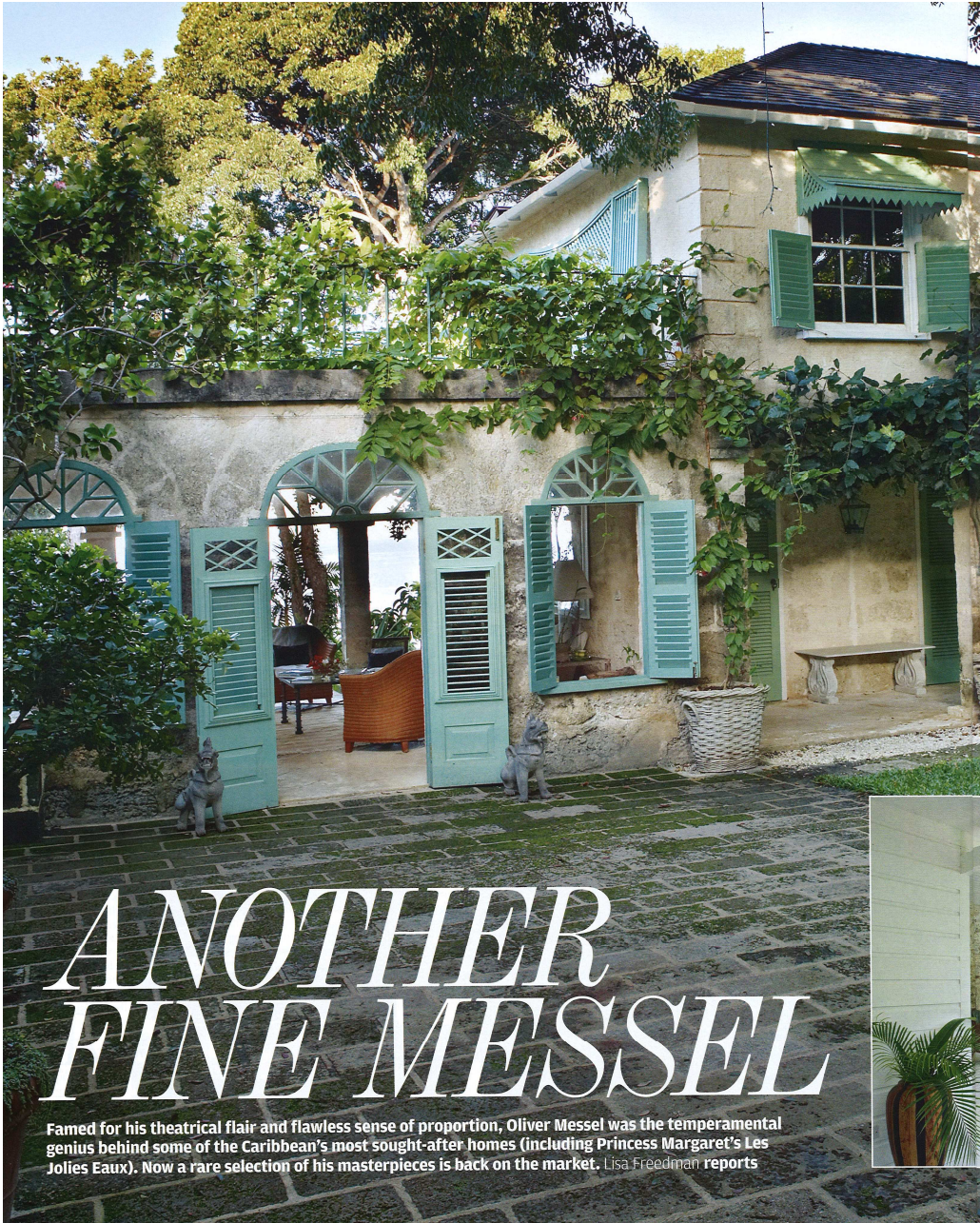
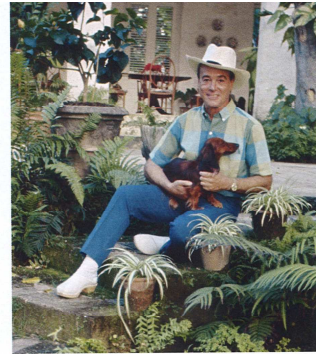


Sotheby's International Realty

FT (How to spend it)

7 September 2012

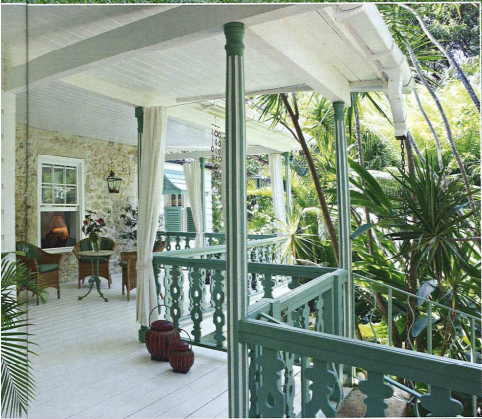




For holidaymakers, the words Mustique and Barbados sum up a world of exclusive indulgence, of blue skies and endless sands, of private pools and white-shuttered villas. This five-star idyll is, of course, all about a sense of timeless magic, and Oliver Messel is perhaps the greatest magician ever to have cast his spell on these shores. Messel was, for much of the 20th century, better known as one of England's foremost theatrical designers, but it was the houses he designed on Barbados and Mustique during the 1960s and 1970s that are perhaps his most lasting legacy. Even today, more than 30 years after his death, to own a Messel property is to own a masterpiece. "Messel's talent was to turn beautiful places into wonderlands," says William Gordon, who is currently selling Fustic House (pictured left), one such work of art.

