

Robert Bruce

WORKS FROM THE WAR (1943-45)

June 15 - July 27, 1995

GALLERY 1.1.1.



Curated by Alexandria Culjat
Sponsored by University of Manitoba
Faculty of Management and its Associates

Foreword

Fifty years ago the Second World War had just ended in Europe, and was drawing to a close in the Pacific. Many alumni of our Faculty as well as others at the University of Manitoba participated in a variety of military and civilian roles during this conflict. In their honour the Faculty of Management and its Associates is pleased to sponsor this exhibition of drawings and paintings created by Canadian army artist Robert Bruce from 1943-45. We welcome this opportunity to co-operate with the School of Art to present this exhibition, and extend our thanks to the staff of Gallery 1.1.1., and to exhibition curator Alexandria Culjat. The co-operation and trust vested in the curator and the project by Melba Cumberland and Robert Cumberland Bruce is sincerely appreciated. Particularly, we wish to honour and remember the wartime sacrifice made by Canadians overseas and at home. And finally, we thank the artist, Robert Bruce, who left this legacy of a particular time in Canadian history when the unity and strength of Canadians made a difference.

William Mackness, Dean
Faculty of Management

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The exhibition and catalogue Robert Bruce: Works From the War (1943-45), was made possible by the sponsorship of the University of Manitoba Faculty of Management and its Associates.

The war was over! On the voyage home from Europe aboard the S.S. Britannic troops in uniform rubbed shoulders on the main deck. A place at the ship's rail was the place to be as the S.S. Britannic plowed nearer to Quebec City.



Robert Bruce was stationed at Portage La Prairie, Manitoba during World War II. From there he sketched and painted the activities of Canadians preparing for war, since endless rehearsal was part of the program to ensure perfect timing and coordination on ground, sea and air. Although a large part of Bruce's output is presently unaccounted for, selections have been made from two bodies of work in the collection of Melba Cumberland (formerly married to Robert Bruce) and their son, Robert C. Bruce of Winnipeg. Thus, drawings and paintings of training exercises form one component of this exhibition, and a series of drawings depicting Canadian soldiers returning to Winnipeg from Europe constitutes the second.

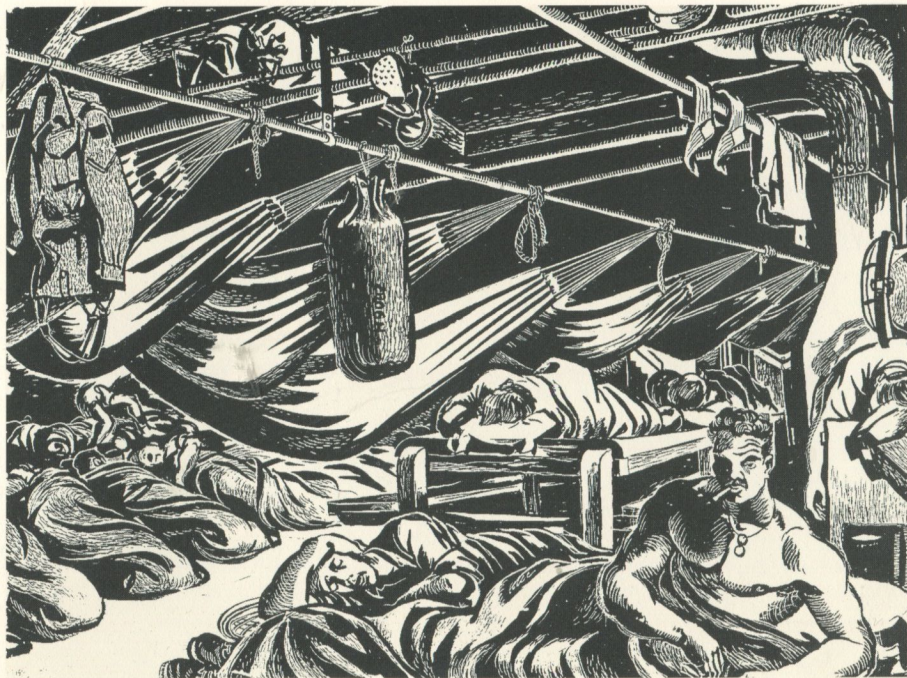
While Bruce was not at the front, his ability to recreate the flavour of events, and to imbue them with significance and humanity attests to his creative powers. For example, when Bruce depicted activities such as a paratrooper adjusting and buckling up his bulky hardware and equipment, prior to the helicopter ride and the practice jump, the viewer will appreciate the physical gyrations necessary for such an exercise, and perhaps even sense the weight of the pack and the hardness of the metal. In his paintings he managed

