

Heritage Council Regulatory Committee

Harry Johns Collection (H2435)

This collection is held across two locations:

- Museums Victoria, 11 Nicholson Street Carlton, Melbourne City Council; and
- Australian Gallery of Sport and Olympic Museum, Melbourne Cricket Ground, Brunton Avenue, East Melbourne, Melbourne City Council.

Regulatory Committee meeting – 15 February 2023

Members – Professor Philip Goad (Chair), Dr Helen Doyle, Ms Maddison Miller

DETERMINATION OF THE HERITAGE COUNCIL

Inclusion in the Victorian Heritage Register – After considering the Executive Director's recommendation and conducting a Regulatory Committee meeting in relation to the matter, the Heritage Council has determined, pursuant to section 49(1)(a) of the *Heritage Act 2017*, that the Harry Johns Collection housed at Museums Victoria, Carlton, and the Australian Gallery of Sport and Olympic Museum, East Melbourne, is of State-level cultural heritage significance and is to be included in the Victorian Heritage Register in the category of registered object.

Professor Philip Goad (Chair)

Dr Helen Doyle

Ms Maddison Miller

Decision Date – 8 March 2023

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

As a peak heritage body, we acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the Country that we call Victoria, as the original custodians of Victoria's land and waters, and acknowledge the importance and significance of Aboriginal cultural heritage in Victoria. We honour Elders past and present whose knowledge and wisdom has ensured the continuation of Aboriginal culture and traditional practices.

INTERESTED PARTIES

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, HERITAGE VICTORIA ('THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR')

The Executive Director recommended to the Heritage Council, that the Harry Johns Collection, housed at Museums Victoria, Carlton, and the Australian Gallery of Sport and Olympic Museum, East Melbourne, be included in the Victorian Heritage Register.

INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

THE COLLECTION

01. On 14 November 2022, the Executive Director made a recommendation (**'the Recommendation'**) to the Heritage Council pursuant to Part 3, Division 3, of the *Heritage Act 2017* (**'the Act'**) that the Harry Johns Collection housed at Museums Victoria, Carlton, and the Australian Gallery of Sport and Olympic Museum, East Melbourne (**'the Collection'**), be included in the Victorian Heritage Register (**'the Register'**), in the category of registered object.
02. The Collection is described on page 4 of the Recommendation as follows:

"The Harry Johns Collection is a distributed collection held at Australian Sports Museum and Museums Victoria. It consists of 85 items related to the Harry Johns Boxing Troupe."
03. The following historical summary of the Collection is an extract from pages 5 to 7 of the Recommendation:

Tent Boxing

Tent boxing has a long history in British culture and was evident in the Victorian colony from at least the 1860s. From around the late nineteenth century, travelling boxing troupes were a familiar sight at agricultural shows in Australia. Previously bare-knuckle boxing had been popular albeit illegal. The adoption of the Queensberry Rules in the 1880s saw boxing legislation and gloved contests, which opened new opportunities for boxers and promoters. Travelling troupes, such as those run by Harry Johns and Jimmy Sharman, became an important part of the Australian boxing story. They followed the annual calendar of agricultural shows, carnivals, and rodeos travelling from southern Australia in the summer to northern Queensland in the winter. Jimmy Sharman's troupe was based in NSW (though had an office in Melbourne) while the Harry Johns Boxing Troupe was based in Victoria. Tent boxing was a theatrical event in an era before television and the broadcasting of sporting events. The action began before the boxing started. Colourful tents, the boom of the drum, the brilliance of the banners promised excitement and drew in the crowds. Local amateurs were encouraged to match their skills in the ring against troupe fighters. Promoters worked the crowd and spruiked challenges to local boxers: 'Who'll take a glove? What about coming inside? Bowl my man over in three rounds and I'll give you a fiver!' For spectators, tent boxing thrived on the rivalry of opposites: the out-of-town troupe man versus the local man, and black versus white. In 1937 an advertisement for the Harry Johns Troupe included references to 'WEE RAPPA the SENSATIONAL MAORI CHAMPION' and 'PIETRO SPAGNOLA: The fierce fighting colourful Italian'. Aboriginal fighters comprised around half the members of travelling boxing troupes, including the Harry Johns troupe, and were central to their success.

