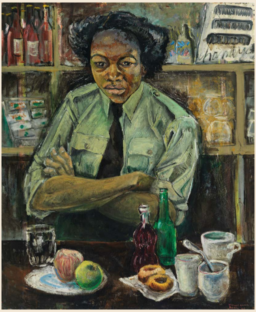
ART CANADA INSTITUTE | INSTITUT DE L'ART CANADIEN

NOVEMBER 7, 2025

WOMEN, WAR, AND REMEMBRANCE
MOLLY LAMB BOBAK'S VISION

Molly Lamb Bobak was Canada's first official woman war artist. Her paintings expanded our country's memory of war, highlighting women's service, community, and lived experience.

Second Lieutenant Molly Lamb Bobak of the Canadian Women's Army Corps, July 12, 1945, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

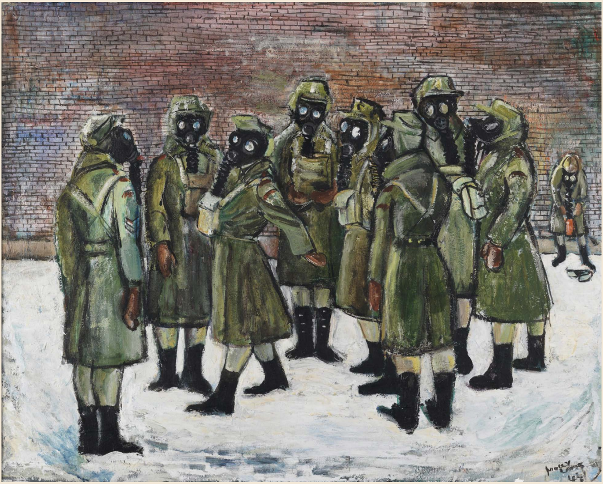


Molly Lamb Bobak, *Private Roy, Canadian Women's Army Corps*, 1946, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa.

Remembrance Day is a time to honour sacrifice and also to ask whose stories are told in our national memory. In her vibrant depictions of the activities of the Canadian Women's Army Corps, Molly Lamb Bobak (1920–2014)—the first woman appointed an official Canadian war artist—captured not only duty but also camaraderie, humanity, and even humour. As Michelle Gewurtz writes in her Art Canada Institute publication *Molly Lamb Bobak: Life & Work*, "Bobak gave visual form to the experience of women whose wartime service had rarely been recognized in art." The artist's work broadened the scope of wartime memory and secured her place as a vital figure in Canadian art and history. This week, we revisit Bobak's legacy and explore the role her art plays in shaping how Canada sees its past.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

BECOMING CANADA'S FIRST WOMAN WAR ARTIST

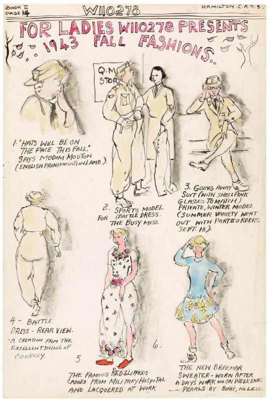


Molly Lamb Bobak, *Gas Drill*, 1944, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa.

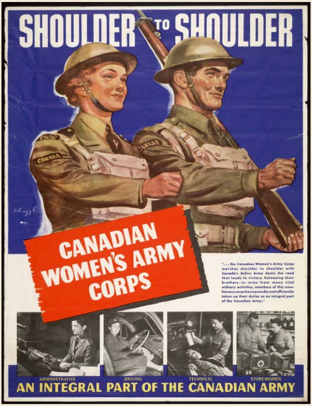
Bobak enlisted in the Canadian Women's Army Corps (CWAC) in 1942, joining thousands of women who stepped into new responsibilities during the Second World War. In 1945, she was appointed an official Canadian war artist—the first woman in that role. Her painting *Gas Drill*, 1944, depicts CWAC members in technical training, their masked faces emphasizing discipline, unity, and collective readiness. For Bobak, such moments also conveyed a deep sense of belonging: "It was a comfort to understand that basically we are all alike. Maybe the CWAC uniform had something to do with it, or all that marching we had to do together."

