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Women Artists and the 1944 Canadian Army Art Exhibition

Laura Brandon

In March 1944, the Canadian Army organized its first independent art exhibition in Ottawa. Among the 33 exhibitors were five women: Cathryne Blackley, Beulah Jaenicke, H.E. Herbert, Molly Lamb, and Mary Wilson. Lamb went on to a stellar career as Molly Lamb Bobak, but no trace of Mary Wilson, H.E. Herbert or their exhibited paintings has yet been found. Unknown and invisible as war artists for more than 60 years, Beulah Jaenicke (now Rosen) and Cathryne Blackley (now Armstrong) recently donated their war-related work to the Canadian War Museum (CWM). Why has it taken more than 60 years for their wartime art to resurface? By briefly exploring the

circumstances that lie behind these artists' presence in the exhibition, their subject selection, their artworks' reception, and their own attitudes to their work at the time and after I hope to shed light on the relationship of women and art during the Second World War.

Hart House at the University of Toronto organized and hosted the first Canadian Armed Forces Art Exhibition from 14-29 November 1942. The exhibit, which later toured eight army camps, included work by Ontario service personnel from the navy, the air force, and the army.¹ It bore witness to a particular period during the Second World War in which, after three years of war, many Canadian service personnel had seen very little action and, to put it bluntly, were getting impatient. The catalogue foreword states: "From the point of view of the services, the development of observation, the creation of initiative, and above all, the relaxation and replenishment of mind effected by such activity [painting], should be recognized as factors directly contributing, not only to the objective use of spare time, but to the more elastic problems of training."² In this statement, we can see a little how those in authority saw art and war as interconnected and how they recognized that art and artists could play a role in the effective conduct of war. This thinking was at

the heart of all the Second World War art programs, whether educational in the form of art classes or propaganda and information, therapeutic in the form of art clubs, competitions, and exhibitions, or documentary in the form of the eventual official war art program. I would be remiss if I did not mention that among the high-minded idealism there was the practical, if still essentially idealistic motive, that art "keeps men out of wet canteens."³

Women were part of the war and art matrix. The acknowledgments section in the 1942 exhibition

Abstract: In 1944, the Canadian Army held an art exhibition in Ottawa. Among the 33 exhibitors were five women: Cathryne Blackley, Beulah Jaenicke, Molly Lamb, H. E. Herbert, and Mary Wilson. Lamb went on to a stellar career but no trace of Wilson or Herbert or their exhibited paintings has yet been found. Unknown and invisible for more than 60 years, Beulah Jaenicke and Cathryne Blackley recently donated their war-related work to the Canadian War Museum. Why has it taken so long for their work to resurface? By exploring the circumstances that lie behind these artists' presence in the exhibition, their subject selection, their artworks' reception, and their own attitudes to their work at the time and after I hope to shed light on the relationship of women and art during the Second World War.

Résumé : En 1944, l'Armée canadienne présenta une exposition d'œuvres d'art à Ottawa. Au nombre des 33 exposants se trouvaient cinq femmes : Cathryne Blackley, Beulah Jaenicke, Molly Lamb, H. E. Herbert et Mary Wilson. Si Lamb connut une brillante carrière, on n'entendit plus parler de Wilson ni d'Herbert, et on ne put retracer les toiles qu'elles y avaient exposées. Ignorées et absentes pendant plus de 60 ans, voici que Jaenicke et Blackley viennent de faire don de leurs peintures au Musée canadien de la guerre. Pourquoi leurs créations ont-elles mis tant de temps à réapparaître ? En analysant les circonstances qui ont mené ces artistes féminins à participer à l'exposition de 1944, les sujets qu'elles ont choisi de traiter, la réception de leurs œuvres ainsi que leur propre attitude face à leur travail à l'époque, j'espère être en mesure de mettre en lumière la relation entre les femmes et l'art lors de la Seconde Guerre mondiale.

catalogue stressed that, "this exhibition comprises the work of men and women." In fact only two women were included, both members of the Canadian Women's Army Corps (CWACs), one of whom was Blackley and the other an M. Ware, for whom no record of any kind has surfaced. The fact that all three of the women's services were in relative infancy at the time explains, perhaps, women's limited presence in the exhibition. The CWACs dated from August 1941, the Women's Division of the Royal Canadian Air Force from February 1942, and the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service from May 1942.

