

**CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM  
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM**

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

**INTERVIEW CONTROL NUMBER: 31D 5 BRANDON**

**INTERVIEWEE: Laura Brandon**

**INTERVIEWER: Mai-yu Chan**

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**Transcription of Interview Number 31D 5 BRANDON**

**Laura Brandon**

**Interviewed 18 November, 2004**

**By Mai-yu Chan**

INTERVIEWER: Canadian War Museum, Oral History Program. Interview with Laura Brandon, November 18, 2004, Ottawa. Tape one, side one.

Laura, we have both signed the legal release form. Is that correct?

BRANDON: Yes. Yes, that is correct.

INTERVIEWER: Laura, tell us something about your early life.

BRANDON: I was born in London, England to Canadian parents. My mother was from Toronto. She'd spent the Second World War working for MI 5, MI 6 and SOE. My father was a fairly well known Canadian historian, who had been teaching at Queen's and had joined the RCNVR and was associated with the writing of the official Naval history. He met my mother in London in 1944 and switched to the Army, working for Colonel Stacey on the official Army history. And after the Second World War, they decided to stay in England. And my father obtained a position at Birkbeck College, which was part of the University of London, and then went on to become a Rhodes professor of Imperial History at the University of London, King's College, until his retirement. So, I grew up in England in an environment in which I knew absolutely nothing about Canadian history or Canadian art history, except what was provided to me by my parents, which was very much associated with history and the war years. We came to Canada regularly to see cousins and aunts and uncles and so on and so forth.

Then, I went to university. I went to school in London, England, to a grammar school. Then I went to the University of Bristol where I did a joint degree in art history and history. I wrote my dissertation on ideal landscape painting in the eighteenth century. After I left university, we were hit by the oil crisis of the early 1970s. At that point, I was newly married. We decided it was time to explore the world. So, we logically came to Canada because I had family.

My husband got a job. I did not get a job. I had children instead. But I began volunteering at the Art Gallery of Ontario because I had been volunteering in museums all through my life as a student, at the Bristol City Art Gallery and then consequently at the National Maritime Museum in London.

We moved to Prince Edward Island in 1979. I continued being a volunteer in their art gallery. I initiated the Docent Program. The Docent Program began to curate exhibitions. Wrote articles for Arts Atlantic on a regular basis, reviewed all the art exhibitions that came through, taught art history at the University of Prince Edward Island, all between raising three children.

Then, after my father died in 1988, I inherited a little bit of money. I wanted to do something with it so I used it to go back to university. I went to Queen's and got my MA in Canadian art history. My subject was the self-portraits of Peggy Nicol MacLeod, who was a Canadian artist who I had been researching since 1981 with the intention of producing a book. But I hadn't had much success in persuading anyone to publish the book so part of my research became my MA thesis on her self-portraits. And I just graduated in June of 1992 -- when I was wondering what to do with the rest of my life -- when my husband spotted an advertisement in the Globe and Mail for Curator of War Art in Ottawa. And I told him that he was utterly nuts, that I shouldn't apply for that because it was in Ottawa and we were in PEI. He said, "Well try it. It won't hurt you. You've been out of the job market for such a long time." So I applied and much to my surprise, I got it.

So we had to make a fairly substantial decision as to what to do. So, my husband, who was running the PEI Energy Corporation at the time, said that it was my turn. And he left his job so we could come to Ottawa. He found another one based in the United States, so he commuted for a couple of years. That was how I became the curator of war art.

There are two reasons why I think I got the job. The first is because Peggy Nicol MacLeod had been a war artist, albeit unofficially. And secondly, at the board exam, I had to talk about various pictures that were put in front of me. One of them was a First World War print containing a large number of aircraft. My youngest son at that point was busily making models. I was quite familiar with a number of aircraft at the time. So I was able, with out a hiccup, to name the aircraft in the print, which I don't think I could do now. But anyway, my family believes that that's the only reason I got the job, was my ability to name all the aircraft in this particular print.

