



Private Roy by Molly Lamb Bobak.

ARTISTIC IMPRESSIONS OF WAR

by Raina-Clair Gillis

Artistic impressions of war are valued for their extraordinary capacity to convey reality. Presentation of a subject on canvas is testimony to what an artist has seen, or, more particularly, *perceived*. What is exposed is the artist's consciousness, imagination, feelings and emotions. And given the grim reality of subject, and the concomitant sobering realization about humanity – or should one say, the *lack* of humanity – the presentation of war on canvas is among the most highly-charged of artistic expressions.

As one studies art that depicts war over the centuries, one senses both the subject and the documenter to be gender-specific: the conduct of war is primarily a man's world. But relatively early in the history and development of art in Canada, women artists were admitted to the arena of war, although not to the war zone, just as they had been summoned to nurse in the war, to work in ammunition factories at home, and, in general, to provide infrastructure at home for a war effort abroad. And it was during the Second World War that the first Canadian female artists were permitted to document war overseas.

Enter the Ladies

Molly Lamb Bobak and her colleague, Pegi Nicol MacLeod, were two of Canada's leading female war artists from 1943 to 1946. They were also artistic activists, both at that time and subsequently. Sketches of the military experiences of Bobak as a member of the Canadian Women's Army Corps are to be found in the artist's published war diary entitled simply *W110278*, after her service number. Additionally, Bobak's recent memoir, *Wild Flowers*

of Canada, supplements the art of her diary, and provides further insight into a number of the artist's paintings, including *VJ Celebrations* (1945), *Private Roy* (1946) and *Canteen* (1945). In a similar way, MacLeod's memoir, *Daffodils in Winter*, complements her paintings – including *WRCNs in Dining Room* (1944) and *Beauty Parlor* (1944). Of course, the larger historical context of the Canadian art scene in the 1940s provides an important backdrop in considering their art because Bobak and MacLeod operated within the circle – and agenda – of a relatively small group of male artists and politicians who fraternized, and shaped the 'official' art of the nation.

In the early 1940s, a renewed national consciousness of the arts emerged with the rallying efforts of André Biéler, a local Kingston artist and fine arts instructor at Queen's University. Biéler had a personal interest in contributing to the cultivation and promotion of contemporary Canadian artists and their works on a national and international level.¹ The Kingston Conference that Biéler convened in 1941 was the first of its kind in Canadian history,² an event that brought together 150 artists, art critics, and art educators from across the country to address the nature of Canadian art, as well as its future.³ The conference focused primarily on the role and function of art and democracy, and, specifically, the issue of government sponsorship of the arts within Canadian society.⁴

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Women's WCRNs in the Dining Room by Pegi Nicol MacLeod.

For artists whose output was beyond the interests of this relatively close-knit aristocracy, the 'Continuation Committee' – otherwise known in contemporary times as the 'Canadian Federation' (CF) – was viewed as necessary by participants at this conference. It was led by Biéler himself – and attended by notable artists, including A.Y. Jackson and Arthur Lismer. The platform of the CF was to foreshadow the later Canadian 'Cultural Report,' and, in particular, the CF lobbied for "research...concerning the general development of Canadian culture, on the relationship of art to public opinion, and on economic status of the artist."⁵

The birth of the CF also represented an important change in the patronage system of the 20th century, by which government sponsored selected artists. The CF gave voice to previously marginalized artists in society and their interests. In a letter addressed to Biéler post-conference in July 1941, MacLeod, who had invited herself to the conference, commented on the changing pattern of patronage: "André, I'm still threshing conference ideas in my sleep and I hope everyone else is. What a fine democratic thing to have done [having the conference]. Hurray!!!...Someone said the [Canadian Federation] needed a blood transfusion – I think some blood-getting is

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good too."⁶ Clearly, the formation of the CF committee heralded a new initiative of national art in Canada.

