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Bruno Bobak

War Artist (1923-2012)

Laura Brandon

“Can we sum up the influence of the war on the career of Bruno Bobak? The important fact is the opportunity given to a young artist in his twenties who rose by sheer merit from sapper to lieutenant and finally captain before he was 22. Who at the age of 21 was chosen as a replacement for the senior Official War Artist (Will Ogilvie) to serve with the...Canadian armoured division in the final great battles that defeated the Third Reich...It should also be remembered that more than any other war artist, Bruno Bobak hated war. However, when called on, he did his duty through some of the fiercest fighting of his time.”¹

Bruno Bobak was 20 years old when he enlisted in the Canadian Army in January 1943. He drew continually throughout his training period, which included a period when he was a participant in gas warfare experiments which he kept secret for 60 years.² Stationed in Petawawa, Ontario, for a large part of 1943, he “spent every night doing drawings of my bunkies. Around five bucks for every portrait, ten charcoal portraits every night. They would send them home to their mothers and girlfriends.”³ The official and collegial acknowledgement of his artistic skills

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• **Abstract: Bruno Bobak enlisted in the Canadian army in 1943 at the age of 20. As an amateur artist who sketched his bunk mates for extra money he came to the attention of the Historical Section at Canadian Military Headquarters in London and was taken on strength as a service artist. After completing officer training in the summer of 1944 he became an official war artist and served with 4th Canadian Armoured Division from December 1944 to July 1945. The two years he spent as a war artist provided him with the equivalent of the art schooling he had never had and it allowed him to become a painter, which he continued to be for the next seven richly productive decades.**
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undoubtedly helped propel Bobak into submitting five watercolours based on his Petawawa experiences for inclusion in an upcoming Canadian Army art competition and show at the National Gallery of Canada.⁴

In March 1944, Bobak won first prize with *Cross-Country Convoy*.⁵ His success was widely reported in the newspapers of the day.⁶ The artist himself heard the news in England where the Army had recently posted him and where he was ferrying vehicles the length of the country. They were being waterproofed in northern England in preparation for the imminent invasion of Europe (Operation Overlord on 6 June 1944). On the strength of his artistic success, the Historical Section at Canadian Military Headquarters (CMHQ) in London took him on as a service artist. Reflecting on his appointment, Bobak remarked in a 1998 interview that the occupational change “saved my life. Most of the platoon I was in died on D-Day.”⁷

Working as a service artist, Bobak found himself in an environment no less structured than that which he had left in the Engineers. His early months were unsettled pending

decisions as to his status and his duty location.⁸ Once appointed a military artist, the quartermaster at 1 Canadian Army Headquarters in London issued Bobak with the necessary equipment, which included a helmet, a water bottle, a cape, and complete webbing.⁹ He made a watercolour sketch of it all.¹⁰

The Canadian War Records Committee that ran the war art program from Ottawa always intended that Bobak should become an official war artist. Owing to his lack of a college education and his rank as

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• **Résumé : Bruno Bobak s'enrôla dans l'Armée canadienne en 1943; il avait 20 ans. Pour se faire un peu d'argent, il esquissait des croquis de ses compagnons de dortoir. Cela attira bientôt l'attention des autorités qui l'affectèrent en tant qu'artiste militaire. Une fois sa formation d'officier terminée à l'été 1944, il devint un artiste militaire officiel et servit dans la 4e Division blindée canadienne de décembre 1944 à juillet 1945. Ces deux années passées en tant qu'artiste militaire lui procurèrent l'équivalent de la formation en beaux-arts dont il n'avait jamais bénéficié et lui permirent de devenir peintre - ce qu'il continua d'être pendant sept décennies hautement productives.**
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Lieutenant Bruno Bobak, photographed sitting on a field chair as he completes a painting, Germany, 8 March 1945.

