

. AGNEWS .

EST. 1817

THOS. AGNEW & SONS LTD.
6 ST. JAMES'S PLACE, LONDON, SW1A 1NP
Tel: +44 (0)20 7491 9219.
www.agnewsgallery.com

Oliver Messel (London 1904-1978 Barbados)

Portrait of a soldier

Oil on canvas

24 1/2 x 20 1/8 in. (62 x 51 cm.)

Painted in c.1940-50



Provenance

Gifted by the artist to Brenda Haydon;
and by descent to the previous owner.

Oliver Messel (London 1904-1978 Barbados) is known primarily as a set, costume and interior designer. His opera and theatre designs and his interiors for houses in Barbados and hotel suites, such as The Dorchester in London, are recognisable and iconic. He used a soft, powdery green for windows and doors in many of his projects, later popularly coined "Messel green."

Born into a wealthy, well-connected, and intellectual family, he was exposed to art, theatre, and poetry from a young age. Uncle of Lord Snowdon, friend of Cecil Beaton, and member of the so-called 'Bright Young Things' of the British high society, after having studied at The Slade School of Art in London, he became the studio assistant of the portrait painter John Wells. Although he rapidly started working in theatre and opera, designing masks, headdresses and costumes, he continued to paint portraits throughout his life, exhibiting them in solo exhibitions (The Leicester Galleries, 1938; O'Hana Gallery, 1962) and gifting them

Thos Agnew & Sons Ltd, registered in England No 00267436 at 21 Bunhill Row, London EC1Y 8LP
VAT Registration No 911 4479 34

. AGNEWS .

EST. 1817

THOS. AGNEW & SONS LTD.
6 ST. JAMES'S PLACE, LONDON, SW1A 1NP
Tel: +44 (0)20 7491 9219.
www.agnewsgallery.com

to friends and family, as is the case of this painting. He famously portrayed fashion designer Carolina Herrera and Bianca Jagger. His subjects, however, were not limited to socialites, acquaintances or family members. Messel often captured the likeness of people he encountered during his travels, making no distinction in quality between the portraits of famous and unknown subjects. They were frequently black men, as *Portrait of a young man in a white shirt* shows (fig. 1), often also artists, actors, and soldiers. Gifted with a unique sensibility, issues of inequality, social injustice, and racism were critical to him, and he fought against them on many occasions.

During the Second World War, from 1940 to 1944, he served as a captain of the Camouflage Corps, part of the Royal Engineers, painting camouflage and foliage motifs. The technique used to paint the background of this work and other pictures, such as *Blue Harbour Garden Boy* (fig. 2), seems influenced by Messel's activity during the war. Our portrait of a black young man belongs to a series of similar paintings, which the artist executed mainly from the 1940s to the 1960s, such as the *Portrait of Lloyd* (fig. 3). The distinctive brushstrokes, the soft colours, and the exceptional way of capturing the subject's expression and personality put this image in continuity with other works, such as this *Portrait of a woman* (fig. 4), and the *Portrait of a Torero, three-quarter length, seated wearing a 'traje de luces'* (fig. 5).

The loose brushstrokes in the lower half of this unfinished work clearly delineate a military costume. Due to their conspicuous physiognomic similarity and to their attire, one could identify the subject of our painting as the man depicted in another of Messel's works (fig. 6), also dressed as a soldier. This dashing and confident gentleman may have been a companion or a friend the painter met during the war or during his travels.

. AGNEWS .

EST. 1817

THOS. AGNEW & SONS LTD.
6 ST. JAMES'S PLACE, LONDON, SW1A 1NP
Tel: +44 (0)20 7491 9219.
www.agnewsgallery.com

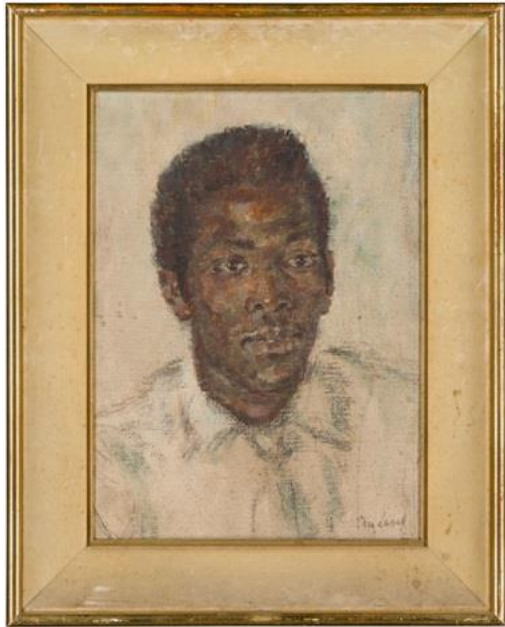


Fig. 1: Oliver Messel, *Portrait of a young man in a white shirt*, pencil and oil on canvas, 16 3/4 x 12 1/4 in. (42.5 x 31.1 cm.). Private collection.