INTERVIEWER: Who was the curator of the War Museum before you and what was the state of the collection on your appointment?

BRANDON: There actually wasn't a curator before I arrived. There hadn't been one for two years. But if I go back in time that might help in setting the context for when I arrived in 1992. The art collections were all with the National Gallery until 1971. There was no curator for them until 1960 when the then director, Charles Comfort, who had been a war artist himself in the Second World War, appointed one. There were two very short-lived ones and then, for a decade, there was Major Wodehouse who put together the checklist of the collections, catalogued them, found out where they'd gone missing in various bases across the country and basically set up the structure under which the war collections still operate until this day. He died in 1971, shortly after the collections were transferred to the War Museum. Everything about that is in an article, which can be

looked up so I won't repeat any of that. And after his death, again there were two short-lived curators, one of who was Victor Suthren, who ultimately became director of the War Museum in the '80s. After he retired from being war art curator, Hugh Halliday took the position and held it for approximately ten years as well. And Hugh Halliday's great contribution was to achieve the transfer from the art collection at the National Gallery, that was appreciated in a limited way as art, which show its significance to the military community. Because Hugh came from that aviation, military aviation history background, and he had worked on the official RCAF history. He did a number of very thorough studies of aviation artists in the collection and showed how their work related to the combat of war. He retired in 1988. There was a very short lived curator again, called Rikki Cameron. I don't even think she was there two years. Then there was a gap. Then there was me in 1992.

I was the first appointment with an art history background in that position. That was quite unusual for the museum because up till then its appointments had largely been from the military community. This was the first time they had a nationwide competition to find somebody with art historical qualifications. And I think it's to the credit of the museum that they did that because, although today I sometimes feel uncomfortably associated as the face of that collection, that wouldn't have happened unless the museum had decided for itself that the collection was of importance as a collection of art and actually tried to get somebody into that position who could promote it as art.

The War Museum's art collection is the third largest of its kind in the world. The largest is that of the Australian War Memorial. The second largest is that of the Imperial War Museum.

The collection consists of four discreet collections. The first is the First World War collection of about a thousand paintings. The second is the Second World War collection, which originally was about 5000 but has been augmented by sketches that have come in subsequently and is probably nearer to 8000 pieces strong now. The CAFCAP collection, which is the post war collection of the Canadian Armed Forces, the Canadian Armed Forces Civilian Artists Program. And the last collection is the museum's own collection, which is an eclectic collection of sculptures, prints of -- works of art held in other collections and unusual pieces that say something about how the public felt about war. Sometimes the work's done by veterans in seniors' homes who used painting as a way of expressing how they felt about that war and their own experiences. Other pieces are civilian artists who responded to military events in Canada's history and depicted them. It's an interesting collection of [ muffled?].

In terms of where the collection has been, historically it didn't go anywhere after the First World War or immediately after the Second World War. But in terms of the Second World War, what did happen was that there was a huge loans program to military bases and offices across the country, largely at the instigation of Major Wodehouse. And that's the basis of how that collection became known. It became very well known to the military and it's still very dear to the hearts of Canada's military. It's one of those collections that people do know about. We have a huge number of requests for loans still

from the military. And reproductions of works are [a] fairly substantial breadwinner now.

In terms of the art environment, the art was not very well known until the last few decades and certainly wasn't integrated into artists' careers to any great degree, certainly not to the extent it is now. There were two major exhibitions of war art in the past, one of which was 'A Terrible Beauty', which was in 1977, which toured to relatively small institutions across the country but certainly a great many. I think there were fourteen. And was accompanied by a glossy coffee table book in both official languages. The second was an exhibition put together by the McLaughlin Gallery in Oshawa and Joan Murray on Canada's Second World War artists, which also toured substantially around the early 80s.

Then there was a gap when there wasn't a huge amount of activity. Hugh did curate exhibits on single artists but there were no massive group shows touring until 'Canvas of War' in 2000, which had an unprecedented popular appeal. It was seen by half a million people, which made it into a Canadian blockbuster.

