



RALPH FASANELLA *The Public Domain Story*

by Ron Carver

It was about 8:30 on a hot August night in 1989. A friend drove me from my home in New Bedford, Massachusetts, to Manhattan's lower east side, dropping me off in front of the Knickerbocker Village apartment complex. I sneaked by the doorman, rode up to the thirteenth-floor penthouse, and knocked on art collector Ronald Ferrara's door. We had never met, but this man had something I wanted. He owned one of Ralph Fasanella's seminal paintings.

I heard footsteps inside the apartment and then a voice: "Who's there?" I told him my name and he responded with an expletive. But he opened the door and let me in.

A few hours later we had a deal, and I was invited to sleep on the couch in Ferrara's living room, right below the Fasanella painting I had been seeking. For eighteen months I had tried—unsuccessfully—to persuade Ferrara to sell the 1972 painting *Family Supper*, which he had purchased in 1974.

I didn't yet have the money I pledged, nor did I plan to keep the painting for myself. I dropped in on Ferrara as part of my quest to purchase Fasanella's greatest works from private collectors and donate them to museums and public buildings, where they could be seen by Fasanella's intended audiences. I named the project Public Domain.

I had begun this venture in my spare time three years earlier and had secured a couple of Fasanella paintings: one for New Bedford's City Hall and one for the Lawrence, Massachusetts, Heritage Park Visitors Center. In March of 1988, I quit my job as a representative for the United Electrical Workers union (UE) to devote myself to this task full time. I originally thought of it as a one-year "sabbatical," but one year turned into two, then three, then four.

Along with Henri Matisse, Claude Monet, Vincent van Gogh, Romare Bearden, and my sister Suzanne, Fasanella was one of my favorite artists. I fell in love with his work in October, 1974, when a co-worker from the UE suggested I check out his show at New York's Coe Kerr Gallery. I was overwhelmed with emotion at Fasanella's depiction of ordinary people—many of them painted en masse, with tiny brushstrokes—but with such verve and heart.

Art critic Alfred Frankenstein wrote in the Coe Kerr Gallery notes, "A new master is added to the list of the modern Americans." As if foretelling the work of Public Domain and Fasanella's eventual legacy, he added, "When the history of these times comes to be written, if those who write it have sense enough to search out its visual image, the paintings of Fasanella will take a major place."¹

As I walked out of the Coe Kerr, the artist himself stood by the stairs, smoking a cigarette. I was thrilled when he signed my catalog.

A decade later, my wife and I met Fasanella at a memorial service in New York for the UE's longtime cartoonist, Fred Wright. Ralph had organized for a variety of unions: longshoremen, hospital workers, janitors, and teamsters. But his longest stint, upon returning from service with

the Abraham Lincoln Brigade during the Spanish Civil War, was with the UE, the union that employed me in the seventies and eighties.

Ralph suggested we visit his exhibit at Hostos Community College on our way back to Massachusetts. We did that and drove home wishing we could bring a few Fasanella paintings to New Bedford so my union members could see this fabulous art celebrating the lives and struggles of working-class people.

The quest began. From Ralph's wife, Eva, I learned that Paul D'Ambrosio and Suzette McAvoy from the Herbert F. Johnson Museum at Cornell University were curating a traveling exhibition of fifty of Fasanella's paintings. Eva was skeptical about the possibility of adding another venue to the tour, but when I called the Johnson, the news was good. If we could meet the funding requirements and secure an appropriate museum host, *Urban Visions* could travel to New Bedford for two months the following year, in 1986.

New Bedford's Whaling Museum had never shown the work of a living artist, but its director, Richard Kugler, loved the idea. The museum's local patrons came primarily from the wealthy suburbs. Other visitors were mainly tourists traveling through the city on their way to Cape Cod. Kugler hoped that featuring Fasanella's paintings of textile mills, dress shops, union halls, and stickball games might persuade the city's working class residents to explore the museum. For decades after the demise of the whaling industry, New Bedford's economy had centered on its own dress shops and textile mills.

With help from the University of Massachusetts–Dartmouth's Labor Education Center, many local trade unions, and a variety of business and cultural organizations, we raised the money. Best of all, the Whaling Museum was around the corner from my union hall. Day after day, I brought workers, friends, and colleagues to the exhibit during my lunch break.

No one in New Bedford could have imagined that, while we were falling in love with Ralph Fasanella and his paintings, the artist was falling in love with this industrial city on Buzzard's Bay, just west of Cape Cod. He was like Orson Welles in *The Man Who Came to Dinner*, but in a good way. Rising early along with the working people of New Bedford, sketchpad in hand, Fasanella wandered the cafés, the factories, and the docks; he became a friend to the community. After the exhibition's opening, Eva went back to New York; Ralph stayed for months.