It is clear that the organizers of the subsequent Canadian Army Art

Exhibition in 1944 did not deny access to women military artists. Inspired by the reception afforded the 1942 exhibition, it opened on 21 March 1944 in Ottawa. Drawn from a cross-country competition and supported to a notable degree by the National Gallery of Canada, significant practicing Canadian artists judged the entries.⁴ A 7 February 1944 article in the Toronto *Daily Star* entitled "Cwacs [sic] Compete with Soldiers in All-Army Art Competition," notes that:

more than a score of artists in khaki from Toronto and district, five of them girls, have entered samples of their work in an all-army art competition being held this week in

Toronto. Final selections will go to Ottawa where they will be hung in the National gallery [sic] with entries from other military districts. Later the exhibition will make a dominion-wide tour...The 25 entrants are divided about half and half, art students and professionals in civilian life, against amateurs, many without any formal training.⁵

Sadly, neither of the two women referred to in the article, Joy Bain and Patricia Howden, made the cut. The photograph accompanying the article shows Bain, who had trained at the Winnipeg School of Art and the Ontario School of Art, and was a member of the Ontario Society of Artists, the Canadian Society of Graphic Art, and the Canadian Society of Painters in Water Color, with her self-portrait, *Farewell to an Artist's Dream*. One can deduce from this portrait, a woman with a paintbrush, that subject matter had perhaps more influence on selection than calibre, something borne out by the entry form, which states, "Subject matter is restricted to that pertaining to the Canadian Army and its activities."⁶ Why the Toronto and Ottawa judges chose Blackley's and Jaenicke's work is unknown although dealer Douglas Duncan, one of the Toronto judges, writing to National Gallery of Canada director H.O. McCurry, made the point that the 1942 exhibition had included the same works by Blackley they recommended.⁷ That may be why in the final selection for the 1944 exhibition one of Blackley's works was dropped. Only one piece of hers is in the exhibition catalogue.⁸ The organizers of the second and last Canadian Army Art Exhibition, in 1945, did not include either Blackley or Jaenicke; the only woman accepted was the now unknown H.E. Herbert.

Canadian War Museum CN 20070131-001



Cathryne Armstrong (née Blackley)
Decontamination Squad

Cathryne Armstrong (née Blackley)
Commandos Advancing Toward
the Enemy

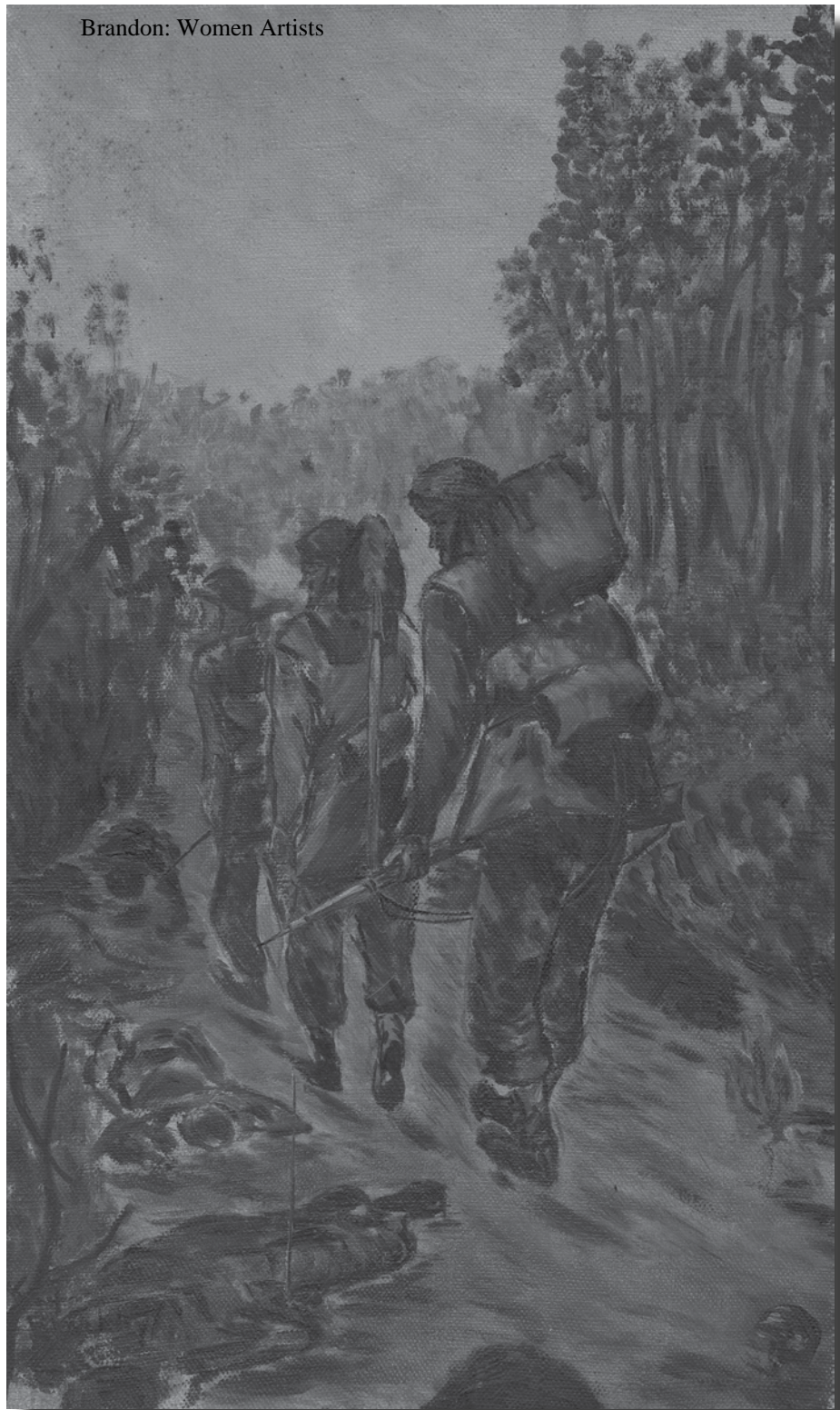
We do know that Blackley entered three works.⁹