Canadian War Museum 19710261-1542



Canadian War Museum 19710261-1477



CWM 19710261-1464



CWM 20030257-006

Top: Bruno Bobak, *Untitled*, 1945; Above left: Bruno Bobak, *Friesoythe, Germany*, 1945; Middle right: Bruno Bobak, *Dead German Soldier*, undated; Bottom right: A photograph taken by Bobak which may have been the model for the sketch above.

a sapper he was initially unable to accept such an appointment. Thus, he was sent on officer training in July and August 1944 and provided with the opportunity of attending lectures at Oxford University for six weeks, which ultimately solved the problem. He was appointed an official artist in the Canadian Army with the rank of 2nd Lieutenant on 26 September 1944. His first posting as a war artist was a two-week attachment to the headquarters of the Canadian Armoured Corps Reinforcement Unit (CACRU) in Surrey, England which commenced on 19 October.¹¹ In due course, he returned to London to work up some of his field sketches into oil paintings. This was what was expected of him; an assignment of a specific duration where he made studies followed by time in a London studio, where completed paintings were the order of the day.

Bobak served in Europe with 4th Canadian Armoured Division from 11 December 1944 until 1 July 1945. When he went to the continent, he was issued the equipment previously used by Army war artist Will Ogilvie.¹² This material ranged from a tent, a table, and lamps, to mittens and trousers. He was also provided with a driver. Bobak was required to file monthly reports to his London superiors.¹³ Annotated with map references, they give, at times, a sense of his search for subject matter he could work with, but they also document the structured environment within which he continued to develop as a painter. The monthly reports also list his productivity – six to eight watercolours a month on average.

In this period, Bobak's army-issue camera was an asset second only to the significance of his driver, a man of the same age. The photos Bobak took that survive show that in his photography, he used the same compositional format that he used in his paintings.¹⁴ In fact some paintings are clearly based on photographs.¹⁵ Trees or buildings



