Great Britain’s leading theatre designer from the early 1930s to the mid 1950s, Oliver Messel (1904-1978) won international acclaim for his lavish, painterly and poetic designs informed by period styles. His work spans ballet, drama, film, musical, opera and revue. Messel’s traditional style of theatre design became unfashionable from the mid 1950s onwards, and he increasingly concentrated on painting, interior and textile design, including designing luxury homes in the Caribbean.

Messel’s painterly and poetic interpretation of medieval period costume and architecture complemented Christopher Fry’s verse play, The Lady’s Not For Burning (1949), about a woman wrongly accused of witchcraft in a small English market town around 1400. Fry’s first play to be presented at a West End theatre, it won critical acclaim; one critic hailed it as ‘a poetic fantasy of rare splendour and delight.’ (The Times, 10 November 1950).

Messel designed an an ink horn and quill belt, delicately drawn in ink and pencil.

**Costume design by Oliver Messel for an ink horn and quill belt in Christopher Fry’s play The Lady’s Not For Burning, 1949.**

**Physical description**

A costume design by Oliver Messel for an ink horn and quill belt in a H.M. Tennent production of The Lady’s Not For Burning, 1949. A pencil and ink sketch. A large quill inside the belt.

**Dimensions**

Height: 37.8 cm, Width: 25.2 cm

**Museum number**

S.130-2006

**Object history note**

The Lady’s not for Burning, a verse play in three acts by Christopher Fry. Oliver Messel’s production was first produced by H. M. Tennent Productions Ltd. at the Globe Theatre, London on 11 May, 1949. It was directed by John Gielgud and Esmé Percy and featured John Gielgud as Thomas Mendip, Pamela Brown as Jennet Jourdemayne, Claire Bloom as Alizon Eliot and Richard Burton as Richard. It was also performed at the Royale Theatre, New York, on 8 November, 1950.

Lord Snowdon, Oliver Messel’s nephew, inherited Messel’s theatre designs and other designs and artefacts. The designs were briefly stored in a disused chapel in Kensington Palace before being housed at the V&A from 1981 on indefinite loan. The V&A Theatre Museum purchased the Oliver Messel collection from Lord Snowdon in 2005.

**Historical significance: Association with Christopher Fry’s abortive poetic drama movement.**

**URL**

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O125201/costume-design-messel-oliver-hilary/