Though Fasanella had left school when he was nine, he always said he got a "graduate degree" at the New York Public Library's main branch on Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street. He could carry on conversations with anyone, no matter their education or social standing. In New Bedford, Fasanella enchanted art collectors, artists, and members of the business community. Using my union hall as his home base, he got to know the fishermen, the "lumpers" who unloaded the boats, the painters, and carpenters. He spent days wandering through New Bedford's largest industrial plant, Morse Cutting Tools, sketching, drinking coffee, bumming cigarettes, and trying to learn what made our city tick.

Fasanella captivated students at our public schools and at the Swain School of Design with tales of his life and work. "If you grew up in New Bedford and Fall River," he asked the older students, "why do you paint as if you are from New York City? Want to make great work? Paint from your belly, from your life, your heritage. Don't forget where you came from."²

Richard Kugler's gamble paid off. The *Boston Globe's* Sunday Magazine ran a cover story promoting the exhibition at the Whaling Museum. We organized a "Fasanella's Favorites" film festival in the museum's auditorium and brought more than 4,000 school children to see the paintings

and meet the artist. CBS “Sunday Morning” covered the exhibit, as did the *Christian Science Monitor* and the *New York Times*. Fasanella’s art—powerful, colorful, and emotional—made for good copy and great graphics. But the compelling story was of a working class community pulling together to reclaim its heritage and revel in the paintings by this passionate working class artist. We took the project one step further when the local arts council came up with funds to commission an original Fasanella for New Bedford.³

One day during his extended stay, Fasanella told me with great joy and pride that his gallery was selling his ten-foot-wide painting, *Lawrence 1912—The Bread and Roses Strike*, to a private collector. I felt stricken at the thought of this major work being hidden from public view. “You can’t do that,” I almost screamed—before I stopped and congratulated him. After all, the amount of the potential sale was six times more than he had ever received, even after a caption on the cover of a 1972 issue of *New York Magazine* suggested he might be “the best primitive painter since Grandma Moses.”⁴

“That is the most important labor painting in America,” I told Ralph as calmly as I could. “I wish that *New York City*, *Family Supper*, your baseball paintings, and *Iceman Crucified* were all in public collections. But *Bread and Roses* is *our* painting, it represents *our* heritage. You can see it in union halls all across America, thousands of prints of that painting. Please don’t sell it to a private collector,” I pleaded.

We talked about it for a few more days before I formulated what I hoped would be a respectful and fair solution. “Give me a year to raise the money and I will buy the painting and donate it to a public building in Lawrence, Massachusetts, where it belongs.” Ralph talked it over with Eva and agreed to give me a year.

That was the moment that launched Public Domain, in 1986. *Lawrence 1912—The Bread and Roses Strike* was still owned by Fasanella and his wife. But now I was inspired to raise the funds to purchase as many of his important paintings as possible and place them in the public domain.

I drew together an advisory board of prominent people who knew Ralph and loved him as much as I did, including Studs Terkel, who wrote to Ralph that he felt exhilarated by “the way you capture the throb of a large metropolis!”⁵ Pete Seeger, Olga Hirshhorn, and baseball commissioner Bart Giamatti also joined, as did former New York mayor John Lindsay, as well as actors Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, and Ed Asner.

The board’s labor leaders included the UAW’s Owen Bieber, United Steelworkers’ Lynn Williams, Ladies Garment Workers’ Jay Mazur, and Moe Foner from Hospital Workers I199, who had published the first poster of Fasanella’s painting depicting the Bread and Roses strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts. Leaders in the art community, including Gerard C. Wertkin of the American Folk Art Museum and Thomas Leavitt, director of Cornell’s Johnson Museum, also joined, lending further expertise to our efforts.

At a 1986 Christmas party in Boston’s Dorchester neighborhood, the *Globe*’s editorial writer, Kirk Scharfenberg, revealed that Massachusetts Attorney General James Shannon was a fan of Fasanella and had a print of the Bread and Roses painting in the study of his Lawrence home. Soon Shannon agreed to lead a committee of local business, labor, and cultural leaders to raise funds to purchase the painting. Three months later, the *Globe* ran an editorial promoting what some had dismissed as a quixotic idea. Titled “The Art of The Possible,” the editorial declared, “The natural home for that painting would be Lawrence.”⁶ Senator Ted Kennedy joined the effort and a year later, he spoke at the painting’s installation in Lawrence.

In cities from coast to coast, we replicated the New Bedford and Lawrence models, bringing Fasanella into schools, union halls, and libraries. In all of his talks he noted the haunting slogan

painted onto the apartment building in his painting, *Family Supper: "Lest We Forget."* That was Ralph's lifelong theme; the insistent refrain that thrummed within his creative soul.