to convey what it was like to move around in bulky outerware, performing heavy work such as moving oil barrels and packing in supplies to a remote camp during Operation Muskox in Canada's Arctic. On the faces of the young men in full parachute gear Bruce imparted restrained anxiety under a veneer of disciplined impassiveness.

The comparisons which come to mind when viewing the art of Robert Bruce parallel great works in Western art history. Bruce was an effective caricaturist, who may well have honed his skills by studying the etchings of William Hogarth. It is known that Bruce studied in London, and Hogarth's prints have been found in Bruce's private papers in the collection of Melba Cumberland and Robert C. Bruce. As someone who earned his living as an illustrator, he certainly was familiar with illustrations in magazines such as Punch, as well as comic book techniques for conveying action. Bruce was exposed to the sculptural modelling with pencil and brush that was the hallmark of the "Art Students' League style" as early as 1928-29, albeit indirectly, when he studied with LeMoine FitzGerald at the Winnipeg School of Art. FitzGerald had attended the Art Students' League in 1921-22, and came away with a love of form and volume, and a painting style based essentially on drawing.

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This was the men's quarters aboard the S.S. Britannic, as portrayed by Canadian army artist Robert Bruce of Winnipeg. Bruce sat up to sketch a huge room of sleeping sergeants on their way home to Canada aboard the S.S. Britannic, following the war's end. Some of the troops were able to sleep like old salts, sailor-style in the hammocks, while others took their hammocks and grey issue blankets and "hit the floor". Bruce's eye for detail is apparent in the socks, shirt, and boots drying over a hot water pipe, and in the kit bag and uniform of the still-regimental lance-jacket hanging from a coat hanger. The figure in the foreground is likely a self-portrait of Bruce, who met the troops to record the homecoming.



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Just as FitzGerald is most appreciated as a master of drawing, so too is Bruce. The voluminous forms in Bruce's art are also present in the work of his Canadian contemporary, Miller Brittain. In the work of both Brittain and Bruce, bodies are rendered three-dimensionally by skilful drawing. Furthermore, the figures in Bruce's bathroom scene on board the troop train arguably assume as much corporality as the paintings of Giotto, an Italian master working in the first quarter of the 13th century, and an early master of the three-dimensional human form. Like Giotto, Bruce was also especially sensitive to color, as demonstrated by the subtleties of his oils where even army fatigues are rendered with exquisite refinement. His inclination to foreshorten figures at the pictures' edges contributes to bring the soldiers into the viewer's space. This technique is effective in creating empathy with the string of soldiers following one another in succession, weighted down by heavy sacks in the Operation Muscox scene. This painting has the same degree of futility about it as Peter Breughel the Elder's 16th century painting Parable of the Blind Men, which depicts blind men following one another into a ditch. One may well empathize with the plight of both groups of men, separated only by time and circumstance.

The series of prints depicting Canadian soldiers returning from Europe conjures the waiting of those who served, along with their discomfort, their loneliness and their boredom. Like Velázquez, the artist sometimes placed himself in the picture to indicate his privileged view, as we see in the scene where Bruce is leaning against the train bathroom wall observing the men grooming themselves. Along with these elements Bruce conveys the excitement of coming home by juxtaposing the interminable train ride with the emotion of a homecoming. Even so, he noticed that the returning soldiers who continued to sleep as the train drew near Winnipeg were those who did not have family waiting to greet them. The sleepers also serve metaphorically for those who lost their loved ones in the war, and so had no reason to wait at the train station. Bruce was not heavy handed, however, as is discernable in the "arrival scene" where the central action focuses on parents urging their son to come home with them, while the son is, quite frankly, locked in passionate embrace with a woman. What we do see before us in this body of work is evidence of a man who could turn drudgery into the stuff of history.