During the war, the Forces themselves organized art exhibitions; the RCAF, the Navy and the Army. There were two kinds. The first kinds were because art was seen as a form of relieving boredom. It was possible to paint in wartime when you were stuck on a base. Artists were encouraged to, and some artists who participated were artists and others were not. Shows were organized, out of which most of the official war artists were drawn. And it was one of the ways the young, unknown artists managed to get into the programs -- for example, the Bobaks. So, Bruno Bobak is one example.

Immediately after the Second World War, there were exhibits of the art that had been produced in the Second World War, in Ottawa specifically. In fact, in 1944, there was also one of art produced to date at the National Gallery in London, England. These exhibits, in terms of where they were exhibited overseas, were about stating nationhood. The one in 1946 in Ottawa was a different form of nationalism in that it was more about national pride -- we have a war art program -- than about actually having to persuade people they were Canadian.

But the art program in the Second World War was important in terms of nation building in that one of the major instigators of the program was Vincent Massey. And Vincent Massey went on to head the Massey Commission which established Canada's national museums and a host of other cultural institutions. And he was very well aware of the ability of art to bind nations, as were artists themselves. They had -- they lobbied for a war art program but their interest in this was derived from earlier attempts to bind a nation through art by having an Art Federation, for example, which was something that came out of the Kingston Conference of the Arts in 1941. So those art exhibits were very much associated with the politics of the time, in a broad sense.

And the subsequent art exhibits that I talked about earlier, in the 70s and the 80s, were about showing that Canada had artists who were war artists. 'Canvas of War' had a

different political spin. It was conceived as a way of getting the message out that Canada needed a new war museum. So it acted as a lobbyist. But what it achieved was to become a site of memory. It became part of the growth of public commemoration and interest in public commemoration because people went to it as though they were going to a memorial. Boxes of tissues had to be provided as some people started to cry. Masses and masses of people wrote notes in which they stated that they were so grateful to have seen the exhibition because it enabled them to understand what their fathers, grandfathers, great uncles had been through.

INTERVIEWER: Tell us about when and how the Beaverbrook Collection started.

BRANDON: Lord Beaverbrook was in Britain. He was a member of the British Cabinet. He was a Canadian by birth. Really remained a Canadian by instinct, even though he spent so much time in Britain. He became responsible for documenting Canada's First World War. And included in that documentary program was the creation of art.

He began initially by thinking that there should be some paintings that would go into the recently destroyed Houses of Parliament, which were being rebuilt at the time. He began to meet artists. And London, at that time, was a very interesting place to be an artist because it was at a time when traditional art forms and more avante garde art forms were competing for public interest.

And Beaverbrook, as a result of starting his art program, began to meet war artists and he liked the company of artists. That, combined with the historical necessity of having a visual record of the war, concerned that photography would not work for a number of reasons. One, large photographs didn't always develop perfectly. And secondly, there was a concern that they wouldn't survive, that the image would disappear, whereas paintings were known to survive the passage of time.

He started to hire more and more artists. He funded the program. It wasn't just Beaverbrook. There was a committee but he is the person most closely associated with having an activist role on it. It was actually called the Canadian War Memorials Fund and had other newspaper magnates on its roster of committee members. Anyway, he liked artists. He hired more and more and funded it through photographic shows.

He learnt – because he was a newspaperman – he learnt that people responded to very large images. They had been exhibiting huge photographs of battle sites that were built up, some little composites, in some instances, but were only possible because of the kind of glass negative that they used at the time. And these were immensely popular. So he went for size.

It's the only war art program in the world – on the Western side, at least – that has such massive paintings. These massive paintings were designed to go into a war memorial building that he was going to build in Ottawa. There were going to be niches all around a central dome. It looked a bit like the Les Invalides in Paris or the Pantheon in Rome.

They would chronologically tell the story from the early enlistment to the final victory. And then, in other galleries in this museum, would be rooms full of portraits of Victoria Cross winners, the heroes of the war, and studies done in the battlefield.