The prospect of implementing an *open* Canadian war art programme as a tangible expression of progressive patronage is noted specifically by MacLeod: "I believe in the idea of a war-record...If artists feel like choosing war record as subject should it not be welcome?... I'm afraid I'm too democratic but I don't see any future for an aristocracy of painters."⁷ Given these insights of MacLeod, it is obvious she is aware of the difficulty of meeting the traditional profile expected of a national artist. And her comments to Biéler relate to gender issues of the times as much as they relate to social positioning. In the world of MacLeod, the "aristocracy of painters" would no doubt remain exclusive to men. On the other hand, the efforts of influential men, such as Vincent Massey – a catalyst to the development of Canadian arts and culture – and others of his stature must not be forgotten, nor found less credible.⁸

High Level Patronage

The Right Honourable Vincent Massey is remembered as one of Canada's most progressive governors-general, but it is his involvement with and influence upon the early development of arts in Canada that, with

the passing of time, has become most significant. While remembered for the Massey Report, he also made the contribution of arranging for the programme sponsoring Canadian war art. He had been a major patron to Canada's First World War artists such as David Milne, and members of the Group of Seven, including Lawren Harris and A.Y. Jackson.⁹ As High Commissioner to Britain during the Second World War, Massey had the opportunity to foster a relationship with the curator of the British National Gallery, Kenneth Clark.¹⁰ The war efforts of the British National Gallery, and its success in implementing

a war art programme in the first year of German bombing, inspired Massey to begin lobbying the Canadian government for a similar programme. Massey's active position as chairman of the board of trustees for Britain's National Gallery from 1943 to 1946, his political ties to Canada, his close relationship with Prime Minister Mackenzie King, and his personal connection to acclaimed Canadian artists and directors of Canada's National Gallery provided him with enough social and political 'clout' to defend the case for Canadian artists documenting the war.

The directors of the National Gallery of Canada at the time – Eric Brown and

H.O. McCurry – supported Massey’s efforts, and became key contacts for Canadian artists who had enlisted in the armed forces. Bobak, in an interview conducted in 2000, recounts her efforts to get the attention of McCurry in high hopes of becoming a war artist for Canada. “I would hitchhike to Ottawa and go up to National Gallery and practically get down on my knees and say, ‘Mr. McCurry, make me a war artist!’”¹¹

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Bobak’s contemporary, Patricia MacLeod, enjoyed a close relationship with Brown and McCurry that is documented in surviving letters dating from 1934. At first glance, the focus of such letters is related to the Observatory Art Centre that MacLeod established in Fredericton, New Brunswick, in 1940. However, later correspondence discloses the artist’s opinions about the artistic endeavours of other accomplished artists and their impressionable exhibitions. On 17 February 1942, MacLeod related to McCurry her impressions of *Art of the Auxiliary Fire-Fighters of London* – a touring exhibition of war art sponsored by the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Her succinct pronouncement: “[the] show was ‘very swell.’”¹² She wrote: “Hurray for war-art.”¹³

Prior to the approval of the programme to record the art of Canada at war by Mackenzie King and his Cabinet in 1942, hundreds of letters from people requesting work as official war artists were forwarded to the historical section of National Defence Headquarters.¹⁴ The personal relationships Bobak and MacLeod fostered with Biéler, Massey, Brown and McCurry no doubt contributed to each woman’s ‘official’ commission to document Canadians at war.

Molly Lamb Bobak and Pegi Nicol MacLeod

Bobak’s memoir makes it apparent that A.Y. Jackson, to whom she often affectionately referred to as her “Uncle Alex,” was another important association for the artist. She explained in her memoir: “[w]hen I had settled in the CWAC barracks at St. Clair and Avenue Road, I wrote to A.Y. Jackson and asked if I could visit him at his studio and show him my illustrated war diary...[W]e loved each other right from that first meeting.”¹⁵ As advisor to the committee of Canadian War Records, Jackson was responsible for recommending artists who demonstrated an ability to capture the Canadian spirit in the visual form.¹⁶ In a letter to McCurry, he describes her drawings as “very real stuff.” He continued: “I know of no woman artist in Canada who could do such stuff under such conditions. If she only had half a chance she could go places.”¹⁷ Bobak herself seems aware of his possible intervention on her behalf. “I wanted very much to be a war artist...when I did become one. I’m sure Jackson had something to do with it.”¹⁸ A detailed drawing featuring Bobak and A.Y. Jackson appears in *W110278*. The sketch shows Bobak extending a bouquet of flowers to Jackson, who in return, according to the attending caption, gives her a “letter of introduction to Vincent Massey.”¹⁹

Bobak’s *W110378* is unique, and the quality of her illustrations is singular. The human figures featured in Bobak’s sketches are striking, and each subject expresses its own personality. In her vignettes, Bobak depicted environments that convince a viewer with their real life quality. Small details add character to each scene. Several of Bobak’s works are related to travel – not surprising, since Bobak was sent back and forth across the continent on assignment a number of times, and enjoyed travelling the country by herself when on leave. From British Columbia, Bobak was ordered to attend training camp in Vermilion, Alberta, followed by a posting to MacDonald College in Montreal. For a short time, she was enrolled in drafting school, and later was promoted to scene painter in the Army Show, both of which were situated in Toronto. Bobak was also a participant at the Trades School in Hamilton, and eventually received war record training in Kitchener. On leave, Bobak recorded her adventures of hitchhiking – somewhat surprising given her time and gender – to Ottawa, Niagara Falls and New York.

