication on Fasanella was Paul S. D'Ambrosio's *Ralph Fasanella's America*, 2001, which remains the definitive volume on the artist's life and work.
- 14 D'Ambrosio, 128.
- 15 Ron Carver, "The Public Domain Story," AmericanArt.si.edu, 2014
- 16 Doss, 5.