

Oliver Messel: Magic Maker

(Materials and Process)

Oliver Messel:
Wake Up and Dream
Schools' Resource
(Art and Design)

Suitable for
Key Stages
3, 4 and 5

About the Oliver Messel: Wake Up and Dream Schools' Resources

These resources have been designed to introduce teachers of Art and Design across Key Stages 3, 4 and 5, to artist, designer and magic-maker Oliver Messel (1904-1978). They can be used in conjunction with the Oliver Messel Personal Archive, held by the University of Bristol Theatre Collection (an accredited museum and archive), which provides a fascinating insight into one of the twentieth century's greatest theatrical stars, documenting his personal life and extensive body of creative work.

The Archive provides a rich source of material with which to inspire students to create, experiment and evaluate, whilst developing critical thinking skills, visual literacy and an understanding of how art and design interweaves with all aspects of society, reflecting and shaping our history.

Through exploring different objects in the Archive students can also develop their knowledge of a wide array of visual artists working within the sphere of art and design in the twentieth century and beyond, improving their understanding of the cultural and historical context for a multitude of materials, mediums and different artforms.

How to use these resources

Each pack contains thematic material, reference images and creative activities such as discussion points, focused tasks and ideas for independent research (dependent on level of study) which can be adapted as needed for different stages of the curriculum.

The packs can be used separately by teachers with which to plan an individual lesson, or sequentially to help develop a larger project around Oliver Messel, art and theatre or twentieth century art and design.

The packs can be used either in the classroom or as part of a structured visit to the Theatre Collection facilitated by a member of our team (see page 10 for details). For students undertaking study at Key Stages 4 and 5 there are suggestions for follow-up tasks which can be used to develop portfolios (including both practical and written application) and as a springboard for longer term projects including independent study for A-Level entrants.

Each pack can be used to support and evidence key criteria and requirements at different stages of the Art and Design curriculum. For GCSE and A-Level, this includes each of the six pathways (Art, Craft and Design, Fine Art, Graphic Communication, Textile Design, Three-dimensional Design and Photography).

Additional resources are available to accompany each pack including:

- A glossary designed to introduce students to specific terms and vocabulary related to the art of theatre design.
- Biographical history covering Oliver Messel's personal and professional life.
- Downloadable image packs containing both high-resolution images suitable for classroom use and low-resolution, ideal for printing and including in sketchbooks.
- Access to the Oliver Messel Personal Archive online catalogue with an additional 800 images and over 10,000 object descriptions to research.

For further support in using these resources, or to arrange a visit, please see the contact details and booking a visit section on page 10 or visit the website at: bristol.ac.uk/theatre-collection

Oliver Messel: Magic Maker (Materials and Process)

As an artist and designer Oliver Messel worked across a range of different artistic practices including mask making, portraiture, theatre, ballet, opera, film, textiles, illustration, interior design and architecture. He used a wide variety of media, possessing an exceptional ability to manipulate and transform the most basic materials. His approach was highly experimental and his imagination vast. He utilised his skills as a maker to embrace the multidisciplinary approach for which early twentieth century art and design is now remembered.

Oliver Messel: Magic Maker (Materials and Process) explores three themes in focus:

- The Art of Mask Making
- Manipulating Materials
- Finding Inspiration

It allows students across all programmes of study to:

- Learn about the history of art, craft, design and architecture across different periods, styles and major movements.
- Learn how to select appropriate and inspiring primary and secondary sources.
- Develop personal and intuitive responses in recording and exploration of ideas.
- Develop their visual, sensory and tactile language.
- Develop ideas through thinking, research and making.
- Develop an awareness of different work practices within art, craft and design.
- Respond creatively using a range of media.
- Build confidence experimenting with ideas, processes, media, materials and techniques.

Right: Black and white photograph of Oliver Messel working on one of the props for the Jean Cocteau play *The Infernal Machine*, c.1940. Photograph by Tunbridge and Sedgwick, OHM/3/2/34

“I attempted to use every device to make as much magic as possible.”

Oliver Messel,
Oliver Messel: A Biography



The Art of Mask Making

After leaving school Oliver Messel studied at the Slade School of Art in London. In his spare time, he made Papier-mâché masks using brown paper and wax. These were created as decorative objects, or for entertainment purposes to be worn as part of a costume. This led to his first job in the theatre, making masks for the Ballets Russes' production of *Zéphyr et Flore*, 1925.

In addition to Papier-mâché he also experimented with adding new materials such as the headdress worn by Tilly Losch as The Fu Manchu Marchioness in Cole Porter's 1929 revue *Wake Up and Dream!* in which the effect of porcelain was created using painted rubber and fabric.

