



# Oliver Messel Schools' Resources

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## Oliver Messel Biography

Suitable for  
Key Stages  
3, 4 and 5

# Oliver Messel Biography

This biography has been designed for use by teachers and students alongside the Oliver Messel Schools' Resources. It covers key moments in Oliver Messel's personal and professional life providing social, political and cultural context for the material found within the thematic resources.

## Childhood

Oliver Messel was born to Leonard (1872-1953) and Maud Messel, née Sambourne (1875-1960) on the 13 January 1904 and was the youngest of three children after Linley and Anne. The family moved to Nymans, the Messel family home in Sussex, from nearby Balcombe in 1915. Nymans remained in the family until 1953 when it was bequeathed to the National Trust, following a fire in 1947 which destroyed a large portion of the house.

The Messel's originated from a line of German Jewish bankers on Leonard's side, however, both family lines boast a number of artistic influences, including Maud's father, Linley Sambourne, a cartoonist for the political publication *Punch*. Maud was brought up at 18 Stafford Terrace, Kensington (now known as the Linley Sambourne House Museum), amongst collections of antique porcelain and eighteenth-century furniture, with a host of artistic visitors such as Henry Irving and Oscar Wilde.

Oliver's own upbringing appears to be influenced by his mothers, as the Messel family were also affiliated with artists and writers and were keen collectors of art, filling their home with textiles, paintings and collections of European and Asian fans from their travels abroad. It was amongst such treasures that Oliver, Anne and Linley spent their childhood, in addition to the beauty of Nyman's extensive gardens which Maud spent significant time improving, including the much-remembered Rose Garden added in the 1920s.

Oliver was schooled at Eton but rather than going up to university was encouraged by family friends, gallery owner Archie Probert and painter and sculptor Glyn Philpot, to attend art school. In 1922 he enrolled at the Slade School of Fine Art in London, where he studied under Henry Tonks. Here, he met the artist Rex Whistler with whom he remained firm friends until Whistler's death in WW2.

Upon leaving the Slade in 1924 Oliver was apprenticed to the studio of portrait artist John Wells, where he learnt various Old Master painting techniques, and met artists such as Jacob Epstein, Augustus John and William Orpen.



## Theatre and Film

Whilst at the Slade Oliver developed his interest in Papier Mâché masks, a pastime popular amongst many art students at the time. Whilst apprenticed to artist John Wells several of Oliver's masks were exhibited at the Claridge Gallery, London, alongside pieces by Whistler and other young artists. These were seen by Serge Diaghilev, director of the Ballet Russes, and Charles B. Cochran, a theatrical producer, both of whom made Oliver offers of work.

His first job in the theatre was creating masks for the Ballets Russes' *Zéphyr et Flore*, 1925, designed by the French artist Georges Braque, followed by numerous musical revues for Cochran, including *Wake Up and Dream!*, 1929, with music by Cole Porter. It was during these revues, working with Porter and Noel Coward, that Oliver also began to design headdresses and costumes. In 1932 he was rewarded with his first full commission to design both costume and sets for *Helen!*, directed by Max Reinhardt. The production design is still celebrated today for its innovative approach and ground-breaking 'white on white' aesthetic, which referenced 'Greek temples, Rococo drapes, Baroque colonnades and Louis XIV carousels'.

Above: Black and white photograph of Nymans, photographer unknown, date unknown, OHM3/4/2/1

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The success of *Helen!* led to further offers within the theatre including Reinhardt's version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Old Vic in 1937, starring Vivien Leigh as Titania and Robert Helpmann as Oberon, the Jean Cocteau play *The Infernal Machine* in 1940, and Christopher Fry's translation of Jean Anouilh's *Ring Round the Moon*, 1950.

One of Oliver's best-known productions during this period was the Russian ballet *The Sleeping Beauty*, performed by Sadler's Wells Ballet in 1946 at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. Encompassing over 200 costumes and four set changes, Oliver's romantic designs were celebrated for bringing colour back to post-war London, and variations on his designs are still used today. Additional designs for the ballet included *Comus* in 1940, for which he was released from war duties, and *Homage to the Queen*, choreographed by Frederick Ashton and performed in 1953 for the Queen's coronation.

