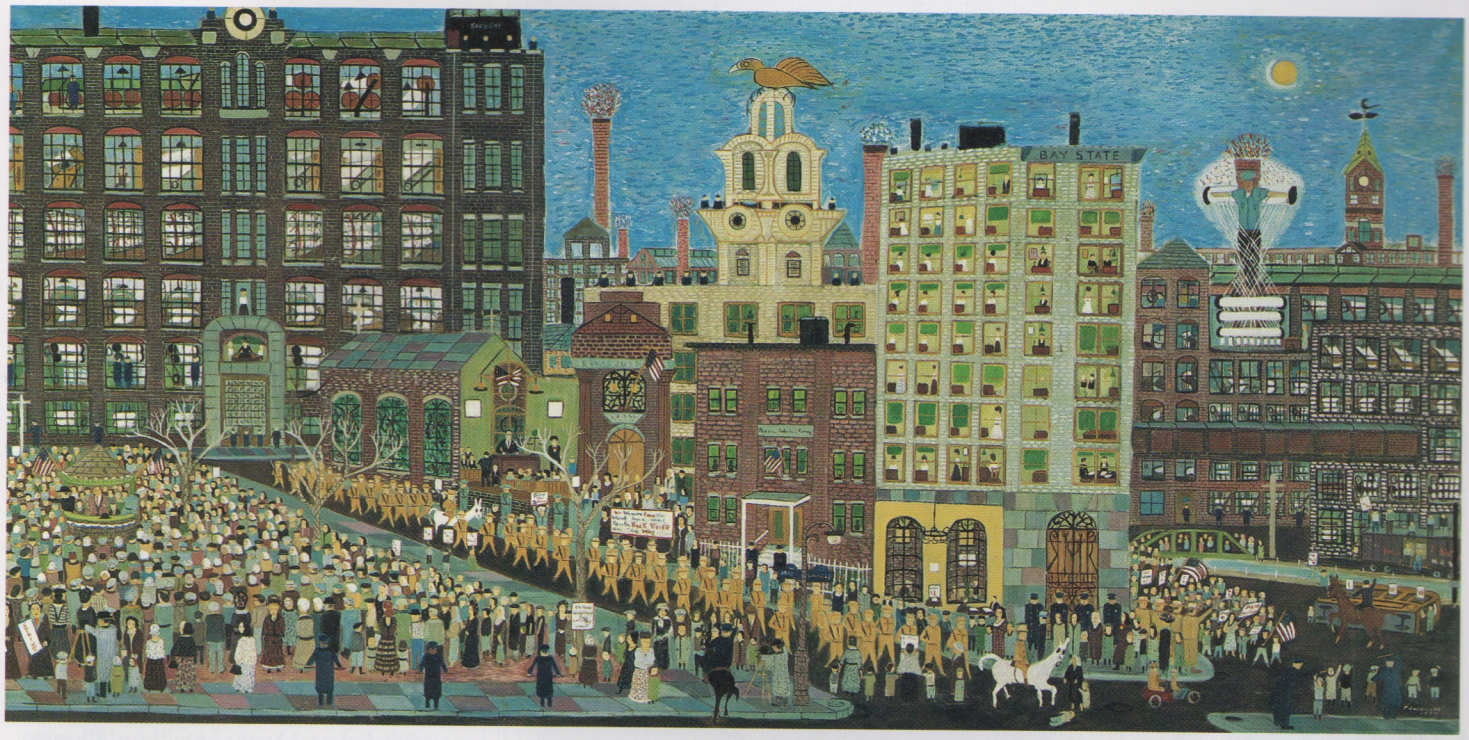


Lawrence, 1912: The Bread & Roses Strike (1977)

The Guy in the Street

The working-class artist Ralph Fasanella painted pictures that, the author writes, just "got it right."

