Reflecting upon Family Supper

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On the occasion of the exhibition, Ralph Fasanella: Lest We Forget, marking the artist’s one-hundredth birth anniversary, Ralph’s son Marc shares his thoughts on his father’s iconic painting, Family Supper.

Ralph Fasanella, Family Supper, 1972, oil on canvas, National Park Service. ©1972, Estate of Ralph Fasanella

I know so much and yet so little about this painting. It makes me realize that my father was born in a time where radio, television, automobile travel, refrigeration, telephones, flight, industrial agriculture were uncommon or didn’t exist (1914). He came of age and lived his life throughout a period of remarkable technological and social change. On the left hand side of the kitchen depicted is the ice box containing home made wine and imported cheese, it is topped with fresh locally grown fruits and vegetables, in the upper left is a gas meter use for cooking, heat and lighting, my grandmother is centered in the top portion of the painting depicted as a crucifix tied to the cross by her career in the needle trades and below as the intellectual and emotional center of the family, to the right is my grandfather crucified by the ice picks and tongs of his trade, along the bottom of the painting is the steamer trunk of an immigrant family and a day and trundle beds where two members of the family needed to sleep for lack of space anywhere else in the apartment. In the center of the painting sits my father with his mother, a family friend, and my aunts and uncles (my grandfather notably absent from an otherwise complete familial scene).

"The kitchen and the meal they are enjoying is shown encased in the little Italy neighborhood in which they dwelt. I can hear the sounds of the tenement neighborhood and taste the pastries my grandmother made (though I never met her). I can feel the warmth and tensions of the family members sharing a meal. I can see the light, the radiance my father put into every detail of that kitchen. How those meals and discussions shaped my father, made him an empathetic guy with an ability to engage people on many different intellectual and emotional levels. His brothers and sisters were very unalike and ranged from highly intelligent to not so much, and though he was closer to some, he loved and understood all of them equally.

"I marvel at how removed so many in the United States have become from a life centered around communal family meals where life is shared, argued and dealt with over delicious home cooked food purchased from trusted grocers who would give you produce on personal credit—no banks involved. I find it interesting that immigrant families today are so similar in their habits, aspirations and trades. I wonder why my life has become so different from this pre-WW II lifestyle and long for the time to share meals with my family. I feel disturbed by how technology has made me rich in comfort and poor in culinary and emotional gratification. Family Supper is a foreign image from another age to me and I yet I strongly see it as my heritage, my home—a marriage of basic elements of my intellectual and emotional core. It stands for so much that I believe in and yet it seems so remote.

A webcast of the joint lecture by the exhibit curator Leslie Umberger and Marc Fasanella is available at the Smithsonian American Art Museum Website:
http://americanart.si.edu/multimedia/webcasts/archive/2014/Fasanella/

Mounted by the Smithsonian American Art Museum Ralph Fasanella: Lest We Forget was on display in Washington DC from May 2 – August 3 2014 and travelled to the American Folk Art Museum in New York City where it was on display from September 2 – December 1, 2014.