



Oliver Messel: The Art of Theatre

(Storytelling in Space)

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: The Art of Theatre (Storytelling in Space)

The theatre has the magical ability to transport us to a multitude of times and places and the role of the theatre designer is crucial in achieving this. A vast array of design elements can be used to both tell and support a story within a theatrical space, such as colour, texture and composition. Subtle alterations can instantly change the mood, tone or focus of the narrative, with bigger changes affecting the time or period in which the story has been set.

Although considered one of the century's greatest theatre designers, Oliver Messel had no formal training and honed his craft 'on the job'. He designed for over 50 theatrical productions, including musical revues, ballet and opera, as well as eight feature films. As with many artists at the time he designed both sets and costumes, bringing stories to life through a range of media. Drawing on an extensive knowledge of art and architecture his designs were often referred to as a 'pastiche' of different styles, yet each was meticulously researched. Messel was also known for his innovative approach, such as the hot house in *Ring Round the Moon*, 1950, which he insisted could be made from metal hoops, rather than the traditional technique of carpentry, creating a light and airy effect.

Embodying the idea of a 'visual storyteller', his experimental approach, combined with an intimate knowledge of art and architectural history, led to highly imaginative designs which transformed words and two-dimensional drawings into captivating three-dimensional forms.

The Art of Theatre (Storytelling in Space) looks at three different productions in focus, exploring both costume and set design:

- *The Sleeping Beauty*, ballet, 1946
- *Caesar and Cleopatra*, film, 1946
- *Gigi*, musical, 1973

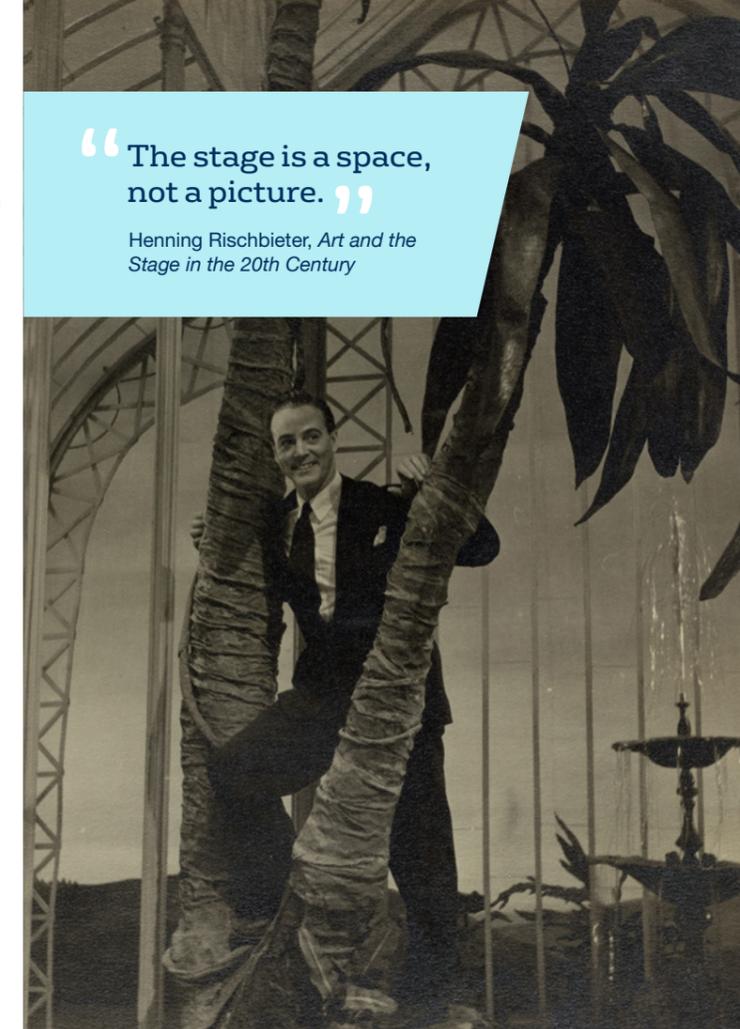
Right: Black and white photograph of Oliver Messel standing in the set he designed for the play *Ring Round the Moon*, photographer unknown, 1950, OHM/11/8/53

“The stage is a space, not a picture.”