BY JEANNE SCHINTO

I moved to Lawrence, Massachusetts, in the mid-1980s and stayed ten years, but it was still too late to meet Ralph Fasanella. He spent only three years in the old textile-mill city, in the 1970s, living in a room at the YMCA—"like a monk," he was fond of saying, though he certainly didn't live like a hermit. It seems that he met and charmed everyone in Lawrence. On the occasion of his death three Decembers ago, they recalled how he talked, talked, talked, in his New York way, and, when words failed him, how he dramatized with big gestures—the pitch of an imaginary baseball, for example, to demonstrate how the sport he loved really is ballet-like, an art. They also remarked that most people in Lawrence would never have guessed that by then he was an artist of some renown, with works in several major museums and in the homes of many collectors.

Lawrence is by no measure a wealthy place, but in 1988, with the help of the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Management and numerous private donations, the city bought a painting of Fasanella's for $100,000. It is called *Lawrence 1912: The Bread & Roses Strike*, and it depicts both facts and feelings about one of the most celebrated events of American-immigrant labor history, using actual headlines and an image of a mill worker crucified on a cross made of bolts of cloth. The strike was spontaneous, sparked by a pay cut in the textile mills. When it ended after several weeks, the whole country knew about it. Not only was pay restored in Lawrence, it was increased throughout New England, since the singing strikers (as they were dubbed) had forced management to acknowledge that workers, just like everyone else, do not live by bread alone. Lawrence has no art museum, so the painting has been permanently installed at the Heritage State Park Visitor's Center, a refurbished nineteenth-century mill workers' boarding-house, situated not far from where workers and the state militia clashed during the strike. The painting is a prized possession in a city that has few others.

Lawrencians don't often take kindly to non-natives who presume to tell their stories for them, but everyone seems to agree that this little guy in the cap and with the ever-present cigarette somehow got it right. He did it by plying folks with questions about their or their parents' memories of the strike, by reading old newspaper coverage at the Lawrence Public Library, and by studying photographs at the textile-history museum in nearby North Andover. The result was a dozen large canvasses showing the historical moment of the strike, along with other scenes from Lawrence's heyday: its mammoth brick mills, the machinery inside them, and especially the city's legion of workers from around the world.

In the past few years, Fasanella paintings have sold at Sotheby's for $37,375 and $41,400. Fasanella has also had shows at

the prestigious ACA Galleries on East Fifty-seventh Street in New York, where he had his first solo show in 1948. In the coming months ACA will feature his work again, in a memorial exhibition, and the Fenimore House Museum, in Cooperstown, New York, is planning a retrospective for 2001. The arts papers that report on these events often call Fasanella an "outsider" artist, the term in vogue for someone who has had no formal art education. That describes Fasanella, but he never took to the term, nor to the term "primitive." He always preferred describing himself as "self-taught."

Fasanella came relatively late to art, and for a long time he worked in obscurity. When he was "discovered," in 1972, he had been painting at night, sometimes all night, for twenty-eight years, while by day he had been a union organizer, a factory worker, and an attendant at his brother's filling station, under the Cross Bronx Expressway near his beloved Yankee Stadium. He was fifty-eight years old and had sold only two paintings. Then came a *New York* magazine cover story, "Portrait of the Artist as a Garage Attendant in the Bronx." And while it's true that he didn't visit an art museum until he was thirty, at about the time he started to paint, in 1944 he did once try art lessons and found them wanting: the nude model looked "dead" to him, and, besides, he felt self-conscious. Because of that, his hands couldn't make his pencil work right. But riding the subway home from the class he found himself sketching, the way he often did, on the dense print of the classified-ad section of the newspaper. What he sketched was the people riding with him, people like himself—"the working guy," as he would put it, "the guy in the street."

