

NOVEMBER 10, 2023

# ART AND REMEMBRANCE THE CANVAS OF WAR

Two years ago, the Art Canada Institute published the groundbreaking and comprehensive *War Art in Canada* by Dr. Laura Brandon, CM. In honour of Remembrance Day tomorrow, we asked her to guest-edit this week's newsletter.



Remembering war through art has a long history: In Canada the diverse range of works resulting from conflict date back hundreds of years and reflect our cultural, military, political, and social evolution. One feature that unites war art in this country is that it has always involved people of all genders and ethnicities. It can be made by anyone and take virtually any form, including painting, sculpture, graphics, film, photography, craft, textiles, and carving. The examples below, drawn from *War Art in Canada* (available [online in English and French](#) and in a [print edition format](#)), also illustrate what unites the war artists themselves: a shared commitment to creating art that bears witness to victory, loss, service, and sacrifice. With their astonishing work, they invite us to pause, give thanks, and remember.

**Dr. Laura Brandon, CM**

Author of *War Art in Canada*, published by the Art Canada Institute

## WAR EXPLOIT ROBE

*probably Niitsitapi (Blackfoot)*



War Exploit Robe, probably Niitsitapi (Blackfoot), c.1830–50, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto.

Before the arrival of Europeans to North America, Indigenous communities stretched across the continent—as did their conflicts. This magnificent war exploit robe is one of just a few Indigenous war artifacts made of perishable materials (in this case, most likely elk skin) that have survived from early contact times. The garment is covered in painted images of stick figures as well as of feather bonnets, horses, arrows, quivers, guns, shields, and bows. Functioning as the autobiographical record of one accomplished warrior, its twenty-one vignettes depict more than eighty war deeds.

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## CANADA AND THE CALL

*by J.E.H. MacDonald*



J.E.H. MacDonald, *Canada and the Call*, 1914, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa.

Soon after the First World War broke out in 1914, J.E.H. MacDonald (1873–1932), a talented graphic designer and future member of the Group of Seven, created the emblematic *Canada and the Call*. Canada, represented by a woman dressed in a white robe emblazoned with French fleurs-de-lis and English red roses, holds the British flag aloft. Circling her head is a victory wreath of bronze maple leaves, which, in their living incarnation, also flutter behind her against a deep blue sea. In the distance, ships firing guns defend the white cliffs of southeast England. The figure is supported by agricultural tools: the form of a farmer and his plough; behind them march soldiers paired with the Red Ensign, the Canadian flag at the time.

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## 29TH INFANTRY BATTALION ADVANCING OVER “NO MAN’S LAND”