So the artists that were hired either were hired as single commissions for the large paintings or were sent overseas to try and capture the battle in the field. Those artists were specifically attached to units. So you had the painters that went to the Veterinary Corps, the Forestry Corps or who went to the sites of major battles. Part of the problem was the program didn't get going until 1917 and some of the major battles had already been fought. So a lot of artists, for example, went to Vimy Ridge, but it was after the battle of Vimy Ridge. Jackson managed to get quite close to Passchendaele but he didn't actually see anything. He just heard it in the distance.

The artists didn't go for long periods of time. And when they got back, they had to make little sketches that they'd done into paintings that had meaning. The most active part of the war was during the last Hundred Days. A number of artists followed along behind the Canadians as they moved into Germany at the end of the war, after the long years of virtually no movement during the trench warfare period. What those artists saw as a result of moving so much was an enormous amount of destruction, a large number of graves, because they were covering ground so they could see. And the end result is a series of paintings by a number of artists, including Fred Varley, which speak to the destruction of war.

Coming into that last period, as well, is the influence of other artists and other programs who were painting at the same time, particularly the British and particularly Paul Nash, who managed to take the iconography of the war that he saw, which was the destroyed trees, the churned up ground and make it stand in for the destruction of humans. And many of the war artists, particularly Varley and Jackson, were very impressed by Nash's work and absorbed that influence into their own work. They were primarily landscape artists in their own right. And being able to see the landscape as something that could carry other meanings was quite a significant development for them in their art. And they combined the influence of Nash and their exposure to the Western Front with an already existing style of painting that was receptive to these meanings, to create works of art that were very, very powerful in terms of speaking to the more negative meanings associated in the public mind with war. And these works were quite popular afterwards.

The influence of British art on Canadian art, which was ultimately absorbed in to the way Canadian landscape was painted itself, has largely been neglected. And this has a lot to do with nationalism in that Canada at the time, after the First World War, was very strongly oriented towards becoming more of a country that was no longer was the two solitudes but an integrated and forward looking nation of two founding peoples, at that point in time. And it was not in anybody's interests to focus on the influence in art of the mother country. And it kind of got shunted to one side in the interests of showing that the art of Canada had sprung from the soil of this nation itself. And it was a much more popular and more appealing way to look at the art and it certainly took off. Look at the art of the Group of Seven. It became the epitome of nation. And people still like to look

at their paintings because, to them, this is Canada. And it's really rather ironic because this is Canada at the time of, in fact, quite an industrialized nation. It's a bit like the impressionists. You have to look very hard at a lot of impressionist paintings for the signs of industrial, late industrial state of France at the end of the nineteenth century. It's much the same with the Group of Seven. We want our country to look like an unsullied wilderness. We want it to look permanently like Algonquin Park and forget about the fact that there are logging roads within meters, a hundred meters of virtually every unsullied spot that you look at.

INTERVIEWER: What was the state of the collection at the War Museum then, on your appointment?

BRANDON: In some respects, I was quite lucky because if I'd joined ten years before hand, I probably would have thrown up my hands in horror because the collection was being moved from different storage areas on a fairly regular basis, even when under the responsibility of the National Gallery. In fact, when I joined, the large paintings were at a place called Holly Lane, which was not an environmentally secure building at all. But the bulk of the collection was in a vault, which was climate controlled. So in terms of further deterioration, there was not going to be any unless it was inherent in the pieces themselves.

But the collection as a whole has never had the resources directed at it that a traditional major collection of that kind would normally receive, which in Canadian times, I think, is actually quite scandalous. It's one of the major public collections in the country and it has never been recognized as such. It was a gift, in all instances, to the people of Canada. In terms of the First World War, the largest gift ever made to the country. Its value is in the hundreds of millions. And its value to the public memory is -- has no financial value but it's extraordinarily high.

But one of the things that was achieved was that because the works started being exhibited more and more and more, they had to be exhibited to meet the standards of other museums and institutions, which meant that they had to be conserved. They couldn't just be dumped on the wall, which is probably what tended to happen in the 50s and 60s when they were sent off to bases and offices and things like that.