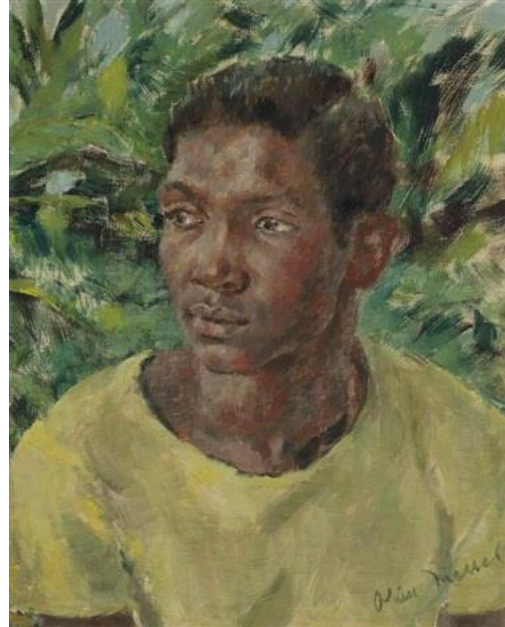


Fig. 2: Oliver Messel, *Blue Harbour Garden Boy*, 1951, oil on canvas, 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm.). Private collection.

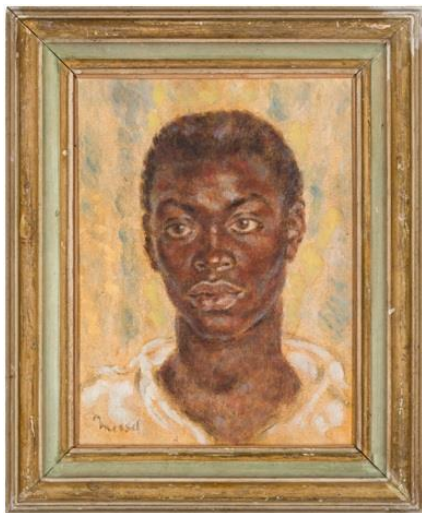


Fig. 3: Oliver Messel, *Portrait of Lloyd*, c. 1962, oil on canvas, 18 x 14 in. (45.7 x 35.6 cm.). Private collection.

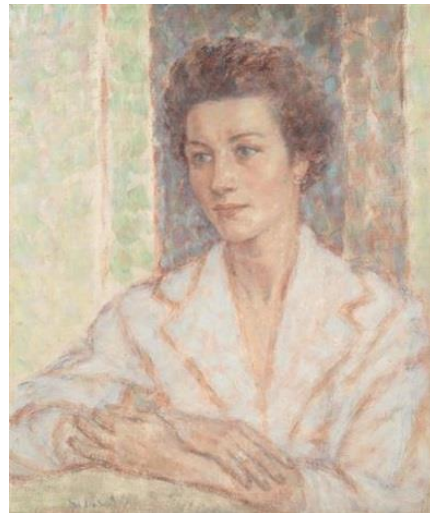


Fig. 4: Oliver Messel, *Portrait of a woman*, oil and charcoal on canvas, 24 x 20 1/8 in. (61 x 51 cm.). Private collection.

. AGNEWS .

EST. 1817

THOS. AGNEW & SONS LTD.
6 ST. JAMES'S PLACE, LONDON, SW1A 1NP
Tel: +44 (0)20 7491 9219.
www.agnewsgallery.com



Fig. 6: Oliver Messel, *Portrait of a Torero*, three-quarter length, seated wearing a 'traje de luces,' 1950, oil on canvas, 30 x 23 in. (76.2 x 58.4 cm.). Private collection.



Fig. 6: Oliver Messel, *Portrait of a black man in military costume*, oil on board, 20 7/8 x 15 3/8 (53 x 39 cm.). Private collection.