

Oliver Messel: Twentieth Century Art and Design

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: Twentieth Century Art and Design

In the twentieth century the worlds of theatre, art and design became increasingly intertwined. The birth of the Ballet Russes – Serge Diaghilev's international ballet company which worked with visual artists including Picasso, Matisse and Dalí – epitomises this period of cross-pollination, which encompassed artists, writers and musicians. As a painter, with no formal theatre training, Oliver Messel was one of a number of artists who turned their skills to the stage, utilising his imaginative flair to bring to life both costume and set designs. As with many artists at the time he also experimented with textiles, illustration and interior design (amongst other mediums).

The twentieth century is also remembered for the immense impact of World War Two on Modern art. Messel was part of a generation of artists for whom careers were interrupted (or for many cut short) by this conflict and he was tasked with applying his creative skills to the art of camouflage painting. Both before and after the war, a number of interesting links can be made between form, function and practice across varying spheres of art and design.

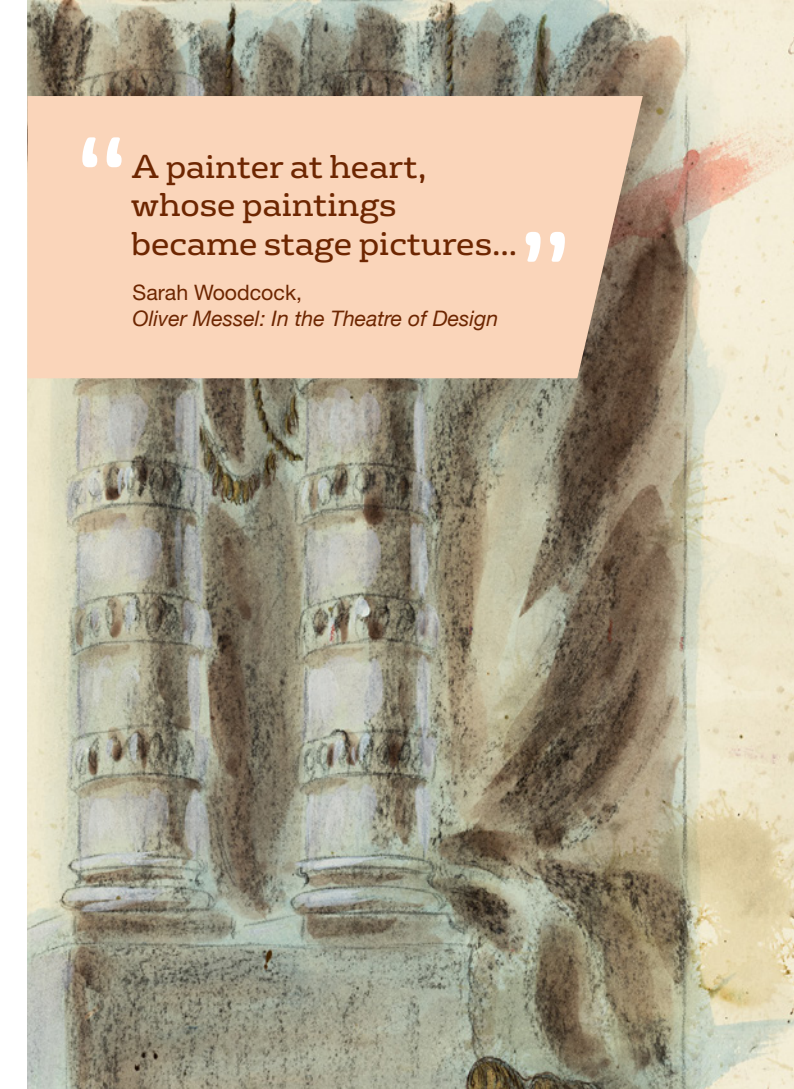
Oliver Messel: Twentieth Century Art and Design explores three themes in focus:

- The Art of Theatre Design
- Artists and World War Two
- Designing Textiles

Right: Watercolour and pencil sketch on paper of design of the wing from the Prologue of *The Sleeping Beauty* by Oliver Messel, c.1946 © Theatre Collection, OHM/1/2/4/2/2

“A painter at heart,
whose paintings
became stage pictures...”

Sarah Woodcock,
Oliver Messel: In the Theatre of Design



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.
- Gain knowledge of great artists, craft makers and designers.
- Learn about different creative roles, practices and functions across creative industries.
- Build understanding between society, art and historical terms.
- Understand the interrelatedness of art and design processes.