*by William Ivor Castle*



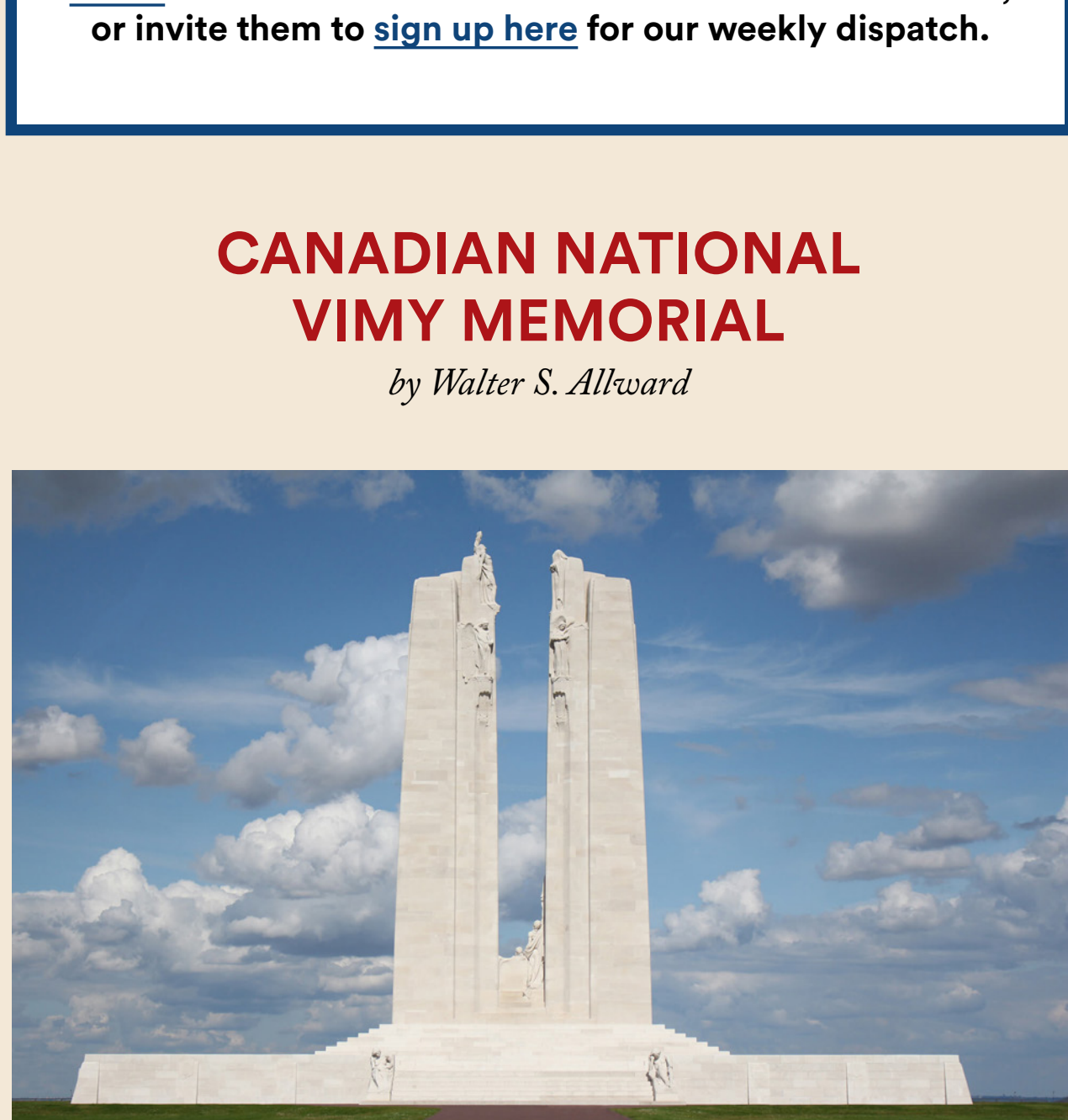
William Ivor Castle, *29th Infantry Battalion Advancing over “No Man’s Land” through the German Barbed Wire and Heavy Fire during the Battle of Vimy Ridge*, 1917, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

*The Taking of Vimy Ridge* by William Ivor Castle (1877–1947), a former employee of the English *Daily Mirror*, is made from parts of three battlefield negatives, two of which have survived to tell their story and are known as *29th Infantry Battalion Advancing over “No Man’s Land” through the German Barbed Wire and Heavy Fire during the Battle of Vimy Ridge*. The first negative (the missing one) would have shown the explosions in the sky. Of the others, one depicts a half-buried shell behind which soldiers cross a pock-marked battlefield, and the other shows two bodies lying on churned-up terrain with soldiers in the distant background. A feature of the combined images—the scale of the corpses—betrays Castle’s manipulation of the photographic medium: the dead are too large in relation to the figures crossing the battlefield behind them.

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## FOR WHAT?

