

## WOMEN AND WAR

### Women and the Art of War

#### Facts:

- 31 war artists participated in the Canadian War Records Program; one was female. Female civilians artists recorded WWII in Canada and abroad.
- During WWII Britain employed 400 artists to wield their talents. The “Recording Britain” Program utilized 43 female artists, 18 of whom were on salary.

#### Before the Reading:

- Why would Britain use significantly more female artists in the war effort than Canada?
- What can war art accomplish that goes beyond war photography?

### Reading 1 – Through Women’s Eyes: Molly Lamb, Paraskeva Clark and Pegi Nicol

#### Molly Lamb

Molly Lamb<sup>1</sup> enlisted in the Canadian Army in 1941 while in her last year of art school. From November 1942 to June 1945 she kept an illustrated diary in newspaper format which she called W110278 after her service number. She prepared the first edition of her diary between serving soldiers in the canteen at the Vancouver barracks.

In the CWAC barracks at St. Clair and Avenue Road in Toronto, Lamb wrote A.Y. Jackson to ask if she could visit him with her diary. The two hit it off so well that, Jackson an advisor to the Canadian War Records Committee recommended her in a letter to H.O. McCurry then Director of the National Gallery. Commenting on her diary Jackson stated that he knew of no woman artist in Canada who could produce what she had under the conditions of her service. After her selection, Lamb’s W110278 featured a detailed sketch of Molly handing Jackson a bouquet of flowers.

Molly Lamb completed Officers’ Training in Quebec but it was not until May 1945 that she was posted overseas. When Second Lieutenant Molly Lamb finally arrived in London, due to lack of space, she shared a studio with the most junior Canadian War Artist, Bruno Bobak. In a 2006

reminiscence with columnist Roy MacGregor, Bruno stated that, “I didn’t like that much, so I built a barrier of crates down the middle and told her, ‘I’m painting on my side, you paint on your side’. Well, eventually the wall came down.”<sup>1</sup> Molly and Bruno married before they returned to Canada.

During her European war service in 1945–46 Molly went to Holland, England, Germany, France and Belgium. Her assignment to paint ‘happy women’ was difficult as she saw a lot of death and violence. Images of flattened and burned out buildings surrounded her. Molly described the war as unbelievably barbaric especially when she saw the concentration camp Belsen.

Molly Lamb’s “Private Roy, Canadian Women’s Army Corps”<sup>2</sup> depicting a young black girl remains unique among Canadian War Art. It captured two emerging tendencies in Canadian society—the changing roles of women and that of visible minorities. Painted in a canteen in Halifax in 1946, Molly Lamb Bobak’s work forever reflects and causes reflection upon a significant moment in time.

## Paraskeva Clark

After her marriage to Canadian accountant Philip Clark in Paris, Russian-born Paraskeva Clark joined the Toronto art scene of the 1930s. She was exploring political art when she developed a friendship with Dr. Norman Bethune and became involved with the Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy. Clark turned down the offer of a full time commission as an official WWII War Artist due to family commitments. Then in 1941 while the Germans besieged her native city of St. Petersburg, she wrote to the National Gallery to ask to be included as a Canadian civilian war artist. Clark was appointed to record the activities of the Royal Canadian Air Force Women's Division in Trenton. Her three canvases, "Maintenance Jobs in the Hangar"<sup>4</sup>, "Parachute Riggers"<sup>5</sup> and "Quaicker Girls"<sup>6</sup> are in the Canadian War Museum.<sup>7</sup>

## Pegi Nicol Macleod

One hundred and ten of Pegi Nicol Macleod's water-colour and oil paintings are in the war collection of the National Gallery. By and large Nicol provided the only substantial record of Canadian women in uniform in WWII—17,000 of whom served in the RCAF, 21,600 as CWACs and 7,000 as Wrens.

Pegi's brash and colourful depictions show Canadian servicewomen in action in all aspects of military service from cooking to drills, in dormitories and on ships. Upon her early death from cancer in 1949, the tributes that flowed described her work as capable of catching life on the wing, arresting for a moment its vivid pattern.

## After the Reading:

- Because Canadian female artists weren't allowed to enter combat areas, what do their works add to the 'record of war'?
- What life lessons do the stories of these female artists provide?

## Reading 2: Portrait of a nation on the brink of annihilation

During the dark hours of WWII Kenneth Clark, Director of Britain's National Gallery, was concerned about preserving Britain's heritage and values. In the eventuality of defeat, he wanted future generations to see evidence of what Britain had looked like before a repressive regime took over.

The concerned Clark deployed 400 artists in the "Recording Britain" project, 43 of whom were female. Most artists were commissioned to produce specific works, but 18 female artists were on contract. While bombs fell, these women armed only with paintbrushes selected scenes that captured the soul of Britain.

