

## Hill Gallery / On Dignity: Labor and Leisure in the Visionary Art of Ralph Fasanella



*Mill Town – Weaving Department, 1976 • Oil on canvas • 50" x 72"*

# Hill Gallery / On Dignity: Labor and Leisure in the Visionary Art of Ralph Fasanella

**Dignity:** the state or quality of being worthy of honor or respect

**Labor:** work, especially hard physical manual work / considered collectively as a social class or political force

**Leisure:** use of time for enjoyment / a social class that is independently wealthy (does not need to earn a living)

Ralph Fasanella (1914-1997) celebrated the common man and tackled complex issues of postwar America in colorful, socially-minded paintings. Fasanella developed an astute and accessible style that reflected his affiliation with, and commitment to, the struggles waged by the working class for a dignified life. He viewed painting as an extension of his activism and his alternately subtle and brash paintings functioned simultaneously as memorial documents, didactic tools, and rallying cries, making the possibility of a better society palpable to viewers from all walks of life. His paintings, often large in scale and laden with symbolic imagery, deal with themes of activism, endurance, social justice, family, and community. Drawing upon his experiences fighting against fascism in Spain, running for political office as a member of the American Labor Party, working as a union organizer, demonstrating against antisemitism in defense of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, attending civil rights demonstrations in support of Dr. Martin Luther King, advocating for equal rights and freedom of sexual expression, campaigning for affordable housing in the Bronx, or supporting the environmental work of Pete Seeger's Clearwater Hudson River Revival Project, Ralph painted what he knew firsthand. He spoke about, lived into, and depicted what he felt was worthy of admiration or derision so that his generation and those that succeed it could understand the content and context of his times and envision a path to a more just and egalitarian society. His work continues to tell the story of progressive change and serves as an academic and cultural marker of American history. In dynamic canvases often referenced in articles, books, and film, widely represented in museum collections and travelling exhibitions, Ralph accomplished what Jacob Riis did in his photography, depicting *How the Other Half Lives*, forces of change, and the status quo that define American life.

An important collection of Fasanella's most encyclopedic paintings enhances the holdings of the American Folk Art Museum where an archive of his personal papers also resides. Both the Fenimore Art Museum and the Smithsonian Museum of American Art house significant collections of his work. In addition, The Columbus Museum, The Hudson River Museum, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art have acquired Fasanella paintings for their permanent collections. Fasanella's art is displayed in several prominent public locations, most notably the Ellis Island Immigration Museum, Lawrence Heritage State Park, and the New York City Arts for Transit program. Three major monographs on his oeuvre have been published to date: *Fasanella's City* by Patrick Watson, *Fasanella's America* by Paul D'Ambrosio, and *Ralph Fasanella: Images of Optimism* by the artist's son Marc Fasanella an activist / curator / designer / educator. Ralph achieved wide recognition and critical acclaim for his insight, unique form of creative expression, and eminence as a keen social chronicler of his time.

The paintings exhibited by the Hill Gallery at the 2023 outsider Art Fair in New York City highlight Fasanella's intimate knowledge of the dignity he witnessed in the everyday struggle of workers. Whether on their way to work, at their jobs, in union halls, in moments of contemplation about their future, or at leisure when invited to his home and studio, Ralph came to know his subjects personally and depicted them with a remarkable depth of character.

Tim and Pamela Hill, both graduates of Michigan State University, are pleased to be able to donate a portion of the proceeds from the sale of each painting to the *Ralph Fasanella: Art of Social Justice Project* at Michigan State University. For more information on this project visit [fasanella.org](https://fasanella.org) and click on the *Social Justice* tab. [fasanella.org](https://fasanella.org) is a project of MATRIX: A Center for Digital Humanities & Social Science at Michigan State University.

To inquire about purchase of original work by Ralph Fasanella contact the **Hill Gallery** / (248) 540-9288 / [info@hillgallery.com](mailto:info@hillgallery.com)