

## A Twitch on the Thread: Oliver Messel between Past and Present • Paul Jobling

**I**t might seem ironic, if not downright perverse, in a project whose leitmotiv is *Unravelled* to try to weave strands together again. However, like something of a latter-day Penelope, I want to enact this as a matter of simultaneously picking and unpicking the threads of the day's hard labour so as to keep the end view in sight. But what is the end view here? What is the bigger picture? And what is on the surface and what lies beneath? These are the questions that seem to subtend and unify the work of the three artists/craftspeople I concentrate on in this essay: Gavin Fry, Caitlin Heffernan and Matt Smith, all of whom enter Nymans House under cover, so to speak, and through the strategy of masquerade and artifice seek to represent – to one degree or another – the mythological entwining of past and present in the work and life of one its inhabitants, the celebrated theatre and costume designer Oliver Messel.

Headdress for the stage production *Twang!* designed by Oliver Messel



As Fry attests, one of the hallmarks of Messel's practice was his sense of experimentation with materials and sleight-of-hand in making something synthetic or cheap pass as authentic or precious as with Maid Marian's headdress, made from lurex, braid, beads and artificial jewels, for the 1965 production *Twang!*. The remarkable footstool cover, which Fry has fashioned as a collage of blowtorched multi-chrome metallic sequins, plastic buttons and glass beads and stones mimics this sense of invention and improvisation, while at the same time symbolising the way that a mundane object from the everyday world can metamorphose materially into something extraordinary. Set against the oriental carpet of the Garden Hall and echoing Messel's interest in the exotic, this shimmering object resembles a spangled crown to the extent that it conjures up how, in Handel's opera *Giulio Cesare* (1724), the decadent Egyptian ruler Ptolemy XIII desires to have the head of the Roman potentate for a footstool.



Music room stool design by Oliver Messel for *Caesar and Cleopatra*

And yet, it signifies more than this, for Fry likens his resplendent footstool to a gilded tortoise. We do not know whether the Nymans household ever owned such a pet but, appearing to be as much a bouquet with trailing garlands as it does a crown, Fry's object is in turn redolent of the jewel-encrusted tortoise that appears in Joris Karl Huysmans' novel about the wealthy decadent aesthete Des Esseintes, *A Rebours/Against Nature* (1884). Joseph Halpern has described this work as 'written against itself ... its language is that of "untruth"... expressed in the idiom of truth'<sup>1</sup>, and certainly its anti-hero inhabits an escapist dream world that is threatened by disruption as soon as reality encroaches on it. For Des Esseintes, it is not the thing itself that matters but ultimately the vision it evinces and he meditates at length on how acts of consumption and imagination interact. Hence, observing the drab tortoise against the lustrous colours of a Turkey carpet, he designs a bouquet of flowers in which 'the leaves and petals of each and every flower are to be executed in precious stones and mounted on the actual shell of his tortoise' so as to bring out the tessellated pattern of the carpet. Moreover, as Fry iterates, while most tortoises may live at the same property for many years, Des Esseintes' pet was not to share a

similar fate. Since things exist for him only to stimulate an acutely personal memory or mood, once this is achieved he feels no regret if the object fades away or dissolves. Thus he shows no remorse when he discovers that the unfortunate creature has died under the weight of its jewelled carapace. A similar sense of things spinning out of human control is also connoted by the stone-capped twine and loose threads of the footstool which suggest it is fraying or unravelling at the edges.

The symbol of the tortoise and theme of loose ends and embodiment also spill over into Matt Smith's commission, a military jacket studded with glass beads and a plumed ceramic guardsman's helmet, with which he festoons a herm, a form of Ancient Greek sculpture with a divinity's head on top of

a squared column onto which male genitals are also sometimes carved. The name of the god Hermes, son of Zeus and the nymph Maia, is derived from the same root, and it was he who was responsible for inventing the lyre by stretching strings across a scooped-out tortoise shell. Hermes was also originally associated with roads and travel and thus votive herms were often placed at crossings and borders as a form of protection. Draped in a costume based on Messel's designs for *Piccadilly 1830* as worn by the Russian dancer Serge Lifar in Charles B. Cochran's *1930 Revue* that was performed at the Palace Theatre, Manchester on 4 March and the London Pavilion on 27 March, the Nymans' herm instantiates another kind of border crossing in time and space.

