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In 1915, while working as a volunteer in a munitions factory canteen, Canadian artist Florence Carlyle described the munitions factory in letters to her family as a "systematized hell." However, the atmosphere of the factory made a deep impression on her, for she continued: "what a picture for an artist...an artist with a fifty foot canvas and tubs of paint."[1]

This paper will focus on the art commissioned from Canadian women artists during the First World War by the Canadian War Memorials Fund (CWMF), and specifically upon art which depicts the subject of women working in Canadian munitions factories. These works of painting, sculpture and printmaking were executed by four of Canada's premier women artists: Frances Loring (1887-1968), Florence Wyle (1881-1968), Henrietta Mabel May (1884-1971), and Dorothy Stevens (1888-1966) between 1918 and 1920. These commissions garnered significant critical acclaim, and were hailed as among the most successful works in the Canadian War Memorials (CWM) exhibitions that toured between 1919 and 1924. The art created by these women not only forms the nucleus of official war art by Canadian women artists during the First World War, but is also significant as powerful expressions of Canadian home front activity during the war.[2] This paper will examine this artistic production with consideration of the social context of the time, and in the light of the contemporary critical reception.

Frances Loring
The Shell Finisher *(ca.1918)*
(CWM CN #8501)

The Canadian War Records Office was established in 1916 thanks largely to the efforts of Sir Max Aitken, later Lord Beaverbrook, a wealthy expatriate Canadian and member of the British House of Commons. Initially collecting materials such as photographs, maps, and diaries, Aitkin soon realized that in order to fully document Canada's participation in the war, and to fully express the experience of war, the Canadian War Records Office would also have to commission artists to record the war effort. This Canadian war art scheme was established as a war charity fund on 17 November 1916. Notable Canadian artists commissioned in the overseas program included A.Y. Jackson, James Kerr-Lawson, and David Milne. Only two Canadian women,

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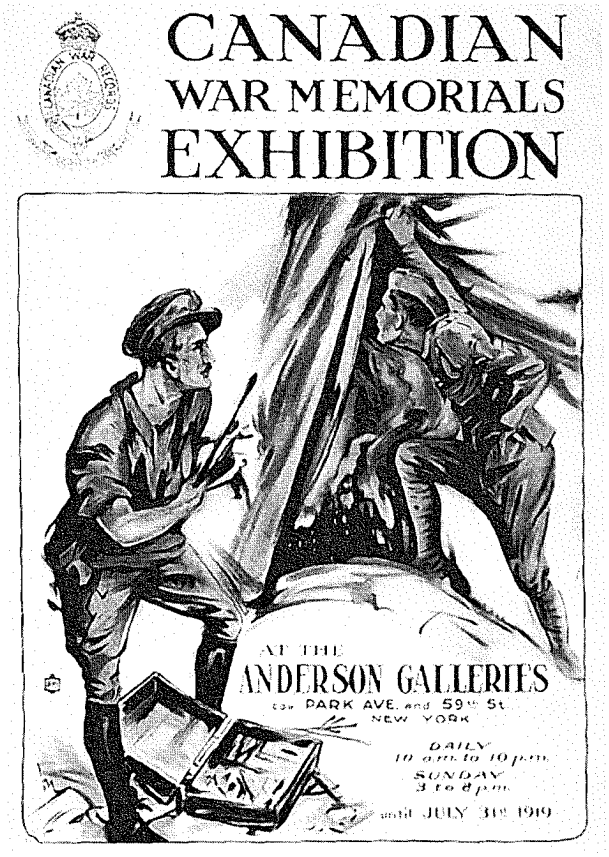


Canadian War Memorials Exhibition Poster.
(CWM 95-03763 AN19870226-001)

Florence Carlyle and Caroline Armington, were chosen to participate in the overseas program.[3]

In 1918 the Canadian War Memorials Fund expanded its coverage of the First World War to include the Canadian home front. The home front program was overseen by Sir Edmund Walker, president of the Toronto Art Museum and champion of Canadian art. However, Eric Brown, the Director of the National Gallery of Canada, played a pivotal role in the commissioning of artists to record home front activity. Brown, who had misgivings as to the "pictorial qualities of modern warfare" was, however, much in favour of the home front as a subject for art, writing that it "had vastly more pictorial possibilities than the front line trenches."[4] Eric Brown was soon actively promoting the importance of this homefront artwork to the overall CWM scheme.

