

Sculptor Leo Mol: A Gift to Canada

By Christian Corbet

Introduction

Leo Mol (b. Leonid Molodozhanyan, January 15, 1915 – July 4, 2009) emerged from humble beginnings in Polonne, Ukraine, to become one of Canada's most celebrated sculptors, known for his richly realized bronze portraiture, wildlife subjects, religious figures, and monumental public works. While primarily recognized for his mastery of figurative sculpture and stained-glass, his formal connection with the Canadian Portrait Academy (CPA)—being made an **Honorary Academician in 2000**, rather than a founder—marks a significant institutional recognition of his contributions to portraiture sculpture in Canada. This essay explores his biography, artistic development, major works, stylistic hallmarks, public installations, sculptural technique, and his role within Canada's portrait-sculpture community, particularly his CPA connection.

1. Biography and Formation

Born in **Polonne, Ukraine**, in 1915, Leo Mol was initiated into clay modelling through his father's pottery workshop. He trained formally at the prestigious **Leningrad Academy of Arts** from 1936 to 1940, mastering classical technique and realistic form ([Wikipedia](#), mayberryfineart.com).

World War II disrupted his trajectory: deported to Germany under forced labour, he encountered the German sculptor Arno Breker and studied further in **Berlin**, then at the **Academy of Arts in The Hague** in the Netherlands ([Wikipedia](#)).

In **December 1948**, Mol and his wife Margareth emigrated to Canada, arriving first in Saskatchewan before relocating in **1949** to **Winnipeg**, Manitoba. He began as a church mural painter and ceramic figurine maker, drawing on his Ukrainian background and rapidly adapting to Canadian themes ([Winnipeg Free Press](#)).

2. Early Career and Artistic Development in Canada

Mol's early Canadian career involved decorating churches, painting murals, and creating ceramic figurines for local shops—including the Manitoba Craft Guild—often featuring Canadian wildlife, rural life, and dance forms, such as his "Square Dancers" series ([C2 Centre for Craft](#)).

He also embarked on stained-glass commissions: ultimately producing **over 90 windows** in Manitoba churches, notably a sweeping depiction of Ukrainian history in the **Saints Vladimir and Olga Cathedral** in Winnipeg (mhs.mb.ca).

Melting bronze and lost-wax casting became central to his practice, as did realist portraiture honed through formal academic training. His ceramics, stained-glass, painting, and drawing laid a firm foundation for his later monumental sculpture ([C2 Centre for Craft](#), [Heritage Winnipeg](#)).

3. Signature Works: Subjects, Themes, and Techniques

Portraiture of Notables

Mol achieved international renown through portrait busts and statues of prominent figures such as **Queen Elizabeth II, John Diefenbaker, Winston Churchill, Dwight D. Eisenhower**, and several **popes** (John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul II), as well as Ukrainian cultural heroes like **Taras Shevchenko** ([Wikipedia](#)).

For example, his **2.73 m bronze statue of Elizabeth II (1970)** was installed in Winnipeg's Steinkopf Gardens and later carefully restored on the 70th anniversary of her coronation in 2023 ([Wikipedia](#)).

His monument to **Taras Shevchenko**, unveiled in **Washington, D.C. in June 1964**, drew an audience of over 100,000 and cemented Mol's international reputation (winnipegregionalrealestateboard.ca).

He also created busts of **Group of Seven painters**—A. Y. Jackson, A. J. Casson, Frederick Varley—and figures such as **Tom Lamb**, pioneer bush pilot of Manitoba, hailed as among his best-known Canadian portraits ([Wikipedia](#)).

Wildlife, Figurative, and Abstract Works

Apart from portraiture, Mol produced numerous sculptures celebrating wildlife—**deer, bears and cubs**—and figurative studies of women and children: works such as *Kateryna* (1960), *Walking Girl* (1968), *Swing and Reflecting Pool* (1980), and *Justice* (1976) showcase his delicate realism and compositional balance (umlarchives.lib.umanitoba.ca).