As Doreen Massey has argued in *For Space* (2005), the meeting place/passage involves a fresh understanding of past and present, or the 'here and now': 'Here is where spatial narratives meet up or form new configurations, conjunctures or trajectories, which have their own temporalities (so 'now' is as problematical as 'here') ... 'Here' is an intertwining of histories in which

the spatiality of those histories (their then as well as their here) is inescapably entangled<sup>2</sup>. Thus the web of associations that is embodied in Messel's original costume design suggests a kind of neat temporal symmetry in the hundred-year leap from 1830 to 1930. And yet, in keeping with Massey, his



Serge Lifar dressed in Oliver Messel's costume for a highlander in *Piccadilly 1830*



Oliver and Anne Messel, photographed by Cecil Beaton

design and Smith's reconstitution of it also signify that the web is a tangled one and the criss-crossing of time between past and present it involves is far from straightforward when it comes to male dress and masculine identities.

It is illuminating, for instance, that Cochran's production and Messel's costumes travel back in time to the reign of George IV and its attendant dandyism. Certainly, military-style dress was incorporated into the dandy cult both through its archetype George Beau Brummell, who in 1794 had joined the regiment of the 10th Hussars, as well as two other masculine stereotypes: the hyper-masculine Hercules, and the excessively vain Adonis. This intense interest in looking good and *bon ton* informs contemporaneous accounts of the dandy's lifestyle, from Edward Bulwer-Lytton's novel *Pelham, or Adventures of a Gentleman* (1828) to Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly's

Opposite:  
Oliver Messel dressed  
up for a Christmas  
card

seminal tract *Of Dandyism and of George Brummell* (1844), in which he alludes to the dandy's 'very special kind of vanity'<sup>3</sup>. Thus to see and to be seen were at the core of the dandy's existence. Brummell, for instance, resigned his military commission in 1797 when his regiment was about to be posted to Manchester for fear that a fashionable life could not be sustained there on the same basis as in London. But this narcissistic preoccupation with superficial appearances also lays dandyism open to the charge of effeminacy and decadence. D'Aurevilly stated that 'A Dandy is a woman on certain sides'<sup>4</sup> and, indeed, several dandies of the period were reputed to have unconventional sex lives. Lord Byron had several male lovers, including John Edleston, a 15 year-old Cambridge choirboy (Byron featured in another part of Cochran's 1930 *Revue* called *Heaven*, also costumed by Messel). While the Comte d'Orsay, a leading light in Paris and London fashion between 1820 and 1845, was widely believed to be bisexual because of his peculiar living arrangements with Lord and Lady Blessington.

Although in *Piccadilly 1830* Lifar's character flirts with a woman, the subversion of gender norms in the dandy's lifestyle is signified by Messel's military dress, where he substitutes ostrich feathers for bearskin in his helmet design and thereby echoes D'Aurevilly's axiom that dandyism is '... almost as difficult a thing to describe as it is to define. It is thus Frivolity on the one hand ... on the other Imagination'<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, as a haunt for fashionable upper-class men in 1830, Piccadilly and its purlieu were a distant cry from what they had become by 1930. Alongside the bespoke Savile Row tailoring trade, the area was then the locus of middle-market menswear retailers – Austin Reed had opened its flagship Regent Street store in 1925 and Simpson went on to open its on Piccadilly in 1936. Yet it was also known as a cruising ground for the working-class gay Dilly Boys, who were typified and vilified by the police and the popular press alternately as 'effeminate looking people', 'West End Pests' and 'Poofs'. One wonders, then, if rather than associating Piccadilly with its seedy synchronic reputation for casual sex, Cochran's 1930 *Revue* transposes the action diachronically to 1830 in order to rehabilitate its former reputation as a site for fashionable males to promenade, while not losing sight also of the dandy's queering of masculinities. It is interesting to observe how Smith embodies a parallel double identity in his adornment of the Nymans' herm: on the one hand he mimics Messel's original costume design for *Piccadilly 1830* by using ostrich feathers; and on the other, in decorating the jacket with thousands of mirror-backed, glass bugle beads, he evinces the way that Messel customised