*by Frederick Varley*



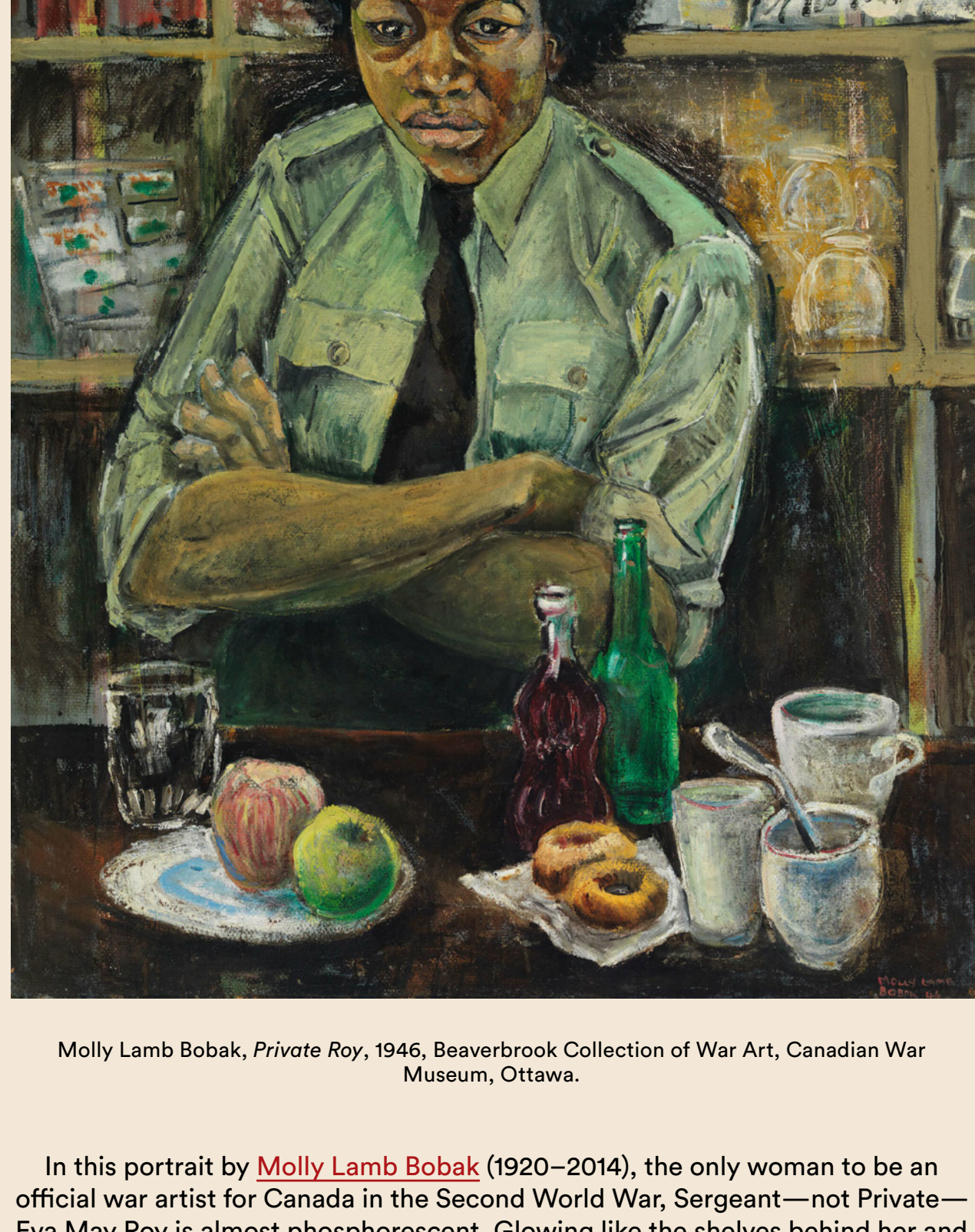
Frederick Varley, *For What?*, 1918, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa.

In *For What?*, 1918, by future Group of Seven member Frederick Varley (1881–1969), a single gravedigger takes a break from his labours, a cart full of bodies beside him. In this painting, Varley brings together horrific scenes he witnessed as an official war artist: rows of crosses, mutilated bodies on muddy battlefields, dead horses’ bones, and shells whistling overhead. Although he does not refer to this particular painting by title, after he completed it, Varley wrote to his wife, Maud: “A photograph would be horrible of the same subjects because it would be deadly literal—I have escaped that and attained something worse—hopelessness and to get it I have had to live it.”