Masks have been used for centuries in both religious ritual and for performance, allowing the wearer to take on different personas. They can also be traced throughout a variety of cultures, such as their use in ancient Greece for worship, the mystery plays of the Middle Ages and in Commedia dell'arte, a theatrical form that began in Renaissance Italy and spread across Europe.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century masks from Africa were brought to Europe providing inspiration for avant-garde European artists. However, they often appeared out of context such as in Pablo Picasso's painting *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R.)* (1911, MOMA, New York).

Discussion points

- What materials and techniques have been used throughout history for mask making?
- What effect might different materials create in terms of the transformative power of masks?
- What emotions might different materials and techniques evoke in the audience?
- How are masks used in contemporary culture today?
- What other examples can you identify of masks in modern and contemporary art?

Creative activities

Students can design their own masks, experimenting with unusual materials such as household items. You may wish to provide suggestions for cultural references, narratives or art movements to spark inspiration (or choose an image from the accompanying image pack). Students should consider what type of emotion they would like their mask to convey. Encourage students to present their ideas to the class and evaluate one another's work. This could include an analysis of some of Messel's masks.

Practical prompts for future work and discussion

Key Stage 3

For longer projects you may wish to turn these designs into finished artworks, encouraging students to evaluate the progress of their work from the initial design through to the finished mask. Encourage students to assess the success and limitations of the materials they have chosen.

Key Stage 4 and 5

Further tasks could include researching the history of masks and mask making techniques. Students can look at the use of masks in art across different cultures including the appropriation of these in twentieth century western Modern art. Independent research projects might include the study of masks throughout theatre history, using Messel as a case study.

The accompanying *Mask Making* image pack contains a number of Oliver Messel's designs along with a list of image credits and productions.

Manipulating Materials

Oliver Messel worked across a variety of media and art forms resulting in an extensive knowledge of materials. He often applied similar techniques and processes across different practices, such as using scale models to envisage both stage sets and interior design commissions, including plans for the iconic Rayne shoe shop and a suite at the Dorchester Hotel.

He often used unusual materials with spectacular results, such as Titania's crown in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1937, which is made from upright strips of cellophane, metallic paper and chandelier drops, see: collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O128416/theatre-costume-messel-oliver-hilary. He also learnt how to repurpose materials, especially during and after World War Two when fabric and other traditional supplies were in high demand due to rationing. His 'make do and mend' approach is particularly evident in the ballet *The Sleeping Beauty* and the film version of *Caesar and Cleopatra*, both 1946.

The Archive contains several boxes of materials found in Messel's studio, including beads, ornate trims and opalescent fabric samples which were most likely used for costumes or props, and a cardboard box from Harrods containing leaves and berries made by Messel from plaster of Paris and wire, similar to those seen in the decorative scheme for the Dorchester Hotel.

His eclectic use of materials is evident throughout the Archive and can be seen in sketchbooks, finished artworks, designs, samples of wool and fabrics, architectural moulds, and correspondence and notes discussing the use of particular materials or design concepts.

Discussion points

- Why do we use different materials and what are their effects?
- How do we evaluate a material?
- What materials might you use from daily life in your artwork?
- What unusual materials have been used by artists throughout art history (you may wish to look at the Dada and Surrealist movements and the concepts of readymades and assemblage)?
- How many different materials can you list that have been used in famous works of art?

Creative activities

Choosing from a number of objects illustrated in the *Manipulating Materials* image pack, students can select an object to disassemble or repurpose. Think about what new function this object could have? What materials and techniques would be needed to repurpose this object?

