
Temple Court & mosaic mural 'The "Eight" Aboriginal Tribal Headmen'.



B4336 Temple Court

Location

422 - 428 Collins Street,, MELBOURNE VIC 3000 - Property No B4336

Municipality

MELBOURNE CITY

Level of significance

State

Heritage Listing

National Trust

Statement of Significance

Last updated on - November 27, 2007

Temple Court is a reinforced concrete office building constructed in 1924 to replace an earlier Temple Court (the original centre for barristers in 19th century Melbourne).

It was designed by architects Graninger Little Barlow and Hawkings and is built to the then maximum height limit of 132 feet (40 metres). It is a substantial and impressively detailed example of the classical revival in modern architecture in Melbourne in the 1920s.

Classified: 07/09/1994

Mural Statement of Significance: Mural known as *The "Eight" Aboriginal Tribal Headmen*.

What is significant? The mosaic mural known as *The "Eight" Aboriginal Tribal Headmen*, was created in 1963 by major Australian artist Mervyn Napier Waller, then aged 70. It was commissioned for the foyer of Temple Court at

422 Collins Street Melbourne, designed as an office building by architects Grainger Little Barlow and Hawkins and built in 1924. Napier Waller's mosaic was commissioned by Commercial Union Assurance in 1963 for the entrance foyer after the company moved their headquarters to Temple Court. The mural is located immediately below the ceiling line on the west wall near the Collins Street entrance. Approximately 392cm x 246cm it comprises tesserae set into cement. Since 1982 the work has, for most of the time, been covered by panelling. The mural depicts the eight heads of the Kulin nation, the three Jagajaga brothers, Cooloolock, Bungarie, Yanyan, Moowhip and Mommarmarmalar, who, on 16 June 1835, were claimed to have made their marks on the 'Batman Land Deed', for the land on which the City of Melbourne now stands. All, except the figure on the left, face the viewer and each holds up depictions of portrait heads of the European men (with titles, names and dates) regarded as significant in the early European settlement of Portland and Port Phillip District: namely, Edward Henty, Major Thomas Mitchell, John Batman, John Pascoe Fawkner, William Lonsdale, Lord John Russell, Charles Joseph La Trobe, Robert Hoddle, and Sir Richard Bourke. The depictions of most of the Europeans are based on authoritative portraits.

From physiognomy, markings and adornment, it is evident that Waller modelled the figures of the headmen from photographs taken by Baldwin Spencer in central and northern Australia in 1901² and 1911¹², rather than from images of Victorian Kooris. The mural figures depicted are not, therefore, of Port Phillip district Aboriginal men. This incongruity contrasts dramatically with Percy Leason's earlier (1934) 31-portrait, Victorian, series painted from life in which Victorian Kooris (mostly from Lake Tyers) had been the subjects. The event is depicted in a neo-classical style within an Arcadian setting - a motif seen in many of Waller's monumental works. The front of the composition is a foreshortened prospect of the coastline of Victoria.

How is it significant? The mosaic mural *The "Eight" Aboriginal Tribal Headmen* is significant for aesthetic, historic and social reasons at State level.

Why is it significant? Aesthetically, the mural *The "Eight" Aboriginal Tribal Headmen* is significant as a late work of major Australian artist Napier Waller, the foremost exponent of large-scale decorative work in the early twentieth century. The work is an interpretation of the European origins of "Victoria Felix" depicted in a manner that reflects mid 20th century artistic sensibility in the depiction of European and Aboriginal peoples.

It demonstrates the artistic appropriation and incorporation of Aboriginal images and/or symbols in works of non-indigenous art and design in the period from the late 1930s to the 1970s. The work is a distinctive amalgam of the European neo-classical style in the representation of Aboriginal people and culture. It is the only known monumental work of art to give expression to Victoria's European origins and the only work by Waller involving Aboriginal people.

Historically, the mural *The "Eight" Aboriginal Tribal Headmen* is significant for its subject matter - for its depiction of the foundation of Melbourne and the settlement that became the State of Victoria, through its portrayal of the eight Aboriginal headmen who were claimed to have made their marks on the 'Batman Land Deed' together with the eight European men accorded significance in the early history of the European settlement of Port Phillip District and Portland.

Socially, the mural *The "Eight" Aboriginal Tribal Headmen* is significant for the way in which Waller went about using the images of Central and Northern Australian Aboriginal men in the depiction of the eight Aboriginal headmen and that he, apparently, did not seek permission from any descendants or Aboriginal organisations for consent to depict the men featured in Spencer's photographs. This illustrates, from a contemporary perspective, a rather cavalier misappropriation of tribal motifs for which permission for their reproduction appears not to have been regarded as relevant. It illustrates a further dimension of inappropriateness in that Waller, perhaps not having recognised the regional variations in the physiognomy and dress of Aboriginal people, seems to have placed no importance on locating indigenous males from the Port Phillip environs as models for the mural. Although many aspects of Waller's interpretation are problematic, the work is a rare acknowledgement of Aboriginal land ownership.

By way of contrast, an artist working today would be expected to recognise the diversity of indigenous peoples and cultures and to seek permission from Aboriginal individuals, descendants and/or representative organisations of those whose images were to be depicted.

Classified: 21/02/2011

Hermes Number 64697

Property Number

This place/object may be included in the Victorian Heritage Register pursuant to the Heritage Act 2017. Check the Victorian Heritage Database, selecting 'Heritage Victoria' as the place source.

For further details about Heritage Overlay places, contact the relevant local council or go to Planning Schemes Online <http://planningschemes.dpcd.vic.gov.au/>