His first opera was in 1940 for Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* at the Royal Opera House, followed by a series of productions at the newly founded Glyndebourne Opera House in Sussex, for which Oliver also designed the proscenium arch. He triumphed in 1956 designing a season of four different productions for their Mozart bicentennial, providing illustrations for the programme covers.

His popularity also spread beyond theatre to film, where he worked on over eight different feature films including *Romeo and Juliet*, 1936, directed by George Cukor. During a three month research trip to Italy Oliver collected over 3,000 reference images including postcards of artwork by Piero della Francesca, Giovanni Bellini and Leonardo da Vinci, along with prints and photographs of textiles and architectural features.

A production of Gabriel Pascal's *Caesar and Cleopatra*, 1946, starring Vivien Leigh and Claude Rains, was celebrated for Oliver's ability to recreate the opulence and luxury of ancient Egypt under the constraints of wartime rationing. Such was his skill that Vivien Leigh in a letter to Oliver declared that "I have of course told Pascal that nobody in the world must do the costumes except you." He was later nominated for an Academy Award for his work on his final film *Suddenly, Last Summer*, 1959; an adaptation of Tennessee Williams' American Southern Gothic mystery starring Katharine Hepburn, Elizabeth Taylor and Montgomery Clift.



Although hailed for his innovation and ability to experiment with materials, throughout his theatrical and film career, Oliver remained loyal to the same techniques in order to create his imaginative designs. For each production he conducted rigorous research into various periods, mining art and architectural styles, amounting to a vast array of reference material from which to draw upon. He would start first with the sets, sketching ideas on his characteristic blue-grey paper that would then be translated into three-dimensional form through set models. Always working to the same scale, he would make bits of the model with paper first, sticking brown strips of gummed paper together until he was sure the design was right. This would then be transformed into a finished model ready for the scene builders to work from. Last would come the costumes, having already designed the world which they would inhabit. Oliver utilised his extensive knowledge of materials to ensure that textures and colours worked from a variety of perspectives, whether seen from the distant corners of an auditorium or magnified in full technicolour by the camera lens.

A full list of productions encompassing the world of theatre, ballet, opera and film from 1925 through to 1976 can be seen in the accompanying *School's Resources Oliver Messel's Professional Practice*.

Above: Black and white photograph of Oliver Messel, George Cukor and unidentified female on set from album titled 'Oliver in Hollywood - Romeo and Juliet', photographer unknown, c. 1936, OHM/3/1/5/13

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## Beyond Theatre: Portraiture, Textiles and Illustration

In addition to designing for the stage and screen Oliver also turned his hand to a host of creative practices, applying his art and design skills to a number of different art forms.

Having started his artistic career as a portrait apprentice, capturing the faces of family and friends, Oliver continued to develop this practice until the end of his life. His style is said to have been influenced by Glyn Philpot, the Messel's family friend who encouraged Oliver from an early age in his pursuit of art and design. His most prolific period came in the 1950s during which he produced over 50 portraits, which were shown in exhibitions in New York, London and Barbados.

The exhibitions included both well-known faces and anonymous sitters captured on Oliver's travels, and a number of these works have entered private collections. He continued to paint after moving to the Caribbean in 1966, capturing society figures and the rich and famous including fashion designer Carolina Herrera and Bianca Jagger. His style remained unchanged throughout his career, using the same soft painterly strokes and subtle palette as in his theatre designs.

He also utilised his eye for colour and pattern by turning his skills to textile design (along with a host of other visual artists at the time). Commissioned by Miki Sekers, a member of the board of trustees at Glyndebourne, he designed a range of commemorative silk brocades for Sekers Fabrics (formally the West Cumberland Silk Mill) to mark the Queen's coronation in 1953. The finished fabrics were used by couturier John Cavanagh and turned into elegant gowns which adorned the pages of *Vogue*. His textile designs for Sekers were later displayed in an exhibition which included work by Cecil Beaton and artist Graham Sutherland and featured enchanting Papier Mâché monkeys (created by Messel for an advertising campaign) scaling the walls. Oliver also worked for Cresta Silks designing a coronation scarf with gold leaf detail, which was changed to silver when reproduced in 1977 for the Queen's Silver Jubilee. Further forays into textiles included fabric designs for the suite at the Dorchester Hotel and for various other interior commissions.