Henning Rischbieter, *Art and the Stage in the 20th Century*

It allows students across 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.
- Learn about different creative roles, practices and functions across creative industries.
- Understand the interrelatedness of art and design processes.



Offering of a magic
Conch from the
Fairy of the Crystal Fountain



The Sleeping Beauty

Choreographed by Marius Petipa, music by Tchaikovsky, 1946

In 1946 Oliver Messel designed the costume and sets for the Russian classical ballet *The Sleeping Beauty*, performed by Sadler's Wells Ballet at the reopening of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, after World War Two. The production was performed over 1,000 times between 1946 and 1970 using Messel's original designs.

Messel's visionary approach to stage design was first celebrated with his revolutionary 'white-on-white' aesthetic for *Helen!* in 1932. However, he was most well-known for his painterly approach and the ability to transfer his ideas into scalable designs. Another distinct aspect of his work was a tendency to borrow extensively from historical art and architecture – he was particularly fond of the eighteenth century. For example, the columns in *The Sleeping Beauty's* Prologue have been likened to the painting *Les Charmes de la vie*, c.1718-19, by the French master Jean-Antoine Watteau, and the trees in Act One have been compared to those of British artist Thomas Gainsborough, later in the century.

In addition to the elements above, the Rose Adagio tutu worn by Princess Aurora has been compared to paintings by seventeenth century Spanish artist Diego Velázquez, and the intricately designed gifts given by the visiting fairies to both Renaissance gold smithery and Jacobean court masques, with further Rococo flourishes spotted in baby Aurora's cradle.

Messel was sometimes critiqued for this mixing of styles, with the suggestion that his designs lacked authenticity. Yet, despite extensive 'borrowing', his poetic ability to synchronise these references through a harmonious colour palette and an injection of pure imagination, established him as one of the greatest theatrical designers of the century. *The Sleeping Beauty* is one of his most praised productions and in total he created four different sets, gauzes and drop curtains in the same romantic green-blue hues and over 200 costume designs for this iconic ballet.

Discussion points

- What might the benefits be to drawing-on different historical styles and movements?
- What techniques might differ when designing a back drop for the stage as opposed to creating a painting?

- When designing for the stage how might this effect perspective, for example if an audience is seeing the stage from a distance?
- Why might harmony be a key word when discussing the relationship between staging and costumes?

Creative activities

In *The Sleeping Beauty's* Prologue, six fairies attend Princess Aurora's christening, each bearing a gift such as a birdcage or a cornucopia (see image pack for more references). Drawing on different art historical styles and movements – you may wish to look at ones in *Oliver Messel: Twentieth Century Art and Design* – ask students to design their own gifts encouraging them to think about colour, scale and harmony. Students could be encouraged to experiment with a variety of media. Suggest using written annotations to help convey their ideas. Think about use of language and encourage students to explore sensory and visual examples with which to help convey their ideas.

Practical prompts for future work and discussion

Key Stage 3

Students can expand on their existing 'gift' designs by applying the same visual theme to a full backdrop. Encourage them to think about the story by looking at period, mood and tone. They can also consider elements that help create harmony such as colour palette and visual motifs, thinking about how to achieve consistency between designs. Students could focus on these elements of cohesion when evaluating their work.

Key Stage 4 and 5

For independent research projects students can evaluate the stage designs of a theatrical production in detail, looking either at Messel's work, or the work of other designers. They can use the Theatre Collection website to research other prominent theatre designers such as Julia Trevelyan Oman and John Elvery.

The accompanying *The Sleeping Beauty* image pack contains several of Oliver Messel's designs along with a list of image credits and productions.