Canadian War Museum 20030257-067



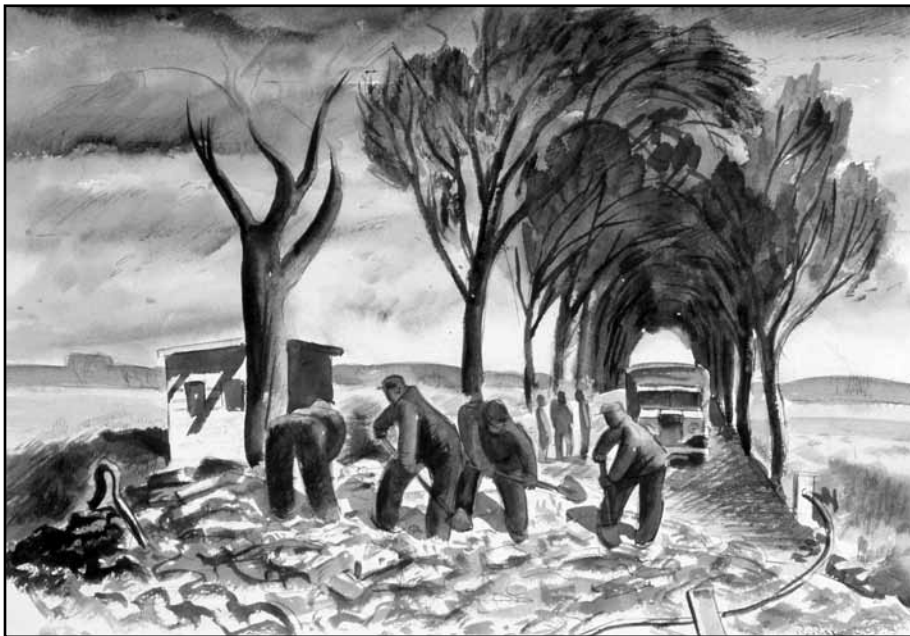
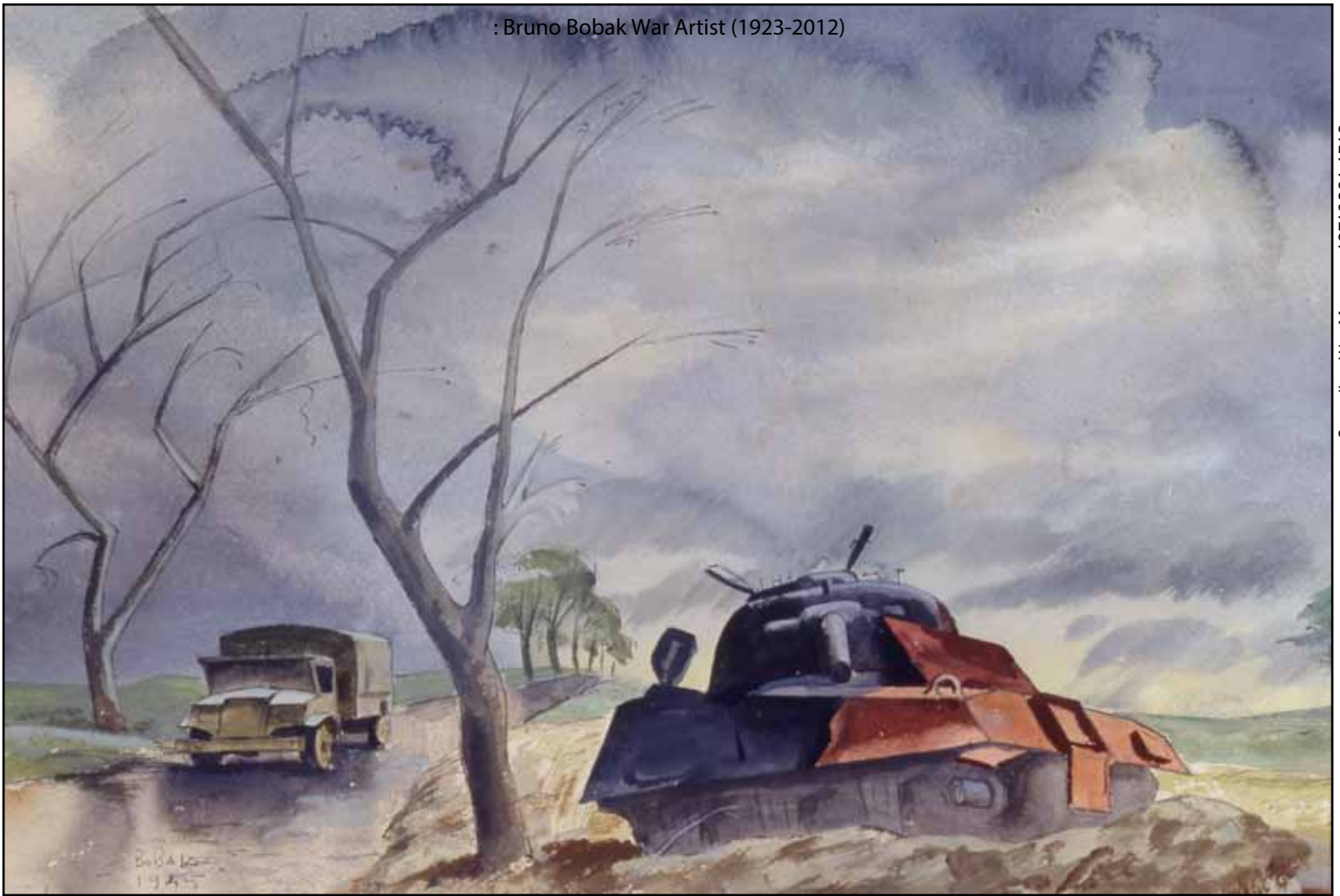
Canadian War Museum 20030257-020

Bobak carried a Voigtlander camera to capture scenes he would later paint. Top: A closeup of a destroyed German Jagdpanzer IV in front of a destroyed farmhouse. Above: A street scene of destroyed and burning buildings in a German town.

frame many and he makes extensive use of contrasts of dark and light. He also photographed the occasional dead body.¹⁶ Photographs provided him with subject matter he could revisit, the exigencies of war making a leisured study of a motif in the field sometimes challenging. On 8 May 1945, the war was over and Bobak returned to London. On 9 June, he handed in his Browning pistol and holster and on 2 July, he parted with his Voigtlander camera.¹⁷ It was now time to get on with painting canvases

based on all he had seen, experienced, sketched, and photographed.

Bobak submitted a list of nine works he wished to complete.¹⁸ A status report that references ten subjects still exists in his papers.¹⁹ It notes the status of each painting as "rough" or "completed." Provision of adequate working space seems to have been an occasional problem for Bobak. "Further shuffling of furniture & space arrangements for Lts. Bobak and Lamb [Bobak's future wife, war artist Molly Lamb]," notes one of the



Above: Bruno Bobak, *Sherman Tank Burned Out*, 1945.

