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Molly Lamb Bobak

Official War Artist (1920-2014)

AMBER LLOYDLANGSTON

Abstract: This article marks the passing, earlier this year, of Molly Lamb Bobak, Canada's first woman war artist. It recounts her art-steeped upbringing and education in British Columbia, her service in the Canadian Women's Army Corps, and her long struggle to be named an official war artist, an appointment she held in 1945-1946.

Résumé : Cet article fait suite au décès, au début de l'année, de Molly Lamb Bobak, la première femme à être nommée artiste de guerre du Canada. Il traite de son éducation et de sa formation artistique en Colombie-Britannique, de son service au sein du Service féminin de l'Armée canadienne et de son long combat pour faire partie des artistes de guerre officiels, une nomination qu'elle a obtenue en 1945-1946.

“LAMB’S FATE REVEALED! 2nd/Lieutenant Reels in Street! To Be First Woman War Artist!” So reads Molly Lamb’s final entry in her illustrated war diary, *W110278: The Personal War Records of Private Lamb M.* It marked the end of her three-year struggle to become an official war artist, a struggle that had begun almost as soon as she enlisted in the Canadian Women’s Army Corps in November 1942 and which ended with her May 1945 appointment as an official Canadian Women’s Army Corps (CWAC) war artist.

The daughter of Harold Mortimer-Lamb and his housekeeper, Mary Williams, Molly Joan Lamb Bobak was born on 25 November 1920 on Lulu Island, in the estuary of the Fraser River outside Vancouver. Immersed in the art world of the time through her father, a patron and friend of artists including A.Y. Jackson, Emily Carr,

Frederick Varley and Lawren S. Harris, Lamb Bobak began her own art studies as a teenager. She attended the Vancouver School of Art and while she did not enjoy the first year there, everything changed when artist Jack Shadbolt became her teacher during her second year of studies. Lamb Bobak had found the “right teacher for her” and flourished.¹ She graduated in 1942 and not long after, joined the CWACS, wanting to do something for the war like so many at that time.

After an initial period of culture shock, Molly Lamb came to love the army:

All your needs were looked after – dentist, doctor, clothes, food. Of course there was discipline in the women’s army ... And you had to do a bunch of marching around. It was a giggle really. I met all these different Canadian women with foreign names ... I had adventures, like going to New York and hitchhiking in trucks. I mean the war was serious, it was terrible, but for me the army was a wonderful place.²

Serving with the CWACS was about camaraderie. She expressed an enduring affection for the women she served with: “I was thrown in with girls from all different ethnic backgrounds ... Meeting all those different girls and having to live twelve to a room, I can honestly say that there wasn’t one girl I didn’t like. I was so relieved to know that we were all the same.”³

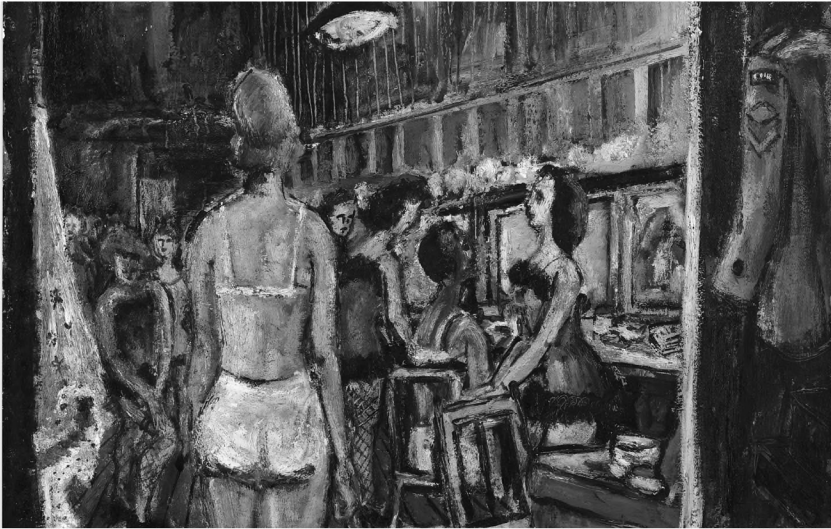
From her enlistment, Lamb Bobak began a unique diary in which she not only wrote about what happened to her and her fellow CWACS as they trained, worked and travelled, but drew and painted their experiences, as well. Designing the diary like a newspaper with headlines, editorials, special supplements and interviews, Lamb Bobak chronicled CWAC life, poking gentle fun at her own mishaps and at the army in general. And the women with whom she served were her first audience for Private Lamb pinned her broadsheets to the bulletin board so that “everyone would have a chuckle over it.”⁴