Harry Johns Boxing Troupe

Harry Johns was born c. 1880 and entered the Australian boxing circuit around 1914. By 1915 he had become a well-known boxer and featherweight of Bendigo. Following his retirement in 1918, Johns became a boxing trainer and manager at the Fitzroy Athletic Club, 'where he imparted his knowledge to a great number of youngsters'. In 1928 he launched the famous 'Harry Johns Boxing Troupe', which toured the show circuit in the eastern states of Australia until the 1960s. In Melbourne some fights took place at the Melbourne Stadium

in West Melbourne (replaced by Festival Hall) and at the Fitzroy Stadium on the northeast corner of St David and Brunswick streets, Fitzroy (now demolished). In 1934 Johns' troupe was described as a team of around twenty fighters which undertook extensive travelling in a caravan 'which is a good-sized motor van, carrying the team and a collapsible trailer for the gear... Every year South Australia, Victoria, Tasmania and New South Wales, right to the Queensland border, are covered'. In 1954 Johns purchased a new cabin and chassis from the International AR 160 Series and attached the rear section from his previous truck onto it. Johns arranged for the Olympic Tyre company to pay for the painting and signwriting on this long vehicle in exchange for advertising their brand. Like other boxing entrepreneurs, Harry Johns possessed business acumen and a flair for showmanship and visual communication. During busy times of the year, he was managing two or three troupes under his name.

Harry Johns Collection

From around the 1950s Harry Johns' daughter Francesca Rose accompanied him and helped manage the troupe. In 1960 Harry Johns ceased active involvement after experiencing a stroke and died seven years later. The red truck sat in Francesca's backyard for more than 30 years. In 1996 the Johns' children, Francesca, Ernie and Harry junior, donated the truck to Museums Victoria along with the original equipment inside it, including a tent, trestle tables, loudspeakers, spotlight, tickets and clothing. In 1989 the family had already donated objects related to the Harry Johns Boxing Troupe to the Australian Gallery of Sport and Olympic Museum including banners, boxing shoes and the drum. The truck was on display on the ground floor of Melbourne Museum from 2000 to 2020. It was accompanied by a text providing the history. During that time, it became part of the Treasures of the Museum exhibition. Items from the Harry Johns Collection are currently (2022) on display in the 'Black and Proud' exhibit at the Australian Sports Museum.

Aboriginal tent boxers

Boxing was an important aspect of Aboriginal culture in the twentieth century. Former fighter Alick Jackomos recalled 'If you were looking for Aboriginal people at the show grounds you went to the boxing troupe and nine time out of ten, you'd find them there'. Doug Nicholls, later an Aboriginal leader, pastor and Governor of South Australia, signed on with Jimmy Sharman for three years in 1931. The Ritchie brothers from Kempsey fought under the name of 'The Famous Fighting Sands Brothers' with Harry Johns, and also with Jimmy Sharman. At Warrnambool in the 1940s, the Aboriginal families from Framlingham all contributed fighters to boxing tents at the show, including members of the Roach, Alberts, Couzens, Clarke and Austin families. Henry 'Banjo Clarke', a Framlingham elder, joined Harry Johns' troupe in the 1930s when he was living in Kerr Street, Fitzroy down from the Johns family.

Like other promoters, Harry Johns recruited Aboriginal men. For example, in 2010 Ted Lovett a Gunditjmara- /Djabwurrung man, recalled: 'Well, I can remember when I was about 14 or 15 and I remember Harry Johns coming into the Royal Hotel one day and he was looking for fighters... and to take one of us up to Ferntree Gully... there was a showing up there and he came and got me and a couple of other blokes that were there'. A lot of Aboriginal fighters camped at the back of Johns' house at 38 Kerr Street, Fitzroy 'because they came down from the country towns and didn't have homes in Melbourne ... so they stayed at the back there with their swags in the shed'. Banjo Clark recalled