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## WOMEN MAKING SHELLS

*by Henrietta Mabel May*



Henrietta Mabel May, *Women Making Shells*, 1919, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art.

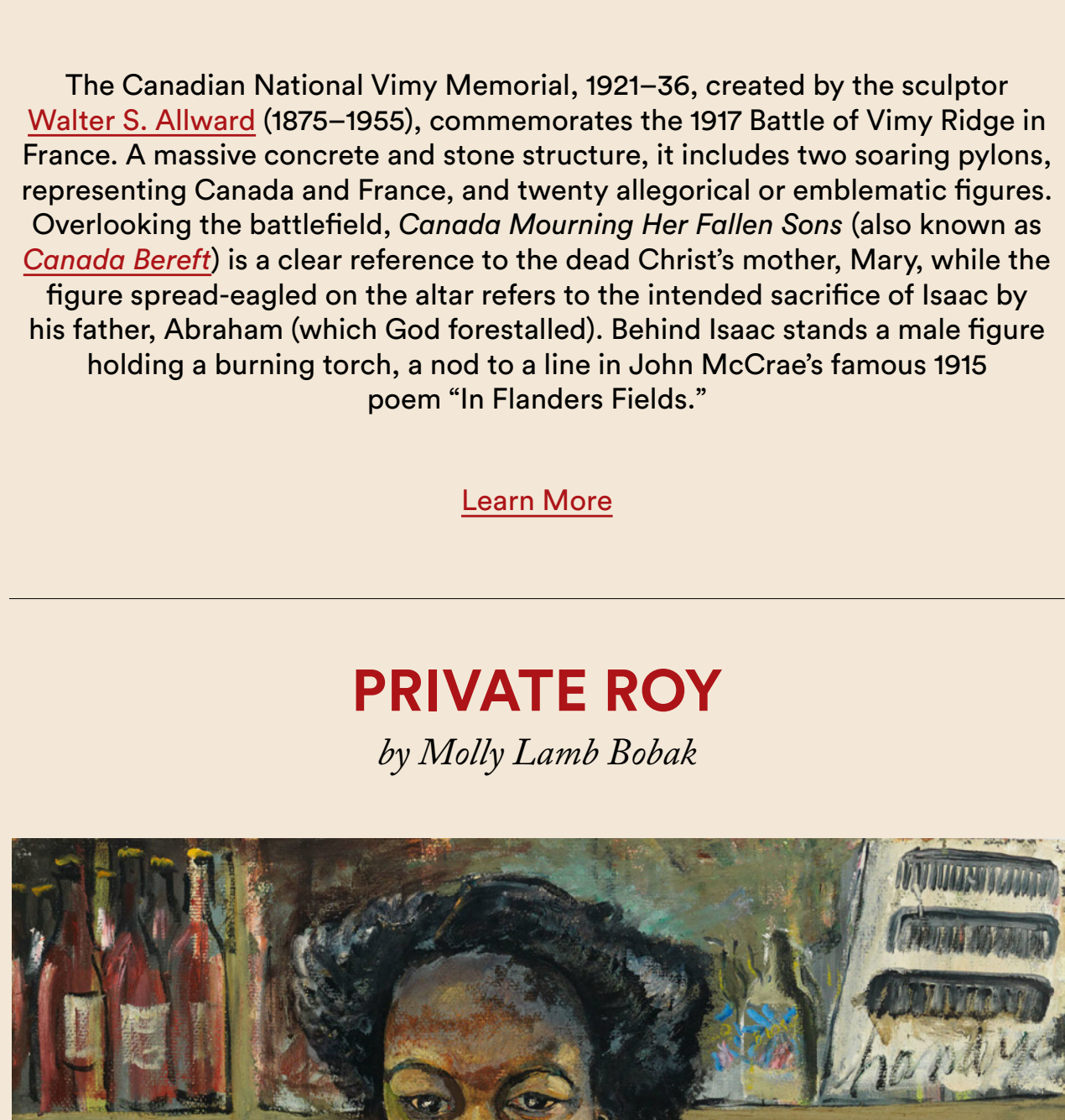
The large and atmospheric canvas *Women Making Shells*, 1919, by Henrietta Mabel May (1877–1971) depicts a noisy, machinery-filled shell factory in Montreal. Although many women were employed in industrial work before the war, roughly 12,000 women entered the munitions workforce following its declaration. These workers were depicted frequently, appearing in film, photography, and print propaganda as well as art. Their jobs were dangerous, owing to the chemicals used in shell manufacturing. One such chemical, trinitrotoluene, led to toxic jaundice and turned skin yellow, altered hair colour, and caused liver damage.