The truthfulness of Bobak’s diary in documenting the collective CWAC experience is highlighted in a CWAC *New Letter* dated June 1945. “When the war is history and army careers a past, Lieut. Lamb’s scrapbook should be made available to all CWACs...that they may live through its pages... It is our story, told by one of us as it was lived by us all.”²⁰



CWAC Beauty Parlor No.1 by Pegi Nicol MacLeod.



Victory Over Japan Celebrations by Molly Lamb Bobak.

Life in the barracks, as perceived by Bobak, revolved around repetitious artillery drills, uniform and civic fashions, food and its preparation, off-hour pranks, and holidays. A number of the entries were concerned with the special art-related endeavours of Bobak, such as her debut in the *New World* magazine on 30 August 1943.²¹ In Bobak's 'Triumph Issue' of March 1944, the artist expresses her appreciation for having been selected as a winner in the National Gallery's Army Art Competition. The thrilling experience of being summoned to Ottawa to receive an award in the presence of Princess Alice greatly encouraged and inspired the 23-year-old in her work. She devoted a whole page of her diary to the honour.²² It is interesting that, later in life, Bobak emphasized the politics of the event and alluded to the significance of her fortunate connections to people in power. In *Wild Flowers*, it is revealed that gallery judges had rejected Bobak's work initially.²³

Bobak's rank, and any special recognition or promotion she might have received while in service, is duly noted in her diary as it pertained to her end goal of becoming a war artist. On 24 December 1942, she wrote, "[t]hey gave me a coat to put on with one stripe on the sleeve. At once I felt superior and my drawing a success."²⁴ Thirty months were to pass until a 'red-letter day' on 24 May 24 1945 when Bobak wrote: "[i]t was official[ly] disclosed this morning that after two and a half years of hope, 2nd Lieutenant Lamb, C.B.I. (can't believe it)...(L.Cpl. Lamb and before that, reverted L/Cpl. Lamb) was told...that SHE WAS GOING OVERSEAS WITHIN THREE OR FOUR WEEKS!"²⁵ In May 1945, Bobak was overjoyed and filled great expectations for

the adventures she was to have while working on assignment in Europe. Her assignment was timely. By this time, the Canadian war art programme had been formally established.

The Canadian tradition of documenting the art of war was rooted in the guidelines given to the artists by the War Record Committee.²⁶ But beyond such instruction, each artist supposedly had the freedom to develop his or her own unique style. Contemporary art historians have divided Canadian war artists into two camps – the realists and the impressionists – and each school had its own following. Mackenzie King, Cornel A. Fortescue Duguid and the Canadian public at large, according to subject matter expert Katherine Robertson, supported military artists whose primary goal was acute accuracy.²⁷ And yet, McCurry and Massey supported the others who attempted to show feeling and emotion in their works of art. To quote McCurry: "[U]ltra-realistic work was too dreadful for words." Elsewhere, McCurry noted that were it not for the selection of 'better' artists, the National Gallery's reputation would become "mud to future generations."²⁸ Since funding for the programme was an issue, it has been argued that war artists tended to cater to the tastes of the major patron – the Government of Canada, headed by Mackenzie King. Yet, the opinions of McCurry and Massey sustained the credibility of artists who might be fingered as being "too casual, and not studied enough."²⁹ A.Y. Jackson admitted to adopting an impressionist technique for the work completed during the First World War,³⁰ and considering his personal connection with Bobak, it is not surprising that she developed a style representative of the impressionistic genre.