The Art of Theatre Design

After training as a portrait artist at the Slade School of Art, Oliver Messel was given his first job in theatre, designing masks for a Ballet Russes production of *Zéphyr et Flore*, 1925, designed by French artist George Braque. Diaghilev's ballet company was instrumental in changing approaches to theatre design. He envisaged a 'world of art' in which costumes and sets worked as one, embracing a bolder and more imaginative use of colour and staging.

Known as the 'painters' theatre', between 1909 and 1929 the Ballet Russes employed the talents of visual artists, such as Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, Mikhail Larionov, Natalia Goncharova, Marc Chagall, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Georges Braque, Fernand Léger, Sonia Delauney, Max Ernst, Jean Cocteau, Joan Miró, Salvador Dalí and Alexander Calder, to name a few. The Slade established its first taught theatre design course in 1932, formalising the art of theatre design for future generations.

The Ballet Russes, with its innovative illusions in space, contributed to major developments in perspectival art such as Cubism and Surrealism. Similar exchanges were also taking place in the wider world of theatre. For example, during the 1920s and 1930s, Messel and artists such as Cecil Beaton and Rex Whistler regularly worked for producer Charles B. Cochran on his musical revues, which were influenced by movements such as Art Deco.

Visual artists worked in the theatre across the twentieth century, with art influencing design and vice versa. This can be explored further through the work of British artists such as Edward Burra, Rex Whistler, John Piper, Christopher Wood, Robert MacBryde, Robert Colquhoun and David Hockney. However, the painterly tradition to which Messel belonged went out of fashion in the 1960s as British theatre moved towards more minimal staging.

Discussion points

- What skills might a visual artist bring to the theatre?
- In what medium, for example drawing or set models, would you expect to encounter theatre designs?
- What is the difference between a theatre design and a drawing or painting that is considered fine art?

- Can you think of any examples of artists who use theatrical techniques in their work such as perspective or illusion?
- Think about what other creative roles exist within theatre, for example prop makers or lighting designers?

Creative activities

Choose a set or costume design from Messel's theatre designs (see image pack provided) and reinterpret this in the style of either another twentieth century artist or an art movement from this period, such as Cubism or Surrealism. Encourage students to think about how they can apply techniques associated with these movements, such as collage or abstraction. Students can evaluate their work by discussing the suitability and limitations of transferring a variety of styles and techniques from the visual arts to theatre design.

Practical prompts for future work and discussion

Key Stage 3

For longer projects students could be asked to translate their designs from two-dimensional works into three-dimensional models. Encourage them to think about scale and perspective. You may wish to explore different aspects of theatre design, for example the movement from flat back cloths to individual stage flats (freestanding panels) or the different effects achieved by creative use of lighting. You might focus on particular painting techniques, such as Trompe-l'œil which originated in the Baroque period and was later utilised in the Theatre.

Key Stage 4 and 5

Students could be asked to research visual artists from the twentieth century who have also worked in the theatre, such as John Piper and David Hockney. Independent research projects might include visual analysis between different styles and movements.

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

Artists and World War Two

During World War Two artists and designers were employed in a number of different roles to support the war effort. Oliver Messel joined the Royal Engineers becoming a Camouflage Officer (also known as a Camoufler, meaning to blind or veil).

The first camouflage unit was created in 1915 by the French and was partly inspired by the patterns and forms seen within Cubism. It was first used in Britain in 1917 with the establishment of the 'Dazzle Section' who were based at the Royal Academy of Art. Dazzle painting was a particular camouflage technique used for disguising ships based on a series of disorientating lines and patterns.

In World War Two Messel was originally stationed in North Somerset where he disguised pillboxes. He used postcards of Somerset villages and Glastonbury Abbey to achieve realistic effects when replicating local stonework. Messel was later transferred to Norwich, running a camouflage school out of Norwich Assembly Rooms, where he shared techniques for 'trapping tanks' and disguising weaponry vehicles with his fellow soldiers.

Artists were also appointed as Official War Artists, commissioned by the government to capture the events of war, such as Messel's contemporaries John Piper, Graham Sutherland and Paul Nash. Many of these artists also worked across a variety of different forms in art and design, re-purposing their artistic skills during the conflict. After the war there was a marked change in style in British and European art, as artists dealt with the aftermath of such brutality. These changes in subject, palette and tone, can also be seen to a lesser extent in theatre design.