And over the first eight years I was at the museum, there was also a paintings conservator associated with the collection, Danielle Allard. And we worked very closely together to ensure that any work that left the museum met national standards in terms of presentation of the work and its condition. And we had a program of conservation. And within ten years, a huge, huge number of paintings ended up being conserved so that when we had to start putting paintings on the walls in the new museum and the conservation budget was limited, there were collections of hundreds of works that we could choose from, that were ready to go up, which was really quite marvelous. But none of that would have happened if the exhibition/loan program hadn't increased so considerably in that decade.

INTERVIEWER: Were there any losses of paintings due to.... Did you write off any paintings?

BRANDON: No paintings have been written off. In my time, there are paintings that I'm aware of that can never be exhibited again because they were over exhibited -- works on paper specifically, which can only take a certain amount of light. And there are still 500 works from the Second World War that are missing, which Wodehouse documented as missing. These include a painting that had been sent to Arromanches Museum in Arromanches in Normandy in 1954, which, I guess, was the tenth anniversary of the D-Day landings. Three paintings were sent there. We only recovered them in the mid-1990s but we were only able to recover two because one was no longer there. And the person who had been responsible for it at the time was dead, so there was no way of finding out what had happened to it. But that's the only specific loss that I was made aware of, in my own right. More positively, paintings have been found and come back into the collection.

INTERVIEWER: How do you think the move to the museum will affect the collection?

BRANDON: I think the move to the museum is a very positive event for the collection because so much of it is going to be on display. Over 300 paintings will be on display in their original form and a further 150, I think approximately, will be used in reproduction form in places like the washrooms, the cafeteria and so on. So it's over 500 images that you'll be able to see throughout the museum. And when I say throughout, it is throughout. It's east to west and north to south, from the basement up to the top floor.

One of the achievements is that all the major large paintings, which have always been in storage, will be on display – the ones that were intended for the niches in the war memorial. Unfortunately, some of them won't be conserved when they go on display. But the idea is that people will perhaps want to support further conservation. That kind of conservation is very, very expensive.

There're going to be specific exhibitions. The exhibitions will involve work from the collections of the Australian War Memorial and the Imperial War Museum in a Second World War exhibit about the experience of war as seen through artist's eyes. There's going to be a portrait wall which will draw on the collection of portraits, which is very strong in the collection. There are going to be displays of contemporary works of Veterans. The subject is Veterans, the artist is not a Veteran. And some sculpture will be on display. And there are plans in works for other exhibitions over the years, which will show different aspects of the collection. We're also thinking of perhaps hosting collections of retrospectives on artists, in which war art is part of the show, in an attempt to show that the war art collection shouldn't be isolated from the rest of Canadian art and that it forms a part of a greater whole in Canadian art. And in doing that, we're trying to show that the collection isn't just a document of war but it's also part of the nation's art history.

INTERVIEWER: What was your criteria for choosing from the collection, works to be on display at the new War Museum and would these be on permanent display or will there be a rotation from the collection?

BRANDON: There are two questions so I'll deal with the first one first. The criteria for exhibit was two-fold. And some of it is not art because I was responsible in the new museum for all the public spaces. What I took very seriously was an attempt make aspects of all the collections visible, especially the two dimensional ones, which include the art collection and the photography collection.

So, I've already mentioned the portrait wall which highlighted one aspect of the collection, the large paintings which was another aspect. I've also -- in the group entrance particularly, using photography behind the main desk, we've used the collection of panoramic photos to show a panorama of Canada over historical time and across from sea to sea. So there are thirteen images which cover all the provinces and territories and go back, in a sort of way, to the Seven Years War with an anniversary picture of Wolfe and Montcalm's armies which is actually 1908. It's part of the tri-centennial of Quebec. Then there are three panels with photos of children and war, both positive, happy images and other sad images because that's where mostly children will go.