Both Bobak and MacLeod appear to have been inspired by the painterly post-impressionist styles of ‘the old boys’ – among others, the 19th century European masters of the oil medium Paul Cézanne and Paul Gauguin.³¹ Bobak’s *VJ Celebrations*, for example, presents a scene where form is abandoned for essential meaning. One senses the great excitement and relief of the crowd depicted by the intense rhythm of small brushstrokes. It is impossible to determine the identity of any of the figures facing the viewer as facial details have been muted. MacLeod’s *Beauty Parlor* has the same intent as *VJ Celebrations*. The overt emphasis of the painting is the wartime ‘duties’ of a female officer, even though the subject is a woman seated beneath a hair dryer. The woman depicted continues to perform her military secretarial work while attending to her general appearance. Such works are characterized as ‘depersonalized’ – and, in this sense, unique to the Second World War art collection.³² Likewise, the work by MacLeod depicting women in uniform serves the purpose of completing “a chapter omitted from the painting being done by official artists for the Canadian War Records.”³³ The debate concerning the proper representation of Canadians during wartime had been ongoing since the First World War. Art critic Hector Charlesworth, for example, is quoted to have said following a war art exhibition: “[w]ho shall say but that to future generations the panels which strike us as wantonly hideous will not carry a more effective message of what Canadian endured in the great war, than some of the works in which nobility of treatment is obvious.”³⁴ In an article written by MacLeod, published while she was still working for the National Gallery, the artist reaffirmed Charlesworth’s argument. Wartime art was for the benefit of future generations, and one had to be mindful of both sexes.³⁵

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Recent scholarly reviews of works done by the Group of Seven have been concerned with the lack of proper representation of peoples belonging to visible minorities within Canada. What effect their works have had on the development of the Canadian consciousness is difficult to determine. Nevertheless, the argument remains that absence speaks volumes, and racial exclusion and discrimination among Canadian peoples can be traced even to the art of the nation. Part of the frustration MacLeod feels toward biased artistic interpretations of the war, at least until 1945, when Bobak was actively deployed as an artist, is expressed in a letter to her friend, Marian, in which she exclaimed: “I find the Can[adian] war artists very disappointing; feel I’d like a chance to do it!”³⁷

MacLeod’s *WRCN’s in Dining Room* and *Salmon in the Galley* both demonstrate this artist’s unique philosophy of painting. “My painting, whatever it is, is at best a search for essential *beauty* within reality when no such thing is to be found in any gallery”³⁸ Both *Salmon in the Galley* and *WRCN’s in Dining Room* are finished impressionist works where the dramatic use of colour is used to determine form. The significance of these two works, however, is related to their subject matter – the domestic activities of preparing and consuming of food. *Salmon in the Galley* shows four women preparing fish at a large stove. Each is wearing a chef’s cap and apron. While one can assume that these women are preparing the meals for the Women’s Royal Canadian Naval Service, given the rather clear title *WRCN’s in Dining Room*, there is little visible to the viewer that might indicate their rank. Each woman depicted appears content in her work, diligent and considerate of her

Bobak’s *Private Roy* is an unusual work of art, in part given its subject matter – a young black girl. Contrary to *VJ Celebrations*, *Private Roy* is a portrait of a specific person whom Bobak encountered. One might suggest that Gauguin’s series of works on young black girls of Tahiti inspired Bobak to consider the private as a subject of some greater significance. However, it can also be argued that Bobak was simply attuned to the reality of Canada’s multicultural state. In a diary entry dated March 1943, the headline reads, “French-Canadians, Negro, Chinese...and CWAC’s return journey [(back to British Columbia)] into party... Here, *W110278* sends news pictures on the Brotherhood of man.”³⁶ Representations of people of visible minority active in duty were entirely uncommon for the vast majority of works produced by Canadian war artists. But *Private Roy* captures two significant elements of emerging Canadian culture – the value of females in the war enterprise, and the ethnicity of Canadians involved in the war.



Salmon in the Galley by Pegi Nicol MacLeod.

comrades. *WRCN's in Dining Room* shows a sea of heads bowed over long tables that stretch from the bottom to the top of the canvas. All appear to be eating, with the exception of five foreground figures. One woman is seated and reading a book, the other four are shown in profile or three-quarter profile, looking off into various directions, seemingly uninterested in the activities of the mess hall. Unlike *Salmon in the Galley*, one can be sure that the highlighted women hold some rank because of the detail on the hats of the foreground figures. Despite the large and intimate foreground portraits, again, as with *Beauty Parlour*, one cannot be sure of identity. The unnatural colours used in the faces of the foreground figures is in the tradition of the Fauves – who were famous for choosing symbolic colours to express the inner feelings and emotions of their subjects. Perhaps MacLeod cast the woman in the bottom right-hand corner of her work after someone she knew, and she may have wanted to convey some intense emotion relative to that particular individual by painting the face of the woman red.

Given the impressionist techniques utilized by both Bobak and MacLeod, what is remarkable about their works is the feeling and emotion each artist brings to the surface of the canvas. There is an absence of the gore of war in the paintings, but this is no doubt owing to the fact that neither Bobak nor MacLeod had ever set foot on an active battlefield.