I started with Harry Johns troupe when I was fifteen. If you can use your dukes you just go, and they test you out in a big shed in the yard. If you can fight a bit, they say, 'Righto you'll do'. Or Johns' would say to someone, 'Learn a bit more sense so you will be able to join me'. And he would put them on to some of the good men and into it. This was his backyard in Melbourne'. Tent boxing was infused with a complex mix of race politics. The sport offered young Aboriginal men the chance to travel, to meet other Aboriginal and white Australians, make friends, and to experience the capital cities. It provided an escape from missions, and potentially saw them earn more than as a labourer or factory worker: 'The better the fighter was, the more money could be made. Tent fighting became a very significant part of mission life – a very important money earner. It kept whole communities of families living with adequate food supplies and clothing'. Aboriginal boxer Eric Clarke from Framlingham recalled that in the 1930s spruikers or 'geemen' would stir up the crowd by calling out statements like 'Who wants to fight the darkie?' Racial stereotypes also informed the promotion and experiences of international fighters of colour. The tent theatre allowed Aboriginal men to challenge dominant racial discourses. One boxer remarked: 'I felt good when I knocked white blokes out. I felt good. I knew I was boss in the boxing ring'. Tent boxing played a role in supporting Aboriginal fighters to achieve employment, success and acclaim at a time of profound discrimination. Fighters became heroes within their communities, who turned out to see them on the line-up board and claim a connection to them. For some it became an entry into professional boxing as well as inspiring family members. Lionel Rose's father Ron Rose, a Gunditjmara man, fought with Harry Johns. Lionel Rose became an Australian sporting hero, was awarded an MBE and was Australian of the Year in 1968. Some participants in tent boxing took up positions of political and cultural leadership later in their lives.

In October 2022, Rodney Carter, a Dja Dja Wurrung and Yorta Yorta man, reflected on the meaning of tent boxing in Aboriginal communities:

Tent Boxing, as did many competitive sports, allowed a moment of sameness or even equality to compete on Country as family whereas many of the Ancestors before could not. It is known to the competitor of the historical discrimination as First Nations people of the individual, family, and community that many of their inherent rights now better understood today were not acknowledged. You now enter this place of competition to not just compete as a sports person but show others and evidence that your race is valuable and have been able to tolerate many injustices and still have an exceptional honour to the rules of that competition. You have at the least in your participation represented with the weight of the world upon you, our people with honour.”

04. The above description and extract of the historical summary have been taken verbatim from the Recommendation and are provided for information purposes only.

PROCESS FOLLOWING THE RECOMMENDATION OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

05. After the Recommendation, notice was published on Friday 18 November 2022 in accordance with section 41 of the Act for a period of 60 days. No submissions were received during the public advertisement period.
06. At a meeting of the Heritage Council on 2 February 2023 it was determined, pursuant to section 15(3) of the Act, that the determination in relation to the

Collection be delegated to a Heritage Council Regulatory Committee (**‘the Committee’**) to consider the Criteria under which the Collection had been recommended.

PRELIMINARY, PROCEDURAL AND OTHER MATTERS

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

07. The Chair invited Committee members to consider whether written declarations or otherwise were required to be made in relation to any matters that may potentially give rise to an actual or apprehended conflict of interest. All members were satisfied that there were no relevant conflicts of interest and made no such declarations.

FUTURE USE, MAINTENANCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE COLLECTION

08. It is not the role of the Committee to consider future proposals or to pre-empt any decisions regarding future permits under the Act. Pursuant to section 49(1) of the Act, the role of the Committee is to determine whether or not the Collection, or part of it, is of State-level cultural heritage significance and is, or is not, to be included in the Register.

REASONS FOR INCLUSION

09. Any reference to the Criteria or to a particular Criterion refers to the *Heritage Council Criteria for Assessment of Places of Cultural Heritage Significance* (updated by the Heritage Council on 3 December 2020) [‘Criteria for Assessment’]. Please refer to **Attachment 1**.
10. The Executive Director found that the Collection satisfies the following criteria for inclusion in the Register:
- **Criterion A** – Importance to the course, or pattern, of Victoria’s cultural history; and
 - **Criterion B** – Possession of uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of Victoria’s cultural history.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Discussion and conclusion

11. The Committee’s reasons for including the Place in the Register are generally in accordance with the Executive Director’s Recommendation. Nonetheless, the Committee wishes to express its views in relation to the assessment of Criterion G and Criterion H.

Criterion G

12. The Committee notes that it is not empowered or required to approve, endorse or publish a Statement of Cultural Heritage Significance when making its determination in accordance with the Act.
13. The Committee also understands that, as the Collection is not a place people can go to, it is difficult to quantify and find evidence as to whether knowledge of the Collection exists in the broader Victorian community.
14. However, the Committee wishes to record its views in relation to the following statement on page 18 of the Recommendation:

“However, there are many Aboriginal people in Victoria who have no knowledge of this collection, despite its historical importance”.

15. The Committee is of the view that this sentence makes an assertion about the knowledge of Aboriginal people in Victoria in relation to this Collection, which the Committee disagrees with. The Committee finds that this statement may be too sweeping, and based on the evidence before them the Committee is of the view that many Aboriginal people in Victoria may have knowledge of this Collection and its association with Harry Johns.
16. The Committee ultimately agrees that no evidence of a strong attachment between Aboriginal communities and the Collection in the present-day, is evident at this time, but the Committee points out that evidence of a strong attachment has not been suitably tested for the purpose of the assessment.