However, as in all walks of life, a generation of artists was also lost. Many were sent to fight, dying tragically young, such as Messel's friend the celebrated portrait painter, muralist and stage designer Rex Whistler.

Discussion points

- Can you think of other forms of camouflage in the natural world?
- What elements of Messel's painting skills would be useful for creating camouflage, for example think about colour, patterns and painting from life?
- How useful do you think source material would have been for artists during this period?

- Which artistic movements can you associate with World War Two?
- What do you think were the biggest challenges for artists after the war?

Creative activities

The word camouflage is now part of the English vocabulary and specific patterns referred to as camouflage are seen in all aspects of visual culture. Ask students to think about how camouflage is used in other aspects of life, such as patterns, colours and shapes found in animal coats. Students could select an object from everyday life to camouflage, choosing their own technique and design. Encourage students to think about the difference between man-made patterns and those found in nature. Suggest using a mixture of mediums to create differing effects. Completed designs can be evaluated and assessed on the basis of experimentation and innovation.

Practical prompts for future work and discussion

Key Stage 3

Students could be asked to develop their research into patterns and shape, exploring these concepts across a variety of twentieth century art movements. For example, you could look at British artist Edward Wadsworth's dazzle painting and its relationship to Vorticism, or American Pop artist Andy Warhol's camouflage paintings. Encourage use of sketchbooks to both collate and evaluate source material.

Key Stage 4 and 5

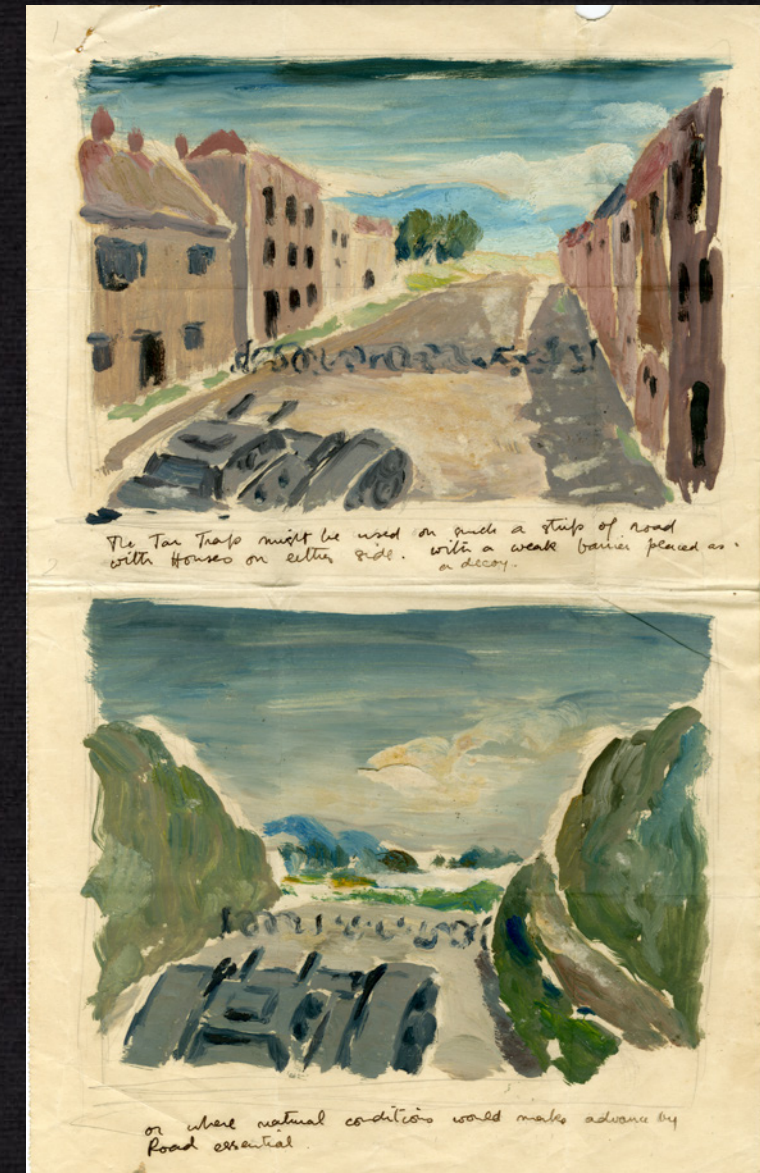
Students may wish to select an artist and explore their development, for example Messel or other artists working across art and theatre such as John Piper. They could analyse changes in the artist's work before and after conflict, thinking about subject matter, colour and tone.