¹ Brigid Grant, “An Interview with Molly Lamb Bobak,” *ArtsAtlantic* vol.12, no.3 (Winter 1995), 37.

² Grant, “An Interview with Molly Lamb Bobak,” 37.

³ Brian Foss, “Introduction,” *Molly Lamb Bobak: A Retrospective* (Regina: MacKenzie Art Gallery, 1993), 109.

⁴ Lora Senechal Carney, “Molly Lamb Bobak as Wartime Portraitist,” unpublished paper presented at the Canadian Women Artists History Initiative Conference,



Dressing Room. No one captured the female realm like Molly Lamb Bobak, as illustrated in this painting of Canadian Women's Army Corps entertainers in their dressing room. [Canadian War Museum 19710261-1600]

After failing an NCO training course at St. Anne-de-Bellevue, in March 1943 Private Lamb was sent to Toronto to take a drafting course. She understood this training opportunity to be an effort on the part of a superior officer to give her a chance to exercise her artistic ability. Though well-intentioned, the drafting course was a bad fit. As Lamb Bobak later said, "I didn't even know what a ruler was, so I wasted time."⁵ And yet she still considered it a lucky break because it allowed her to visit A.Y. Jackson, not only an old friend of her father's but also an advisor on the newly-established Canadian War Artists Selection Committee, the body created to choose the lucky few to be official war artists. With her illustrated war diary in one hand and a bottle of wine in the other, she met Jackson and the two became firm friends. As Lamb Bobak later recognized, he believed in her implicitly and wanted her to have the opportunity to work as an official war artist. He introduced her to the editor of the magazine *New World* from whom she received a commission to make a series of six drawings illustrating CWAC life. And, with Jackson's support, Lamb

Concordia University, 5 May 2012.

⁵ Grant, "An Interview with Molly Lamb Bobak," 37.

Bobak began to correspond with National Gallery Director and Chair of the War Artists Selection Committee, H.O. McCurry, about her desire to be a war artist. McCurry quickly became a supporter as well. While she did not become an official war artist in 1943, she did receive the first in a series of art-related postings.

Transferred out of the drafting course, Lamb Bobak first went to the Trades Training offices in Ottawa where she was tasked with drawing universal joints, pinions and rear axles. There followed yet another setback. After seven months as a lance-corporal, in July 1943, Lamb Bobak was demoted to private for returning 48 hours late from a furlough in Vancouver. Even worse, she was transferred to the Canadian Army Trades School in Hamilton, Ontario, to draw meat-cutting charts for the CWAC School of Cookery. Later she reminisced that this posting “was really hell. They had me drawing things like sides of beef. They were trying to make me useful.”⁶

The year 1944 had better things in store for Lamb Bobak. In January, she was reinstated to the rank of lance-corporal. In February, unknown to her, A.Y. Jackson wrote to H.O. McCurry, director of the National Gallery, to praise her work: “Molly Lamb’s stuff looks fine and I am all for giving her an opportunity to do war records. I know of no one in the country who is doing that kind of thing as well.”⁷ Public approval came in March, when Lamb Bobak learned that her painting, *Meal Parade, Hamilton Trades School*, had placed second in the National Gallery’s Canadian Army Art Show. She did not know it then but in 1946 she would marry the first place winner and the second-to-last person to be named an official war artist, Bruno Bobak. In April 1944, Lamb Bobak was transferred again, this time to Toronto where she was assigned to the Canadian Army Show.⁸ She described her responsibilities to McCurry: “My job is not only to design [300 different costumes and 40 sets] but also to select all the cloth, bicker with the Department of Munitions and Supplies, painting the costumes we cannot buy, and making chalk plans and painting the sets as well.”⁹ In May 1944, Lamb Bobak learned that

⁶ Marty Klinkenberg, “New Brunswick’s First Lady of Art,” *Telegraph Journal*, 25 September 2010, S6.