Criterion H

17. The Committee is of the view that the Harry Johns boxing troupe provided a fundamental form of entertainment in Victoria during the early 20th Century, and made an important contribution to entertainment, recreation and social life during that era.
18. The Committee notes that the Executive Director’s assessment found that the Collection did not meet Step 1 or Step 2 of the threshold test for Criterion H.
19. However, the Committee wishes to record its views that although evidence as to whether or not Harry Johns and tent boxers made a ‘strong or influential contribution to the course of Victoria’s history’¹ was not found at this point in time, it may be useful to undertake further investigation into the contribution of Harry Johns in Victoria’s history in the future. The Committee is of the view that further investigation may reveal that Harry Johns and tent boxing did have a strong or influential contribution to the course of Victoria’s history, but agrees that evidence to authoritatively meet the threshold test for this Criterion was not presented before it in the Recommendation.

EXTENT OF REGISTRATION

20. The Executive Director recommended that the extent of the registration for the Collection include all 85 items in the Harry Johns Collection held at Museums Victoria and the Australian Gallery of Sport and Olympic Museum which are listed on the catalogue held by the Executive Director.

Discussion and conclusion

21. The Committee agrees with the extent of registration recommended by the Executive Director and records the determined extent of registration in **Attachment 2**.

PERMIT EXEMPTIONS

22. The permit exemptions recommended by the Executive Director include two ‘general’ exemptions and other specific exemptions in relation to conservation and management of the Collection.

Discussion and conclusion

¹ *Heritage Council Criteria for Assessment of Places of Cultural Heritage Significance*, 2020, Criterion H, p.20

23. The Committee agrees with the permit exemptions proposed by the Executive Director pursuant to section 38 of the Act, and determines, pursuant to section 49(3) of the Act, to include these categories of works or activities which may be carried out in relation to the Collection for which a Permit under the Act is not required, as detailed in **Attachment 3**.

ATTACHMENT 1

HERITAGE COUNCIL CRITERIA FOR ASSESSMENT OF PLACES OF CULTURAL HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

CRITERION A	Importance to the course, or pattern, of Victoria's cultural history.
CRITERION B	Possession of uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of Victoria's cultural history.
CRITERION C	Potential to yield information that will contribute to an understanding of Victoria's cultural history.
CRITERION D	Importance in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a class of cultural places or environments.
CRITERION E	Importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics.
CRITERION F	Importance in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technical achievement at a particular period.
CRITERION G	Strong or special association with a particular present-day community or cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons.
CRITERION H	Special association with the life or works of a person, or group of persons, of importance in Victoria's history.

These were updated by the Heritage Council at its meeting on 3 December 2020, and replace the previous criteria adopted by the Heritage Council on 6 December 2012.

ATTACHMENT 2

EXTENT OF REGISTRATION

All of 85 items in the Harry Johns Collection held at Museums Victoria and the Australian Gallery of Sport and Olympic Museum which are listed on the catalogue held by the Executive Director.

ATTACHMENT 3

CATEGORIES OF WORKS OR ACTIVITIES (PERMIT EXEMPTIONS) RECOMMENDED UNDER SECTION 38 (SECTION 40(4)(b))

GENERAL CONDITIONS

- All exempted alterations are to be planned and carried out in a manner which prevents damage to the fabric of the registered object.
- Should it become apparent during further inspection or the carrying out of works that original or previously hidden or inaccessible details of the object are revealed which relate to the significance of the object, then the exemption covering such works must cease and Heritage Victoria must be notified as soon as possible.
- All storage and exhibition locations, methods and materials must be designed to prevent light damage to the colours, damage from handling and other deterioration.
- Items must be removed or protected in the event of any building or maintenance works occurring nearby.

PERMIT EXEMPTIONS

The following permit exemptions are for works and activities not considered to cause harm to the cultural heritage significance of the Harry Johns Collection.

All of the following exemptions must be in accordance with the National Standards for Australian Museums and Galleries and/or in accordance with the accepted collection management standards, policies and procedures of Museums Victoria and the Australian Sports Museum.

- Management of items (including removal and relocation, display, conservation, and temporary loans of eighteen months or less).
- The conservation, research or analysis of items does not require approval by the Executive Director pursuant to the Act, where the custodian employs qualified conservators.