The accompanying *Artists and World War Two* image pack contains a number of images relevant to Oliver Messel's time in the Royal Engineers during World War Two.



Left: 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

Right: Part of a letter from Oliver Messel to Randolph Churchill explaining ideas for tank traps illustrated in watercolour, c. August 1940 © Theatre Collection OHM/1/9/1/2



The Tank traps might be used on such a strip of road with houses on either side. with a weak barrier placed as a decoy.

on these natural conditions would make advance by Road essential

Designing Textiles

Across the twentieth century movements and groups such as Arts and Crafts, Bloomsbury and the Bauhaus extended their work beyond visual art to include textile and surface design. Elements of these designs can be seen in domestic and everyday objects creating a more immediate relationship between the public and Modern art.

Oliver Messel was accustomed to working with fabric through his work in costume design and had considerable knowledge of the differences between textiles and how they could be used for greatest effect to create pattern and texture. In 1953 he was asked to design a range of silk brocades for Sekers Fabrics as part of their 'Coronation Collection'. Each design was inspired by nature, with names such as *Acorns*, *Twigs* and *Scattered Leaves*. These were later turned into evening gowns by couturier John Cavanagh and featured in *Vogue*. The same year Messel was also commissioned to design a souvenir scarf for Cresta Silks, a Cornwall based company who also worked with the artists Paul Nash, Graham Sutherland and Patrick Heron.

In 1959 Sekers Fabrics organised an *Exhibition of Paintings for Fabric Design* which included drawings and paintings by Messel, Graham Sutherland and stage designer and photographer Cecil Beaton. These were displayed alongside silk wall hangings and Papier-mâché monkeys (originally made for a Sekers advertising campaign by Messel) dressed in Georgian-style liveries using Sekers silks. The exhibition raises interesting questions about the hierarchy of different types of art and design by displaying textiles in the same manner as paintings and other two-dimensional art forms.

Numerous artists designed for textiles during this period including Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Duncan Grant, Paule Vézelay, Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth, creating examples of Modern art movements, such as Fauvism and Abstraction within textile design.

Discussion points

- Think about the differences between textile art and textile design?
- How does medium effect our relationship with an artwork?
- What other forms of surface design have been influenced by art movements?

- What processes do you think are involved in creating a textile design and where would you start?
- Look at images of the Sekers exhibition, what do you notice about the way that the designs and textiles have been displayed?
- In what ways is textile design used in the theatre?

Creative activities

Using Messel's work as inspiration, ask students to create their own textile design. With reference to colour, pattern and texture they could think about what might make the most suitable fabric for their design. For example, Messel's coronation designs were printed on silk brocade with a silver thread running throughout that can be seen in raised areas of the design. Encourage students to choose from a selection of media with which to create and develop their designs. They could also name their patterns thinking about what sources have inspired their designs.

Practical prompts for future work and discussion

Key Stage 3

Students could be asked to adapt their existing designs by selecting a twentieth century art movement or visual artist (there are lots of names within this pack to choose from) as inspiration. This could include developing a variety of colourways, exploring the effects of different combinations. Students could also play with scale, altering the size of individual elements of the design. Encourage students to critically evaluate each stage of the design process.

Key Stage 4 and 5

Students preparing individual research projects could explore the relationship between art and textiles at a pivotal point in the twentieth century. Encourage them to think about context and wider issues such as gender, for example, the Bauhaus school of art, architecture and design in Germany actively guided women artists to study textiles; what are the implications of this?

The accompanying *Designing Textiles* image pack contains a number of images related to Oliver Messel's textile designs along with a list of useful links to complementary material in the V&A's online catalogue.

Left: Press cutting from *Vogue* featuring Sekers fabric designs by Graham Sutherland, Cecil Beaton and Oliver Messel, July 1959, OHM/1/8/2/6



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: Twentieth Century Art and Design*. These include costume and set designs, sketchbooks, Papier-mâché monkeys and masks, studio materials including fabric swatches, trims and beading, ballet costumes, set model pieces, reference material (including correspondence) relating to camouflage designs, reference material gathered for various commissions across different artforms, 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.Catalog&id=OHM

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

Front cover: Sekers Monkey made of Papier-mâché over a metal armature dressed in Sekers silks by Oliver Messel, date unknown © Theatre Collection, OHM/1/8/2/20

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 Oliver's ingenious use of materials and working practices and *The Art of Theatre (Storytelling in Space)* exploring the role of artists and designers across stage and film in the twentieth century

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.



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