The foreword to the catalogue confirms the exhibition's military orientation. "The intention of this exhibition is not to produce a collection of professional war records, but rather to give an insight into the life of the soldier as he sees it." The use of the word "he," moreover, infers a masculine world in which there is little room for women like Bain or their dreams. The exhibition foreword also expresses the hope, however, like its 1942 predecessor, that soldiers will continue to paint and draw.

A largely self-taught artist, Ontarian Cathryne Blackley (1922-2008) enlisted in the CWAC in 1942 and served in Canada, England, Belgium and Holland until 1946. She worked in communications, radio, recruitment, and as an orderly. When asked in a 2008 interview conducted by CWM volunteer Mai-yu Chan if she thought there was any discrimination against women in the Army art exhibition, she replied, "No, I don't think so."¹⁰ Her 1942 experience supports this conclusion. In Toronto, shortly after she enlisted, she painted the walls of her barracks on Trinity Street. A former art teacher, Wayne Martin, saw her mural and encouraged her to submit paintings to the 1942 exhibition. She submitted two, *Decontamination Squad* and *Commandos Advancing Toward the Enemy*.¹¹ The 1944 exhibition showed *Decontamination Squad* as well.

Decontamination Squad met the needs of both exhibitions. It exemplified in its origins how service personnel were encouraged to paint and depicted an aspect of military life. In 2008, Blackley described the painting as being "about basic training" and "applicable to men and women." She said that she used colours that were "horrific and