Walker and Brown employed more than 20 artists to document the war effort in Canada, and of this number, four were women: Mabel May, Frances Loring, Florence Wyle and Dorothy Stevens.

During the 1914-1918 conflict, Canadian women were not recruited as official war artists. They were, however, commissioned to do portraits, to record "home front" work and, in particular, to record the contributions of women engaged in war work.[5] In contrast to their male contemporaries, who were commissioned as official war artists and had a significantly broader range of subject matter available to them, women artists were employed for restricted and specific commissions.[6] Clearly adopting a protective attitude, in keeping with societal conventions, women artists' choice of subject matter was restricted to that which CWMF officials deemed appropriate for women to witness. Male artists recorded overseas *and* home front activity; women artists alone were restricted with regard to subject matter.

The significance of women artists being assigned to record munitions activity becomes clear when examined in the context of contemporary social expectations. Prior to World War One appropriate subject matter for women artists was deemed by social convention to be centred on the domestic world. Domestic interior scenes, still life studies, and portraiture had traditional connotations as "women's" subjects.[7] Restrictions on the art practice of women artists, which included society's questioning of the very suitability of the profession for a woman, remained in place in Canada well into the first decades of this century. Social upheaval brought about by the First World War, with an accompanying loosening of many of the strict social mores of the previous century, gradually resulted in great changes in women's roles in the cultural community. Thus, while the CWMF rulings that confined women artists to painting home front activities were restrictive, these commissions facilitated the expansion of acceptable subject matter for women to include non-traditional areas such as industry and armaments. Despite restrictions which kept women artists from the areas of combat, the War Memorials commissions represented a significant opportunity for Canadian women artists to participate in an unprecedented national artistic scheme. In addition, those commissions presented an opportunity for them to exhibit their

work to a broad national audience and to gain national exposure.

In total, it is estimated that 35,000 women were employed in munitions production in Canada during World War One.[8] In addition to presenting professional opportunities for women artists, the employment of women in munitions manufacturing from 1914-1918 helped to establish a new and unconventional female image that was in direct contrast to accepted definitions of femininity. This emerging role for women encompassed many of the characteristics of the socially emancipated "New Woman," a concept that emerged during the late 19th century and presented a modern, alternative image of femininity.[9] Wages in munitions factories compared favourably with those of domestic service and with the other limited career options for women prior to 1914. Significantly, in the munitions industry women were paid the same rate as men for the same work. Thus, the woman who worked in munitions had economic freedom and independent purchasing power.[10] Because of the dress requirements that had many women munition workers wearing trousers for the first time in their lives, a new body image was presented for women. As with the concept of the "New Women," the image of the female munitions worker was that of a strong, healthy, and athletic woman, wearing comfortable, less restrictive clothing, and performing physically demanding work on a daily basis.

This new image of women was in conflict with traditional definitions of socially acceptable behaviour. Women employed in munitions often lived away from the influence of their families, came into unchaperoned contact with men, and mixed with all classes of society. In addition, munitions work brought women into association with technology and with weapons of destruction, an unprecedented situation in the traditionally male preserve of war.

The unconventional image of women war workers appealed to Eric Brown, the director of the National Gallery. He wrote to Frances Loring in September 1918 to ask whether she and her friend Florence Wyle would accept commissions to create several bronze figures for the Canadian War Records, based on "the various types of girl war workers."[11] Subsequently, other women artists received commissions to record the image of the woman munitions worker.

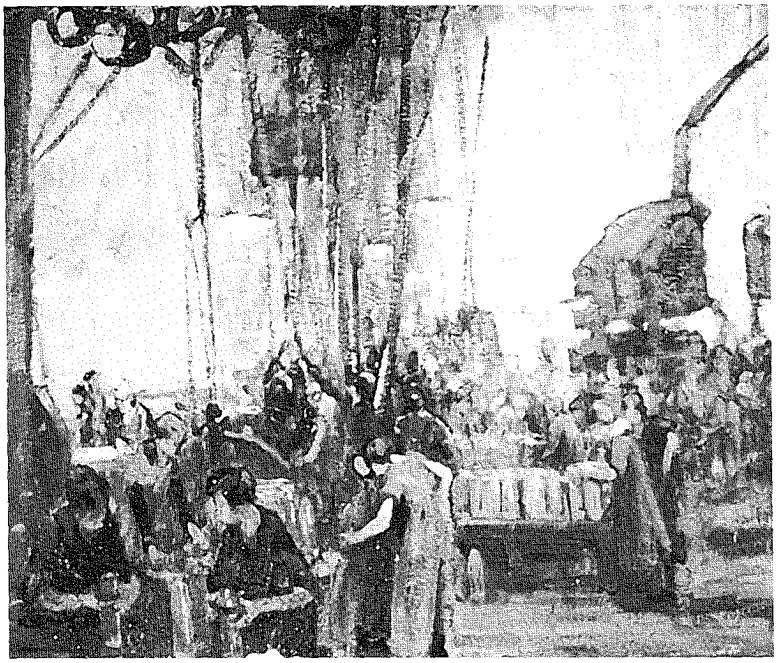
While war gradually loosened social restrictions on women, this was thought at the time to be only a temporary state of affairs for the duration of the war. In 1919, one Toronto critic observed of Loring and Wyle's bronze sculptures of women munitions workers that "it was a happy thought to *preserve* these figures of the *working women* who were so *peculiarly the creation of the great war*."[12] The implication was clearly that women in the working role were a temporary aberration.