During this period Oliver also turned his designs into illustrations, contributing programme and greeting card designs for his seasons at Glyndebourne as well as creating a series of whimsical chapter illustrations for the cookery book *Delightful Food*, by Adrienne Allen and Marjorie Salter, which featured a foreword by Noel Coward. Although not always realised, he received various other commissions in the form of an elaborate cutlery set, a glass goblet engraved with characters from *The Sleeping Beauty* and a design for Donegal Carpets.



## Beyond Theatre: Interiors and Architecture

By far his greatest contribution in addition to theatre and film was Oliver's interior and architectural designs. His ability to imagine whole worlds on stage and screen, from floor to ceiling, led to commissions for party decorations, shop interiors, stately homes and Caribbean villas.

His first interior commission was for the San Carlo Club, Devonshire House, London, which included murals of the Rialto Bridge and Piazza San Marco in Venice. He went on to create an elaborate bathroom suite for Wright Ludington at his villa Val Verde in Santa Barbara, followed by a suite at the prestigious Dorchester Hotel in London, which later became known as the Messel Suite. Combining references from throughout his career, the romantic décors took their inspiration from Venetian, Rococo and Ottoman interiors. The suite also featured several of Oliver's own paintings evoking an English country garden. The success of his designs led to further commissions at the Dorchester, such as the Pompeian themed Pavilion Room, and decorating the hotel's exterior in the style of a theatre box for the coronation in 1953.

Another, much celebrated commission included Rayne shoe shop in Old Bond Street, where he created jewel-like interiors using the same practice of scaled models as his set designs. Other notable interior designs include those for Norwich and Bath Assembly Rooms, Flaxley Abbey in Gloucestershire, Rosehill Theatre in Cumbria and the Reader's Digest offices in Paris.

Above: Press cutting from the *Sunday Times* of a story about the redesign of Rayne shoe shop, 15 November 1959, OHM/1/10/5/38

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However, upon moving to Barbados in 1966, Oliver embraced a new career envisioning architectural concepts for private houses, hotels and public buildings, utilising his experience with interior design to furnish them with bespoke items of furniture and textiles.

His first project was Maddox, the deserted eighteenth-century plantation house bought by himself and his partner Vagn Riis-Hansen in 1964. The existing building and gardens were remodelled to Oliver's designs embracing an inherent theatricality with views out to sea. These were framed by terraces and verandas which extended out from the living rooms creating what is often referred to as a Caribbean style of 'indoor-outdoor' living. For the woodwork he used a shade of green that is now known as 'Messel green' and often associated with the island of Barbados.

Maddox included extensive gardens, a workroom and a guest cottage used by a host of family and friends. Oliver was involved in every aspect of the design including choosing the plants and designing tables and chairs. He worked on numerous houses in Barbados, employing the skills of local craftsmen to recreate authentic design elements such as louvred windows. However, his designs also incorporated highly imaginative elements from his theatrical days, including an old fort and a southern 'gingerbread house' design, whilst others borrowed elements from Turkish and Mediterranean styles of architecture.

His biggest project was the design of over 17 private houses and various (unrealised) public buildings on the island of Mustique, working with a young Swedish architect, Arne Hasselqvist. His first commission here was the Cotton House Hotel, reconstructed from an old cotton factory. Here, he designed the layout of the accompanying grounds and guest cottages, producing numerous configurations for additional buildings such as a schoolhouse, general store, and community centre for the island.

## Twentieth Century Society and Culture

Oliver was born into a wealthy family; he travelled extensively and was exposed to art and culture from a young age. A privileged youth, his name is often mentioned amongst the 'Bright Young Things', for whom costume parties at country houses and jaunts to Europe on a whim became a thing of fable. This informal group included people such as Cecil Beaton (a life-long friend whom Oliver first met at Eton), Lord Berners, Noel Coward, John Betjeman, Harold Acton, Nancy Mitford, Edith Sitwell, Stephen Tennant, Rex Whistler and Evelyn Waugh, who famously satirised their exploits in the 1930s novel *Vile Bodies*. Having witnessed WW1, the 20s and 30s were a time of new freedom for these wealthy, artistic group of high society friends and acquaintances, who knew only too well how short life could be.