⁷ National Gallery of Canada (NGC), 5.42-L, Canadian War Artists, Lamb, Molly, “Letter from A.Y. Jackson to H.O. McCurry,” 16 February 1944.

⁸ Foss, “Introduction,” 95–97.

⁹ NGC, 5.42-L, Canadian War Artists, Lamb, Molly, “Letter from Molly Lamb to H.O. McCurry,” undated.



Molly Lamb Bobak (middle) poses with her husband, Bruno Bobak (right) on their wedding day. [Canadian War Museum 20040082-045]

the Canadian War Artists Selection Committee had recommended that she be named an official war artist. While she waited a year for the formal appointment, the committee began to pay for her painting supplies and encouraged her to paint CWAC life provided that it did not interfere with her CWAC duties. The National Gallery subsequently purchased nine of her works for \$500. An ecstatic Lamb Bobak wrote to McCurry to explain that “\$400 [has] gone into the new Victory Loan and part of the \$100 left, is going into a gigantic party for the two platoons of cadets. So everyone is feeling just as elated as I am.”¹⁰ She also went back to Ste. Anne-de-Bellevue and completed training to advance to the rank of second lieutenant. An officer, she finally became an official war artist in May 1945, the only woman and the last person to be appointed to the position.¹¹

The delay in her appointment was due to a real reluctance to make a woman an official war artist. As Colonel A.F. Duguid, director of

¹⁰ NGC, 5.42-L, Canadian War Artists, Lamb, Molly, “Letter from Lamb to McCurry,” 19 April 1945. To put these sums in perspective, \$500 in 1944 is worth \$6,860 today and Molly would have spent nearly \$1,400 on her party. See Bank of Canada Inflation Calculator: <<http://www.bankofcanada.ca/rates/related/inflation-calculator/>>.

¹¹ Foss, “Introduction,” 98.



Canteen, Nijmegen, Holland. Molly Lamb Bobak was posted to Holland after V-E (Victory in Europe) Day, and painted the tasks and experiences of female soldiers overseas. [Canadian War Museum 19710261-1561]

the Army Historical Section and the army's representative on the Canadian War Artists Selection Committee, stated, "[women's] appointment was not desirable as the artists were at the scene of combat."¹² With the war in Europe over, this obstacle disappeared. Still another one appeared: the army was permitted only 10 war artists and its roster was complete. Indeed, according to army bureaucrats, in May 1945 Lamb Bobak was not an official war artist. In a June 1945 letter to editor of *Canadian Art*, the deputy minister of national defence asked that the magazine correct a mistake: "With reference to the list of official War Artists (Army) contained in *Canadian Art*, V II, no. 4, April-May 1945, it is desired to point out that Lieut. Jack L. Shadbolt and Lieut. Molly Lamb are not official War Artists ... Molly Lamb is a CWAC Officer who is being temporarily employed for eight weeks to depict CWAC activities, after which she will return to CWAC duties unless a vacancy for a War Artist should occur during that time."¹³ It would appear that when T.R. MacDonald

¹² Foss, "Introduction," 99.

¹³ NGC, 5.42-L, Canadian War Artists, Lamb, Molly, "Letter from Deputy Minister, National Defence to Editor, *Canadian Art*," 22 June 1945.



Private Roy. Molly Lamb Bobak sketched Private Roy several times in a canteen in Halifax, Nova Scotia, before undertaking the finished portrait. [Canadian War Museum 19710261-1626]

ceased being a war artist in September 1945, the necessary vacancy occurred, allowing Molly Lamb Bobak to be an official war artist.