In 1918, when commissioned by the CWMF to paint "studies and [a] picture of women's munition work," Henrietta Mabel May was a successful Canadian artist at the beginning of a long and critically acclaimed career.[13] In an article entitled "Women and Art in Canada" published in 1914, May was included as "amongst the more recent lights in art in Canada."[14] In September 1918 May received a letter of confirmation from Sir Edmund Walker and a photostat permit from the Imperial Munitions Board which allowed her access to munitions factories to record the work of women engaged in munitions work. Her chosen sites were in Montreal at the CPR Angus Shops and also, after further negotiation of "much red tape," at the Northern Electric plant in Montreal.[15] The three studies and one large oil painting, entitled *Women Making Shells* (1918) (see front cover), completed by the following September, were shown in the Home Work Section of the Canadian War Memorials exhibitions that toured Canada between 1919 and 1920.[16]

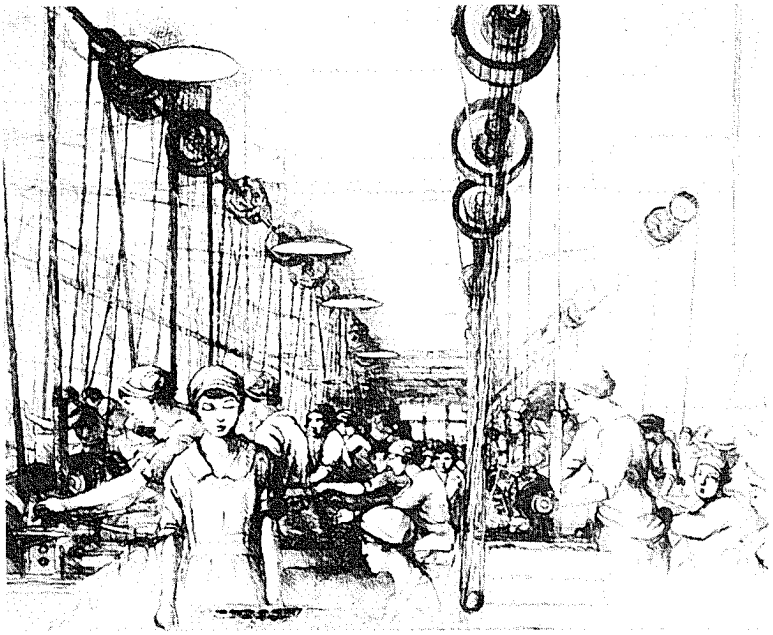
In *Women Making Shells* May reveals her early interest in figure painting and her concern for light and atmosphere. One critic noted:

> Miss May's 'Women Making Shells' is filled with eager figures stooping over lathes, concentrating on their new task. The air is dusty from the turning of a thousand wheels, and shafts and belting further convey the idea of the energy and haste of the place.[17]

Respected art critic Barker Fairley praised the "bustle" and "activity" expressed in the large canvas, yet seemed to prefer May's "preliminary study for the larger picture." Fairley observed that although "in this smaller picture there is less movement [it has] a far more luminous texture,...



Henrietta Mabel May, A study for Women Making Shells.
(CWM CN #8412)



Dorothy Stevens, Munitions, Fuse Factory.
(CWM CN #8829)

[a] glow."[18] In each of her commissions, the artist has emphasized the strength and physical endurance of women working under dirty and potentially dangerous conditions.