Oliver Messel costume design for Tree Man

It is, of course, well known that Messel demonstrated such a supplementary set of standards in his love for masquerade and that fancy dress was an integral part of both his and his sister Anne's life since an early age. Hence, photographs in the Messel family album of them dressing up became the springboard for Caitlin Heffernan to explore and recapture the creativity and theatricality of their childhood years in her sculptures with fabric covered in fan motifs and exotic birds. By contrast, Messel's series of *Tree Man* drawings, which he executed when designing costumes for a 1932 production of Karl Vollmoeller's Expressionist wordless panoply *The Miracle* (1911), led her to evolve an uncanny and mutant embodiment of childhood in the form of the three hybrid tree-boys, stitched together from organic shapes of stuffed fabric. Just as Fry's footstool trades on the convulsive aspect of 'this one' becoming 'that one' before one's very eyes

the outfit, allegedly to pose as Lifar at a party given in Paris in 1931 by Daisy Fellowes, editor-in-chief of *Harper's Bazaar*. By extension, this kind of masquerade and the material ingenuity and improvisation in both his and Messel's designs betray many of the characteristics and tropes of the Camp sensibility that Susan Sontag enumerated in her seminal essay of 1964, namely: exaggeration, artifice, aestheticism, 'Being-as-Playing-a-Role' (travesty, impersonation, theatricality), 'gestures full of duplicity', corrupted innocence and the perverse 'new-style dandy', who 'sniffs the stink and prides himself on strong nerves'. As she contends, therefore: 'Camp taste turns its back on the good-bad axis of ordinary aesthetic judgment. Camp doesn't reverse things. It doesn't argue that the good is bad, or the bad is good. What it does is to offer for art (and life) a different – a supplementary – set of standards'<sup>6</sup>.

so also, therefore, do Heffernan's fabric sculptures. And just as Smith's dandy costume has a lineage with Antiquity through its link with the herm, so too is there a correspondence between her dendroids and the Latin poet Ovid, who in *Metamorphoses* relates several instances of the relationship of human life to trees, such as the prodigious oak inhabited by one of the nymphs of Ceres, or Peneus and Gaia's transformation of the nymph Daphne into a laurel tree in order to save her from the amorous pursuit of Apollo. At the same time, *The Miracle* is separated by only two years from Cochran's 1930 *Revue* and the sense of fantasy evident in Messel's designs for both productions also share a social or political dimension; that is to say, in common with Hollywood cinema, they satisfied the public thirst for escapist spectacle as the world economy was beginning to unravel during the Depression era.

This is to suggest, however, only a set of equivalences in the illusive work of Messel and the three artists represented in this exhibition rather than to bundle it all up into a neat package. For I am mindful that when I started this essay I also wanted to respect the theme of unravelling, and what sets their work apart, as much as what binds it together into a tangled web of associations. On this level, then, we might speak of their individual responses to Oliver Messel's rich legacy as a theatrical designer as a matter of the harmony of difference. And we might also frame the way that their site-specific installations at Nymans thoughtfully enact a twitch on the thread (to coin Evelyn Waugh's phrase from *Brideshead Revisited*) between time and space in regard to Pierre Nora's concept of *les lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) and the concomitant 'push and pull' between history and memory that it entails.<sup>7</sup>

1. Joseph Halpern, 'Decadent narrative. A Rebours,' *Stanford French Review*, Spring 1978:100.

2. Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005) 139.

3. Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly, *Of Dandyism and of George Brummell* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1988) 25.

4. Ibid: 70.

5. Ibid: 31 and 43.

6. Susan Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"' (1964), *A Susan Sontag Reader* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982) 108-111 and 117.

7. Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989) 12: 'If history did not besiege memory, deforming and transforming it, penetrating and petrifying it, there would be no *lieux de mémoire*. Indeed, it is this very push and pull that produces *lieux de mémoire*.'