Lamb Bobak travelled to Britain in June 1945 and from there, she went to Europe and drew and painted in the Netherlands, Germany, and Belgium “for the six of the richest and most exciting weeks” of her life.¹⁴ As a war artist she was tasked with the “portrayal of significant events, scenes, phases and episodes in the experience of the Canadian Armed Forces, especially those which cannot be rendered in any other way.”¹⁵ She had a vehicle, a driver, and with those instructions, “complete freedom to go and do whatever” she liked. As she wrote to McCurry, “And I can tell you I was going and doing about 24 hours of every day.”¹⁶

She produced more than 115 works through to 1946 which depict CWACS at work in canteens, laundries, kitchens and offices as well as

¹⁴ NGC, 5.42-L, Canadian War Artists, Lamb, Molly, “Letter from Lamb to McCurry,” 5 November 1945.

¹⁵ Quoted in Anja N. Werner, “Brush, Canvas, Paint, and Uniform: Malak Karsh’s Portrait Photographs of the Second World War Canadian War Artists,” *Canadian Military History* 21, no.2 (Spring 2012), 58–68.

¹⁶ NGC, 5.42-L, Canadian War Artists, Lamb, Molly, “Letter from Lamb to McCurry,” 5 November 1945.



Gas Drill. A group of women try on black gas masks. All looking in different directions, the women appear curious but not sure what to do with the masks. [Canadian War Museum 19710261-1603]

at rest in barracks and parks. She also painted and drew some of the destruction that she witnessed as she travelled around war-torn Europe. Lamb Bobak did not feel her subject was dramatic and she felt that her work was almost illustration.¹⁷ Art critics have thought differently.

In a review of the exhibition, “Molly Lamb Bobak: A Retrospective,” an unnamed author comments upon the “interesting level of anger in Lamb Bobak’s war work.” Musing about the source of this anger, this critic wondered if it stemmed from her “invisibility and the menial chores she and other women were expected to perform.” To this person, Lamb Bobak’s “subjects seem despairing, stressed-out, ground up in futile milling actions. She uses roly-poly shapes, informal moments, slap-happy compositions and comic ingredients to disguise material which was fundamentally critical of the army’s constant sidelining of women.”¹⁸ Others see instead a cheerful optimism in her work as well as respect and affection for the

¹⁷ Jo Anne Bouchard, “Molly Lamb et Bruno Bobak: Peintres de Guerre,” *Vie des Arts* no.158, 33.

¹⁸ “Review of ‘Molly Lamb Bobak: A Retrospective,’” Memorial University Art Gallery, St. John’s, *ArtsAtlantic* vol.13, no.3 (Winter 1995), 9.

women Lamb Bobak depicted. In Brian Foss's view, Lamb Bobak "poked fun at stereotypically feminine concerns such as fashion." As much as the Canadian Women's Army Corps wanted to emphasize the inherent femininity of its members, Lamb Bobak's art work did not communicate this message. Indeed, in works like "Private Roy," she disrupts gender expectations. While undeniably beautiful, Private Roy is not fragile, coy or frivolous.¹⁹

No matter how critics interpret Lamb Bobak's war paintings, they are a valuable and beautiful record of the contributions of an important group of women, more than 22,000 strong, whose service during the war was pivotal to Canada's war effort.

Married and pregnant, Molly Lamb Bobak was discharged from the Canadian Women's Army Corps as medically unfit in May 1946. Once Bruno Bobak was also discharged, the couple first moved to Vancouver, British Columbia. When Bruno Bobak became artist-in-residence at the University of New Brunswick in 1960, the young family moved to Fredericton. There, Lamb Bobak had a flourishing career as an artist and teacher. Her work is in collections across the country. Molly Lamb Bobak died on 1 March 2014.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Assistant Historian at the Canadian War Museum since 2004, Dr. **Amber Lloydlangston** helped produce the museum's permanent galleries. She has curated *Peace - The Exhibition*, *Stitches in Time*, and *Two Views*. She has also taught at the Institute of Women's Studies, University of Ottawa.

¹⁹ Foss, "Introduction," 112-113.