Practical prompts for future work and discussion

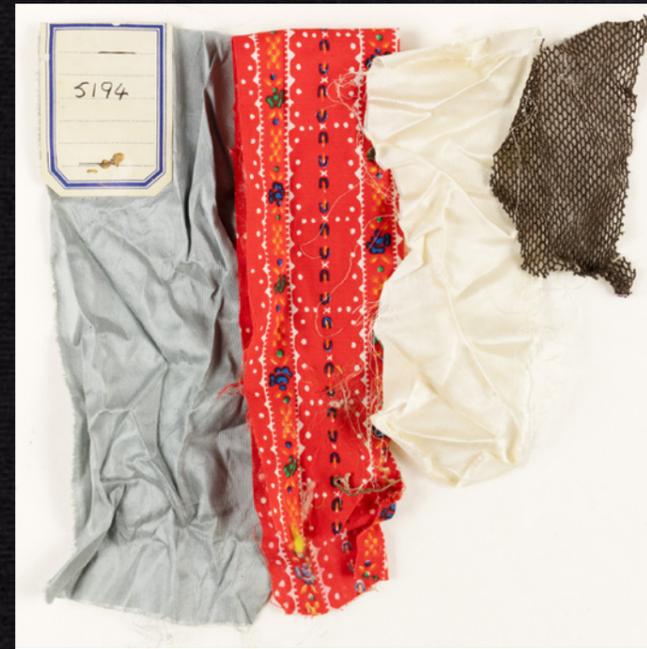
Key Stage 3

Printing out images of their chosen objects students can annotate these in sketchbooks thinking about what materials have been used and what effects they create? They might also want to consider what other materials could be used to create similar effects and what the original purpose of the object was. For example, if it is a design for a costume, consider whether it is for film or stage which will alter the distance at which it was intended to be viewed. If it is an interior design element think about movement and the demands presented by the different types of spaces that we inhabit.

Key Stage 4 and 5

You may want to extend this activity by creating a project brief and asking students to develop material choices based on specific requirements. For independent study students could be asked to research the history of materials within one of Messel's areas of work, such as costume design for the ballet, requiring them to make links across different periods in design. They may wish to explore Messel's Design Archive at the V&A for this (see page 10 for details).

The accompanying *Manipulating Materials* image pack contains a number of objects from the Archive with details regarding both material and use.



Left: Selection of trims and fabric samples, OHM/1/15



Above: Box of costume jewellery and beads (possibly made as props or samples for use in various productions), OHM/1/15/56

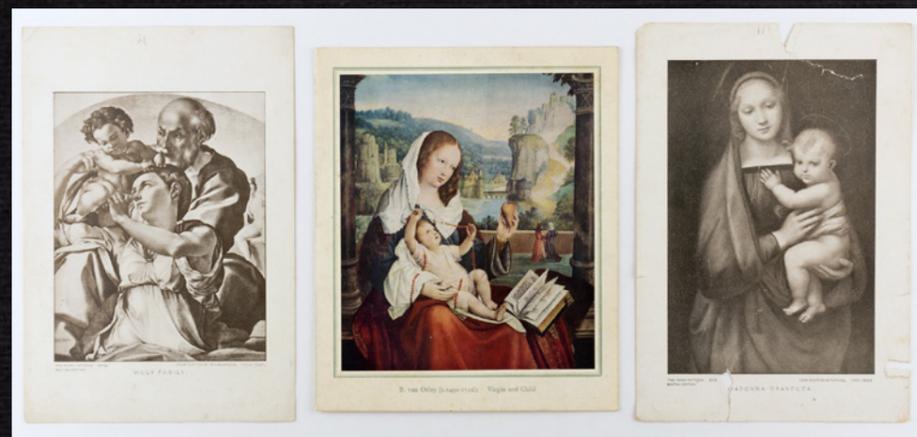


Above: Envelope from Sol Kahaner & Bro including different forms of embellishment, OHM/1/15/13



Above: Cardboard box from Harrods containing leaves and berries made from plaster of Paris and wire, OHM/1/15/58

Right: Top left: Coloured postcard of Madonna and child by a follower of the Verrocchio School, OHM/1/7/5/4/2.
 Top centre: Coloured postcard of Madonna degli alberetti (Virgin Mary of the Small Trees), Giovanni Bellini, Gallerie dell'Accademia, OHM/1/7/5/4/3.
 Top right: Coloured postcard of The Virgin of the Rocks, Leonardo da Vinci, National Gallery, London, OHM/1/7/5/4/13.
 Bottom left: Madonna and child, Fiorenzo di Lorenzo, National Gallery, London, OHM/1/7/5/4/4.
 Bottom centre: Coloured postcard of La Vergine Nicopeia (the Nicopeia Virgin), Basilica di San Marco, Venice, OHM/1/7/5/4/7.
 Bottom right: Coloured postcard of Madonna and child, follower of the Verrocchio School, OHM/1/7/5/4/2



Left: Far left: Black and white reproduction of a painting of the Holy Family from a painting by Michaelangelo, OHM/1/7/5/4/12.
 Centre: Blank Christmas card with an image of Virgin and Child, B. van Orley, Prado Gallery, Madrid, OHM/1/7/5/4/5.
 Right: Black and white reproduction of Madonna Granduca from a painting by Raphael, OHM/1/7/5/4/6

Right: Black and white photograph, possibly a sitter reference for one of Messel's Madonna paintings OHM/1/7/5/6/11



Finding Inspiration

Oliver Messel was influenced by a variety of different art historical and architectural styles which can be identified throughout his work. His childhood was spent surrounded by art and design, living amongst Neopolitan costumes, Hungarian dolls and paintings by the Spanish artist Diego Velásquez.

