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**Media preview:** Thursday, May 1; 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.

**“Ralph Fasanella: Lest We Forget” Opens May 2 at the  
Smithsonian American Art Museum**

***Centenary Tribute Brings Together Self-Taught Artist’s Most Significant Works***

Ralph Fasanella (1914–1997) was a self-taught painter who celebrated the common man and fought for the working class through artworks that tackled complex issues of postwar America. “Ralph Fasanella: Lest We Forget” positions Fasanella within a lineage of American painters who believed that art can come from everyday life and that it can generate important social change.

“Ralph Fasanella: Lest We Forget” brings together 19 of the artist’s most significant large paintings and eight sketches in celebration of the 100th anniversary of his birth. It is on view from May 2 through Aug. 3 before traveling to New York City and is organized by Leslie Umberger, curator for folk and self-taught art.

“The Smithsonian American Art Museum was an early champion of collecting and exhibiting work by self-taught artists, so it is fitting that we are presenting Ralph Fasanella’s powerful paintings on the 100th anniversary of his birth,” said Elizabeth Broun, the Margaret and Terry Stent Director of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. “Fasanella’s message of community and family unity sends a potent reminder that the power to effect change lies in the heart of every person.”

The son of Italian immigrants, Fasanella was born in the Bronx and grew up in the working-class neighborhoods of New York City. He labored with his father on his ice-delivery route, later working in the garment industry, as a truck driver, gas station owner and union organizer. His parents ingrained in him empathy and respect for the common man and taught him the value of hard work and of fighting for one’s rights, lessons that would later resonate in his works. Fasanella took up painting in 1945 and was able to devote himself to it full-time in the 1970s, a period when his art became more widely recognized.

A tireless advocate for workers’ rights, Fasanella viewed painting as an extension of his union activity and created artworks as memorial documents, teaching tools and rallying cries for his

community. These paintings, often large in scale and laden with symbolic imagery, deal with themes of struggle, endurance, social justice, family and community. He felt strongly about the need to remember the sacrifices of previous generations, inscribing the phrase “Lest We Forget” on several of his paintings.

“The artworks on view chart a painting career that spanned five tumultuous decades,” said Umberger. “As Fasanella grew as an artist he developed an astute and accessible style that reflected his deep commitment to the working class. He ardently believed that art didn’t have to be elitist or unapproachable; it was a tool to be wielded like a hammer.”

As early as 1947, Fasanella was exhibited alongside the top social realist painters of the day, including Philip Evergood and Ben Shahn. His works hung in both galleries and union halls and effectively bridged a divide between socially aware, self-taught artists and their trained counterparts.

Among the 27 artworks on display are two major paintings from the museum’s permanent collection. “Iceman Crucified #4” (1958) is a tribute to Fasanella’s father and a recent gift to the museum from the artist’s estate. In “Modern Times” (1966), the artist champions humanistic values in an increasingly technological modern world. The display marks the first time both paintings will be on public view at the museum.

The American Folk Art Museum in New York City, which holds a significant collection of Fasanella’s artworks and archives donated by the Fasanella family, has loaned six paintings to the exhibition as well as the drawings and archival materials presented.

A checklist of works on view in the exhibition and the exhibition wall text are available in an online press kit. Excerpts from footage of interviews with the artist will be shown on continuous loop in the exhibition galleries.

### **Free Public Programs**

Umberger and Marc Fasanella, the artist’s son, will discuss Fasanella’s life and career Friday, May 2, at 6:30 p.m. in the museum’s McEvoy Auditorium. Additional programs include a concert by the 21st Century Consort, the museum’s ensemble-in-residence, Saturday, April 26, at 4 p.m., a Mother’s Day Family Festival Saturday, May 10, from 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. and gallery talks led by Umberger Wednesday, July 2 and Wednesday July 30, both at 5:30 p.m. For additional information, visit [americanart.si.edu/calendar](http://americanart.si.edu/calendar).

### **Tour**

After closing in Washington, D.C., the exhibition will travel to the American Folk Art Museum in New York City (Sept. 2-Nov. 30).

## Connecting Online

A live webcast of Umberger's May 2 conversation with Marc Fasanella will be available online at [americanart.si.edu/multimedia/webcasts](http://americanart.si.edu/multimedia/webcasts). Behind-the-scenes insights about the exhibition will be published on the museum's blog, Eye Level, at [eyelevel.si.edu](http://eyelevel.si.edu). A slide show of selected artworks in the exhibition, which includes commentary by Umberger, will be available on the museum's website, [americanart.si.edu/fasanella](http://americanart.si.edu/fasanella). The public may also follow the museum for exhibition updates on Facebook at [facebook.com/americanart](https://facebook.com/americanart), Twitter by following @americanart and using #Fasanella, Pinterest at [pinterest.com/americanartpin](https://pinterest.com/americanartpin) and Instagram at [instagram.com/americanartmuseum/#](https://instagram.com/americanartmuseum/#) or by subscribing to the museum's email list at [americanart.si.edu/visit/enews](http://americanart.si.edu/visit/enews).

## Credit

"Ralph Fasanella: Lest We Forget" is organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum with generous support from Tania and Tom Evans, the Herbert Waide Hemphill Jr. American Folk Art Fund and Paula and Peter Lunder. The C.F. Foundation in Atlanta supports the museum's traveling exhibition program, *Treasures to Go*.

## About the Smithsonian American Art Museum

The Smithsonian American Art Museum celebrates the vision and creativity of Americans with artworks in all media spanning more than three centuries. Its National Historic Landmark building is located at Eighth and F streets N.W., above the Gallery Place/Chinatown Metrorail station. Museum hours are 11:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily (closed Dec. 25). Admission is free. Follow the museum on Twitter, YouTube, Tumblr, Instagram, Pinterest, Facebook, Flickr, iTunes U and ArtBabble. Museum information (recorded): (202) 633-7970. Smithsonian Information: (202) 633-1000. Website: [americanart.si.edu](http://americanart.si.edu).

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