For a full synopsis of the ballet, visit the Royal Opera House website here: www.roh.org.uk/productions/the-sleeping-beauty-by-marius-petipa

Caesar and Cleopatra

Directed and produced by Gabriel Pascal, 1946

Gabriel Pascal's interpretation of George Bernard Shaw's stage play *Caesar and Cleopatra* began work in 1944 (six days after the D-Day landings) with the lead roles played by Vivien Leigh and Claude Rains. Oliver Messel was commissioned to design costumes, props and interior decoration, with sets by designer John Bryan. Filmed in full technicolour, even the smallest detail was picked up by the camera.

As with *The Sleeping Beauty* materials were in short supply and cloth coupons were still in operation, requiring Messel to 'make do and mend', demonstrating an extra resourcefulness with materials. For example, intricate jewellery was crafted from wire, glass and cellophane, a material used frequently by Messel in his designs. Indian saris were reworked into Egyptian robes and feathered fans were borrowed from the family home for interior scenes.

In order to create authentic designs, Messel collated extensive reference materials such as images of archaeological finds from Egypt, including necklaces, pendants, earrings, bracelets and belt buckles, as well as domestic objects such as ceramic jugs and woven baskets. Elements from these images can be matched with specific details from the finished designs.

Working with maker of wigs and headdresses, Hugh Skillen, Messel created Papier-mâché busts made to resemble Vivien Leigh. These enabled him to see the exact fit of each headdress during the design and making process. Many of the headdresses were made using cheap materials such as wax, wire, beads and leather which was easy to manipulate. It was also lightweight when worn and could easily be painted to look like gold.

Discussion points

- What are some of the differences between designing for the stage and designing for film, for example think about perspective and level of detail?
- This was Messel's only film in full technicolour, what are the differences between designing for black and white and designing for colour?
- What materials do you think would have been difficult to get hold of at the time and why (for example fabric was used for parachutes and uniforms)?
- How would you find out what clothes and jewellery were worn by the Egyptians?
- How important is it to be accurate when designing for a production set during a specific historical period?

Creative activities

Students can pick one of Messel's designs for *Caesar and Cleopatra* and spend time analysing the different aspects of the costume. They should think about what different components tell us about the character. What can we learn about their age, occupation, personality and nationality? How do individual features of the costume contribute to this, for example the headdress or jewellery? Joining together in pairs or small groups, ask students to discuss how their different characters might relate to one another. What can we learn about the narrative by looking at the costumes of multiple characters?

Practical prompts for future work and discussion

Key Stage 3

Thinking about the relationship between costume and character, students can be asked to create a costume for an imaginary character. They should decide on key aspects such as age, gender and occupation, and assign their character personality traits, for example selfishness or humility. They can choose a historic period, for example Ancient Rome, Renaissance Italy, or wartime Britain, to inform their designs. Encourage students to annotate their designs, explaining their choice of colour, texture and materials, considering how this helps to shape the character they have created.

Key Stage 4 and 5

Students can choose their own film with specific historical, cultural or political references, to research in further detail. They could look at the relationship between the story and the costume designs, analysing how different visual elements, such as colour, texture and tone help to convey the intricacies of the film's narrative. They may wish to select a contemporary production or look at another film that Messel worked on, for example *Romeo and Juliet*, 1936, directed by George Cukor, and set in Renaissance Italy, or *Queen of Spades*, 1949, a fantasy horror film based on a story by the Russian writer Pushkin and directed by Thorold Dickinson.

The accompanying *Caesar and Cleopatra* image pack contains a number of Oliver Messel's designs along with relevant reference material.

For a full synopsis of the original story on which the film is based see: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caesar_and_Cleopatra_\(play\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caesar_and_Cleopatra_(play))



Above: Black and white photograph of a Papier-mâché bust sculpted and painted to resemble Vivien Leigh as Cleopatra, wearing a wig and headdress as the Crown of State, made by Oliver Messel, photographer unknown, c.1943-46, OHM/1/4/2/19



Left: Black and white photostat of dresses from the twentieth century, date unknown, OHM/1/1/20/1/3/6



Right: Pencil, watercolour and gouache sketch of costume design for the character Gigi as a young woman by Oliver Messel, c.1973, © Theatre Collection OHM/1/1/20/2/5/2



Left: French fashion plates for two outdoor dresses labelled Le Follet and three outdoor dresses from *Journal des Jeunes Filles*, date unknown, OHM/1/1/20/1/2/3 and OHM/1/1/20/1/2/4

Gigi

Produced by Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe and directed by Joseph Hardy, 1973

Oliver Messel's final designs for the stage were for the musical production *Gigi*, staged in America and adapted from a novel by the French writer Collette (originally published in 1944). Messel was only responsible for the costumes with the sets designed by Oliver Smith.

