

RALPH FASANELLA *Lest We Forget*

Ralph Fasanella celebrated the common man and tackled complex issues of postwar America in colorful, socially minded paintings. Fasanella was born in the Bronx and grew up in the working-class neighborhoods of New York. He became a tireless advocate for laborers' rights, first as a union organizer and later as a painter.

Fasanella's parents were among three million Italians who immigrated to America in the early twentieth century in search of a better life. They taught Ralph about the costs and rewards of hard work. The most lasting lessons they imparted 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.

Fasanella worked as a garment worker, truck driver, ice delivery man, union organizer, and gas station owner before he committed himself to painting in 1945. Untrained as an artist, Fasanella developed an astute and accessible style meant to foster social empowerment. His large paintings were memorial tributes, didactic tools, and rallying cries that made the possibility of a better society palpable to his community.

Fasanella is often remembered for his iconic admonition, "Lest We Forget"—an impassioned plea to remember the sacrifices of our forebears. *Ralph Fasanella: Lest We Forget* unites the artist's most powerful works in a celebration of the hundredth anniversary of his birth.

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Remember Who You Are

Remember Where You Came From

Don't Forget the Past

Change the World

—RALPH FASANELLA, 1914—1997

Pie in the Sky

1947

oil on canvas

American Folk Art Museum, New York, Gift of Eva Fasanella and her children,
Gina Mostrando and Marc Fasanella, 2005.5.4

Sam's Dream

1948

oil on canvas

Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York, and the Estate of Ralph Fasanella

Ralph Fasanella began to draw and paint in the summer of 1945. Through painting, Fasanella hoped to navigate dualities such as individuality/unity, past/present, and tradition/progression.

In *Pie in the Sky*, Fasanella draws on a popular working class song that promises a better life in heaven. Above a depiction of New York's Lower East Side tenements—rough but vibrant—he presents saccharine depictions of life in heaven and in suburbia.

As urban dwellers fled the city with their new-found prosperity in search of the “American dream,” they left behind a close-knit life of stickball and city streets for an alienating “heaven” of swing-sets and trimmed lawns. Fasanella (a disillusioned Catholic) believed that both heaven and the promised happiness of the suburbs were illusions. *Sam's Dream* was painted in response to his brother's decision to leave the Bronx for a comparatively vapid suburbia.

Iceman Crucified #4

1958

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the estate of Ralph Fasanella 2013.69

The *Iceman Crucified* series encapsulates some of Fasanella's most powerful and poignant artistic themes. His father—Joe the Iceman—is cast as the crucified Christ to explore ideas of suffering and sacrifice, memory and personal growth. The series was a turning point for Fasanella; his artistic vision broke free from the confines of realism and his imagery became deeply personal.

As a child, Ralph worked alongside his father on his ice delivery route, putting in long hard days on tough streets. *Iceman Crucified #4* was the final work in and pinnacle of the series. In it Fasanella encompasses old and new worlds and is simultaneously nostalgic and celebratory. The Christ figure is transformed into a heroic presence, 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 viewers to remember who we are and where we come from.

Family Supper

1972

oil on canvas

National Park Service

Family Supper pays homage to Fasanella's mother, celebrating family and acknowledging the inestimable sacrifices of the matriarch.

Seated at the center of a table reminiscent of the scene in Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, Ginevra Fasanella looks at us with tired eyes that express the cumulative exhaustion of child rearing, housekeeping, and laboring in the garment industry. At the right, we see another incarnation of Joe Fasanella as the crucified iceman, but Ginevra, herself crucified to symbolize all she has endured, is the central focus. The top of her cross bears the initials W.H.S. for "We Have Suffered," and Fasanella's iconic admonition, "Lest We Forget," appears on the building's pediment.

A palette of bright colors draws viewers into a scene wherein every bit of imagery holds symbolic detail. The painting offers a powerful crossroads of themes: family, struggle, endurance, gratitude.

New York City

1957

oil on canvas

Collection of Nicholas and Shelley Schorsch

New York City is a monumental celebration of Fasanella's home city—its cadence, culture, architecture, and people. Amid the tensions of the Cold War, Fasanella was blacklisted for his leftist leanings. This painting of his beloved New York City was an attempt to sidestep overt political subjects, yet it nonetheless captured and celebrated the spirit of the masses.