Read more in ACI's
Molly Lamb Bobak: Life & Work by Michelle Gewurtz

REAL WOMEN, REAL WORK


BOOK II
PAGE 14
W110278
HAMILTON .C.A.T.S.
FOR LADIES W110278 PRESENTS
1943 FALL FASHIONS..
Q.M
STOR
1. "HATS WILL BE ON THE FACE THIS FALL," SAYS MODOM MOUTON (ENGLISH PRONOUNCIATION LAMB).
2. SPORTS MODEL (BATTLE DRESS. FOR THE BUSY MISS.
3. GOING AWAY SUIT (WITH SHELL PINK GLASSES TO MATCH) PRIVATE, WINTER MODEL (SUMMER VARIETY WENT OUT WITH PART II ORDERS SEPT. 13).
4 - BATTLE DRESS - REAR VIEW. -A CREATION FROM THE EXCELLENT SCHOOL OF COOKERY.
5
THE FAMOUS RED SLIPPERS CADGED FROM MILITARY HOSPITAL AND LACQUERED AT WORK
6.
THE NEW BRAEMAR SWEATER - WORN AFTER A DAYS WORK AND ON WEEKENDS — PEARLS BY BIRKS, NO LESS.

Molly Lamb Bobak, “For Ladies W110278 Presents 1943 Fall Fashions,” 1943, from *W110278: The Personal War Records of Private Lamb, M.*, 1942–45, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.


SHOULDER TO SHOULDER
CWAC
CANADA
CANADA
CANADIAN WOMEN'S ARMY CORPS
"... the Canadian Women's Army Corps marches shoulder to shoulder with Canada's Active Army down the road that leads to victory. Releasing their brothers-in-arms from many vital military activities, members of this now-famous corps have proudly and efficiently taken up their duties as an integral part of the Canadian Army."
ADMINISTRATIVE
DRIVING
TECHNICAL
STOREWOMEN
AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE CANADIAN ARMY

“Shoulder to Shoulder—Canadian Women’s Army Corps,” a recruiting poster for the Canadian Women’s Army Corps, 1944, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

During the war, recruitment posters like “Shoulder to Shoulder,” 1944, polished the perception of servicewomen, casting them as neat, smiling, and composed. These images reassured the public that military service would not compromise femininity, even as women took on demanding tasks. In her illustrated diary page “For Ladies W110278 Presents 1943 Fall Fashions,” 1943, Bobak offered a different view. Mimicking the format of a fashion advertisement, the page features “models” displaying regulation uniforms, battledress, and red slippers improvised from hospital materials. With wit and keen observation, Bobak replaced propaganda with lived experience, shifting the visual record of the war towards the honest labour of servicewomen.

Read more in ACI’s
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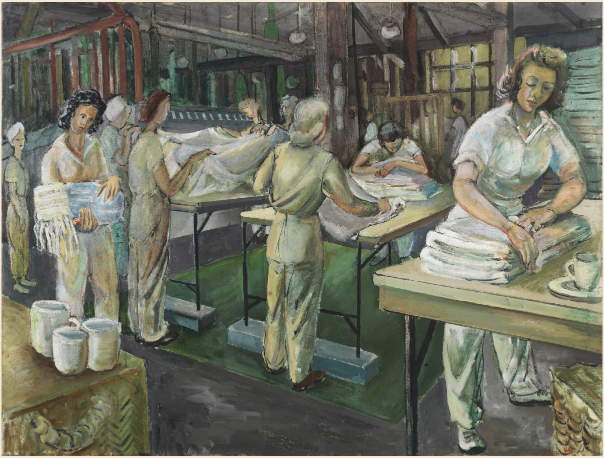
INTERIORS OF WAR



Molly Lamb Bobak, *Number 1 Static Base Laundry*, 1945, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa.

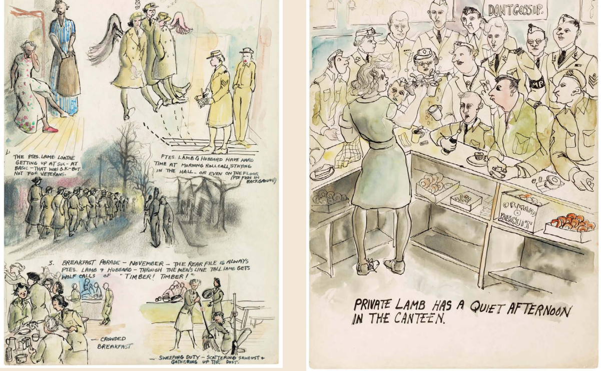
While official war art often focused on combat or front-line action, Bobak turned to the workspaces that quietly sustained military life. In *Number 1 Static Base Laundry*, 1945, women fold sheets and scrub uniforms—tasks far removed from the battlefield yet essential to the army's function. Bobak painted laundries, mailrooms, and kitchens, insisting that these interiors deserved recognition as part of the war effort. By placing women at the centre of these neglected spaces, she broadened the scope of war art. Such scenes highlight the hidden labour of servicewomen and show us that our memories of war must encompass not only battlefields but also the networks of care and logistics that made victory possible.