Left: Bruno Bobak, *German Labour Filling in Crater*, 1945.

Below: A blurry photograph taken by Bobak that served as a study for painting at left.



weekly progress reports on 18 July 1945.²⁰

In August 1945, Bobak worked remarkably quickly to virtually complete *Friesoythe, Germany*²¹ in less than a week in August 1945.²² It

is based on an untitled watercolour also dated 1945.²³ In the painting, which includes a distant “Wasp” flame-thrower, Bobak has added a dead body in the foreground. A study for the body exists – whether

drawn on the spot, or a later sketch is not known.²⁴ Its inspiration could have been the photograph of a dead German soldier that Bobak had taken mentioned above although the angle of the body is reversed.²⁵

The artist seems to have found that the inclusion of dead animals in particular – the corpse present here is rare – added to the pathos of the scene. That he was moving from purely descriptive scenes to compositions of greater theatricality gives evidence of Bobak's growing confidence as an artist. The size of the foreground figure also suggests a developing interest in figurative material, a notable characteristic of his mature work.

The authorities clearly agreed that he had accomplished much for on 1 October 1945, Lieutenant-Colonel Sam Hughes recommended that Bobak be promoted to the rank of captain, which was approved.²⁶ On 10 December, Bruno Bobak married Molly Lamb. His best man was official RCAF war artist Aba Bayefsky. On 9 July 1946, Bobak was "Struck off Strength." But not before he had completed one more canvas.

In January and February 1945, he had been with Canadian units along the Maas River to the south and east of Nijmegen in the Netherlands. March saw the 4th Division taking part in the terrible fighting to pierce the Siegfried Line between the Maas and the Rhine rivers to seize a crossing place. He transformed these experiences into a painting, *The Maas River – February 1945*.²⁷ It was not completed until March 1946 according to the remnants of a label on its back. This late date may account for its more expressive qualities. Bobak's apprenticeship was coming to an end and back in Canada he was free of the controlling structures of CMHQ, London. The brightly lit sky and the drama of the exploding shells align this picture more closely with his postwar compositions. The figures are still somewhat pedestrian but there is a new and confident bravado on view.

What can one conclude about Bruno Bobak's war art? There is no doubt Bobak's development as an artist during the war was remarkable.



Bruno Bobak (right) married a fellow Canadian war artist, Molly Lamb (centre) on 10 December 1945. His best man was another war artist, Aba Bayefsky (left).

