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Leonard Brooks – War Artist (1911-2011)

Laura Brandon

Canadian Second World War artist Leonard Brooks died in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, on 20 November 2011 just 13 days after his 100th birthday. He had lived in Mexico since 1947.

Brooks came to Canada from England in 1913 as a very young child. Largely self-trained as an artist, throughout the 1930s he worked mainly in Toronto as a commercial artist, freelance painter, and teacher in between extensive travels in Europe. He joined the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve in 1943. After designing sets for the “Meet the Navy Show” that toured Canada and Europe, the Canadian navy appointed him an official war artist in 1944.

The Canadian War Museum has custody of 113 naval works by Brooks.

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Abstract: Just 13 days after his 100th birthday, Leonard Brooks, a Second World War Canadian war artist passed away. Trained as a commercial artist, Brooks joined the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) in 1943 and was appointed an official war artist the following year. He painted scenes of the Royal Canadian Navy on Canada’s east coast, shipboard life on minesweepers, frigates and aircraft carriers and various war scenes in England and France. A total of 113 pieces of his work, “all my children” in his words, are held by the Canadian War Museum.

Most are watercolour sketches. “All my children,” he called them when he visited the Canadian War Museum in 1998.¹ They depict scenes from many of the areas where the Canadian navy was active including Canada’s east coast, the English Channel, and Scapa Flow. Because Brooks did not witness any of the major naval events of the war, many of his works capture the prosaic and mundane tasks that formed the day to day existence of sailors at sea. Writing to National Gallery director H.O. McCurry on the 2 December 1944 about his then relatively new naval war artist experiences, Brooks commented: “We have rather a difficult time in finding Canadian activity – but the few routine tasks of convoy, minesweeping – etc. provide material which if not as melodramatic as invasion [here Brooks is referring to the 6 June 1944 D-Day Invasion] – has plenty of chances for creative work.”² In an interview with his biographer John Virtue on 5 October 1995, he noted: “Our terms of reference were to interpret as we could or make sketches. We would wander around and do anything. Being aboard a ship [-] sometimes there’s not that much to paint. You’re looking out at the water forever and there may be submarines underneath. It’s nice when a convoy comes by or a plane. You’re not

supposed to be painting just a bunch of waves. Here’s some guys chipping paint off. Or I’d go down where they were cooking.”³ *Potato Peelers* (undated), which shows two seated sailors preparing vegetables against a seascape background, for example, is not a subject that was ever painted by any other naval war artist.⁴

Brooks described his working approach in his December 1944 letter to McCurry. “Forgive the scrawl. - We are rolling along in great style & the ward-room table gives a kick every so often. I have managed to work out a system of scribbling & taking notes on this kind of rough day. By devious ways I scribble a note or two on rough paper – dodge the spray & find my way below to re-draw and fill in as

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Résumé: À peine 13 jours après son 100e anniversaire de naissance est décédé Leonard Brooks, un artiste canadien de la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Formé comme artiste commercial, Leonard Brooks s’est joint à la Marine royale du Canada (MRC) en 1943 et a été nommé artiste de guerre officiel l’année suivante. Il a peint des scènes de la Marine royale du Canada sur la côte Est, la vie à bord de dragueurs de mines, de frégates et de porte-avions, et diverses scènes de guerre en Angleterre et en France. Au total, 113 de ses œuvres, « ses enfants » comme il le disait, font partie de la collection du Musée canadien de la guerre.



Potato Peelers – Leonard Brooks

much information as I can – dash up again & repeat the performance. It looks rather ridiculous – but is very effective.”⁵

In London, he mourned the restriction of his subject matter to naval scenes. Writing to McCurry on 4 February 1945, he lamented that “Some of the best material is of course – nothing to do with Canadian navy. Forster [fellow war artist Michael Forster] & I gaze with longing at V2-holes - & walls – sleepers in the tubes etc [London’s subway system] – but try & remember it is Navy material we should deal with.”⁶ Mc Curry

encouraged him to branch out from the navy in his 21 February 1945 reply. “It will all add up to the picture of Canada at war” he noted.⁷ Not only did Brooks branch out but he took advantage of his time in London to see what other war artists were doing. *Pink Room, V2 Damage* (1945) shows the influence of the wax resist technique utilised by British war artists like John Piper.⁸

The war provided most of the war artists with materials that had not been affordable for many of them in the Depression years. While the military services were generous (war

artist Charles Comfort had drawn up the list) anything that appeared not to have gone through the usual channels for approval was treated with suspicion. The Canadian War Art Committee considered Brooks’ personal order of a No.198 size 30 watercolour brush at a cost of \$9.60 plus postage as exorbitant.⁹ Artist suppliers Loomis and Tole disagreed. “The brush was a very large wash brush made of red sable and the price we assure you was in no way exorbitant [*sic*].”¹⁰