Learn more about *Number 1 Static Base Laundry*

EVERYDAY LIFE IN THE BARRACKS

PAGE 21
BOOK II
W110278
NOVEMBER 8
C. A. T. S.
A TYPICAL DAY IN THE LIFE OF A C.W.A.C.
HAMILTON, ONTARIO.
-FIRST MOS.

NUMBER III
PUBLISHED FOR AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE IN PRIVICY FROM NOW ON
W110278.
VANCOUVER BARRACKS
DECEMBER FIRST
1942. TUESDAY.
6
A SHIP WAS SUNK


THE PTES. LAMB LOATHE GETTING UP AT SIX – AT BASIC – THAT WAS O.K. – BUT NOT FOR VETERANS.
PTES. LAMB & HUBBARD HAVE HARD TIME AT MORNING ROLL CALL, STAYING IN THE HALL – OR EVEN ON THE FLOOR (PTE FISH IN BACKGROUND)
3. BREAKFAST PARADE – NOVEMBER – THE REAR FILE IS ALWAYS PTES. LAMB & HUBBARD – THROUGH THE MEN'S LINE TALL LAMB GETS WOLF CALLS OF "TIMBER! TIMBER!"
– CROWDED BREAKFAST
– SWEEPING DUTY – SCATTERING SAWDUST & GATHERING UP THE DUST.
DONT GOSSIP
MP
ORMAND BISCUIT
PRIVATE LAMB HAS A QUIET AFTERNOON IN THE CANTEEN.

Molly Lamb Bobak, *W110278: The Personal War Records of Private Lamb, M.*, 1942–45, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

Bobak chronicled her time in the Canadian Women's Army Corps through a lively illustrated diary she titled *W110278*, her military service number. She documented the routines and rhythms of barracks life—morning roll call, crowded breakfasts, noisy canteens—transforming the everyday into part of the historical record. Her sketches humanized servicewomen, adding warmth and levity to their labour. At the same time, Bobak used wit to point to the gendered dynamics women faced in these male-dominated spaces, from wolf whistles at meal lines to admiring gazes at the lunch counter. As she later reflected, "It was a matter of documentation. That was our mandate. To record what you saw. I was the one that did it for the women."

Learn more about Molly Lamb Bobak's illustrated diary

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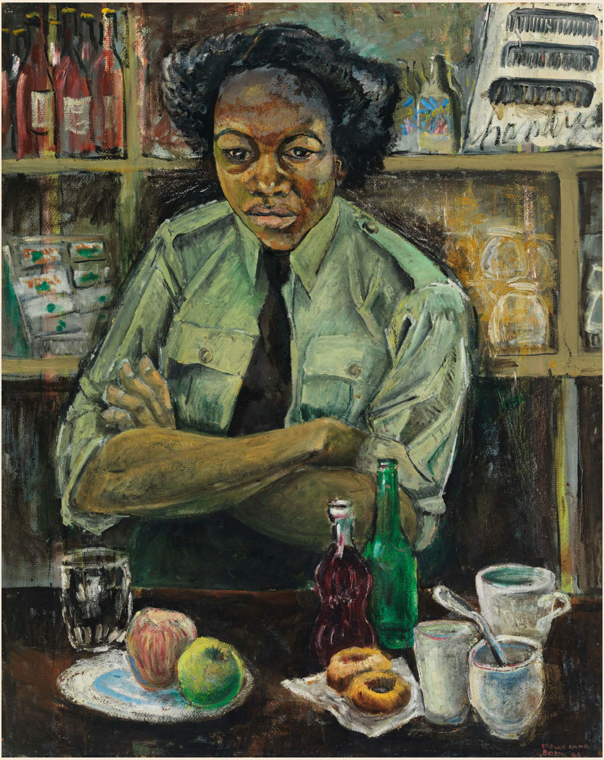
PORTRAIT OF SERVICE