In his youth, Fasanella worked on his father's ice truck. He said he gained his appreciation and skill designing, balancing, and ordering the images on his canvases from his days emptying the iceboxes along his route and then restacking the contents in an orderly fashion. When Ralph was older, he worked alongside his mother and sisters in a dress shop, operating a steam press. Later, he toiled in factories and machine shops and in his brother's gas station. Fasanella was a worker.

He was also an artist, a teacher, and an organizer—and a great partner for me in the Public Domain project. We worked together to ensure that a significant body of his work was reclaimed and installed where workers could enjoy it and share it with their children. The project became a passion for both of us. "I didn't paint my paintings to hang in some rich guy's living room," he told a reporter for the *Providence Sunday Journal*.⁷

We both thought like organizers. Whenever a local newspaper published a story about Public Domain, we diligently copied the article and distributed it to the folks in the factories, our friends in the schools, and patrons on heritage committees and art councils.

Fasanella had a genial manner and, at the same time, strong opinions. His painting, *Build Your Union*, illustrated his ideal of a meaningful union. It showed separate rooms for meetings, jazz concerts, a library, and dance and lecture halls. He told me to make the New Bedford UE hall a cultural center, and that is what I did. I knew a wise man when I met one.

The joy of Public Domain was not just in reclaiming and redistributing great paintings. It was in watching Ralph walk into a classroom as an old man suffering from emphysema, and walk out an hour later with a skip in his step and a big smile on his face.

The kids loved him. They would line up for him to sign autographs and share a few words, a secret thought, or a newly discovered idea. Seventh grader Lisa Pellitier told the *Lawrence Eagle-Tribune*, "He helped us understand that we are important."⁸ A Filipino girl at an Oakland high school told him she knew for the first time what she wanted to do: teach art in the city schools.

Across the country, a Providence high school teacher held up his copy of *Fasanella's City*, by Patrick Watson, in front of sixty students from art and social studies classes. For ten years he had used the book, with its many reproductions of Ralph's urban paintings, to inspire kids to paint similar themes. He never expected to have Fasanella there in his classroom, he said, with tears streaming down his face.

Most wondrous was that when the bell rang for the end of the final class of the day, not a single kid got up to leave. They were spellbound and as eager as I was to see Ralph's last slide and hear his last story.

At all our events, Public Domain sold posters to help raise funds to purchase the paintings. The price was \$10 each, or \$20 with the artist's signature. We had the printer produce a limited-edition print without the poster text; Ralph signed and numbered these for organizations or businesses that donated \$1,000. Over four years, we raised close to one million dollars and "rescued" more than a dozen paintings for the public domain. Through the contacts we created and with additional donations, the number is now well over twenty, including *Iceman Crucified #4*, which was donated to the Smithsonian American Art Museum in 2013 by the artist's family.

Fasanella insisted that we print enough posters to give one to each student in every classroom he visited. When unions donated money for the project, he asked for hundreds of posters to give to their members.

For four years, I traveled with Ralph from Lawrence and Lowell, Massachusetts, to Auburn, Maine, and Woonsocket, Rhode Island; from Oakland, California, to Miami, Florida; from his old haunts in Greenwich Village and Trenton, New Jersey, to Flint and East Lansing, Michigan. We had a good model for raising funds and building excitement in small and mid-sized communities.

But, I worried: how could we do this in cities as large as New York and Washington?

I raised this concern one evening with two leaders of the Communications Workers of America: Larry Cohen, then the organizing director and now the union's president, and Yvette Herrera, then the director of education. "It's simple," they said. Make a video to show in hundreds or even thousands of classrooms. I was already overwhelmed by the task of raising tens of thousands of dollars to purchase the paintings, but Larry and Yvette offered to finance the film through the union's Bierne Foundation and recommended the Academy Award-nominated filmmaker, Glen Percy.

In 1993, our twenty-three minute documentary, *Fasanella*, won second prize at the Chicago International Film Festival. It captured the essence of Fasanella as he spoke in classrooms and talked about labor history, his old neighborhood, his parents' struggles to make ends meet, and his love of baseball, which he described as the "ballet of the working class."

We interviewed Ralph in his studio and at a modern-day dress shop. Then the three of us stumbled into the quintessential chance of a lifetime. As Glen was filming Ralph outside of the Sullivan Street apartment building in Greenwich Village where he grew up, I rang the superintendent's bell to see if we could gain entrance. When we walked into the super's apartment, Ralph realized it was the same one he and his family had occupied more than seventy years earlier.