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## CANADIAN NATIONAL VIMY MEMORIAL

*by Walter S. Allward*



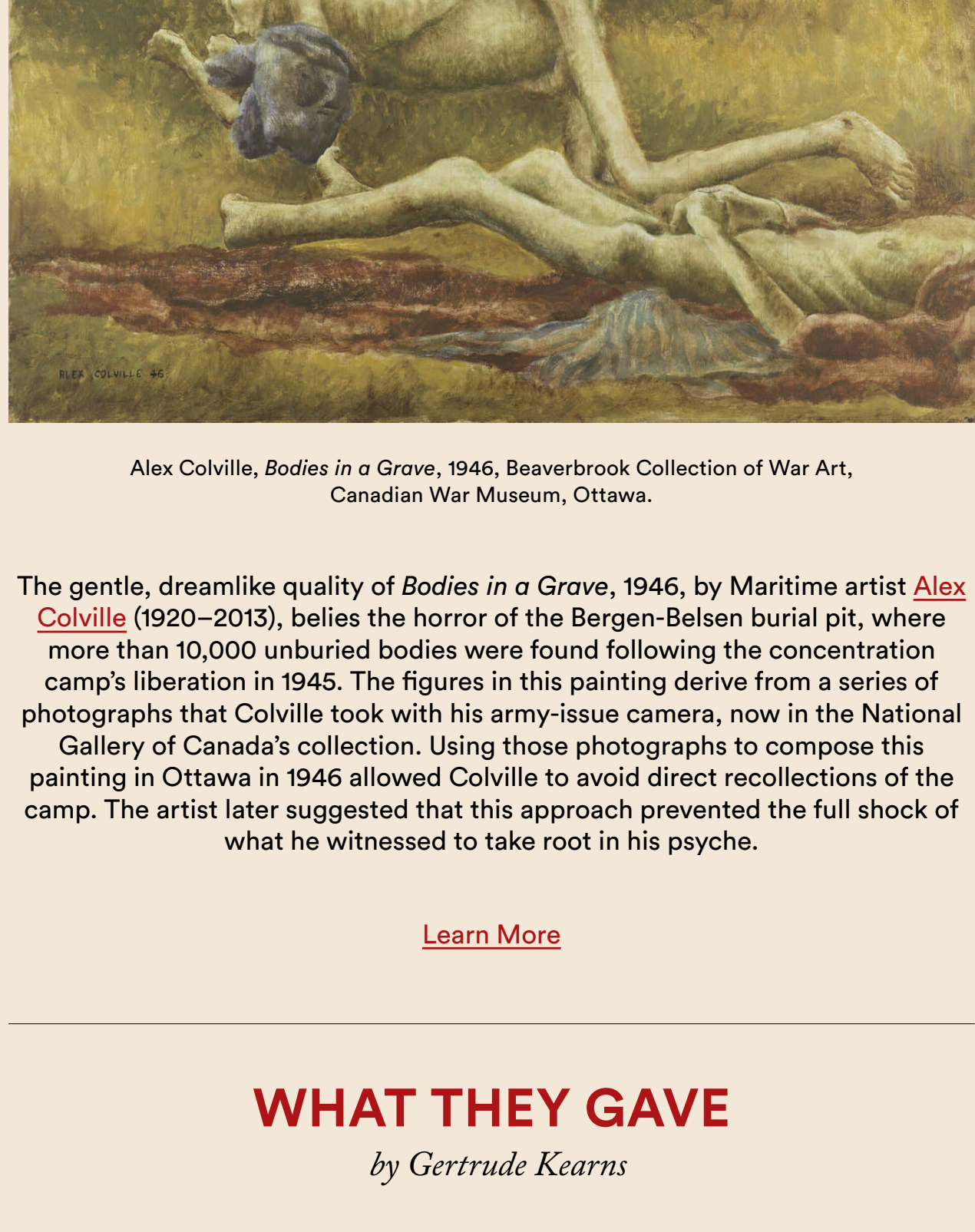
Walter S. Allward, Canadian National Vimy Memorial, 1921–36, Vimy Ridge, France, Veterans Affairs Canada.