Queens and Long Island mark the horizon as the iconic Queensboro Bridge brings the viewer into the teeming heart of the city. Fasanella based the foreground on the uptown neighborhood he lived in 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.

Mill Worker (Night Shift)

1976

acrylic on canvas

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1977

Meeting at the Commons: Lawrence 1912

1977

oil on canvas

Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York, and the Estate of Ralph Fasanella

The Great Strike: Lawrence 1912

1978

oil on canvas

Building and Construction Trades Department, AFL-CIO

The tide finally turned for Fasanella in the early 1970s after he had been showing his paintings in union halls, churches, and various small venues for about twenty-five years. He caught the attention of folk art scholar Frederick Fried, who helped Fasanella get a promotional agent and, subsequently, devote himself to painting full time.

In 1975, Fasanella became drawn to the topic of the historic 1912 Bread and Roses Strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, a two-month battle in which twenty thousand immigrant workers challenged textile mill owners over fair pay and conditions. Fasanella spent three years in Lawrence, reading, sketching, and talking to the surviving strikers and their families. His project culminated in a series of eighteen major paintings.

Mill Worker (Night Shift) conveys the inner workings of the industrial mill environment and shows how intimately Fasanella came to understand it. *The Great Strike* encompasses the major events of the strike's duration, chronicling them both pictorially and in text that streams down a ticker tape on the library's façade. *Meeting at the Commons* highlights the square where workers would later celebrate their historic victory. In this series, Fasanella mines the past to keep the power of collective action alive.

Modern Times

1966

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Maurice and Margo Cohen, Birmingham, MI 2002.10

By the mid-1960s, Fasanella was disheartened by the arrogance and self-centeredness that, to him, defined the counterculture movement. *Modern Times* proposes a futuristic urban scene in which an impersonal and technological society has displaced one of humanity and unity.

Fasanella completed this work following Pope Paul VI's 1965 visit to Yankee Stadium. In it 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.

Farewell Comrade/End of the Cold War

1993–99

oil on canvas

American Folk Art Museum, New York, Gift of Eva Fasanella and her children, Gina Mostrando and Marc Fasanella 2005.5.3

Fasanella's final painting captures the artist's internal conflicts following the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, which signaled the end of the Russian experiment with socialism. Fasanella was a staunch socialist and anti-fascist. As a youth, he was a member of the Young Communist League and in the 1930s he volunteered for the Abraham Lincoln Brigade to fight against fascism during the Spanish Civil War. A laborer and union organizer, Fasanella feared a society in which the drive for profit trumped the welfare of its people.

In this complex image, the artist employs American news sources and sports idioms to chart a complex history. Lenin lies in state in a packed stadium; stacks of books symbolize the intellectual pillars that supported the socialist enterprise with titles that identify those who heroically battled for economic and social justice.

Oversized covers of *The New York Times* and *New York Post* succinctly call the game's outcome: "Gorbachev ... Fumbles the Ball" and "Yanks Win Big." Fasanella passed away before the work was fully realized.

American Heritage

1974

oil on canvas

American Folk Art Museum, New York, Gift of Eva Fasanella and her children, Gina Mostrando and Marc Fasanella

Watergate

1976

oil on canvas

American Folk Art Museum, New York, Gift of Eva Fasanella and her children, Gina Mostrando and Marc Fasanella

Fasanella became increasingly dissatisfied with American politics in the wake of the Civil Rights movement. *American Heritage* appears at first to be a patriotic scene at the White House; a closer look reveals instead a mass funeral for the many lost souls of the era, from President John F. Kennedy to the slain civil rights workers of Mississippi. Flanked by their own coffins, Ethel and Julius Rosenberg loom again as ghostly martyrs. An oversized peace dove looms mockingly above politicians who seem unable to grasp the basics of human dignity and equality.

Watergate's bright colors and sporting themes portray a society in which politics and the presidency had become a circus. Fasanella was outraged by Richard Nixon's disregard for decency and the public trust, and felt his art must record the truth: "Somebody's got to tell the American people what's going on. I don't run away from it.