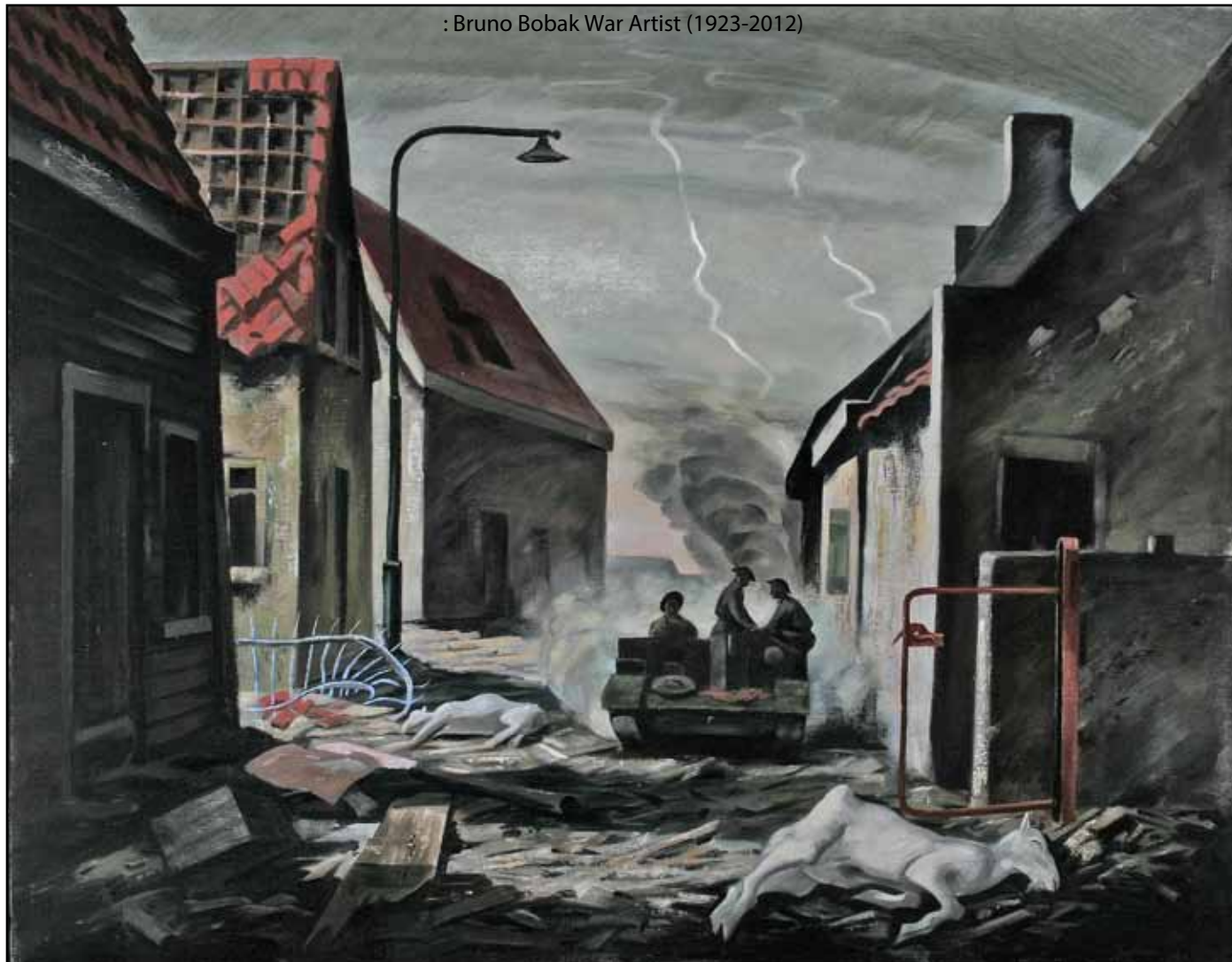
The lowly sapper became Captain Bobak and, certainly, by the time he came to paint *The Maas River* the artistic promise is visibly there. The young man who had submitted works to the 1944 Canadian Army art competition had grown up and set himself on the course he would follow for the rest of his professional life. The two years he spent as a war artist provided him with the equivalent of the art schooling he had never had. The contact he had with the other war artists, especially in London, provided inspiration, exposure, and the habit of discipline. Not only did the war art program save Bruno Bobak's life but it also allowed him to become a painter, which he continued to be for the next seven richly productive decades.²⁸

Notes

1. R.F. Wodehouse, handwritten notes for a lecture (?), undated, Canadian War Museum (CWM) artist file, Bruno Bobak.
2. Bruno Bobak to Andy Scott, 20 February 2004, photocopy in Bruno Bobak personal papers, CWM, George Metcalf Archival Collection, 20060088-002.
3. Donald Andrus interview with Bobak in Donald Andrus, "Bruno Bobak: Four Decades," contained in *Bruno Bobak: Selected Works, 1943–80* (Montreal: Sir George Williams Art Galleries, Concordia University, 1983), p.21.
4. Bobak to H.O. McCurry, 8 January 1944, National Gallery of Canada Archives,

Canadian War Artists, 5.42–B, Bobak, Bruno. Three were displayed: *Church Parade, Cross-Country Convoy, and Winter Scheme*. *Canadian Army Art Exhibition* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1944).