The Canadian National Vimy Memorial, 1921–36, created by the sculptor [Walter S. Allward](#) (1875–1955), commemorates the 1917 Battle of Vimy Ridge in France. A massive concrete and stone structure, it includes two soaring pylons, representing Canada and France, and twenty allegorical or emblematic figures. Overlooking the battlefield, *Canada Mourning Her Fallen Sons* (also known as *Canada Bereft*) is a clear reference to the dead Christ’s mother, Mary, while the figure spread-eagled on the altar refers to the intended sacrifice of Isaac by his father, Abraham (which God forestalled). Behind Isaac stands a male figure holding a burning torch, a nod to a line in John McCrae’s famous 1915 poem “In Flanders Fields.”

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## PRIVATE ROY

*by Molly Lamb Bobak*



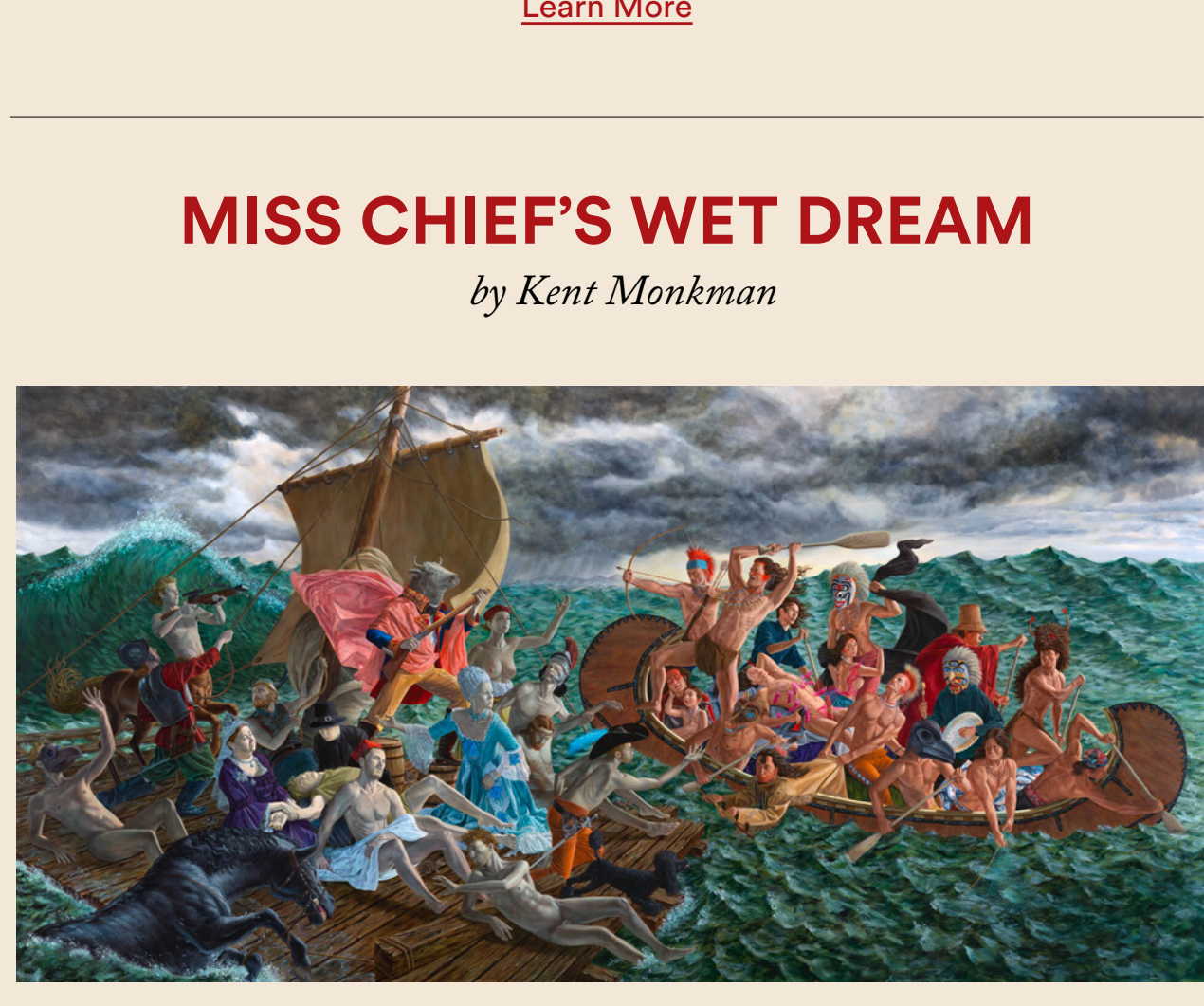
Molly Lamb Bobak, *Private Roy*, 1946, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa.