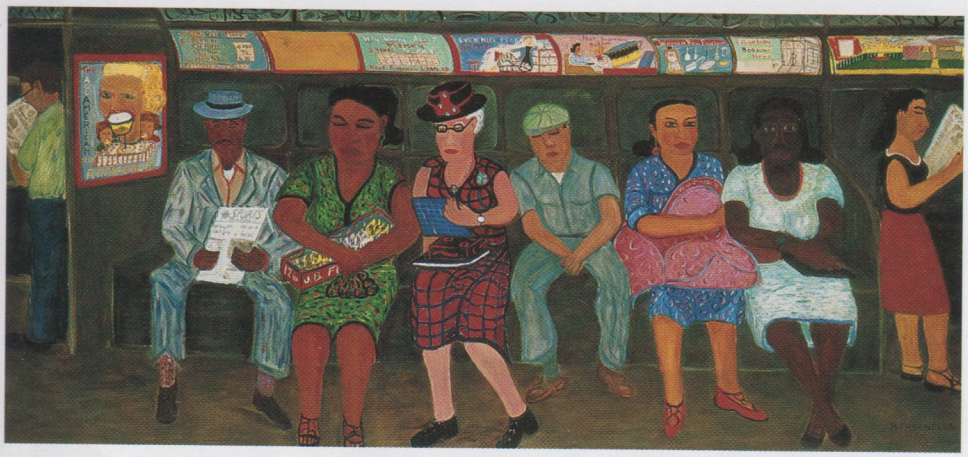
Fasanella initially got involved with art because it alleviated a mysterious pain in his hands. He used to rub them across tabletops, trying to get rid of the sensation. His wife, Eva Lazorek Fasanella, whom he married in 1950, told me, "When I first met Ralph, he wasn't an artist yet and I was afraid of him. There was something inside of him ready to explode. It was like a baby trying to be born." Then somebody suggested that he take up a pencil and draw something, since that was the motion he was making on the tabletops anyway. He drew a shoe, then a face. In no time, the story goes, he was wearing out a paintbrush a week.

One of his earliest subjects was his old

neighborhood—New York's Little Italy, where his parents had moved shortly after his birth in the Bronx, on Labor Day, 1914. A streetwise kid, he evaded the truant officer by jumping from one tenement rooftop to another. He used to sit on fire escapes, watching parades and religious festivals and political rallies down below. So when he decided to put it all down on canvas, it was natural for him to choose an elevated perspective: kids (himself among them) playing stickball between lines of parked cars; mothers pushing babies in strollers on the sidewalks, steering around girls jumping rope and playing hopscotch; truck drivers making deliveries to storefront bakeries and butcher shops; peddlers hawking wares from horse-drawn wagons—all of it seen from the height of a seven- or eight-story brick apartment house.

Though Fasanella obviously used memory to create these highly detailed pictures, he used imagination more. He would often paint little fictional scenes in each of his buildings' windows—precisely the view that tenement dwellers often have of their neighbors. Some of his paintings are so lively with window-framed scenes, they resemble Advent calendars. Sometimes he would remove a whole wall, so a building would look like a doll's house or a shadow box. But there are no shadows here; everything is two-dimensional. A couple of the paintings remind me of surreal board games, in which city streets twist through an urban Candy Land, with uncertain prizes waiting at the end of them.

Of course, life for grown-ups in Little Italy was defined by work, not play. Fasanella's immigrant father, Giuseppe, had a job delivering ice; he would haul one huge block at a time up long flights of tenement steps. His mother, Ginevra, was a buttonhole maker in a coat factory, and although hers was a sit-down job at a sewing machine, it strained her eyes and spine. At age eight Fasanella had been expected to say good-bye to childhood and join the adults, getting up at four in the morning to help out on the ice wagon, but he hated it so much he regularly ran away. He thought he and his father seemed no better off than the horse that pulled their wagon. His parents felt they could do nothing but send him to the New York Catholic Protectory, an East Bronx reform school run by priests and brothers; he was in and out of that prison-like place until he was fourteen, when his father himself ran away. After that, his



ABOVE: *New York City* (1957); LEFT: *Subway Riders* (1950)

mother needed help supporting the family, which included five other children, and Fasanella went to work.

