

## Exhibit at Canadian War Museum honours Canadians who played a role in First World War

Aedan Helmer, Ottawa Sun - August 3, 2014



*This sculpture shows a woman carefully balancing two shells, one on each shoulder. Handling explosives was dangerous work. A dropped shell or a wayward spark could mean disaster for a munitions factory and its workers. The sculpture is now on display at the Canadian War Museum. Sculpted by Frances Loring between 1918 and 1919.*

The faces of Canada's first war heroes stare back at you, their gaze fixed in the permanence of bronze.

Women who hadn't yet gained full voting rights, shown lugging explosive shells from the foundries to the firing lines. Blacksmiths pouring molten metal, children beating the drum as the home fires are kept burning.

The war effort's essential contribution from the home front is the focus of a new exhibit at the Canadian War Museum, with its telling theme of Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times.

"The basic concept is the circumstances of war that thrust people into extraordinary and often entirely new circumstances that they're not prepared for," explains the museum's curator of war art Laura Brandon.

"Young women in particular were put into the munitions factories, they worked on the farms when too many men had gone overseas, young children were involved in the war effort — we have one sculpture of a young drummer boy.

"And in most cases the people in these sculptures have no names, because they represent the thousands of Canadians who responded to the circumstances and challenges the First World War brought to Canada."

The sculptures — 12 in all in the third of a series of exhibits marking the century that has passed since the outbreak of the war — were first commissioned during wartime as a form of remembrance by Lord Beaverbrook as part of the Canadian War Memorial Fund.

"They were commissioned to ensure that there would be something for future generations to look at in order to understand what their forebearers went through," says Brandon.

While the majority of wartime art was captured in paintings — often large-scale depictions of famous Canadian battles at Ypres, Vimy and Paschendaele, or portraits of war heroes — the sculptures tend to focus on the home front.

"That's an accident of the medium," says Brandon. "You couldn't really do much at the front, beyond sketching. So in many cases the sculptures that exist from that time are very tied to the home front, or work that families or companies might commission to commemorate the services of members of their family."

But the pieces rose beyond simply a commemorative role, and gave rise to a new medium of emerging Canadian art.

"The commissions gave a boost to a sort of embryonic sculpture community in Canada, so that when the memorials started being commissioned and created, there was a body of sculptors in Canada who had the capacity to do this kind of work," says Brandon.

"It was very important for Canadian art, and significant in its commemorative value, but also important in the long term."

Also of significance, the majority of paintings commissioned on the front lines were done by male artists, while some of the better-known sculptures not only depict female subjects, but were created by two female sculptors — Frances Loring and Florence Wyle — "who were both prominent in their own right," says Brandon.

"They were quite instrumental in forming the Sculptors Society of Canada, the formation of one of the artist groups, which is what really forms part of our national identity on the artistic front."

Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times, with several pieces that have not been exhibited since the war's end 96 years ago, is now on display until Feb. 2017 in the lobby of the Canadian War Museum.