As with so many of his generation, Oliver's life was significantly affected by WW2. In 1940 his artistic abilities were put to use as a Camouflage Officer in the Royal Engineers, learning various painting techniques for hiding buildings and vehicles. His skills were also used locally, disguising pillboxes in North Somerset. He was released from war service to undertake several design commissions including the ballet *Comus* and the film *Caesar and Cleopatra*.

Despite his privilege, Oliver's life was also affected by social injustice. He was a gay man living at a time when his sexuality was deemed a criminal offence. As a man of wealth and connections he was able to be relatively open about his sexuality amongst family and friends, however, this would not have been the conditions under which most gay men and women lived at the time. Despite his relative openness, his life-long partner Vagn Riis-Hansen has only recently been acknowledged by the National Trust in their interpretation of the family history.

Oliver also lived through British Colonialism and having worked alongside black artists and performers, would have been acutely aware of the existence of significant racial inequality in British society. This is highlighted by his friendship with 'King Freddie', the 35th Kabaka of Buganda, who in 1953 was deposed by the British Government. Whilst the Kabaka was exiled in England, Oliver attempted to rent a flat in Mayfair for his friend, who was later refused entry by the landlord on the basis of race. In protest, Oliver began an extensive letter writing campaign to members of parliament and the press, highlighting the Kabaka's treatment. The Kabaka was eventually returned to his position and in 1955 Oliver and Vagn visited Buganda to attend the signing of a new treaty.

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Oliver Messel died in Barbados on the 13 July 1978.

Above: Black and white photograph of Oliver Messel and King Mutesa II, Kabaka of Buganda, in the garden at Pelham Place, photographer unknown, c. 1946-66, OHM/4/5/1

# Useful Resources



Below are a list of useful additional resources on Oliver Messel which have been utilised in compiling this biography. We have copies of the books listed in our Theatre Library which is open to the public and free to access.

*Stage Designs and Costumes*, James Laver (London: John Lane, 1933)

*Romeo and Juliet with Designs by Oliver Messel* (London: Batsford, 1936)

*Oliver Messel* (exh. cat), Roger Pinkham (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1983)

*Oliver Messel: A Biography*, Charles Castle (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986)

*Oliver Messel: In the Theatre of Design*, Ed. Thomas Messel (Rizzoli International Publishers, 2011)

V&A: [www.vam.ac.uk/page/o/oliver-messel](http://www.vam.ac.uk/page/o/oliver-messel)

National Trust: [www.nationaltrust.org.uk/nymans/features/nymans-house](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/nymans/features/nymans-house)

Art UK: [www.artuk.org/discover/artists/messel-oliver-19041978#](http://www.artuk.org/discover/artists/messel-oliver-19041978#)

Royal Opera House: [www.roh.org.uk/people/oliver-messel](http://www.roh.org.uk/people/oliver-messel)

National Portrait Gallery: [www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp66731/oliver-hilary-sambourne-messel](http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp66731/oliver-hilary-sambourne-messel)

The Dorchester Hotel: [www.dorchestercollection.com/en/london/the-dorchester/rooms-suites/the-oliver-messel-suite](http://www.dorchestercollection.com/en/london/the-dorchester/rooms-suites/the-oliver-messel-suite)

Sekers Fabrics: [www.sekersfabrics.co.uk/timeline](http://www.sekersfabrics.co.uk/timeline)

The Oliver Messel: Wake Up and Dream  
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Above: Black and white photograph of all the dancers in their costumes and masks from *The Dance of the Masks*, from album labelled 'Paintings and Masks 1926-1935', photographer unknown, c.1926, OHM/1/7/3/1/017

Front cover: Black and white photograph of Oliver Messel leaning against a small outhouse beside a larger building which is actually camouflaged canvas flats, photographer unknown, c.1940-44, OHM/1/15/13



Theatre Collection



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