

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person

Entry ID: AWE0323

Cohn, Carola (Ola)

(1892 - 1964)

Born 25 April, 1892, Bendigo Victoria Australia

Died 23 December, 1964, Cowes Victoria Australia

Occupation Author, Philanthropist, Sculptor

Summary

Ola Cohn was the first Australian sculptor to carve large commissions free-hand in stone. She created the statue for the Pioneer Women's Memorial Garden in Adelaide, South Australia, and carved the famous *Fairies' Tree* in Melbourne's Fitzroy Gardens. Examples of Ola Cohn's work in bronze, stone and wood are in state and provincial galleries nationwide. On 1 January 1965, Cohn was appointed a Member of the British Empire for her work in the service of art, especially sculpture. Her studio home in Gipps St, East Melbourne, is now known as the Ola Cohn Memorial Centre.

Details

One of six siblings, Carola (Ola) Cohn was born to Julius Cohn and Sarah Helen Snowball in Bendigo. Both parents were born in Australia: Ola's maternal grandparents arrived from England in 1850, and her paternal grandparents from Denmark in 1852. Ola was educated at Girton College, Bendigo, but studied drawing and sculpture at the Bendigo School of Mines. She went on to study at Swinburne Technical College in Melbourne, and finally, at the Royal College of Art in London. Exhibitions of her work were held all over Australia as well as in London, Paris and Glasgow. In 1930 she received a request from the office of H.R.H The Prince of Wales for a piece of her work to be part of an exhibition given in aid of the British Legion. Years later a faded newspaper clipping reads: 'When still a child she saw that most people were content to live, die and be forgotten. Her determination to become a sculptor, and that in this profession her work and memory would endure, commenced at the age of seven when she first modelled figures in wet sand'.

Ola Cohn was the first Australian sculptor to carve large commissions free-hand in stone. A pioneer of modernist sculpture in this country, her early work generated terrific controversy when it was exhibited in Melbourne in 1931. Over the course of her career, however, Cohn completed numerous commissions in Australia including two sandstone figures for the Royal Hobart Hospital, a six foot lime-stone Pioneer Women's Memorial for Adelaide's Garden of Remembrance and the bronze entitled 'Comedy'. In 1952 she received the Crouch Prize in Ballarat – the first and only sculptor to receive the honour – for her wood carving, *Abraham*. Cohn was perhaps most famous for carving *The Fairies' Tree* in the Fitzroy Gardens between 1931-34. This was a gift to the children of Melbourne, and she received no payment for the work.

Ola Cohn was a central figure in the Melbourne Society of Women Painters and Sculptors, hosting life drawing classes every Friday night at her studio and serving as president of the Society for many years. She joined the Lyceum Club, and the Arts, Press and Letters Committee for the National Council of Women.

The extent of Cohn's philanthropic activity is difficult to assess. One newspaper described her as a 'charity worker', but she is unlikely to have been given honorary life membership of the Royal Children's Hospital simply because she was weaving scarves for charity – which she was indeed doing. Her extensive archives give little clue as to what kind of financial assistance she was able to provide, but certainly she opened her famous studio from time to time to raise money for a particular cause. In this way she raised £400 in aid of the Red Cross, the Comforts Fund and Food for Britain during WWII. She also held art classes for soldiers recovering from injury. Cohn assisted appeals for the Children's Hospital, Save the Children's Fund, Brotherhood of St. Laurence, Heart Foundation, The Cultural Centre Melbourne, and Animal Relief.

Cohn's greatest philanthropic gesture was her bequest to the Council of Adult Education. To this body she left her home and studio at 41 Gipps Street, East Melbourne and a collection of her works, with the idea that it would become a sculpture school. The bequest was valued at just under £1 million. Poor financial management on the part of the CAE led to an attempt to sell the property, but this was thwarted by a legal battle headed by Cohn's niece Helen Bruinier. It is now known as the Ola Cohn Memorial Centre.

Ola Cohn was married at the age of 61 to her friend Herbert John Green, a retired Victorian Government Printer. She was appointed a Member of the British Empire for her work in the service of art, especially sculpture, on 1 January 1965.

Events

1910 - 1919

Attended art classes at the Bendigo School of Mines

1920 - 1925

Studied at Swinburne Technical College, Melbourne

1926 - 1926

Attended the Royal College of Art, London where her lecturers included Henry Moore for sculpture

1928 - 1928

Awarded a Royal College of Art, London free studentship

1929 - 1929

Became an associate of the Royal College of Art, London

1930 - 1930

Established a studio at 9 Collins Street, Melbourne, Victoria

1926 - 1926

Carved *Head of a Virgin*, now in the National Gallery of Victoria, which was considered very modern in Australia at the time

1940 - 1941

Carved the limestone Pioneer Woman memorial statue, Adelaide

1933 - 1933

Taught art at Geelong Church of England Grammar School

1940 - 1954

Part-time lecturer in art at the Melbourne Kindergarten Teacher's College

1948 - 1948

Won the Roman Catholic Diocesan Centenary Prize in Melbourne

1952 - 1952

Won the Crouch Prize – the first time it had been won by a sculptor – for a wood carving