In this portrait by [Molly Lamb Bobak](#) (1920–2014), the only woman to be an official war artist for Canada in the Second World War, Sergeant—not Private—Eva May Roy is almost phosphorescent. Glowing like the shelves behind her and the luminous plates and mugs on the canteen counter, she looks past the viewer, her stare resonant with experience and perhaps fear. Very few Canadian soldiers of colour were depicted as part of the Second World War Canadian War Records art program. Those that were are usually impossible to trace because of their often lesser rank, the absence of their full name, and the ongoing lack of access to Second World War military records.

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## BODIES IN A GRAVE

*by Alex Colville*



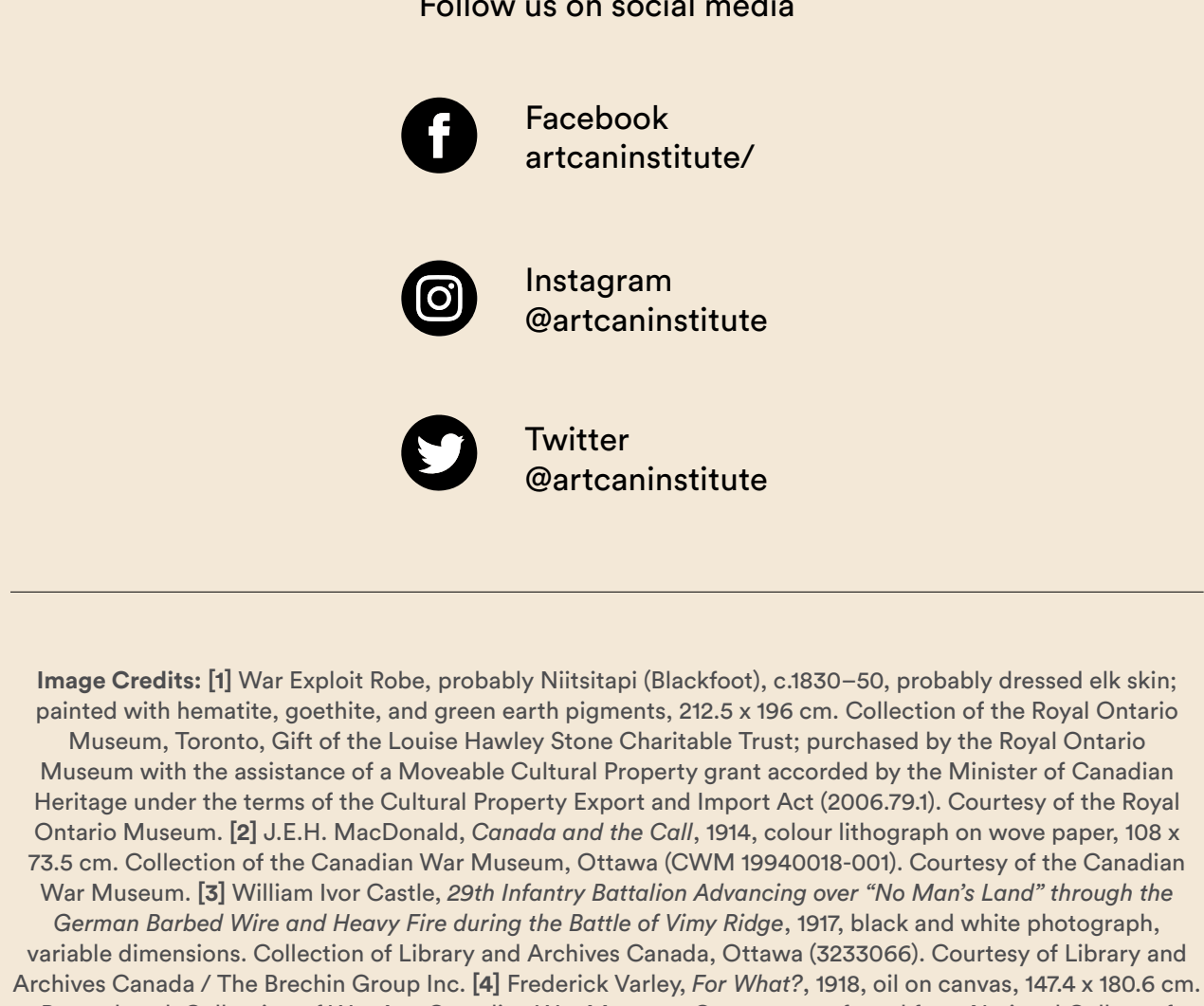
Alex Colville, *Bodies in a Grave*, 1946, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa.