### Malvina Cheek

Malvina Cheek was 23 and a recent graduate from the Royal College of Art when the editor of the forthcoming publication "Recording Britain" asked her to join the group. "I was living in Chelsea at the time and bombs were dropping all around us. People used to go and watch them. You were just lucky if you weren't hit."<sup>2</sup> Malvina travelled across Britain on her bicycle to paint churches, shops and even limestone quarries in Staffordshire. Wherever she went from Cornwall to Cheshire, people offered her food and drink. "Then you came back to London, which was very exciting despite all the bombs, and you just got on with it."<sup>3</sup>

### Phyllis Dimond

Phyllis Dimond was another graduate of the Royal College of Art enlisted for "Recording Britain". She decided to focus on architectural heritage before bombs pulverized it. In scenes described as careful and intricate, she painted scenes as varied as the grand façade of Westminster's Bluecoat School and a tiny rustic hut in Bedford Square. Meanwhile, she lived in an empty basement in Belgravia.

### Erlund (Eleanor) Hudson

Erlund (Eleanor) Hudson drove canteen vans to serve tea at rescue sites; a childhood spinal injury had precluded her from conventional war work. Once, when Eleanor took a break from these duties to help her brother's family in Leicestershire, Eleanor, a graduate of the College of Art, produced a series of works featuring ladies making bandages, pajamas and balms for the Armed Forces. Impressed by her depictions, the Imperial War Museum purchased several pieces, belatedly making Eleanor a War Artist.

In later years Eleanor recalled that her worst war memory was of a bombing raid that wiped out an entire Sunday school in Torquay. "I saw this boy dangling in a tree. I could never walk past that tree again. And I could certainly never paint it."

When London's bombing escalated, the most significant treasures of the National Gallery were evacuated to a mine in Wales. Malvina and Phyllis suddenly found their works on exhibit in the greatest gallery in the land because Kenneth Clark had decided to fill the bare walls of the National Gallery with works from "Recording Britain". A selection of "Recording Britain" paintings were published by Oxford University Press in 1946.

### Phyllis Ginger

Phyllis Ginger's work appeared in three of the four volumes of Recording Britain—her skill as a topographical artist earning her that place. Her scenes of Catherine Place, Bath and the Bristol Council Houses showed bomb damage overlaid with pale transparent washes. In Cheltenham she pictured American Servicemen. Near Regent's Park she depicted closed roads and a distant barrage balloon. She produced "Goldsmith's Hall After Bombing".

Even if the German 'Baedeker' raids, thus dubbed because the Luftwaffe targetted some of Britain's most beautiful cities had wiped out more of Britain than they did, the artists of "Recording Britain" had captured and safeguarded much of the essence of that great land.

The Victoria and Albert Museum which gathered "Recording Britain" works published Recording Britain: a pictorial Doomsday of pre-war Britain in 1990.

### Dame Laura Knight

Dame Laura Knight was one of only three female British war artists to travel abroad. The first woman to be elected to the Royal Academy since 1760, Dame Knight painted the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal.

### After the Reading:

- Make a list of the arguments that you think Kenneth Clark might have made to get an American philanthropist to fund the "Recording Britain" project.
- If you had to paint the 'soul of Canada' for future generations, what would you choose to portray? Are the male and female choices in your class different in nature?

### Extensions

- 1500 of the "Recording Britain" works are at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Check out the complete story at [www.vam.ac.uk/collections/paintings/stories/recording](http://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/paintings/stories/recording)
- Legion Magazine at [www.legionmagazine.com/features/warart](http://www.legionmagazine.com/features/warart) has archived articles on Paraskeva Clark, Molly Lamb Bobak, Pegi Nicol Macleod and other female artists who have taken war as their subject. Read about some of these other women for November 9
- Create an illustrated diary in newspaper format on your life. For example, the headline could be, "Mother serves meatloaf again". There could be articles on what you pass on the way to school. The idea is that like Molly Lamb Bobak, you will capture a 'slice of life'.

<sup>1</sup> Macgregor, Roy, "A celebrated war painter honours the ghosts—and remembers the goats", *Globe and Mail*, November 10, 2006

<sup>2</sup> "Painter whose war efforts led her to capture the nation", *Hampstead and Highgate Express*, editorial February 9, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Hardman, Robert "The last picture show: wartime Britain captured by female artists", *The Daily Mail*, January 31, 2007

<sup>4</sup> <http://collections.civilization.ca/public/objects/common/webmedia.php?irn=1103341>

<sup>5</sup> <http://collections.civilization.ca/public/objects/common/webmedia.php?irn=1103343>

<sup>6</sup> <http://collections.civilization.ca/public/objects/common/webmedia.php?irn=1103344>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.warmuseum.ca/>

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.journal.forces.gc.ca/engraph/vol6/no3/PDF/10-History3\\_e.pdf](http://www.journal.forces.gc.ca/engraph/vol6/no3/PDF/10-History3_e.pdf)

[www.collectionscanada.ca/women/002026-508-e.html](http://www.collectionscanada.ca/women/002026-508-e.html) [www.legionmagazine.com/features/warart/96-01.asp](http://www.legionmagazine.com/features/warart/96-01.asp)

[www.gallery78.com/pmacleod.htm](http://www.gallery78.com/pmacleod.htm) (pegi nicol macleod), [www.civilization.ca/cwm/artists/macleod2eng.html](http://www.civilization.ca/cwm/artists/macleod2eng.html)

[www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/artwar/collections/collection\\_australia\\_e.html](http://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/artwar/collections/collection_australia_e.html)