Alexandria Culjat, Curator

The tension, nervousness and pent-up emotions of the soldiers aboard the S.S. Britannic reached a peak as the returned soldiers caught sight of the lights along the marine drive next to the mighty St. Lawrence River. A member of the Canadian Women's Army Corp. described these lights as resembling "a broken string of pearls." A tiny tug appeared on the scene bearing a blaring, military band which put an all-out effort into "Roll Out the Barrel" and other soldiers' favourites while the razzle-dazzle of multi-coloured rockets knifed the sky and young women waved to the veterans above. This was The Big Moment. The veterans yelled themselves hoarse as they waved their soft berets.





Practically every bit of sleeping equipment the railways had was used to carry repatriots. In addition, there were specially fitted cars known as Armed Forces' Sleepers. The physical and mental thrill as "the boys" slid between white sheets and relaxed on Pullman mattresses and feather pillows can only be imagined after hammocks, ship decks and holds. The inevitable and continuous poker games that started in England continued on the trains.

The troop train roared through the pleasant countryside of Quebec, each turn of the wheels bringing the men just that much closer to home. A feeling of relaxation crept over them at the realization that they were on home turf. Each time the train slowed or stopped for a few minutes in tiny Quebec villages, cheering children quickly gathered to shout and wave their welcome. The relaxed soldiers derived pleasure from throwing candy, fruit and biscuits to the children as the train slowed down for small stations. It was natural for the men to give away these small treats; this was what they had done for the undernourished children of Europe. They used the few French words or phrases picked up in France and Belgium to joke and communicate with their wellwishers.



After drinking powdered milk for years the men went on a milk binge when they reached Canada. They could not seem to get enough of it. When the troop train arrived in Capreol, it was the signal for a hurried dash to restaurants and dairy wagons for quarts of milk. Back into the train they came with a quart of milk in one hand, and a handful of Canadian coins in the other.



The bathrooms on board the troop train were popular places as the homecoming men tried to make themselves as presentable as possible for their loved ones who would greet them at the station. There was so much washing up and shaving that all the train's water supply was soon used up, even the ice water. But this was no new experience for overseas men, and the washing of collar and cuffs of battle shirts continued throughout the trip as caches of water in milk bottles and canteens were brought out from under train seats. The men began to appear anxious as the train sped on. They had been away a long time.



*Robert Bruce at his
drawing board,
c. 1944.*



Biography

Robert Bruce

- 1911 Born, Grandview, Manitoba
- 1928-29 Winnipeg School of Art; Studied with LeMoine FitzGerald
- 1929-33 Worked as a display artist in a Winnipeg department store
- 1933-35 Magazine illustrator, sport cartoonist, London, England
- 1935-38 Studied Lithography, Central School of Art and Design, London
- 1938 Watercolour sketching, South of France
- 1938-39 Academie Grande Chaumière, Paris; began painting in oil
- 1939 Continued graphic work in London
- 1940 Worked in Toronto
- 1940 Studied with FitzGerald at the Winnipeg School of Art
- 1941 Married Melba Cumberland
- 1941-43 Staff artist, Winnipeg Free Press
- 1943 Joined the Canadian army
- 1943-45 Illustrated the war
- 1946-49 Attended Art Students' League, New York
- 1949-55 Worked in New York as a magazine illustrator, textile designer; Taught for six years at the Albright Art School, University of Buffalo where he was a colleague of Charles Burchfield
- 1955-1976 Taught at the School of Art, University of Manitoba for 21 years