Night Game—Practice Time

1979

oil on canvas

Colby College Museum of Art, The Lunder Collection

Fasanella used the theme of baseball to represent the spirit and camaraderie of the American people throughout his artistic career. From kids playing ball in the city streets and on vacant lots to big stadium games, he used the game to convey energy, excitement, and unity. *In Night Game—Practice Time*, Fasanella develops the technique of tilting the playing field forward, both heightening the drama and inviting the viewer to be part of the action.

McCarthy Era Garden Party

1954

oil on canvas

Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York, and the Estate of Ralph Fasanella

In 1951, Ethel and Julius Rosenberg were convicted of treason, though 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 during the Cold War. Fasanella was among those who ardently believed that the FBI had made scapegoats of the couple in an attempt to flush out other left-leaning activists; the Rosenbergs never named anyone else in their testimony. *Garden Party* confronts what Fasanella felt was a wrongful death; it would be the first of many paintings in which he used them as symbols of injustice and protest.

In his 1953 play, *The Crucible*, Arthur Miller allegorically equated McCarthyism and Red Scare hysteria with the infamous 1692 witch trials and executions of Salem, Massachusetts. Fasanella echoes Miller when he depicts 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 building—an icon of democracy and freedom—while those protesting and celebrating the conviction clash at the fore.

McCarthy Press

1958

oil on canvas

American Folk Art Museum, New York, Gift of Eva Fasanella and her children, Gina Mostrando and Marc Fasanella

Fasanella sounds a rallying cry in the 1963 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,” crowned with a devilish totem to symbolize both the atomic bomb and the intense paranoia that dominated the era.

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. The canvas is peppered with icons of the powerful United States government and signboards across the skyline bear the pleading message: “Save.” Fond of employing signage to comment on American consumerism, Fasanella imbues it here with a more somber message: “We can save anything in America—but we couldn’t save two people.”

American Tragedy

1964

oil on canvas

Collection of John and Susan Jerit

Fasanella situates the assassination of President John F. Kennedy against a backdrop that blends imagery of the American civil rights movement and the capitalist industrialization of the South in his powerful painting, *American Tragedy*. 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 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 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 a tunnel of hatred and sin.

The Stuart Sketch Pad No. 763

about 1948

graphite on paper

American Folk Art Museum, New York, Gift of the Estate of Ralph Fasanella

Fasanella began sketching in the mid-1940s as a way to relieve the arthritis in his hands, but quickly developed a passion for art. In 1946, he left his job at the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America to pursue his artwork full time.

Spindle Frame

1976

ballpoint and marker on drawing paper

American Folk Art Museum, New York, Gift of the Estate of Ralph Fasanella

Fasanella arrived in Lawrence, Massachusetts, in 1975 to research the historic Bread and Roses textile strike of 1912. Drawing played a vital role during the visit—for Fasanella, sketching the people, factories and machinery allowed him to absorb the town, physically and emotionally.

Proclamation of Ralph Fasanella Day in Lawrence, MA

May 18, 1987

American Folk Art Museum, New York, Gift of the Estate of Ralph Fasanella

Fasanella's two years in Lawrence, Massachusetts resulted in a body of eighteen works of art that shed light on the mill town's historic past. Honored by his commitment, the city designated May 18, 1987 as Ralph Fasanella Day.

Passports to Ellis Island Signed by Ralph Fasanella

May 16, 1991

American Folk Art Museum, New York, Gift of the Estate of Ralph Fasanella

On May 16, 1991, Fasanella was honored at a ceremony dedicating his painting, *Family Supper*, to the Ellis Island Immigration Museum. These souvenir passports celebrate the success of a fundraising campaign to move the painting from a private collection into the public domain.

Letter to Eva Fasanella from Robert Gwathmey

about 1965

ink on paper

American Folk Art Museum, New York, Gift of the Estate of Ralph Fasanella

Social-realist painter and fellow New Yorker Robert Gwathmey was a champion of Fasanella's artwork. Both artists shared a commitment to the working class in their lives and art. In this letter to Fasanella's wife, Eva, Gwathmey expresses his admiration for Fasanella's authentic style and his unique ability to capture the effusive spirit of New York.