As a family the Messels frequently visited museums and galleries, and throughout his career Messel travelled far and wide, often collecting artefacts and images which he would later use as inspiration.

Using source material was key to Messel's working process and can be seen in all aspects of his work from stage and film to architectural designs. Alongside mask making, portraiture was another of Messel's life-long pursuits, for which he applied the same rigorous research techniques. For an oil painting, based on the Madonna and child, he photographed various sitters and studied Italian Renaissance portraits of the same subject matter for reference.

Whilst preparing for the film version of *Romeo and Juliet*, 1936, filmed in Hollywood, Messel was sent on a three-month research trip to Italy, during which he visited galleries and museums, studying works by Botticelli, Bellini and Piero della Francesca. He returned with over 3,000 reference images including postcards and prints of artworks and architecture which served as inspiration for over 1,200 costumes and multiple set designs.

Discussion points

- Think about a recent artwork, film or performance that you have seen and consider what might have inspired the visual look and feel of the work?
- What types of sources might the artist or designer have used and where might these be found?
- Think about the period, location and time of year or day?
- What is the difference between using primary and secondary sources?
- Can you think of examples where artists have used other artists' work for inspiration?

Creative activities

Messel collected ideas and inspiration from artwork and architecture across different time periods and artistic movements before synthesising the different elements into one coherent design. Ask students to choose an artwork from the twentieth century (this could include a work by Messel from the accompanying image pack) and identify different influences or sources that might have inspired the work. Students can then be asked to evaluate one of their own artworks in the same way, thinking about their influences and inspiration.

Practical prompts for future work and discussion

Key Stage 3

The image pack contains a number of different sources for Messel's work which students could be asked to explore further, making educated suggestions for how they might have been used. Encourage them to draw links between different periods, styles and materials.

Key Stage 4 and 5

Students can also be encouraged to start collating source material in sketchbooks as part of their own practice. Using Messel as a case study suggest ways in which they can draw-on their own collection of memories and ideas for inspiration. Independent study could include an in-depth look at artist sketchbooks, exploring their importance as part of the artistic process by using well-known examples such as: *A Sketchbook* by John Constable, *Vincent van Gogh Drawings* and *David Hockney's Sketchbooks*.

Examples of source material and its intended use can be seen in the *Finding Inspiration* image pack.

Visits, Workshops and Additional Resources

Arranging a visit

If you would like to visit the Theatre Collection as a class please contact us to discuss dates and class sizes on: (0)117 331 5045 or theatre-collection@bristol.ac.uk

Visits and workshops are free of charge and can be tailored to suit your specific teaching needs.

We can work with you to select appropriate material and content for your group which could include activities based on those in one of our *Oliver Messel: Wake Up and Dream Schools' Resources*, or could be expanded to cover additional themes and objects.

As part of your visit you may wish to view objects related to *Oliver Messel: Magic Maker (Materials and Process)*. These include costume and set designs, illustrations, portraiture, sketchbooks, Papier-mâché monkeys and masks, studio materials including fabric swatches, trims and beading, ballet costumes, architectural mouldings, set model pieces and many more fascinating objects. Object handling sessions can also be used as a springboard for developing visual, verbal and written literacy through storytelling activities.

School groups can also make use of our Theatre Library, an open access reference library creating an opportunity for independent research for Key Stages 4 and 5.

You can also view Oliver Messel's Design Archive at the V&A online:

vam.ac.uk/page/o/oliver-messel

You can find out more about Messel's childhood home Nymans, now a National Trust property at:

nationaltrust.org.uk/nymans

The *Oliver Messel: Wake Up and Dream Schools' Resources* also include *The Art of Theatre (Storytelling in Space)* exploring the role of artists and designers across stage and film in the twentieth century and *Twentieth Century Art and Design*, focusing on the relationship between art, theatre and design.

If you would like further guidance on how to use this pack, or the additional resources, please contact the Theatre Collection at:

Phone: +44(0)117 331 5045

Email: theatre-collection@bristol.ac.uk

Web: www.bristol.ac.uk/theatre-collection

University of Bristol Theatre Collection, Faculty of Arts, Vandyck Building, Cantocks Close, Bristol, BS8 1UP.

Additional resources

Image packs are available to download for each of the themes in this resource. Email the Theatre Collection and a download link will be sent to you.

You and your students can explore the Oliver Messel Archive further through our online catalogue which contains over 10,000 object descriptions and over 800 images see: calmview2.eu/BristolTheatreArchive/CalmView/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&id=OHM

The Oliver Messel: Wake Up and Dream Schools' Resources have been supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Front cover: Black and white photograph of Messel's Flora mask, c.1920s © A.C. Cooper (colour) Ltd., OHM/1/7/4/124



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