Another artist involved in the exploration of the theme of women workers in munitions was Dorothy Stevens. At the outbreak of the First World War she was described as "the most brilliant etcher that Canada has known."[19]

Stevens took it upon herself to approach Eric Brown with the idea of becoming a war artist. She presented a proposal to Brown in which she planned to create a series of prints for the CWMF on the subject of work in munition plants, foundries and ship yards.[20] The last of the four women to be commissioned by the CWMF, in September 1918, Stevens was directed to execute a series of six etchings on Canadian "munition works, aeroplane and shipbuilding construction."[21]

Women figure prominently in the two prints by Stevens that deal with munitions work. In the etching entitled *Munitions, Fuse Factory* (c.1918) the hectic activity of the women's labour on the factory floor is expressed in the jumble of cables, pulleys and lighting which recalls the dusty, noisy atmosphere in May's painting *Women Making Shells*. When touring Canada with the Home Work Section of the Canadian War Memorials exhibition in 1920, Steven's series of etchings was described by critics as "powerful."[22]

At the beginning of the First World War, Frances Loring and Florence Wyle were considered to be "in the first rank" of Canadian artists and at the forefront of Canada's sculpting community.[23] In 1918 both artists were recruited by Eric Brown to be part of the home front's war art program to portray civilians in the war industry. Loring was commissioned for seven bronzes and Wyle for nine.[24] The resulting bronze sculptures, depicting women and men as rod-turners, rimmers, and munitions workers, confirmed their positions as nationally renowned sculptors.

Frances Loring, Rod-Turner.
(CWM CN #8500)

In her bronze statuette entitled *Rod-Turner* (1918), Frances Loring emphasizes gesture and movement in the form of the female munition worker. The strength and power is foremost and detail is minimized, with a resulting monumentality given to this small-scale form.

The qualities of Florence Wyle's work, described by one contemporary critic as "quieter, more finished and reserved, more 'Greek,'" than that of Loring, is seen in Wyle's *Woman With Adaptor*, (c.1918).[25] In comparison, Loring's bronze *Shell Finisher* (c.1918), emphasizes the woman's physical strength and, in the words of one contemporary critic, "expresses...a [tense]

Florence Wyle, Woman with Adaptor.
(CWM CN #8520)

Frances Loring, Noon Hour at a Munitions Plant.

(CWM CN #8505)

drama in line and movement."[26] Each of the bronze statuettes and one bronze plaque, entitled *Noon Hour at a Munitions Plant* (c.1918), expresses a positive, active image of women. The artists have concentrated upon expressing the strength, endurance and dignity of labour itself, rather than simply glorifying the war industry, as some other home front war artists did.[27] Their work of a total of 16 bronze sculptures for the CWM was enthusiastically received by critics and public alike.[28] Barker Fairley, for example, wrote in 1919, "the statuettes of Frances Loring and Florence Wyle...are the most interesting thing in the [Canadian War Memorials] exhibition."[29] Another critic asserted that "these bits of bronze should compel a new admiration for sculpture for their rendering of epic characters in the life of a nation at war."[30]

Eric Brown's founding vision for the artwork commissioned by the Canadian War Memorials Fund was that it should express qualities of human enterprise and commitment. Specifically, Brown saw the theme of the women worker in munitions as possessing a heroic quality, expressed by him when he wrote, "women and girls laboured day and night like Trojans" in Montreal munition factories, and women workers offered "a beauty of subject worthy of fifth century Greece."[31] Thus, Brown's view, as male spectator, equated women with warriors and Homeric heroes. The reality, however, was much more complex, for women who worked in the war industry were not only capable and strong, but also courageously working in defiance of accepted social conventions concerning femininity. A view such as Brown's, which cloaked women munitions workers in a Romantic vision, was a somewhat backhanded compliment, for such allusions and language served to obscure their real experience and contribution.

Despite the use by the press of diminutives such as "munitionettes" to describe women munitions workers, the contemporary critical reception of the art of women artists in the CWMF was positive. It recognized not only the contributions of women workers, but was also supportive of the Canadian women artists' bid for professional and public identities.[32] The efforts of women workers was recognized by one Montreal critic's assertion that "it is quite fitting that [the] efforts...of both the men and women war workers...should also be permanently recorded on canvases, marble and bronze for future generations."[33]

Was something more achieved by these commissions of Canadian women artists than simply documentary art? The achievements are clear. Despite Eric Brown's vision of women munitions workers as elegant versions of Homeric heroes, the achievements of the CWMF commissions by Canadian women artists were much more tangible. These images of Canadian women workers document and provide insight

into the individual effort of women at a time of national stress and, more importantly, explore ideas relating to women's participation in skilled, manual labour, with a status equivalent to that of their male co-workers. By presenting women working in non-traditional occupations, these works assisted in the expansion of traditional definitions of femininity expressed in the social structure and art of the time. These images are positive, and significantly, they foreground women's strength and fortitude. They challenge the prevailing myth of women being passive, and instead depict them as producers, as powerful, and as exemplifying the characteristics of the century's "New Woman."

