

Weather

Today: Varyingly cloudy, showers, thunderstorms. High 74, Low 53.
Friday: Partly sunny, windy, possible shower. High 70.
Saturday: Temp. range: 59-61.
AQL: 60. Details on Page B2.

The Washington Post

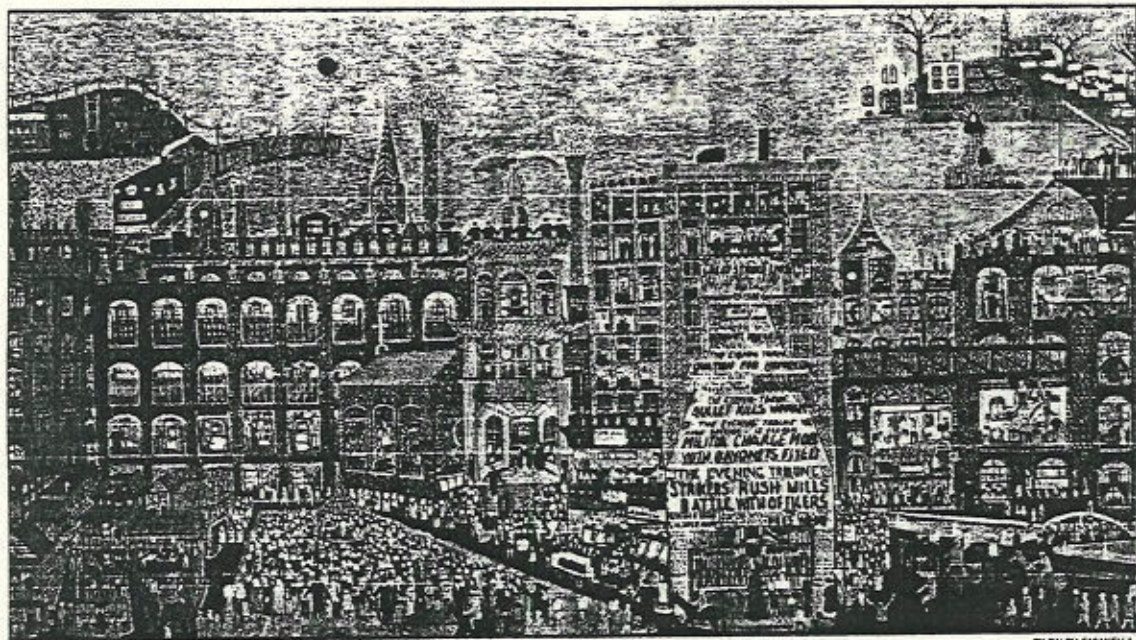
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113th Year No. 156

THURSDAY, MAY 10, 1990

Price May Vary in Areas Outside Metropolitan Washington Area by 40¢



BY RALPH FASANELLA

A campaign is planned to get this mural hung in the U.S. Capitol. It depicts the 1912 uprising of immigrant textile workers in Lawrence, Mass.

Painter's Art Celebrates Working Class

By Allison Silberberg
Special to The Washington Post

Ralph Fasanella, a New York artist whose mammoth mural "The Great Strike—Lawrence, 1912" is getting some new attention on Capitol Hill, has been visiting D.C. schools talking about this country's labor movement and encouraging young artists to fashion their work around events that affect them deeply.

At age 76, this self-taught artist from upstate New York has burst into the national scene as union organizers push to move his work out of private collections and into museums.

Sen. George Mitchell (D-Maine) and art patron Olga Hirschhorn have said they will soon launch a campaign to get Fasanella's See PAINTER, Page 12, Col. 3

THE WASHINGTON POST



BY ALLISON SILBERBERG FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Artist Ralph Fasanella, in front of the Corcoran School of Art, where he spoke to students about his paintings.

Artist's Paintings Celebrate Industrial Workers

PAINTER, From Page 1

colorful mural of America's first major victory for industrial labor hung in the U.S. Capitol. The 1912 uprising of immigrant workers occurred in a textile mill in Lawrence, Mass.

Fasanella's appearances at several District schools were organized by the Public Domain Project, a union group working to boost his visibility in cities where his work has been targeted for public play.

This week, he appeared at John Eaton Elementary School on 34th Street NW and a high school in Montgomery County.

Many of his paintings, striking compositions full of intricate and engrossing details, tell the stories of working-class Americans in the first half of this century.

His message to art students at the private Corcoran School of Art on New York Avenue and the public Lafayette Elementary School in upper Northwest was rooted in the same stories:

"People worked six days a week back then," he

said. "No vacation, no benefits if you got sick or hurt. Nothing. All those things changed [only] with struggle."

Fasanella grew up in the Bronx during the Great Depression. When he was about their age, he told a group of Lafayette fourth- and fifth-graders, his father, a longshoreman, pulled him out of school to help on his ice truck. He hated it so much that he ran away, he said, and eventually was caught and forced to spend 18 months in reform school.

"Did I learn there? It was a hard life and taught me survival," he said. Then again, life was very different back then. "Eating or having enough to eat was a struggle. Not until after World War II did we have [enough] food."

His work took years to develop, he told the students at both schools, many of whom plan or dream of careers in art or related fields.

"It takes time to paint, 15 to 20 years of love and then you paint," he said. "Painting has to be fun, a joy of life. If it's not, forget about it."

Start by painting what you know, he told the students. Life in the cold-water tenements had

been his start. His family was the subject of many of his paintings, including "Family Supper," which will soon hang in the Ellis Island Immigration Museum.

Then "you have to paint what you feel is right," he continued. "I come from the shop. I'm a working man, come from just above the poverty line . . ."

"I'm a labor man. Four out of six of my family were in the clothing industry. My mother was a buttonhole maker; my sister, a tailor; my brother, a presser; and I [pressed] the arms."

Yet he eventually became what Ron Carver, organizer of the Public Domain Project, calls "labor's greatest artist. He's an artist whose work celebrates the heritage of the people. And communities all over are reclaiming their heritage," he said.

Fasanella said he simply captured on canvas an American legacy that should be chronicled. "Art that doesn't come from the belly falls flat," he told the students. "Art has to be an affirmation of life."