In terms of the poster collection, one side of the theatre, the first exhibit is of posters that show women and children. And again, that's an attempt to identify an aspect of the collection because these posters are from across the world and they show how common iconography is used to produce very similar messages, regardless of the country. And that show will be changed over time to show different aspects of the poster collection.

In the washrooms, the pictures are themed to washroom scenes. And in the cafeteria, there are banners, which have 54 images of scenes from all wars to do with cooking and eating, which is rather fun.

In terms of the art gallery -- there is no permanent art gallery but all the public spaces are almost like an art gallery -- paintings will change depending on conservation considerations. So anything that's on paper won't stay up for very long. And oil will change. Sometimes, if they're loans, we have to send them back anyway. But the idea is that there will be continual change but the concept of the exhibit won't necessarily always change. The temporary exhibit space, I don't know how many art exhibitions there will be in the end. Certainly, there's only the first one at the moment. There is not a definite one as follow up yet.

INTERVIEWER: How do you select new works to be added to the collection?

BRANDON: That's probably the most difficult question I have to answer. We don't have an acquisitions budget so we can't purchase unless we can persuade the powers that be that this is something that's needed for an exhibition and that there are no alternatives. In terms of what I learn about, I hear by doing absolutely nothing, nowadays of sketches and related works of art, which people are prepared to donate. For example, a drawing

from one of Paraskeva Clark's paintings in the collection was brought to my attention and that will be donated. Those are relatively easy. There isn't a selective process. It supports the existing collection so it's a pretty easy thing to think about.

The area that's most difficult is the nineteenth century because we don't have a budget. Therefore I can not go out and buy works by British military officers who might have painted in Canada. None of that and I find that very sad. The collection is very weak there. What is available is now incredibly expensive. It's also not easy to borrow because it's on paper. But there are strong collections in places like the Royal Ontario Museum, in Montreal.

The other area that's extremely difficult to collect in is in terms of contemporary art. There is now a fourth program being run by DND called the Canadian Forces Artists Program. And the War Museum can acquire works from that program if it wishes to. But it's a program that's very much defined by how the military wishes to be seen as opposed to the caliber of the artist hired. So I think it's going to be very difficult to know, until the program has been in existence for quite a long time, whether there will be any art worth pursuing for the museum. Because, while we do have a role in collecting documentary art and documents, Canadian military experiences – in particular war experiences – the history of the collection is one of going for quality and the best artists available in the country. And I think that's a goal that has to be maintained in the development of the collection.

The tendency has always been to collect documentary art and it has been very difficult to collect anything that could be broadly considered conceptual. The parameters quite often are read as it has to be Canadian. And in terms of what I would like to have in place, given that I'm the only person with an art background in the museum, in terms of collections at the moment, is that there be an outside review process that involves people from the community, who would either support or reject what I think should be in the collection but based on – it would be peer process as opposed to the current system which mitigates against difficult art, in many respects because the collection's plan doesn't allow for that within its descriptors.

INTERVIEWER: Perhaps you could comment on the CAFCAP program, which is the predecessor of the program that you just talked about.

BRANDON: The CAFCAP program started off in 1968 with the best of intentions. It was Major Wodehouse's idea. And he was at the National Gallery at that point in time. He worked with DND very closely, the then Chief of Defense Staff. And successes were involved in getting the program off the ground. But the program started in 1968 and he died in 1971. After his death, it very largely became a National Defense program with very little, if any, input from the art community in terms of the selection of artists. So the result is a collection of sorts which does document Canadian peacekeeping activities but which contains artists about whom virtually nothing is known, for the most part.

This is not problematic from the point of view of the historic interest of DND in the art, in that the art in the program is, one assumes, what they wanted to see. But in terms of it as a collection that fits into Canadian art history, it doesn't fit in at all. It does not have the ability of the First or Second World War programs to fit into the history of art of this collection. Therefore, it will always be marginalized and somewhat despised, to use a rather strong word.

