



Albert Beckwith  
 The People of the United States  
 1912  
 The cartoon depicts a grand, classical-style building with a portico supported by columns. The pediment of the building contains the names of political figures: Jefferson, Paine, Madison, Washington, Franklin, Douglass, and Lincoln. The building's facade is inscribed with the motto "The People of the United States". The scene is filled with a diverse crowd of people, including men in suits, women in period dresses, and children. In the foreground, a man in a top hat and a woman in a long dress are walking. To the left, a large white swan swims in a blue body of water. In the background, the United States Capitol building is visible under a blue sky with a yellow sun. The cartoon is signed "Albert Beckwith" in the bottom right corner.

## AMERICAN HERITAGE

Ralph Fasanella (1914–1997)

New York; 1974

Oil on canvas; 50 × 80"

Gift of Eva Fasanella and her children, Gina Mostrando and Marc Fasanella, 2005.5.1

Photo by Gavin Ashworth, New York

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### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Ralph Fasanella developed a reputation for his large-scale paintings of the city at work or at play—colorful, richly detailed depictions of city streets, baseball games, political campaigns, strikes, factories, and union halls.

This painting by Fasanella expresses the artist's anger over the assassination of John F. Kennedy and other notable figures in American history, as well as the executions of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. The artist once said, "We'll destroy anything, anybody to keep the system moving. Now they got two more people to destroy; throw them in the Goddam grave. Next! That's the American way."\* Rich in symbols and searing with rage, this painting operates as a history lesson about some of America's most dramatic events and enduring struggles. Images of Washington, D.C., landmarks, mourners, and peace activists complete the narrative of the painting.

### RESOURCES

American Folk Art Museum:

[www.folkartmuseum.org](http://www.folkartmuseum.org)

D'Ambrosio, Paul S. *Ralph Fasanella's America*.

Cooperstown: New York State Historical Association, 2001.

Hollander, Stacy C., and Brooke Davis Anderson.

*American Anthem: Masterworks from the American Folk Art Museum*. New York: American Folk Art Museum in association with Harry N. Abrams, 2001.

Kaufman, Stuart B. "Labor's Heritage." *Quarterly of The George Meany Memorial Archives* 1, no. 4 (1989).

Watson, Patrick. *Fasanella's City: The Paintings of Ralph Fasanella with the Story of His Life and Art*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973.

\* Quoted in Patrick Watson, *Fasanella's City: The Paintings of Ralph Fasanella with the Story of His Life and Art* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), pp. 114–115.

# AN EDITORIAL IN IMAGES

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## QUESTIONS FOR CAREFUL LOOKING

- What story or stories can we find in this image?
- What strikes you about these figures?
- What would you title this piece?
- If you could cut the scene into different pieces, where would the divides be?
- What can we say about the overall mood?

## QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

- The title of this painting is *American Heritage*. How does the title affect your interpretation of the painting? Does this image match your idea of American heritage?
- The artist Ralph Fasanella is known for the social conscience and political messages present in his paintings. How do you interpret the artist's sentiments about the 1960s? Do you think this is a patriotic image?
- Are the ideas in this painting applicable to today's political climate? Which elements are still relevant? How would you update this painting for a modern-day audience?
- Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, the last Americans found guilty of and executed for treason, appear prominently in the center of the composition. Why would the artist have placed the couple centrally in the painting?
- Fasanella was accused of being unpatriotic during the McCarthy era for his leftist associations. How might a McCarthy supporter interpret this image?
- The artist condensed several important Washington, D.C., landmarks into his composition. How does this device impact the narrative?

## QUESTIONS FOR CONTEXT

- Who are the people whose names appear at the bottom of the painting? How did they contribute to the cultural climate of the 1960s?
- Which Washington, D.C., landmarks appear in this painting? What is the function of each of these buildings, or whom do they memorialize?
- How did the intense anti-Communist feeling of McCarthyism impact American culture in the middle of the twentieth century? Are the effects still felt today?

## SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

- Have students create a class painting reflecting the style of Ralph Fasanella. Rather than addressing the 1960s, consider another decade in American history. What will you include? What will you exclude?
- Have students write an obituary for each of the individuals whose names appear at the bottom of the painting. Alternatively, ask students to write newspaper articles chronicling the work of these individuals.
- Research the life and work of Fasanella. What patterns do you find in his paintings? How does knowledge of his biography affect your interpretations of his work?