The turn of the century Parisian setting required extensive research into La Belle Époque fashion (the French name for the era from 1895 to 1914). Subsequently Messel collated an array of reference materials including photostats (photocopies made on a photostat machine) of skating, cycling and swimming outfits, and coloured fashion plates (illustrations) from publications, such as the French *Chic Parisien* and American journal *The Designer*, showing fur coats, capes and outdoor dresses.

The musical's narrative required Messel to demonstrate the character Gigi's development from a girl to a young woman involving a series of costume changes that gradually age her throughout the story. He also had to design numerous costumes for the production's large cast which included peripheral characters (known as extras), such as a nun on a bicycle, a flag seller and a dancing couple. The finished designs have been likened to the romance found in paintings by the French artist Pierre-Auguste Renoir, who painted at the turn of the century.

The Archive also contains stage layouts, indicating the planning required to ensure that each costume change would work alongside the various set changes. Messel needed to ensure that the costumes not only allowed actors to move whilst singing and dancing, but also that they could easily move in and out of the scenery and set decoration. These elements would all need to be considered, alongside agreeing a thematic use of colour and tone, with stage designer Oliver Smith

Discussion points

- What are the differences between designing for different types of stage productions, for example a musical or a ballet versus a Shakespearean play?
- What aspects need to be considered when collaborating on a design?
- How could the development of a character be suggested through their costume?

- When designing multiple costumes for the same production what elements do you need to keep the same, for example period references, colour and tone?
- How does fashion influence costume design?

Creative activities

Gigi was based during La Belle Époque, meaning that Messel needed to design period costumes (relating to a specific period) for his characters. He used fashion magazines and illustrations to influence his designs. Choosing their own period for inspiration, such as the 1930s Jazz Age, students can design a new costume that is reflective of this period for the character of Gigi. They should pay attention to shape, colour, pattern and materials, thinking about the affect these have on both the character that is portrayed and the authenticity of the design.

Practical prompts for future work and discussion

Key Stage 3

In addition to looking at fashion illustrations, Messel would also find inspiration in historical artworks when designing costumes. This might include a small detail of pattern, or a more general sense of the painting's mood, for example the romance found in Renoir's work. Students should choose their own work of art as the starting point for designing a new costume for Gigi. Encourage them to think about colour, pattern and materials, as well as mood and tone. They can annotate their designs to explain how the costume has been influenced by the source material, thinking about how their finished design may change the way we perceive the character of Gigi.

Key Stage 4 and 5

Further independent research can be undertaken by looking at the intersection between costume and fashion design, looking at both the differences and similarities between the two professions. They might choose to look at fashion designers who have worked across both theatre/film and fashion including Coco Chanel, Yves Saint Laurent and Jean Paul Gaultier, or at designers whose work embraces theatricality, such as Alexander McQueen or Vivienne Westwood, identifying and evaluating historical references in the work.

The accompanying *Gigi* image pack contains a number of Oliver Messel's designs along with relevant reference material.

For a full synopsis of the musical see: <http://broadwaymusicalhome.com/shows/gigi.html>

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: The Art of Theatre (Storytelling in Space)*. These include costume and set designs, sketchbooks, photographs, ballet costumes, set model pieces, reference material (including correspondence) relating to various productions, 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.

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.CatalogSid=OHM

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 *Magic Maker* looking at Messel's ingenious use of materials and working practices 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

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Front cover: Black and white proof-photo collage relating to *Breath of Spring*, photographer unknown, c.1958, OHM/1/1/15/4



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