My fear for the new program is that exactly the same thing will happen. That an opportunity to produce something that will speak to future generations about current events is being lost by not going for the top of the tree, even if it's art that is not, perhaps, palatable to those that are being depicted. But if you don't do that, then nobody knows about what you have and they won't ever be interested and therefore they won't be interested in what you were doing.

INTERVIEWER: End of side one, tape one.

### END OF SIDE ONE

INTERVIEWER: Canadian War Museum, Oral History Program. Interview with Laura Brandon. Tape one, side two.

What do you feel you have achieved during your time so far as curator of war art?

BRANDON: Well, it took me a while to understand where I was with the collection. But ultimately, my goals have been pretty consistent all the way through. And that was to have a collection that was well looked after, well known, well respected and well researched and in reasonably good shape.

And getting it well known has not been particularly difficult. It was immeasurably helped by 'Canvas of War'. Getting it into good shape was on the way to reasonable success when we had a painting conservator, Danielle Allard. It's been a little trickier since because the only way we can get things conserved are for exhibition purposes, which obviously the museum has achieved that. But conservation is such a huge, huge, huge expense that the next thing, I think, that has to be done is to develop long term conservation strategies that assess the collection and determine what should be done in terms of the next ten, twenty years, regardless of whether things will be exhibited or not exhibited. One, for example, is the works on paper, making sure that they're all matted and protected. Another is ensuring that the unframed oils are in a situation that they won't suffer any form of damage. All of which is possible. All of which everybody wants. But it's a question of working out how to do it, the best way.

In terms of research, I feel I inherited when I came approximately one filing cabinet drawer of research material on the collection. There's now approximately a large room full of research material on the collection. So I am very proud of that. It is possible to

come in to the museum and do good research on the collection if you're from outside and to also find out where to go to find other research. It remains a work in progress. But as far as I'm concerned, there's no point in having the collection unless you can find out about every single work that's in it, in some way, shape or form.

And I've been blessed with excellent volunteers over a good many years, two of whom are sitting at the table with me now. And I'm grateful to all the volunteers who over the years have done things like look up all the artists who we didn't even know, when they were born or died. Who produced finding aids on collections that are outside of the War Museum so that if you have to order a file box from the National Archives, you don't have to order all of them. You can actually order a specific one. And I think the greatest achievement was when I had a PhD student doing research on the first exhibition of the War Memorials. He said he didn't have to go anywhere else because it was all here. I thought that that was kind of nice.

INTERVIEWER: What do you see as your role in the new War Museum for the future?

BRANDON: I'm getting pretty ancient so even I start to think about retirement. But in the short term, the one remaining goal, which is sort of happening, is the one of integrating the collection in to Canadian art history. Increasingly I'm finding that I'm asked to do the chapters on, in war artist retrospectives, that deal with war. And so, for example, I'm doing that for a Holgate exhibition at the museum in Montreal is putting on, the Musee des Beaux Arts. I'm doing the same for a Charles Comfort exhibition at the Winnipeg Art Gallery is doing.

But my own professional development has changed as well because I'm not now solely associated with the art collection. That remains my prime personal interest but when I did my PhD, I moved into the area of memory. I looked at the war art collections as a historical collection in the context of how national memory is formed of war. And that got me into doing what is called zone five, which is the Hall of Honour. And that I treated but not with much art, as an exhibition about how personal and public memory are formed in a commemorative and remembrance sense. And a lot of the writing that I've done recently has dealt with memory and not always with art.

I do increasingly write. When I began at the museum, I was much more administrative. I was doing, I used to do the art reproductions. I used to do the loans. I used to do all that stuff. And now that's done by specific people so I don't do any of that. So as a result, I do more research and more writing than I've ever done before in my life.

INTERVIEWER: Which is what you want?