For the Canadian women artists who executed these commissions, the national exposure and critical acclaim gained from the CWMF exhibitions helped to establish their professional careers as nationally renowned artists. This art not only forms the nucleus of official war art by Canadian women artists during the First World War, but is also significant as powerful artistic expressions of Canadian home front activity during the 1914-1918 conflict.

Notes

1. Florence Carlyle to Blanche Carlyle, c. May 1915, Carlyle Papers, Woodstock Public Art Gallery Archives (WPAG Arch), Woodstock, Ontario. See also Helene Youmans, Reminiscences of Florence Carlyle, Manuscript, p.19, Carlyle Papers, WPAG Arch.
2. For further discussion of the careers and work of May, Stevens, Loring and Wyle see: Rebecca Sisler, *The Girls: A Biography of Frances Loring and Florence Wyle* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1972). Natalie Luckyj, *Visions and Victories: 10 Canadian Women Artists 1914-1945* (London, Ontario: London Regional Art Gallery, 1983). Christine Boyanoski, *Loring and Wyle: Sculptors' Legacy* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1987).
3. Financial support for the program was received from the Canadian War Records Office and covered such expenses as travel, artists' materials, and studio rents, while the salaries of the official war artists was assumed by the Canadian government. Lord Beaverbrook and the CWMF art advisor, the Hungarian-born art historian and critic, Paul Konody, were responsible for employing artists. Maria Tippett, *Art at the Service of War: Canada, Art, and the Great War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), pp.23-25.
4. Brown quoted in Tippett, *Art at the Service*, p.51.
5. *Ibid.*, pp.56-57. Canadian male artists such as George Reid were also commissioned to paint work in the munitions factories; see, R.F. Wodehouse, *Checklist of the War Collections* (Ottawa: The National Gallery of Canada, 1968), p.49.
6. May, Stevens, Loring and Wyle were listed as "employed in Canada under the direction of Sir Edmund Walker," in addition, Wyle was employed for "sculpture only." Appendix 2. List of Artists, in Canadian War Records Office Report submitted by Lord Beaverbrook to The Honourable Sir Edward Kemp, K.C.M.G., M.P., Minister, Overseas Forces of Canada. 1919. National Gallery of Canada Archives (NGC Arch), Canadian War Art, 5.41 C. Canadian War Memorial (General, File 1).
7. Deborah Cherry, *Painting Women: Victorian Women Artists* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), pp.25, 125; see also Pamela Gerrish Nunn, *Victorian Women Artists* (London: The Women's Press, 1987), Ch.1, pp.1-15.
8. Between 250,000 and 300,000 workers, including an estimated 35,000 women, were employed in munitions production in Canada during the First World War. Carnegie, *The History of Munitions*, pp.252-256. See also J. Castell Hopkins, *Canada At War, 1914-1918* (Toronto: The Canadian Annual Review, 1919), p.209.
9. The figure of the 'New Woman' is characterized as a woman "concerned to reject many of the conventions of femininity and live and work on free and equal terms with the opposite sex." Her distinctive traits were her moral principle, autonomy and quest for personal freedom. Cherry, *Painting Women*, p.75.
10. Skilled workers earned 35 to 65 cents per hour and unskilled operators, paid on a piece work scale, often earned more. David Carnegie, *The History of Munitions Supply in Canada, 1914-1918* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1925), pp.252-256.
11. Brown was impressed by the visual appeal of women war workers "in their working clothes." He wrote, "munition makers, aeroplane girls...it struck me that they were very fine subjects for a series of small bronzes." Eric Brown to Frances Loring, 10 September 1918. NGC Arch, Canadian War Artists, 5.42-L, Loring Frances.
12. Author's emphasis. "Women's Interest in the Home and State," *Mail* (Toronto), 20 October 1919, p.10.
13. Canadian War Memorials, Artists, Commissions. NGC Arch, 5.41-C, CWM Commissions (Lists). May's early training from 1909-1912 was with William Brymner at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts school. Prior to the war in 1912-13, she and fellow artist Emily Coonan studied in Paris together where, the artist later recalled, she admired "the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists, particularly Renoir, Gaugin and Matisse." Dominion Gallery Exhibition Catalogue, Montreal, c.1950. NGC Artist Clipping File.
14. Margaret Bell, "Women and Art in Canada," *Everywoman's World* (Toronto), June 1914, p.15.
15. H. Mabel May to Eric Brown, 25 September 1918. NGC Arch, Correspondence re. Canadian War Records, 5.42-M, H. Mabel May. See also, Anonymous, "Memorial Exhibit Includes Works of Women Artists," *The Herald* (Montreal), 2 October 1920, p.3.
16. May exhibited "several paintings of women at work in the munition factories" in the CWM show held in Toronto, October 1919. Anonymous, "Women's Interests in the Home and State," The *Mail* (Toronto), 20 Oct. 1919, p.10. See also *Canadian War Memorials Painting Exhibition, 1920. New Series, The Last Phase*, Toronto, 1920, p.21. Exhibited as No. 215, *Women Making Shells*, p.21.
17. Anonymous, "Art and Artists," *The Globe* (Toronto), 1 October 1919), np.