That evening, May 16, 1991, we attended the installation of Fasanella's *Family Supper* at Ellis Island. When Ralph got up to speak to the 500 people who had arrived on a specially chartered ferry, he spoke of the surprises he had encountered that day.

"I visited a ladies' garment shop today and found all the workers were Chinese—no Jews and Italians, like when I worked there—but hardworking people like always. And at my old building on Sullivan Street, I sat at a round table with the superintendent. The apartment sparkled. It was so clean, I said, 'Jeez, you're just like my mother.' The super was so beautiful. She came from Malta and her husband was Puerto Rican. Like the people in the factory, all these people, they are us and we are them."⁹

The Ellis Island dedication wasn't the end of the road in New York City. In 1969, the American Folk Art Museum had purchased two brownstone buildings at 45 and 47 W. 53rd Street, adjacent to the Museum of Modern Art, and erected a sign stating that this would be its future home. I often walked in that neighborhood, as my old union's headquarters was just two blocks away. Right from the beginning of the Public Domain project, I was intrigued with the idea of placing Fasanella's *Subway Riders* in the subway station at 53rd Street and 5th Avenue, across from the museum's proposed building. The board of Public Domain, including the Folk Art Museum's director, Gerard Wertkin, was supportive, but at the time the idea first arose it seemed an uphill battle.

We had all been concerned for the long-term security of *Subway Riders*. The reason there were no original oil paintings in the New York subway, and why the art in the Louvre station of the Paris Metro is all reproductions, is that the friction of steel wheels on steel tracks sends a constant, invisible plume of fine particles from the depths of the tunnels to the upper reaches of subway stations.

However, thirteen months after the Ellis Island dedication, we finally found a way to place *Subway Riders* in the underground station. After raising the funds to purchase the painting, we

donated it to the American Museum of Folk Art with the understanding that they would permanently loan it to the Metropolitan Transit Authority. New York architect and Fasanella fan Charles Lauster consulted with curators from the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., and designed an impervious case set into the wall across from the token seller's booth. *Subway Riders* was placed in the case through a door in the room behind the public pathway.

With the MTA's Arts for Transit, we held a dedication ceremony on June 11, 1992. Like all of our joyous installation events—always enlivened by the jazz Ralph loved and painted by—it was our way of acknowledging the help of the hundreds of union members and dozens of corporate sponsors who bought posters to finance the purchase. The events allowed those who loved Fasanella to celebrate another painting coming from behind closed doors to be enshrined in a public space.

A dozen national unions promoted Public Domain in their union magazines, bringing in funds from thousands of union members. As a result, we were able to purchase another of the Lawrence mill series to be installed in the Rayburn House Office Building in the U.S. Capitol. Even within the huge walls and two-story height of the Education and Labor subcommittee hearing room, the painting held its own—at least until the Republican revolution of 1994 when the GOP led by Newt Gingrich gained control of the House of Representatives. The new committee chair removed “Labor” from the name of the committee, ordered *The Great Strike* off the hearing room wall, and sent it to the AFL-CIO headquarters, where it hangs today.

Public Domain didn't succeed with every project, but the triumphs far outweighed the failures. With a limit to how many committees I could build and sustain, my hopes of placing paintings in Miami, Providence, and Chicago never materialized. But in community after community, the Public Domain formula worked: form a local labor heritage committee, bring Fasanella into schools, libraries, and union halls. Encourage people to emulate Ralph by remembering and honoring their “roots, roots, roots,” as he would say. Create the excitement of ordinary people painting their own lives, hanging art posters in their homes, and raising money to install a working-class artist's painting in their town hall, union hall, university, or museum.

Do it all, lest we forget.

Notes

- 1 Coe Kerr Gallery Inc. exhibition handout, “Ralph Fasanella: Exhibition and Sale,” October 1974. Collection of the author.
- 2 Quote as recalled by the author, who joined Fasanella for his presentation to students at the Swain School of Design, March 18, 1986.
- 3 The painting, *Labor Education—New Bedford Union Hall*, was completed in 1986 (oil on canvas, 44 x 60 inches, City of New Bedford, Mass.)
- 4 *New York Magazine*, October 30, 1972
- 5 Letter dated June 30, 1988 from Studs Terkel (signed) to Ralph Fasanella. Collection of the author.
- 6 *Boston Globe*, Sunday Magazine, February 22, 1987.
- 7 *Providence Sunday Journal*, March 5, 1989.
- 8 *Lawrence Eagle-Tribune*, May 19, 1987.
- 9 *Fasanella*, a documentary film about the artist; Glen Percy Productions, co-produced with Ron Carver, and Eva Fasanella (née Eve), 1992.