

PIONEER WOMEN'S MEMORIAL GARDEN

King William Road

The garden and statue were erected in memory of the pioneer women of South Australia. The garden is located midway between the rear of the Government House and the Parade Grounds. The creation of the garden and the erection of the statue were organised by the Pioneer Women's Memorial Trust of South Australia to mark the State's centenary.



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The garden is significant as its function was to commemorate the role played by South Australian women in the development of the State. The fact that the contribution made by women was considered at all, indicates the changing attitudes in the 1930s and 1940s to the importance of women in the community.

It is well accepted that the mobilisation of women into the workforce during the War had a profound effect on women's expectations of and their dissatisfaction with their historical role. It is interesting that the garden and its contents were the work of women, i.e. the landscape design, sculpture and fund raising committee. This statue represents the changing role of women in South Australia as well as the commemoration of their forebears.

The move to create a 'garden of memory' was initiated by the Pioneer Women's Memorial Trust of South Australia in May 1938 when they approached Council for permission to lay out a garden on the flat land at the rear of Government House. The Trust had planned to create a formal garden with a centrally placed sundial and figure, the sundial to denote the passing of time. The garden was planned to be 120 feet by 80 feet and was to be surrounded by a dwarf brick wall with a centrally placed brick pathway and three steps leading to the sundial. The garden plan was prepared by Miss Elsie Cornish, an Adelaide based garden designer. During the course of 1939 the planned location of the garden was slightly altered and some alterations were made to the garden design.

The statue, depicting the figure of a pioneer woman, was the work of the sculptor Miss Olna Cohn. It is 7 feet high and stands on a stepped pedestal. Cohn (1892-1964) was a Melbourne based artist who trained at the Bendigo School of Mines and at the Swinburne Technical College. She studied at the Royal College of Art in London during the period of 1926-1930. She studied sculpture under Henry Moore and travelled extensively throughout Europe before returning to Melbourne in 1931. Cohn's commissions included figures, a drinking fountain, panels for a building in Sydney, a church font and wood carvings of figures.

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She designed the Pioneer Women's Memorial in Adelaide in the middle of her career and considered the work to be one of her major commissions. In October 1938 she was asked to submit a design of a memorial dedicated to the courage and strength of the early pioneer women by the Secretary of the Pioneer Women's Memorial Trust of South Australia.

I suggested ... that they trusted me to carve the monument direct, or freehand, without any copy other than the crude seven-inch sketch I had just completed. Being a pioneer memorial, I argued it would be well to allow me to carve it in a pioneer manner. ...The Committee agreed but first they would like to see a model of the head and shoulders, so that they could approve of the expression. I consented to do this. With the crude little sketch I flew back to Melbourne.

Cohn worked on the statue for 18 months and it was the first of her work to be seen in Adelaide. The artist said about the statue;



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The figure does not date, yesterday, today or tomorrow ... I have draped her simply so that she belongs in period to all time. I have shown firmness, and strength and the solid stance as on one belonging to the earth. Its as if she had come to stay, to go ahead through many years.

Noel Hutchinson said about Cohn's work that her exhibition in 1931 was a significant event in the introduction of Modernism to Australia. She was for a time the most advanced sculptor working in Australia. Hutchinson continues, "After the middle forties Olna Cohn's work became insignificant in the rising tide of modernism, and by the time of her death she had lost her initiative and was using a tepid form of realism. Her misfortune was that she lacked the intellectual robustness to continue evolving her style."

The statue was unveiled by Lady Muriel Barclay-Harvey on 19 April 1941 in a ceremony that also marked the opening of the Flying Doctor base in Alice Springs. South Australian women donated £5000 towards the opening of the building for the Flying Doctor Service in Alice Springs. The opening of the building and unveiling of the plaque in Alice Springs were broadcast to the assembled large crowd in Adelaide. Contained within a crypt of the statue in the Pioneer Women's Memorial Garden is a book containing the names of the 20,000 women who donated money towards the statue. In addition, the records of the women's part in the

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Centenary Celebrations of 1936 were enclosed as was a letter addressed to the women of the state to be opened in 2036. The letter concludes “May your days be days of international peace at last.”

The garden was accepted by the Lord Mayor to be maintained for the people by the Council.

It appears that the sculpture created some controversy prior to its formal opening. It was a strikingly modern and abstracted design for a conservative Adelaide. Adelaide’s public works were for the most part formal and realistic representations of famous persons or significant objects or copies of Classical statues. Cohns’ work heralded the introduction of Modernism in public art to Adelaide.

The work was however favourably considered at its opening to be a “beautiful piece of sculpture, and a memorial worthy of our pioneer women.” The sculpture was considered by Sir John Longstaff, the portrait painter to be an important work. He believed that the figure would be most effective in symbolising pioneer women and that although some may have wished for a more realistic figure, he believed that the sculptor was correct in choosing this form. “It is dignified and impressive and will have a lasting appeal.” Longstaff’s judgement appears to have been correct.

City of Adelaide, *City of Adelaide Reference Book*, Corporation of the City of Adelaide, Adelaide, 1983, p 118; *The Advertiser*, 21 April 1941, p 12; *The Advertiser*, 22 April 1941; *The Advertiser*, 19 April 1941, pp 14 and 20; Scarlett, Ken *Australian Sculptors*, Thomas Nelson Australia Pty Ltd, Melbourne, 1980, pp 113-20; ACC Annual Report, 1937-8, p 13; Town Clerk’s Docket, 1778/1938.

The text in this Information Sheet was copied from the **City of Adelaide Heritage Study, October 1990, Volume Two**, part of a review of the City of Adelaide Plan 1986-1991. The photographs contained in this Information Sheet are a selection of those held by Heritage Services, in digital format.

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Further information on the Heritage Incentives Scheme, an initiative of Council to sponsor timely and appropriate conservation action is available upon request of the Customer Service Centre.