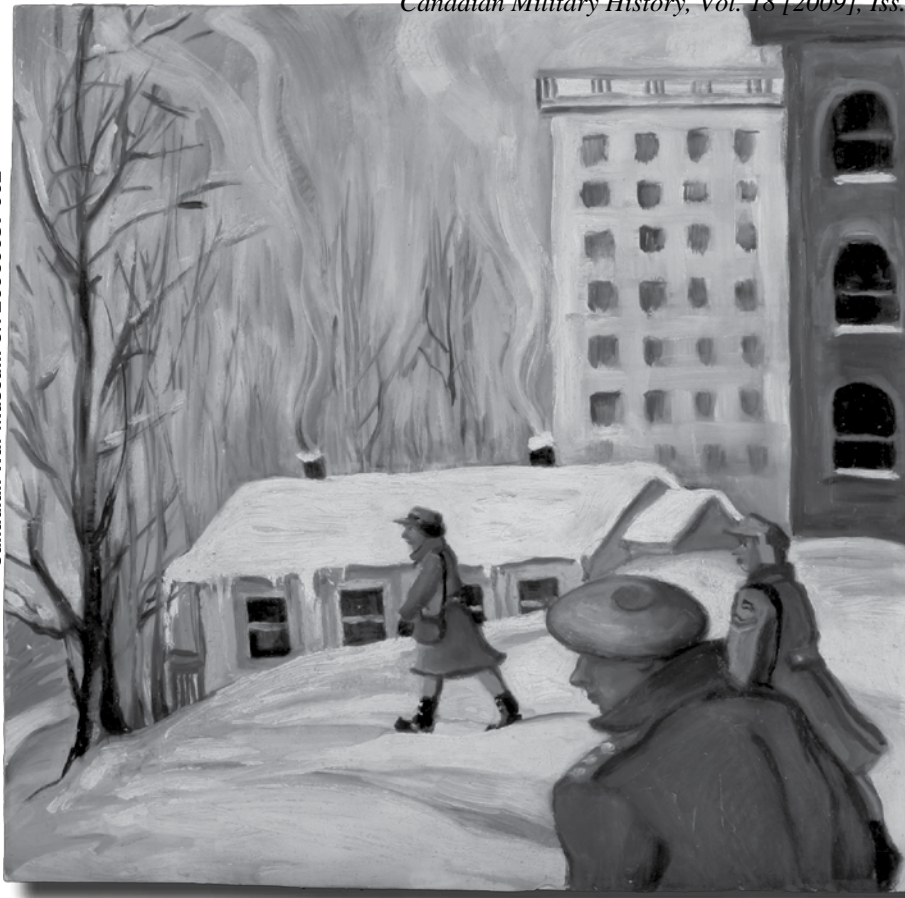
Canadian War Museum CN 20070131-002



dark" and wanted to catch the point of view "looking from inside the mask outwards." Dark greens are prevalent. "Paint was hard to get and the colour is the colour found on gun carriers," she recalled. In a 1996 letter to Andrew Waldron, a university student at the Canadian War Museum who was researching the army show's participating artists, she remarked that the painting "was

well-written up in Toronto papers as being like Wm. Blake's work."¹²

In the 2008 interview, she describes *Commandos* as representing "Canadians participating in the 1944 relief of Antwerp." They are "moving up-country with full pack." She recalls in the interview that she based it on war photographs appearing daily in the newspapers. "I took this



Beulah Irene Rosen (née Jaenicke)
Temporary Hut

picture of glowering officers waiting for a place in an Ottawa restaurant while privates finish their pie.”¹⁵ A Canadian Army photo she retained shows her with this painting at the 1944 exhibition.¹⁶ In her March 2008 interview, she recalled, “This was a restaurant – Murray’s – on Elgin Street. People lived in small rooms and so ate out in restaurants. The food was very good and having been a mere private to officer rank, I thought it might be rather amusing to seat some of the people already eating who were nothing but sergeants and not even that. One I can see is a lance corporal and then the men in higher ranks (three of them) were standing in line, having to wait! I decided to draw attention to the fact that there were only a few privileges for people who are of lower rank!”¹⁷ This painting perhaps speaks also to the fact that an early influence on Jaenicke was her father, a short-term pre-war Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) Member of Parliament.

When the 1944 exhibition toured to Washington and New York in the United States before returning to Canada for further presentations, a review in the *New York Art Digest* referred to Jaenicke’s art in the Metropolitan Museum show as demonstrating “a very practiced hand.”¹⁸ While Jaenicke and Blackley’s artworks were for sale at \$25 each, with the exception of *Commandos*, which was marked NFS (not for sale), none sold so the artists retained them.

Both Jaenicke and Blackley married shortly after the war ended and had children. Both continued to paint for pleasure. As Cathryne Armstrong, Blackley developed a noteworthy career as an activist for women’s rights, becoming President of the National Council of Women in 1982. That year, she received the

information and the feelings I have... these became a part of me and I put [them] on paper to depict what the war was all about.”

Beulah Jaenicke was born in Saskatchewan in 1918 to a German-born father and an English mother. A qualified teacher, she was always interested in art but received limited training before the war. After her enlistment in 1942, she spent her career in Ottawa with army recruitment and then army promotion until her discharge in 1945. One of her tasks was to work on programs to persuade women to enlist in the CWAC. When her supervisors discovered her drawing skills, they asked her to draw cartoons for the Army newsletter *Khaki* and for the CWAC newsletter, *Women in Khaki*, sent to serving women overseas. She was encouraged in her art by a number of people little known today, including the then much admired artist-cum-art show organizer and art program impresario, Sergeant C.K. Redfern of the Auxiliary Services. As chief

organizer, Redfern was key to the success of the 1944 exhibition, and, indeed, of its predecessor in 1942. The authorities regarded Jaenicke sufficiently well that they considered her as an alternate artist to Molly Lamb, Canada’s only official Second World War woman artist.¹³

