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Ralph Fasanella: Worker, Activist, Artist

Abstract

[Excerpt] In his art, as in his life, Ralph Fasanella reminds us all of the complexity of our society and of the need for each generation to dedicate itself anew to the commitment of justice for all. That his work, accomplished without the benefit of formal training, is as arresting and as pleasing as it is, is but a reflection of Ralph Fasanella's basic message.

Keywords

Ralph Fasanella, art, painting, culture, Johnson Museum

Disciplines

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Comments

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Ralph Fasanella: Worker, Activist, Artist

During the 1950s it was fashionable in intellectual circles to proclaim the disappearance of the working class in the United States. The unparalleled prosperity of the post-World War II era seemed to assure the "elevation" of working people to middle-class status and position. That, many felt, would preclude a return to the conflict-ridden decade of the 1930s and ensure domestic peace and progress for as far in the future as the mind could envision. In short, bourgeois America would finally vanquish its nightmare concerning Communism and simultaneously eliminate the pesky irritant of working-class reality in a proclaimed middle-class society. It is important to recall that mood when viewing the work of Ralph Fasanella, for his paintings remain an eloquent testimony to the political and cultural vitality of working-class life, even in an era of homogenization.

As a child Fasanella occasionally accompanied his parents to work, and like most children of the urban working class, he lived in the streets of his neighborhood. As a young adult in the 1930s his childhood experiences and images fused with more-overt political activities. When Fasanella began to experiment with drawing and painting after World War II, his political and cultural experiences structured his emerging artwork.

Understood politically, the body of Fasanella's work is a call to remember the past as much as a direct comment on contemporary issues. His paintings of textile mill towns, with their evocation of the dramatic strikes and struggles for decent wages and humane work conditions, powerfully remind one of the continuity in workers' history, as each generation of workers must engage in its own struggle for dignity. In a broader way, moreover, Fasanella's paintings reflect an

urban working-class culture that possesses a vitality and a perspective substantially different from the homogeneity that many thought inevitable in mass society. In *Festa* (cat. no. 8), in *Family Supper* (cat. no. 20), and in his many paintings on baseball, Fasanella reveals his understanding of working-class culture in a way that underscores the distance between his subjects and middle-class Americans. The rich, collective street energy of *Festa*, for example, would simply be out of place in most middle-class urban neighborhoods. What structures his paintings, what connects the political and cultural images in his art, and what, not insignificantly, separates Fasanella from those who would speak of the disappearance of the working class is precisely his understanding of labor as the central experience for workers and their communities. While that theme appears repeatedly throughout his paintings, it is perhaps nowhere more forcibly presented than in *Iceman Crucified* (cat. no. 9) and *Dress Shop* (cat. no. 21), paintings based on his parents' working lives. It is that experience, Fasanella suggests, that signifies the distinctness of the working class and is the source of both the pain and the joy he finds in working-class life.

In his art, as in his life, Ralph Fasanella reminds us all of the complexity of our society and of the need for each generation to dedicate itself anew to the commitment of justice for all. That his work, accomplished without the benefit of formal training, is as arresting and as pleasing as it is, is but a reflection of Ralph Fasanella's basic message.

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