1938 - 1938

Produced two seven-foot (2.1m) sandstone figures, representing Science and Humanity, for the Royal Hobart Hospital, Tasmania

1939 - 1939

Executed 19 panels for the Mutual Life and Citizens Building, Sydney New South Wales – 14 were designed by Murray Griffen

2007 - 2007

Inducted into the Victorian Honour Roll of Women

2064 - 2064

Appointed Officer of the Order of the British Empire for services rendered in the service of art, especially sculpture

1948 - 1964

President of the Melbourne Society of Women Painters and Sculptors

2053 - 2053

Married Herbert John Green, retired government printer

1921 - 1921

Member of the Victorian Art Society

1922 - 1964

Member of the Melbourne Society of Women Painters and Sculptors

2031 - 2031

Held an exhibition of her overseas work

1937 - 1937

Moved to 41 Gipps Street, East Melbourne where she made her studio a centre for artists

1949 - 1951

Travelled to Europe and Iceland

1931 - 1934

Carved *The Fairies' Tree* in the Fitzroy Gardens, Melbourne

Published resources

Journal Article

Carved magic at the bottom of the gardens, McManus, Bridget, 2003

Book

Castles in the Air, Cohn, Ola, 1936

The Fairies' Tree, Cohn, Ola; Davies, Norman (collaboration with); Wood, Marjorie (illustrations and decorations by) and King, Tom (music by), 1932

More about the Fairies' Tree, Cohn, Ola, 1933

Mostly Cats, Cohn, Ola, 1964

Ola Cohn's Fairies Tree, Delander, Sonja and Buckingham, Rick (photography by), 1972

More Than Just Gumtrees: A Personal, Social and Artistic History of the Melbourne Society of Women Painters and Sculptors, Peers, Juliet, 1993

Glass After Glass: Autobiographical Reflections, Blackman, Barbara, 1997

Catalogue

Ola Cohn 1982-1964: Sculpture, Cohn, Ola

Book Section

Brushing the dust off, Welch, Maureen and Kruger, Lois; Kearney, Verna (graphics and editing); Errington, Helen (poster artwork and production), [1990]

Resource Section

Ola Cohn,

<http://yarranet.net.au/womar/stat2.htm>

Notable Forebears and Relatives, Cohn, Ian and Sue, 1998,

<http://members.ozemail.com.au/~scsiac/>

Cohn, Carola (1892 - 1964), Scarlett, Ken, 2006,

<http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A080064b.htm>

The Word in the Stone: Sculptor Ola Cohn, Lemon, Barbara, 2008,

<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/hindsight/>

Resource

The Melbourne Society of Women Painters and Sculptors, Melbourne Society of Women Painters and Sculptors,

<http://home.vicnet.net.au/~mswps/>

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Edited Book

Who's Who in Australia 1962, Alexander, Joseph A, 1962

Heritage : the national women's art book, 500 works by 500 Australian women artists from colonial times to 1955, Kerr, Joan, 1995

200 Australian Women: A Redress Anthology, Radi, Heather, 1988

Newspaper Article

Melbourne painters prepare to fight, Ketchell, Misha

Artists allowed to stay in sculptor's house

Ola Cohn's house and studio still in question, Backhouse, Megan

\$100,000 gift to help restore artists' centre

Women artists still call Ola Cohn Centre home

Thesis

In Her Gift: Activism and Altruism in Australian Women's Philanthropy, 1880-2005, Lemon, Barbara, 2008

Site Exhibition

Faith, Hope and Charity Australian Women and Imperial Honours: 1901-1989, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2003,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/honours/honours.html>

In Her Gift: Women Philanthropists in Australian History, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2009,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/wiph/home.html>

Archival resources

State Library of Victoria

[Album, \[ca. 1904-1950\] \[manuscript\].](#)

[Papers of Ola Cohn, 1912-1964. \[manuscript\].](#)

[Photograph album, ca. 1920. \[manuscript\].](#)

[Records, 1904-1995. \[manuscript\].](#)

[Records, 1912-ca. 1970. \[manuscript\].](#)

National Library of Australia

[\[Biographical cuttings on Ola Cohn, sculptor, containing one or more cuttings from newspapers or journals\]](#)

[Bust of Fritz Hart \[realia\] / Ola Cohn](#)

Author Details

Anne Heywood and Barbara Lemon

Created 6 March 2002

Last modified 5 March 2019

Digital resources



Title: Ola Cohn with Cat

Type: Image

Date: 3 May, 2023

Title: Ola Cohn with Magpie
Type: Image
Date: 3 May, 2023



Title: AWE0323gc.jpg
Type: Image
Date: 3 May, 2023



Title: AWE0323gd.jpg
Type: Image
Date: 3 May, 2023