Jaenicke exhibited *Temporary Hut* and *0900 Hours NDHQ* in the 1944 exhibition.¹⁴ Recalling *Temporary Hut* in 2008, she remarked that, “she felt familiar with Ottawa at the time with its cold winter. It was interesting with the different clothing people wear. The ‘tam o’shanter’ showed one of the many different regiments there. The girls were in their winter attire. The first hut I worked in going towards the canal, sort of on the slant, inspired that painting.”

Judging from a review in the *Globe & Mail*, what the catalogue refers to as *0900 Hours NDHQ*, was what she calls *Eat Early in Comfort*. Certainly, it matches the description published in the newspaper. “Humor goes all the way [in]...Jaenicke’s

Order of Canada for her work in this area. She died in 2008. Like Blackley in later life, Jaenicke was an advocate for women from early on but did not transform it into a public career after the war. In a June 2008 letter she mentions that she “believed it unfair that [during the war] women,

all ranks, were paid less than the men.”¹⁹

So why in 2005 and 2007 respectively, did Jaenicke and Blackley decide to give their wartime artwork to the Canadian War Museum? Blackley could have done so in 1996, when she was in correspondence with

Andrew Waldron but the idea does not seem to have come to her although she told him she had retained it.²⁰ The widespread media attention that surrounded the opening of the new Canadian War Museum in May 2005 had an impact, commemorating as it did the 60th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. Jaenicke’s sister first called on her behalf in September 2005. A neighbour of the artist, Bradley Foster, helped her get her material in order and encouraged the donation, which was not immediate. In old age, her wartime experiences on her mind, Jaenicke was writing down what she had done during an important period in her life. The collection was still too personally significant to part with. Armstrong wrote to me offering to donate her war art to the museum on 1 January 2007, somewhat belatedly in response to a review of a book I had written published in 2006 entitled *Art or Memorial? The Forgotten History of Canada’s War Art*.²¹

My initial work in the area of gender and museums has identified two main reasons why women traditionally do not associate their work with war museums in the same way that men do and thus



Above: Beulah Rosen (née Jaenicke) poses with her painting “Eat Early in Comfort” at the 1944 Canadian Army Art exhibition.
Right: Eat Early in Comfort.



Canadian War Museum CN 20060087-001

do not donate their material. (They are quite good at donating their husbands' material.) The first reason is cultural. Because war has been a pre-eminently masculine pursuit, men with military backgrounds have largely organized such collecting and recording projects as war art programs. As a result, the military collections reflect men's interests and, perhaps more importantly, men's perspectives. It is hard for a woman to find her experience of war within the constraints of such a dominant discourse.

The second reason is that women do not identify their own material culture relating to war as significant to museum collections even if certain objects are important to them personally. This may have something to do with the historical undervaluing of their experiences as well as their marginalization from the dominant masculine discourse of war. To cite one example, from May to December 2007, the Canadian War Museum presented an art exhibition titled *War Brides: Portraits of an Era*, which presented women's experiences in some 52,000 Canadian wartime marriages through the art of a contemporary artist from Calgary, Bev Tosh. In the course of research for this display, we discovered that the museum had no artifacts relating to war brides in its collections. A letter went out to a number of Canadian war bride associations, but only two women responded, and they donated their collections of wartime papers associated with their move to Canada. Furthermore, in association with this exhibition, the museum organized a bridal fashion show on 24 November 2007. Nine war brides lent their Second World War wedding garments for the event. The Museum has acquired one, the first object of its kind in the permanent collection.²²

This article mentions eight women artists. Only three have entries in the Artists in Canada database, Joy Bain, Molly Lamb Bobak, and

Beulah Jaenicke Rosen and only one, Bobak, has an entry in the Canadian Women's Art History Initiative database. Terresa McIntosh's 1990 MA thesis on Canadian women war artists discusses Molly Lamb Bobak and, in the chapter on the Canadian War Records, suggests that Blackley, Herbert, Howden and Wilson could have been considered as official war artists on the basis of their having entered the exhibition competition and that Bain had actively requested consideration.²³ The time has come for us to do better than at best naming names and hazarding guesses. We must acknowledge that we have quite a task ahead of us to reconstruct the full story of women artists in the nation's war art and in Canadian art as a whole. If we do not, we risk losing the visual evidence of the important female perspective on war. Beulah Rosen and Cathryne Armstrong's generosity is just a beginning.

