Location:
MUSEUM OF VICTORIA, 11 NICHOLSON STREET CARLTON, MELBOURNE CITY

Heritage Status / Level of Significance:
Museum Victoria holds the largest collection of Victorian trade union banners used in Eight Hour Day processions from the late 19th century to the First World War. The collection comprises the following eight banners: Amalgamated Society of Engineers, Blacksmiths, Fitters, Patternmakers, Turners & Machinists, Ballarat Branch (artists Kift & Smith, 1890), now the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union; United Ironworkers Assistants Society of Australia, Ballarat Branch (Kift & Smith, 1890), now the AMWU; Australian Railways Union, Victorian Branch (John Hennessy, c.1912), now the Rail, Tram & Bus Union; Manufacturing Grocers Employees Industrial Union of Victoria (c.1910-12), now National Union of Workers; Amalgamated Society of Carpenters & Joiners, Victorian Branch (W. Dunstan, 1914), now the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union; Operative Painters & Decorators of Australia, Victorian Branch (W. Dunstan, 1915), now the CFMEU; Australian Tramway Employees Association, Victorian Branch (George Grant, 1916), now the Rail, Tram & Bus Union; and Australian Boot Trade Employees Federation, Ballarat Branch (nd), now the Textile Clothing & Footwear Union of Australia.

The first Eight Hour Day procession held in Melbourne in May 1856 celebrated the winning of the eight hour working day by building workers, some of the first workers in the world to achieve these conditions. They marched behind a banner declaring "Eight Hours Labour, Eight Hours Rest, Eight Hours Recreation". Although the right to an eight hour day did not immediately apply to all workers, the movement provided the impetus for other trade unions to agitate for similar conditions. Subsequently the march to celebrate the Eight Hour Day became Melbourne's biggest annual procession and regional towns also staged an annual procession. It grew in popularity after the day was declared a public holiday in 1879, reaching its peak prior to the First World War. In 1903 the Eight Hour Day monument (VHR H2084) was erected in Spring Street and in 1923 was moved to its current location at the corner of Victoria and Russell Streets. In 1934 the public holiday was re-named Labour Day. The procession eventually declined in popularity and ceased in the early 1950s. After 1955 Labour Day became associated with the Moomba procession. The major features of the processions were the large trade union banners, mounted and carried behind horse-drawn carriages or on floats. Most banners were approximately three metres by four metres and featured paintings on canvas and silk by skilled artists. Banners were commissioned by particular unions to represent the collective identity of a trade and they became important declarations of legitimacy. One side of the banner was usually a realistic depiction of the particular trade, including materials, tools and skills needed to carry it out, while the other side used allegorical figures, females in particular, and symbols brimming with classical allusions, medieval guild references, and heraldic symbols to represent the history and ideals of the trade. Australian references also appeared including the Eight Hour Day symbol of the entwined figure of eight,
indigenous flora and fauna and the coats of arms of Australian colonies.

How is it significant?

The Eight Hour Day Trade Union Banners are of historical, social and aesthetic significance to the State of Victoria.

Why is it significant?

The Eight Hour Day Trade Union Banners are of historical and social significance for their important associations with the history of trade unionism in Victoria. The banners are important historical documents visually depicting the concerns of workers, the nature of their work, and the social and cultural aspirations and identity of trade unions. Some of the banners demonstrate the evolving nature of industry in their representation of trades that have disappeared and craft unions that have been subsumed within bigger unions. For trade unionists and many others in the community, the banners are powerful symbols of the role played by unions in advancing conditions and wages of working people.

The banners have historical significance for their association with the Eight Hour Day movement. The symbol of the Eight Hour Day movement, the entwined figure of eight, appears on many of the banners. The granting of the Eight Hour Day was one of the most important industrial reforms won by unionists in the 19th century, contributing towards the image of Australia as the "working man's paradise" in the late 19th century and the development of organised labour.

The banners have historical significance as rare surviving examples of 19th and early 20th century trade union banners. Although hundreds of banners were produced for use in Eight Hour Day (later Labour Day) processions, relatively few are known to survive and this collection represents the only substantial collection in Victoria and one of only two major Eight Hour Day banner collections in Australia.

The banners have aesthetic significance as fine examples of 19th and early 20th century banners demonstrating fine craftsmanship and artistic skills. The highly decorated banners, with their complex mix of symbolism and realistic depictions of contemporary industry, are unique artistic records of the trades, skills and aspirations of working people.
This place/object may also be State heritage listed. Check the Victorian Heritage Database. For further details, contact the local Council or go to Planning Schemes Online