18. Barker Fairley, "At the Art Gallery," *The Rebel* (Toronto), Vol.4, No.3 (December 1919) pp.123-4.
19. Although she was born in Toronto, Stevens lived much of her early life in Europe. She worked in both copper plate etching and in oil painting, although one critic noted, "it is in her etchings that she excels." In 1914 Stevens was well on her way to establishing a successful professional art practice having been elected a member of the Chicago Society of Etchers in 1912 and the Ontario Society of Artists in 1914. Bell, "Women and Art," p.15.
20. Dorothy Stevens to Eric Brown, 19 September 1918. NGC Arch, Canadian War Artists, 5.42-S, Stevens, Dorothy. See also Terresa McIntosh, "Other Images of War: Canadian Women War Artists of the First and Second World Wars." Master's thesis, Carleton University, 1990, p.18.
21. Anonymous, "Women Artists' Work Exhibited," *The Daily Star* (Montreal), 2 October 1920, p.30.
22. "Women Artists' Work Exhibited," *The Daily Star* (Montreal), 2 October 1920, p.30.
23. Both were born in the United States, Loring in Wardner, Idaho, and Wyle in Trenton, Illinois. Wyle pursued an independent and unconventional path, initially training for a career in medicine where a class in anatomical drawing initiated her interest in art. Loring trained in Europe and later at the Art Institute of Chicago were she met Wyle in 1907. Both women studied sculpture and a lifelong friendship began, "The Girls," as they were known, moved to Toronto in 1913 to set up their studio in a "large, raftered attic in Church Street." Estelle M. Kerr, "Women Sculptors in Toronto," *Saturday Night* (Toronto), 20 June 1914, np. See also, Anonymous, "Human Anatomy Classes Turned Her From Medicine To Sculpture," *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), 15 January 1968, np.
24. Eric Brown to Sir Edmund Walker, 30 September 1919. NGC Arch, 5.41-C. Canadian War Memorials (General).
25. Arthur McFarlane, "Two Toronto Sculptors Are Doing Big Work in a Novel Studio," *Star Weekly* (Toronto), 1 August 1925), p.3.
26. McFarlane, "Two Toronto Sculptors," p.3.
27. Paintings by the Canadian artist George Agnew Reid (1860-1947), such as, *Forging 9.2 Inch Shells*, *Shell Piles*, and others commissioned by the CWMF, and in the collection of the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa, are examples of work that tended to glorify the war industry.
28. Anonymous, "Women Artists' Work Exhibited," *The Daily Star* (Montreal), 2 October 1920, p.30.
29. Barker Fairley, "At the Art Gallery," *The Rebel* (Toronto), December 1919, p.125.
30. Anonymous, "Art and Artists," *The Globe* (Toronto), 1 October 1919, np.
31. Brown, "Painting the War at Home," typescript, nd, pp.1-2, 3-5, Brown to Walker, 14 December, 17 October, to Manly MacDonald, 4 Sept, 1918. NGC Arch, as cited in Tippett, *Art At the Service of War*, p.51.
32. Anonymous, "Canadian War Art Exhibition," *Herald* (Montreal), 25 September 1920, p.3.
33. Anonymous, "Women Artist's Work Exhibited," *Daily Star* (Montreal), 2 October 1920, p.30.

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