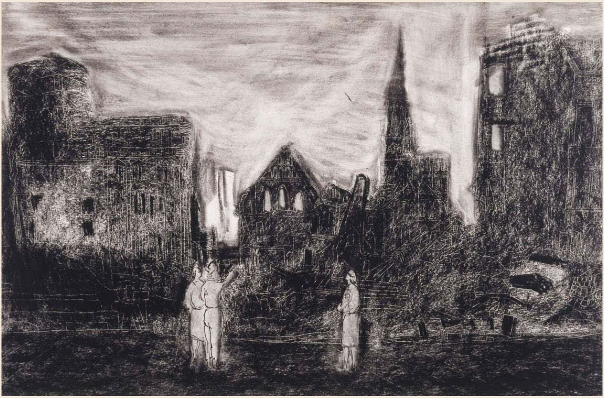


Molly Lamb Bobak, *Private Roy, Canadian Women's Army Corps*, 1946,
Canadian War Museum, Ottawa.

Although the military had no official ban on Black Canadians, systemic racism meant their numbers remained small and their contributions were seldom highlighted in publicity or recruitment materials. This painting—depicting Eva May Roy, a canteen worker in Halifax—is a striking exception that expands the scope of who is seen and remembered in Canada's war record. As art historian Charmaine A. Nelson suggests, "Bobak's sensitive portrait of the introspective Private Roy… successfully [captures] an acute sense of alienation that a black woman must have felt while serving in the predominantly white CWAC." By emphasizing Roy's quiet strength under these circumstances, the portrait underscores the resilience of Black servicewomen and the need to remember those whose stories were so often omitted.

Learn more about Bobak's *Private Roy, Canadian Women's Army Corps*

AFTERMATH OF WAR



Molly Lamb Bobak, *Bremen Ruins at Night*, 1945, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa.

Servicewomen were permitted to travel overseas only after the war's end. In June 1945, following VE Day, Bobak was transferred to London, England, and soon set out in her own car to Belgium, France, the Netherlands, and Germany. She later described this period of travelling and sketching throughout postwar Europe as "six of the richest and most exciting weeks of my life." Along the way, she documented both the joy of victory and the stark aftermath of war—bombed towns, ruined streets, and the traces of violence left behind. This dark, eerie drawing reorients war art away from spectacle and military triumph to the devastation of ordinary places.

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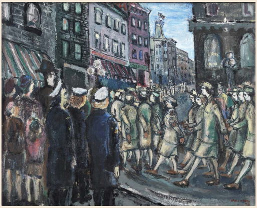
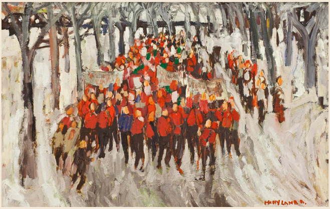
VISUAL LANGUAGE OF TOGETHERNESS



Molly Lamb Bobak, *Canadian Women's Army Corps Parade Through the Town*, 1944, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa.



Molly Lamb Bobak, *March to University*, n.d., Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton.

Bobak's fascination with people in motion began with military parades and drill lines, where the orderliness of uniforms and the repetition of synchronized steps created striking patterns. After the war, she carried this visual grammar of rhythm and energy into civic life, depicting processions and public gatherings. In *March to University*, her brushwork reduces individuals to vibrant blocks of colour, creating a lively cadence. Through movement, Bobak animated the same sense of togetherness and unity that she first grew interested in during her army service. As curator Hilary Letwin observes, "Molly Lamb Bobak's paintings are full of talk: people excitedly calling to each other in the crowd, chatting about this and that, whispering the latest gossip on a street corner."

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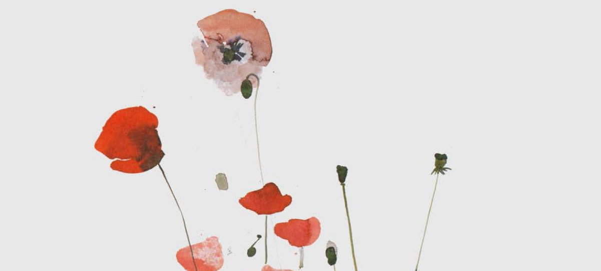
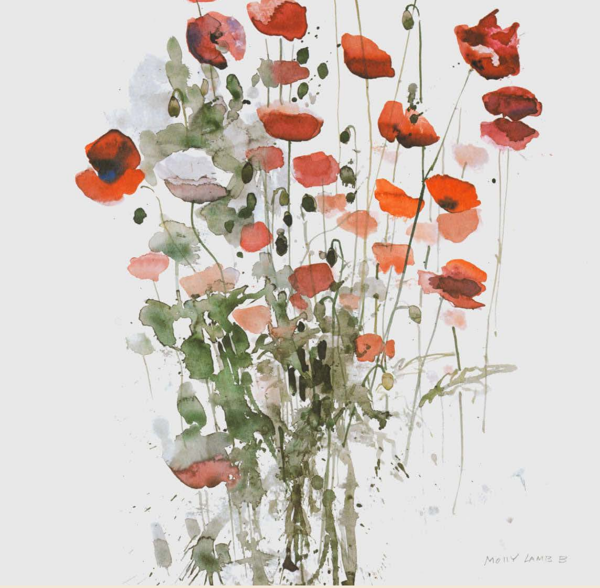
FROM CROWDS TO FLOWERS