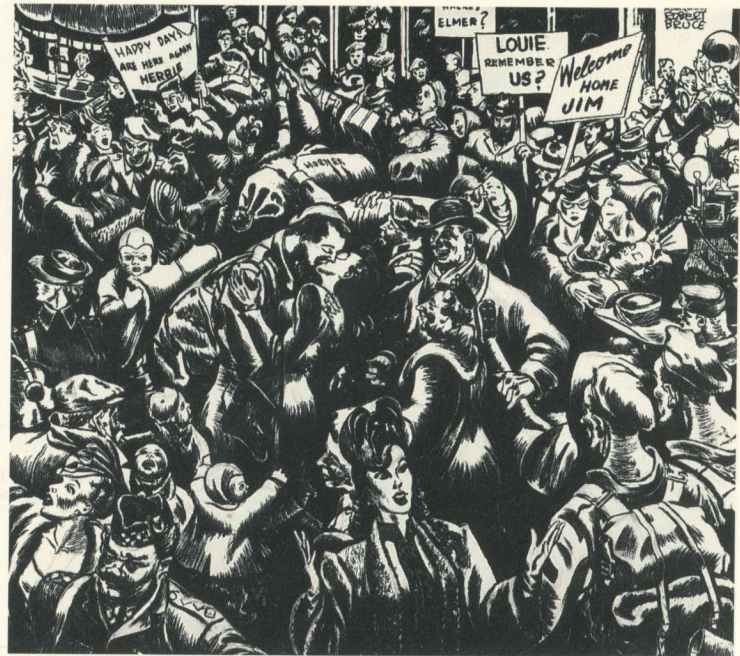
Further research is needed to establish an exhibition record for Robert Bruce. Biographical records from 1976 indicate his work was held in the following collections:

Alberta College of Art
Winnipeg Art Gallery
Queen's University
Riverbend School
Winnipeg School Board
James Richardson & Sons
Vincent Price
Vincent Massey
Arthur Vincent
Peter Curry
Arnold Brigden

Liebling-Michenner
Osler, Hammond & Nanton
Kenneth Osler
Peter Dubosh
Robert Ayre
Phillip Chester
Sam Saidman
Dr. Clifford Abbott
School of Art,
University of Manitoba
Canadian War Museum, 1991

Obviously, some of these works will have changed hands over the intervening years, and are now in other collections. Furthermore, some works are owned by his family. Bruce was a prolific artist, who drew constantly from the age of 12, according to Melba Cumberland. In 1967 he also wrote an impassioned treatise (unpublished) on the need for creating a more beautiful environment in Winnipeg, following the results of his study of European Urban Planning and Aesthetics funded by a grant from the Canada Council.

All the prolonged hell of shellfire, the cold of Italy and the mud of northwest Europe was forgotten as the men stepped into the station rotunda at Winnipeg. The band struck up as the first man appeared, and there were shouts and cries and tears and laughs as loved ones were reunited with their fighting men after months and months of absence and longing. The press of the crowd was so great that some next-of-kin brought banners along so Jim and Louie and Elmer and Herbie could spot them more quickly. Army photographers and writers were there to record the scenes of happiness and delight as wives were reunited with husbands, sons were greeted by mothers and fathers, and sweethearts met again. This was journey's end. This was home. This is what "the boys" fought for. This was it.



"Let's get going for home, son. My, but we're glad to see you."

List of Works

Untitled, D-2687, 49.5 x 40.5 cm., Ink on paper

Untitled, D-2689, 59 x 73 cm., Ink on paper

Untitled, D-2690, 58.5 x 73 cm., Ink on paper

Untitled, D-2691, 41.5 x 58.5 cm., Ink on paper

Untitled, D-2692, 64.5 x 94.5 cm., Ink on illustration board

Untitled, P-187, 56 x 76 cm., Oil on masonite

Untitled, P-192, 64 x 52.5 cm., Acrylic on illustration board

Untitled, P-194, 71 x 63 cm., Gouache on illustration board

Untitled, P-195, 61 x 89 cm., Acrylic on hardboard

Untitled, P-200, 62 x 45.5 cm., Gouache on paper

Untitled, P-201, 61.5 x 45.6 cm., Gouache on paper

Untitled, P-202, 62 x 46 cm., Gouache on paper

17 Facsimiles with captions, from the series,
Train Journey Home

1 Black & White Photograph of Robert Bruce

Director: Dale Amundson

Curated by: Alexandria Culjat

Installation: Jason Nazimek

Assistance: Shawn Anderson
Karen Beauchamp
Donalda Johnson
Darlene Williams

Liaison: Dr. Charles Mossman, Faculty of Management



GALLERY 1.1.1.

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