5. Bruno Bobak, *Cross-Country Convoy*, 1943, watercolour on paper, 30.5 x 57.2 cm, Hart House Collection, University of Toronto. Reproduced on p.91 of *Bruno Bobak: Selected Works*. An image of this work may be found online at <<http://bit.ly/TzIPRX>>.
6. See, for example, Pearl McCarthy, "New Canadian Soldier Wins Army's Art Prize," *Toronto Globe*, 14 September 1944, unpaginated, and "Army Artists' Work Shows Realism, Finesse and Vitality," *Toronto Star*, undated, unpaginated, CWM artist file, Bruno Bobak.
7. Richard Starnes, "War Through the Eyes of Two Artists," *Ottawa Citizen*, 6 October 1998, unpaginated, CWM artist file, Bruno Bobak.
8. The Canadian Military Headquarters (CMHQ) files in Library and Archives Canada (LAC) document this period in detail. See, for example, CMHQ, London, RG 24, Series C-2, War Artists – Policy, vol. 12, 184, file 1/Artists/1.
9. *List of Stores, Plant, Tools, Instruments, &c*, 28 June 1944, CWM, George Metcalf Archival Collection, 20060088-007.
10. *Still Life: Army Kit*, watercolour on paper, 37.5 x 48.3 cm, artist's estate. Illustrated on p.90 *Bruno Bobak: Selected Works*. An image of this work may be found online at <<http://bit.ly/UNojfw>>.
11. Eric Heathcote, Weekly Progress Report, 19 October 1944, LAC, Directorate of History, Kardex Series, RG 24, Series G-3-1-a, War Artists – Weekly Progress Reports, 1943–1945, vol. 20,299. "Lt. B. Bobak due in today, after an attachment of two weeks to the HQ. C.A.C.R.U. Group."
12. *Transfer of Stores*, 8 January 1945, CWM, George Metcalf Archival Collection, 20060088-007.



Bruno Bobak, *Dead Goats in Mepel*, 1945.

13. These monthly reports, both handwritten and typed are in CWM, George Metcalf Archival Collection, 20060088-004.
14. These photos are in the CWM Photo Archives, 20030257.
15. Compare, for example, CWM Photo Archives, 20030257-076 and Bruno Bobak, *German Labour Filling in a Crater*, 1945, watercolour on paper, 25.3 x 35.5 cm, CWM, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, 19710261-1479.
16. CWM Photo Archives, 20030257-006.
17. *Issue and Receipt Voucher*, 2 July 1945, CWM, George Metcalf Archival Collection, 20060088-007.
18. B.J. Bobak, *Comments on Memorandum dated 2 June 45*, 26 June 1945, CWM, George Metcalf Archival Collection, 20060088-005.
19. *Information Regarding Development of Oil Paintings by Lt. Bobak*, undated, CWM, George Metcalf Archival Collection, 20060088-005.
20. Jack Shadbolt, Weekly Progress Report, 19 July 1945, LAC, Directorate of History Kardex Series, RG 24, Series G-3-1-a, War Artists – Weekly Progress Reports, 1943–1945, vol.20,299.
21. Bruno Bobak, *Friesoythe, Germany*, 1945, oil on canvas, 122.5 x 102 cm, CWM, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, 19710261-1477.
22. Jack Shadbolt, Weekly Progress Report, 9 August 1945, LAC, Directorate of History Kardex Series, RG 24, Series G-3-1-a, War Artists – Weekly Progress Reports, 1943–1945, vol.20,299. Bobak is “blocking” on 3 August and “completing details” on 8 August.
23. Bruno Bobak, *Untitled*, 1945, watercolour on paper, 49.2 x 34.2 cm, CWM, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, 19710261-1542. The cataloguing suggests that the sketch may be of Cleve. This is possible if the finished oil is not of Friesoythe.
24. Bruno Bobak, *Dead German Soldier*, undated, carbon pencil on paper, 38.4 x 28 cm, CWM, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, 19710261-1464.
25. CWM Photo Archives, 20030257-006.
26. Lieutenant-Colonel S.H.S. Hughes, *Memorandum*, LAC, CMHQ, London, RG 24, Series C-2, War Artists – Policy, vol. 12184, file 1, Artists, 1, p. 264.
27. Bruno Bobak, *The Maas River – February 1945*, 1946, oil on canvas, 122 x 101.8 cm, CWM, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, 19710261-1488.
28. This obituary is based on work the author completed for Chapter 2, “The War Years,” in Bernard Riordon, ed., *Bruno Bobak: The Full Palette* (Fredericton: Goose Lane Editions and the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, 2006).

Laura Brandon is Historian, Art and War, at the Canadian War Museum. She is the author of *Art or Memorial? The Forgotten History of Canada's War Art* (University of Calgary Press, 2006).