In July 1945, Gilbert Tucker, the director of the Naval Historical

Section submitted to the Canadian War Records Committee a list of the subjects that Brooks had agreed to develop into finished oil paintings. Brooks' proposed subjects included such titles as *Boom Defence Gear at Scapa Flow*, *Cherbourg Harbour*, *MTBs at Felixstowe*, various views of an aircraft carrier (presumably HMS *Puncher*, on which he had sailed), an Atlantic convoy scene, and Channel minesweeping activities; 12 canvases in total ranging in size from 24 x 30 inches to 40 x 48 inches.¹¹ On 26 September 1945, from his Halifax studio the artist reported on his progress to McCurry that "some are getting to be near-illustrations in spite of my effort to avoid that kind of thing."¹²

It is not only his paintings but his written and spoken testimony to the events that he witnessed that mark the death of Leonard Brooks as something to mourn. As documents, his paintings have an important role to play in Canada Second World War naval record but his words, which like his work will live on, give meaning to the entire body of Canada's Second World War art. In summarizing his contribution in an interview with art historian Joan Murray on 25 October 1977, Brooks noted: "It is important that we were commissioned and charged with the task of doing such work. Most of it doesn't add up to great art, but these paintings have left a legacy of truthful seeing and feeling, and caught for

posterity, some of the deep and terrible days of courageous despair and brave hopes for a better future."¹³ With the death of Leonard Brooks, war art in Canada has lost one its most articulate spokesmen.

Notes

1. Laura Brandon interview with Leonard Brooks, 15 June 1998, Canadian War Museum, George Metcalf Archival Collection, not catalogued.
2. Leonard Brooks to H.O. McCurry, 2 December 1944, National Gallery of Canada Archives 5.42.B, Canadian War Artists, Brooks, Leonard.
3. John Virtue interview with Leonard Brooks, 5 October 1995, transcript, Canadian War Museum, Artist Files, Brooks, Leonard.

Bombed German Forts and Canadian Minesweepers, Cherbourg – Leonard Brooks

Canadian War Museum 19710261-1068



Canadian War Museum 19710261-1142



Pink Room, V2 Damage

Leonard Brooks

4. Leonard Brooks, *Potato Peelers* (undated), egg tempera on paper, 32.7 x 38.4 cm, Canadian War Museum, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, 19710261-1147.
5. Leonard Brooks to H.O. McCurry, 2 December 1944, National Gallery of Canada Archives 5.42.B, Canadian War Artists, Brooks, Leonard.
6. Leonard Brooks to H.O. McCurry, 4 February 1945, National Gallery of Canada Archives 5.42.B, Canadian War Artists, Brooks, Leonard.
7. H.O. McCurry to Leonard Brooks, 21 February 1945, National Gallery of Canada Archives 5.42.B, Canadian War Artists, Brooks, Leonard.
8. Leonard Brooks, *Pink Room, V2 Damage*, 1945, mixed media on paper, 57.6 x 43.7 cm, Canadian War Museum, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, 19710261-1142. John Virtue, *Leonard and Reva Brooks: Artists in Exile in San Miguel de Allende* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001) 88.
9. G.L. Ingall for the Canadian War Art Committee to The Loomis and Tole Company, Toronto, 7 June 1945, National Gallery of Canada Archives 5.42.B, Canadian War Artists, Brooks, Leonard.
10. Lynn Kemmet to G.L. Ingall, 6 July 1945, National Gallery of Canada Archives 5.42.B, Canadian War Artists, Brooks, Leonard.
11. Gilbert Tucker to H.O. McCurry, 24 July 1945, National Gallery of Canada Archives 5.42.B, Canadian War Artists, Brooks, Leonard.
12. Leonard Brooks to H.O. McCurry, 26 September 1945, National Gallery of Canada Archives 5.42.B, Canadian War Artists, Brooks, Leonard.
13. Joan Murray interview with Leonard Brooks, 25 October 1977, transcript copy (original in Library and Archives Canada, Joan Murray Fonds, MG31-D142, R4917-0-1-E), Canadian War Museum, Artist Files, Brooks, Leonard.

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Canadian War Museum 19710261-1071



Boom Defence Equipment, Scapa Flow

Leonard Brooks

Brandon: Leonard Brooks

Canadian War Museum 19710261-1152



Rough Weather, Minesweeper Bridge (above); Motor Torpedo Boat Base, Felixstowe (below)

Leonard Brooks

Canadian War Museum 19710261-1123



Canadian War Museum 19710261-1061



Aircraft Carrier, Atlantic Convoy (above); Peeling Potatoes (below)

Leonard Brooks

Canadian War Museum 19710261-1141