The gentle, dreamlike quality of *Bodies in a Grave*, 1946, by Maritime artist [Alex Colville](#) (1920–2013), belies the horror of the Bergen-Belsen burial pit, where more than 10,000 unburied bodies were found following the concentration camp’s liberation in 1945. The figures in this painting derive from a series of photographs that Colville took with his army-issue camera, now in the National Gallery of Canada’s collection. Using those photographs to compose this painting in 1946 allowed Colville to avoid direct recollections of the camp. The artist later suggested that this approach prevented the full shock of what he witnessed to take root in his psyche.

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## WHAT THEY GAVE

*by Gertrude Kearns*



Gertrude Kearns, *What They Gave*, 2006, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa.

*What They Gave*, 2006, is a personal response to the traumatic events that Gertrude Kearns (b.1950) witnessed in 2006 in Kandahar, Afghanistan, as an embedded artist with the Canadian Army. A suicide bomber blew up the vehicle carrying Canadian diplomat Glyn Berry, with whom she had just had breakfast. Berry was killed at the scene, and three Canadian soldiers were severely injured, one of them losing a leg. Kearns’s unprecedented access to the medical facilities to which the wounded were taken inspired this work. Expressing her suppressed sadness and volatility of emotion gesturally in paint, she completed the composition in Toronto nearly nine months after she returned from Afghanistan.

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## MISS CHIEF’S WET DREAM

*by Kent Monkman*



Kent Monkman, *Miss Chief’s Wet Dream*, 2018, Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax.

*Miss Chief’s Wet Dream*, 2018, by Cree artist [Kent Monkman](#) (b.1965) reminds us of the origins of our longest-running conflict: the relationship between the colonizers of this land and its Indigenous peoples. Representing European culture, history, and religion, the raft to the left is populated with the figures of Queen Victoria, Marie Antoinette, Liberty, Christ taken from the Cross, a conquistador, a puritan, and a priest. Powerful figures representing Indigenous nations fill the canoe to the right. Their gestures hint at the known consequences of this fateful encounter: some figures welcome the Europeans, some ignore them, and others violently express their displeasure.

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