Notes

1. "Revised itinerary," undated, National Gallery of Canada Archives, National Gallery of Canada fonds, 5.41-C, Canadian Art Exhibitions, Canadian War Art, 1942.
2. Copy in Canadian War Museum Art Curatorial Binder, War Art – Canada, Unofficial War Artists and Armed Forces Exhibitions.
3. Charles Comfort, "Avocational Art Classes," 2 January 1943, National Gallery of Canada Archives, National Gallery of Canada fonds, 5.41-C, Canadian Art Exhibitions, Canadian War Art, 1942.
4. Detailed correspondence outlining who was invited and who accepted is found in *ibid.*, Canadian War Art 1944. The organizers invited only three women, the men outnumbering them considerably: Liliias Torrance Newton, Julia Crawford, and Violet Gillett.
5. "Cwacs Compete with Soldiers in All-Army Art Competition," *Toronto Daily Star*, 7 February 1944, *ibid.*
6. "Application Form," *ibid.*
7. Extract from letter from Douglas Duncan to HO McCurry, 23 February 1944, *ibid.*
8. Copy in Canadian War Museum Art Curatorial Binder, War Art – Canada, Unofficial War Artists and Armed Forces Exhibitions.
9. Canadian War Museum Art Curatorial Binder, War Art – Canada, Unofficial War Artists and Armed Forces Exhibitions. A

- reference in Blackley's entry refers to this and sources Library and Archives Canada RG 24 vol. 2146, file 54-27-29-109, vol. 5, Canadian Army Art Exhibition, 1945.
10. Interview with Cathryne Armstrong, 28 January 2008, Canadian War Museum, George Metcalf Archival Collection, Canadian War Museum Oral History Project, 31-9, Armstrong, Cathryne.
 11. Cathryne Armstrong, *Commandos Advancing Toward the Enemy*, undated, oil on canvas, 40.3 x 24.4 cm, Canadian War Museum 20070131-002; *Decontamination Squad*, undated, oil on board, 30.5 x 22.3 cm, Canadian War Museum 20070131-001.
 12. Cathryne Armstrong to Andrew Waldron, 19 February 1996, Canadian War Museum, Curatorial Binder, War Art Canada, Unofficial War Artists and Armed Forces Exhibitions, Blackley, Cathryne.
 13. Terresa McIntosh, *Other Images of War: Canadian Women War Artists of the First and Second World Wars*, MA thesis, Carleton University, Ottawa, 1990, p.68.
 14. *Temporary Hut*, 1943, oil on cardboard, 38 x 39 cm, Canadian War Museum, 20060087-001; CWM 20060087-001. *Eat Earlier in Comfort*, 1943, oil on canvas, 30.1 x 35.3 cm, Canadian War Museum, 20060087-001.
 15. Pearl McCarthy, "Much Talent Revealed at Army's Art Show," *The Globe and Mail*, 13 September 1944. Details of the tour are in the correspondence in National Gallery of Canada fonds, National Gallery of Canada fonds, Canadian Art Exhibitions, Canadian War Art, 1944.
 16. Untitled photograph, George Metcalf Archival Collection, Canadian War Museum, 20060087-015.
 17. Interview with Beulah Rosen, 29 March 2008, Canadian War Museum, George Metcalf Archival Collection, Canadian War Museum Oral History Project, 31-9, Rosen, Beulah.
 18. "Metropolitan Displays Canadian Army Art," *The Art Digest*, 1 August 1944, p.10.
 19. Beulah Rosen to Mai-yu Chan, 22 June 2008, copy in Canadian War Museum artist file, Rosen, Beulah.
 20. Cathryne Blackley to Andrew Waldron, 19 February 1996, Canadian War Museum Art Curatorial Binder, War Art – Canada, Unofficial War Artists and Armed Forces Exhibitions.
 21. Laura Brandon, *Art or Memorial? The Forgotten History of Canada's War Art* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2006). Paul Gessell, "Art Missing in Action," *Ottawa Citizen*, 29 July 2006.
 22. Pink crepe utility-style dress-suit worn by Gwendoline McDonald at her 1943 wedding. CWM 2008052-004.
 23. McIntosh, *Other Images of War*, pp.67-68.

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