Other works such as *Europa*, *Balance*, and *Kneeling Girl* reveal a mythological or allegorical dimension to his still-classical style (umlarchives.lib.umanitoba.ca, [Heritage Winnipeg](#)).

Technique

Mol consistently employed the **lost-wax (cire perdue) casting method**, producing bronzes noted for tactile softness and anatomical precision ([Heritage Winnipeg](#)).

His classical training enabled lifelike modelling in clay, with a realistic patination and rendering of textures—from smooth skin to rough clothing or fur—with a sensitivity often described in critical reviews as “touchingly human” yet dignified ([Winnipeg Free Press](#), [mhs.mb.ca](#)).

4. The Leo Mol Sculpture Garden

In **1989**, Mol offered his extensive personal collection—over **300 bronzes**, paintings, terra-cotta works—to the City of Winnipeg, contingent on the creation of a dedicated exhibition setting. This led to the opening in **June 1992** of the **Leo Mol Sculpture Garden** in Assiniboine Park, a unique outdoor gallery dedicated to a single artist, later expanded twice ([Wikipedia](#)).

Encompassing **1.2 hectares**, the garden features winding paths, ponds, and tree-lined lawns interspersed with his sculpture, along with the **Schoolhouse Studio** and indoor gallery showcasing additional works ([Wikipedia](#), [Heritage Winnipeg](#), [umlarchives.lib.umanitoba.ca](#)).

Critics highlight its serenity and accessibility: a space where Mol’s art “can speak for itself” and serve community engagement. Friend and curator David Loch described it as Mol’s lifelong dream realized, representing recognition that he longingly sought ([Winnipeg Free Press](#)).

The garden remains a major cultural attraction in Winnipeg, preserving Mol’s legacy through free public access and continued educational programmes.

5. Honours and Institutional Recognition

Mol received numerous prestigious honors:

- Appointed **Officer of the Order of Canada** in **1989** ([mayberryfineart.com](#)).
- Awarded the **Order of Manitoba** in **2000** ([Wikipedia](#), [umlarchives.lib.umanitoba.ca](#)).
- Held honorary doctorates from the **University of Winnipeg (1974)**, **University of Alberta (1985)**, and **University of Manitoba (1988)** ([main.lib.umanitoba.ca](#)).
- Elected a member of the **Royal Canadian Academy of Arts**; served as vice-president of Manitoba Society of Artists and other associations ([main.lib.umanitoba.ca](#)).
- Importantly, in **2000** he was made an **Honorary Academician** of the **Canadian Portrait Academy** (Hon. CPA) in recognition of his excellence and influence in portrait sculpture—but he was *not* a founding member of the CPA; rather, that institution was established earlier and counts founders such as Elizabeth Bradford Holbrook, a founding member in 1997 ([Wikipedia](#)).

Mol’s honorary CPA membership helps position him within Canada’s formal portrait-sculpture lineage, as peer-recognized practitioner.

6. Aesthetic and Scholarly Analysis

Realism and Humanity

Mol's style is grounded in classical realism—eschewing abstraction and modernist experiment in favour of tangible, comprehensible, emotionally resonant forms. Critics note that Mol's works, whether of popes or pilots or pioneers, avoid hagiography and instead portray complex human expressions in bronze ([Winnipeg Free Press](#), mhs.mb.ca).

His disciplined productivity (“like a man on a mission”) and adherence to craftsmanship consistently focused on accessibility, clarity, and community service through art, aligning with his belief that “art is serving the community in a spiritual form” ([Winnipeg Free Press](#)).

Compositional Range

While portraiture remained central to his oeuvre, Mol balanced this with wildlife themes, domestic scenes, nudes, and public monuments. His wildlife pieces are depicted with finesse and charm, while monumental works convey authority and presence.

Technical Mastery

Mol's command of modeling, bronze casting, polishing, and patination—often performed in collaboration with German foundries—reflects rigorous training and meticulous process. Lost-wax casting gave his sculptures subtle surface nuance and lifelike volume ([Heritage Winnipeg](#), umlarchives.lib.umanitoba.ca).