Immigrants were usually grateful to have any job at all, but Fasanella, whose views were not reformed by reform school or anything else, never saw it that way. He became successful as an organizer in the 1930s and 1940s, fueled by anger at the exploitation of his parents. Years later his anger took the form of three autobiographical paintings. In one of them, *Iceman Crucified* (1958), his father is fastened by ice tongs to a cross; a block of ice in a big wooden bucket is balanced on his shoulder. For the working poor there isn't even time to be a martyr; Giuseppe works as he is dying. Another painting, *Dress Shop* (1971), is a complementary painting for his mother: a depiction of her coat factory, with one side open like a multistoried theater stage, and women sitting in rows at their sewing machines. People like the Fasanellas were expected to stay in line, not to make trouble, if they wanted to be considered good Americans. But how "good" was America itself? On the roll-up shades of the windows in *Dress Shop* are newspaper headlines depicting the assassinations of the Kennedys and other events of the 1960s; some of the windows are surreal TV screens showing more of the same. And written in a lower corner of the canvas are the words "In Memory of the Triangle Shirt Workers," to honor the women who died in the sweatshop fire of 1911. In the third painting, *Family Supper* (1972), Fasanella secularizes religious symbols, bringing his parents and grown-up siblings back together, seating them like Christ and the apostles at the Last Supper, around the dining table in their Sullivan Street apartment. The apartment itself is lovingly furnished with items typical of immigrant households of the period, including a religious wall calendar showing a miniature version of *Iceman Crucified*.

These works are not politically subtle, and they aren't meant to be. They *are* politically astute, however. Fasanella once said that he didn't paint for "the guy on Wall Street"; he painted for people like himself, who would instantly recognize his sentiments. They would also recognize his parents and siblings as similar to their own, and would share his often-quoted dismissal of "scratchers," which is what he called abstract artists, those presumed insiders of the art world.

Lawrence isn't the only city that owns a Fasanella. Oakland, California, has one, at the public library. So does New Bedford, Massachusetts—it's up at City Hall. Both Ralph and Eva worked long and hard with a nonprofit organization called Public Domain, created by the union organizer Ron Carver, to get the paintings out of private collections and on display in public places where people who don't have a habit of visiting art museums are more likely to

chair when I visited was Fasanella's paint-splattered maroon cardigan sweater. In the living room were stacks and stacks of pencil sketches. I also saw a scholarly journal devoted to the history and culture of Italian Americans. Eva brought me downstairs to his basement studio, where the huge three-part work in progress dominated the space. Against a bright red background it showed Lenin lying in his casket, and columns of shapes that were intended to be soldiers marching below the headline, CAPITALISM DEFEATS AND DESTROYS THE SOCIALIST STATE. Eva told me that Ralph had complained to her that the half-done figures were "too flat"—he needed to find a way to make them "sing." Then I saw some other, much smaller canvasses piled up against a wall. They turned out to be a series of paintings that Eva said he worked on when he was in a more playful mood. They showed his favorite hangout in Ardsley—Nathan's, the hot-dog place, where he loved to drink coffee and talk. It seemed to me that he was having no trouble at all making those figures sing: even though their eyes were often nothing more than two quick brushstrokes, their faces were real and uncannily familiar.

Before I left Ardsley that day, Eva told me I should pick out some posters to take home. I already had all the Lawrence scenes, so I took a copy of *Subway Riders*. At the bottom of it there is a caption, in the artist's own words. "Here I show the subway riders at night after a hard day's work," it begins. "Everyone is separate, alone, but very much together." And then it continues:

> We don't know the people sitting next to us, but in another way we do. We are with them every day. The woman with the flowered hat: she's an Irish schoolteacher. The Puerto Rican woman with the baby—I know I know her. The worker slumped in his seat with his eyes closed—is that me?

It could have been, but obvious self-portraits were simply not Ralph Fasanella's style. Instead, he left us with another kind of personal statement, most notably in what I think is his greatest piece of all, *New York City*. Eva gave me a poster of that, too. The image was much reduced and was not the whole painting; the original is a triptych that measures four feet wide by nine feet long, and took Fasanella six months of nearly nonstop work to complete in 1957. It shows a composite of many places in the city—a collage in paint, as it were, extravagantly detailed and colored. There are apartment houses with a different portrait in every single window, and dozens of wonderful 1950s-style finned cars cruising the streets below, amid buses, trucks, and horse-drawn pushcarts. There are churches and liquor stores, rooftop clotheslines and pigeon roosts, billboards and neon signs. And all of it is all held together aesthetically with the long graceful arch of a suspension bridge, frilly with its black, lace-like curlicues of metalwork. The bridge is one of Fasanella's expansive gestures in paint, a kind of caress. The reason he once gave for making this picture, in fact, was this: "I wanted to get it all, hug it all, everything." It's the reason he might have given for making any of his pictures. It's the reason he succeeded. ■

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