Molly Lamb Bobak, “Red Poppies,” 1977, colour illustration from *Wild Flowers of Canada: Impressions and Sketches of a Field Artist* (Pagurian Press, 1978).

Bobak is widely recognized for her paintings of crowds and flowers—subjects she often described in the same breath. “I love flowers,” she once said. “Poppies [are] like crowds; they move in the wind. You don’t organize them. You don’t settle them into something. You paint them as they are, blowing or moving or dying or coming to birth.” In her flower works, she displayed the same fascination with rhythm, spontaneity, and colour that had defined her crowd scenes. Echoing the shifting energy of gatherings, Bobak transformed everyday nature into a language of memory, community, and togetherness.

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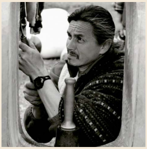

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Image Credits: **[1]** Molly Lamb Bobak painting in London, England, July 12, 1945. Photograph by Karen Margaret Hermiston, Collection of Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa (1967-052 NPC). © Library and Archives Canada. Photo courtesy of Library and Archives Canada. **[2, 9]** Molly Lamb Bobak, *Private Roy, Canadian Women's Army Corps*, 1946, oil on fibreboard, 76.4 x 60.8 cm. Collection of the Canadian War Museum, Ottawa. Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa (19710261-1626). Photo credit: Canadian War Museum. **[3]** Molly Lamb Bobak, *Gas Drill*, 1944, oil on canvas, 68.8 x 86.8 cm. Collection of the Canadian War Museum, Ottawa (19710261-1603). Photo credit: Canadian War Museum. **[4]** Molly Lamb Bobak, "For Ladies W110278 Presents 1943 Fall Fashions," 1943, from *W110278: The Personal War Records of Private Lamb, M.*, 1942–45, pencil and watercolour with pen and black ink on wove paper. Collection of Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa (R5336-21-3-E). © Molly Lamb Bobak. Photo credit: Library and Archives Canada. **[5]** "Shoulder to Shoulder—Canadian Women's Army Corps," a recruiting poster for the Canadian Women's Army Corps, 1944. Collection of Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa (1992-622 DAP 003). Photo credit: Library and Archives Canada. **[6]** Molly Lamb Bobak, *Number 1 Static Base Laundry*, 1945, oil on canvas, 70.7 x 101.5 cm. Collection of the Canadian War Museum, Ottawa (19710261-1618). Photo credit: Canadian War Museum. **[7, 8]** Molly Lamb Bobak, *W110278: The Personal War Records of Private Lamb, M.*, 1942–45, pencil and watercolour with pen and black ink on wove paper. Collection of Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa, gift of Molly Lamb Bobak (1990-255 DAP). © Library and Archives Canada. Photo credit: Library and Archives Canada. **[10]** Molly Lamb Bobak, *Bremen Ruins at Night*, 1945, charcoal and ink on paper, 30.5 x 45.7 cm. Collection of the Canadian War Museum, Ottawa (19710261-1558). Photo credit: Canadian War Museum. **[11]** Molly Lamb Bobak, *Canadian Women's Army Corps Parade Through the Town*, 1944, oil on canvas, 40.8 x 51.2 cm. Collection of the Canadian War Museum, Ottawa (19710261-1582). Photo credit: Canadian War Museum. **[12]** Molly Lamb Bobak, *March to University*, n.d., oil on canvas, 55.5 x 75.5 cm. The Leslie B. Marcus Collection, Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton. Photo credit: Beaverbrook Art Gallery. **[13]** Molly Lamb Bobak, "Red Poppies," 1977, colour illustration from *Wild Flowers of Canada: Impressions and Sketches of a Field Artist* (Pagurian Press, 1978). Photo credit: Rachel Topham.