Legacy and Public Impact

By placing his works in public parks, churches, and civic spaces, Mol democratized high art. His Sculpture Garden serves as a spatial embodiment of his ethos: art embedded in everyday life. Local and international commissions, plus institutional honors, reflect his stature as a national cultural figure.

7. Mol and the Canadian Portrait Academy

The **Canadian Portrait Academy**, founded in the late 1990s (with founding members including **Elizabeth Bradford Holbrook** in 1997) developed as a national body promoting excellence in portrait sculpture and painting ([Wikipedia](#)).

Mol was granted **honorary academician status in 2000**—a recognition of his decades-long contribution to portraiture in Canada, elevating his place among the finest sculptors in this tradition ([Wikipedia](#), lochgallery.com).

Although *not* among the founding members, his honorary position further highlights the respect and esteem the CPA and portrait-sculpture community held for his body of work.

8. Key Major Works: Case Studies

Taras Shevchenko Monument, Washington, D.C. (1964)

Won via international competition, unveiled to a crowd exceeding 100,000. A fourteen-foot bronze monument representing Ukraine's national poet, symbolically placed on Embassy Row, integrating cultural pride, diasporic identity, and Mol's realistic style (winnipegregionalrealestateboard.ca, [Winnipeg Free Press](#)).

Statue of Queen Elizabeth II, Winnipeg (1970)

A life-size (2.73 m) bronze statue, originally at the Centennial Concert Hall and later restored in 2023. The portrayal emphasizes dignity without grandiosity—royal presence grounded in approachable realism ([Wikipedia](#)).

Tom Lamb Monument (Winnipeg)

A dynamic image of the bush pilot in parka spinning a propeller, reflecting human perseverance and Manitoba's history. Widely regarded as Mol's masterpiece for its narrative and technical execution ([Winnipeg Free Press](#)).

9. Scholarly and Public Reception

Mol's reputation combined academic respect with populist appreciation. Art historians and critics emphasize his virtuosity, while visitors to the Sculpture Garden experience accessible emotional resonance.

A retrospective at the Winnipeg Art Gallery in 1974 reportedly left Mol feeling under-acknowledged by the formal art establishment, reinforcing his outsider sensibility; yet public recognition—including art awards, garden establishment, and CPA honors—systemically affirmed his impact ([Winnipeg Free Press](#), mhs.mb.ca).

Conclusion

Leo Mol's sculptural legacy rests on a robust integration of classical form, humane portraiture, technical craftsmanship, and civic generosity. From his migration from wartime Europe to his decades-long career in Canada, Mol maintained an unwavering commitment to realism, to art in service of community, and to making enduring, accessible monuments to human dignity.

While he did **not found** the Canadian Portrait Academy, his recognition as an **honorary academician in 2000** underlines his status among Canada's top portrait sculptors. Ultimately, his work bridges personal history, cultural identity, and public memory—finds its lasting home in the **Leo Mol Sculpture Garden**, and is cemented through honors like the Order of Canada, the Order of Manitoba, and institutional respect from bodies including the CPA and the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts.

References (selected)

- Wikipedia entry on Leo Mol (birth, biography, major works, honors) ([Wikipedia](#))
- Manitoba Historical Society, "Memorable Manitobans: Leo Mol" (mhs.mb.ca)

- Winnipeg Free Press profile, “From a humble start...” and discussion of techniques and garden ([Winnipeg Free Press](#))
- University of Manitoba Archives entry on Leo Mol works and garden history ([umlarchives.lib.umanitoba.ca](#))
- Heritage Winnipeg blog on Leo Mol Sculpture Garden and casting methods ([Heritage Winnipeg](#))
- CPA founding member info via Elizabeth Bradford Holbrook entry ([Wikipedia](#))
- Statue of Elizabeth II entry (Winnipeg) for specifics on installation and restoration ([Wikipedia](#))