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Yet, Bobak and MacLeod operated on the basis of emotions and feelings where empirical truth held great significance of the expression of their perspectives on life.

Conclusion

The works of art produced by women during the Second World War are unique. Bobak and MacLeod foreshadow a progressive movement of art in Canada that flowered in the 1960s. Each was motivated by her own ambition to become a war artist in a male-dominated discipline. Additionally, these two artists helped to develop a narrative of Canadian art that had not been heretofore articulated. They did this in part by capturing unique subjects in terms of gender and ethnicity. And so, while recent studies of this nation's art may claim its art narrative to have been determined by a dominant hegemonic ruling class, it can be said that Bobak and MacLeod upset the status quo. Most importantly, works of Bobak and MacLeod are to be valued for presenting a different face of war, since they provide glimpses of the daily routine and events that go on quietly behind the scenes of horror and suffering characterizing war at the front lines.



NOTES

1. Jeffrey Brison, *Cultural Interventions: American Corporate Philanthropy and the Construction of the Arts and Letters in Canada, 1900-1957* (Kingston, Ontario: 1998), p. 231.
2. Paul Litt, *The Muses, the Masses and the Massey Commission* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), p. 22.
3. Ellen Pool, *Sixty Years Later: FCA History*. <<http://www.artists.ca/FCA-7cm.html>>, accessed 5 April 2004.
4. Maria Tippett, *Making Culture: English-Canadian Institutions and the Arts Before the Massey Commission* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), p. 164.
5. Tippett, p. 166. And “to unite all Canadian artists, related art workers and interested laymen for mutual support in promoting common aims; the chief of these is to make the arts a creative factor in the national life of Canada and the artist an integral part of society.” At <<http://www.artists.ca/FCA-7cm.html>>.
6. Pegi Nicol MacLeod. *Daffodils in Winter: the Life and Letters of Pegi Nicol MacLeod, 1904-1949*. Joan Murray (ed.) (Moonbeam, Ontario: Penumbra Press, 1984), pp. 161-162.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 162.
8. Interestingly, MacLeod stayed at the Massey home in 1936 and tutored Hart Massey in painting. Apparently, dinners at the Masseys were quite lively, and guests of the family included Will Ogilvie, later to become a Second World War artist for Canada, and none other than Mackenzie King. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
9. Dean Frederick Oliver and Laura Brandon, *Canvas of War: Painting the Canadian Experience, 1914 to 1945*. (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2000), pp. 156-157.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Canvas of War: the Art of World War II* (Videocassette) (Ottawa: Sound Venture Productions/The Canadian War Museum, distributed by Kineticvideo 2000). MacLeod, *Daffodils in Winter*, p. 178.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Oliver and Brandon, p. 158.
14. Molly Lamb Bobak, *Wild Flowers of Canada: Impressions and Sketches of a Field Artist* (Toronto: Pagurian Press, 1978), p. 44.
15. Oliver and Brandon, p. 159.
16. Molly Lamb Bobak. *Double Duty: Sketches and Diaries of Molly Lamb Bobak, Canadian War Artist*. Carolyn Gossage (ed.) (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1992), p. 63
17. Bobak, *Wild Flowers of Canada*, p. 44.
18. Bobak, *Double Duty*, p. 132.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
22. Bobak, *Wild Flowers of Canada*, p. 56.
23. Bobak, *Double Duty*, p. 38.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 130.
25. “You are expected to record and interpret vividly and veraciously, according to your artistic sense 1) the spirit and character, the appearance and attitude of the men, as individuals or groups of the Service which you are attached – 2) instruments and machines which they employ, and 3) environment in which they do their work. The intention is that you productions shall be worthy of Canada's highest cultural traditions, doing justice to History and as works of art, worthy of exhibition anywhere at anytime.” Oliver and Brandon, p. 158.
26. Kristy M. Robertson, *We Stand on Guard for Thee: Protecting Myths of Nation in “Canvas of War.”* (Kingston, Ontario: 2001), p. 61.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
30. Oliver and Brandon, p. 131.
31. MacLeod, *Daffodils in Winter*, p. 186.
32. Robertson, p. 37.
33. Pegi Nicol MacLeod “Recording the Woman's Services,” *Canadian Art* 2, December 1944, p. 51.
34. Robertson, p. 50.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
36. Bobak, *Double Duty*, p. 60.
37. Bobak, *Wild Flowers of Canada*, p. 211.
38. MacLeod, *Daffodils in Winter*, p. 186.