BRANDON: I enjoy it greatly. I'm glad I had the opportunity to do exhibits and have so much hands-on involvement. But ultimately, if this collection is going to survive -- and I've always known this -- it has to be relevant to current intellectual academic concerns. And the only way that can happen is if I also, as curator, remain alert to current interests so that I can make it a participant in that kind of thing. And the memory thing has been

critical for that. It was inadvertent. I had no idea that memory was going to take off and become, sort of, one of the themes of the first decade of the twenty-first century. But the collection has been very well positioned to capitalize on that. If the collection becomes part of that kind of history and that kind of activity, then it's only to the good of the whole museum and our knowledge of war in Canada, as well.

INTERVIEWER: Can you give us an example of the memory part of this?

BRANDON: In terms of art, I think nothing actually specific. But Elaine Goble's work is interesting contextually because one of the great concerns about the new War Museum is that it be built while veterans were still alive, especially those of the Second World War, to see it. And for that reason, one of the areas that we collected in very actively and really as the result of the generosity of the artist Elaine Goble, herself, was a series of portraits she did of veterans, mostly in the Perley-Rideau Home in Ottawa but also from her neighbourhood. Because what she's produced is basically is a document of war, sixty years afterwards. It began when she was horrified that her daughter was totally bored by the stories that her grandmother was telling her about the Second World War. And she realized that if her daughter wasn't interested then that memory would be gone. She had to somehow engage her own children in that history, to ensure that nobody forgot about it. And so she started to draw people who were veterans of war, not just soldiers but women, holocaust survivors in her neighbourhood and in, as I said, the Rideau, Perley-Rideau Home. Many of her subjects have died since she portrayed them.

For us, it was a very important collection because so much of what was happening after 1995, at the end of the sixtieth anniversary, sorry, fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War, was about saving those memories. That in terms of the art collection, this has been the most visible way in which we've been able to save those memories and ensure that when the museum opens, there will be veterans there. That they will be captured forever as drawings and on the wall and present in that form.

INTERVIEWER: What is your favourite piece in the collection?

BRANDON: That's a very difficult question because I have more than one favourite but I tend to have favourites. And I kind of almost possessive of specific paintings and feel that they're not being treated well and need to be given the chance to shine. So one of those, way back when, was the Cohn Gill of the 'Canadian Observation Post' with the shell-shocked soldier at the right. I was devoted to that painting. Nobody knew anything about Cohn Gill, the artist, other than he was a cousin of Eric Gill, who designed very nice lettering, fonts and things like that. But I thought it was a brilliant painting. It was wonderful when it was cleaned and looked great.

Recently, I guess, the thing I'm proudest about, about my favourites is -- again a 'Canvas of War' painting -- was the 'Canadian Headquarters Staff', which was cleaned for the first time for that exhibition and is now the star of London, as it's in the William Nicholson exhibition there, which is getting rave reviews. It's rather like a child. You

feel immensely proud when you've had them all cleaned and spruced up and then they behave well in public.

I'm hoping the same thing will happen for another First World War Series of four paintings called the 'Roads of France' by C.R.W. Nevison, which again have been restored for the first time since they were painted and are intellectually very interesting paintings. In that matter, they have to be about something more than just the subject for me to be interested in them. And the four – well, the Nicholson, for example, is about -- there's a huge backdrop of a reconnaissance photo of the destruction of Ypres, but it's painted with thick, sort of plaster paint, so it looks like a painting. And the officers, mostly generals, standing in front of it, who look real, are in fact are based on the photographs. So I like the kind of double meaning of all that.

And with the C.R.W. Nevison, the 'Roads of France', the four paintings take you from the beginning of the war when the trees are covered in leaves and houses are still standing to the end of the war when there are no leaves on the trees and there are no houses standing and everyone was miserable. But it does that in one narrative. But the other thing it does is fool the eye, to some degree, by out of the two dimensional surface creating an illusion of a three dimensionality by the painting goes slightly out of focus as you move away from the left edge of the first painting and comes back in to focus as you get to the right edge of the last painting. So although it's flat, it gives the illusion of being a semicircular image. And I think that's very clever. So I'm hoping that when it's on display that maybe someone will notice that.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you for talking to us Laura.

BRANDON: You're welcome.

INTERVIEWER: End of interview.

**TRANSCRIPT ENDS**