Messel's designs for opera, ballet, stage and screen included the lavish 1940s *Caesar and Cleopatra*, starring Vivien Leigh, and the Royal Ballet's legendary production of *Sleeping Beauty* with Margot Fonteyn. At the age of 62, however, exhausted and suffering from arthritis, he moved to Barbados and

Left and below: **Fustic House in Barbados, currently for sale.** Above: **designer Oliver Messel at Maddox, his home on Barbados in 1967**





“The best thing about Oliver was taste. He always got the shape right. The worst thing about him was that if he was in a bad mood he’d write tiresome letters”

embarked on a career as an architect and interior designer. Over the following 12 years, he designed and created 27 properties on Barbados and Mustique.

Mustique in the early 1960s was still a weed-covered island, but Barbados was already a well-established holiday resort for the international jet set. A British colony from the 17th century and a vital source of sugar-cane production, its historic plantation houses were to prove the ideal raw material for the designer’s talents.

Messel’s own house, Maddox, provided the template for his unique style. In *Oliver Messel: A Biography* (Thames and Hudson, 1986), Charles Castle captures his pride in the design. “I transformed [it] into one of the most unusual and romantic houses in Barbados,” said Messel. “I redesigned [it] to suit the ideal way of living in the tropics, with balconies, loggias and terraces overlooking

the sea [and] all the main living areas open and part of the garden.”

Though Messel had no architectural training, he’d undertaken some interior-design work while still in London (the Oliver Messel Suite at the Dorchester remains true to his 1953 designs), and his professional life had equipped him with an encyclopaedic knowledge of historic detail. At Maddox, taking the mood from early Barbadian houses, he introduced shutters and sash windows, trellis work and an external staircase. Here, too, is the seamless unification of indoors with out, a fluid sequence of rooms that

pour airily from cool interiors to lush surroundings.

“He was very conscious of the romantic atmosphere... and also very aware of how gardens and buildings might be transformed when illuminated at night,” notes the architectural historian Jeremy Musson, in his recent monograph *Fusite House & Estate – A Messel Masterpiece* (2010, available to read in The London Library).

Messel, however, was not simply concerned with the broad architectural sweep. Like the theatrical designer he was, he liked to be involved with every detail, designing much of the furniture and dictating the colour schemes. (His signature Messel green, a distinctive shade of sage, has become as strongly associated with the Caribbean as pink is with India.) His garden design, too, composed like a

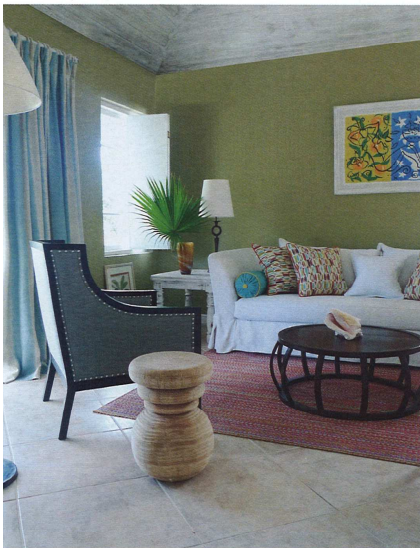
painting, focused minutely on the pattern and colour of tropical plants and leaves.

Born into a wealthy and cultured family, Messel had from childhood inhabited an unusually well-connected milieu. A captivating and witty young man, from the moment he left Eton in the 1920s he was surrounded by the most creative names of his generation. In his 20s, he caroused in Venice with Cole Porter and roared across Europe with Isadora Duncan. As his career – and his fame as a host – developed, his circle of intimates expanded to include Noel Coward, Cecil Beaton, John Gielgud and Claudette Colbert. Once in Barbados, he slipped into the West Coast set, a tight-knit social whirl. Here, his clients included old friends such as Lord Bernstein, founder of Granada TV, and wealthy acquaintances such as Jack and Drue Heinz, of the 57 Varieties fortune.

It was, however, the marriage of his nephew, Antony Armstrong-Jones, to Princess Margaret in 1960 that was to prove pivotal in his Caribbean career. In 1958, Colin Tennant (later Lord Glenconner) had bought the tiny island of Mustique for just £45,000. At the time, the 1,400-acre offshoot of St Vincent and the Grenadines was little more than a sparsely populated mass of scrub, but Tennant hoped to reinvent it as a luxury holiday destination. Tennant’s wife, Lady Anne, was Princess Margaret’s lady-in-waiting and a close friend, and on the Princess’s marriage in 1960, Tennant presented the royal couple with a 10-acre plot on Mustique. Through the Princess, Tennant met Messel, whom he commissioned to design all the houses on the island. (“Rather like designing... a housing estate for millionaires,” commented Charles Castle).

For Princess Margaret, Messel created Les Jolies Eaux – “the only square inch in the world I own,” she said. She remained

This page: Messel’s Yellowbird villa in Mustique is up for sale



From top: **Leamington Pavilion in Barbados. A suite in Mustique's Cotton House Resort hotel. Both properties are available for rent**

devoted to it until her death. "The best thing about Oliver was taste," the princess told Castle. "He always got the shape right. The worst thing about him was that if he was in a bad mood he'd write tiresome letters."

Other failings included a weak grasp of finance – he regarded a house rather like a stage set and would have it pulled down if it wasn't progressing according to his vision – and his habit of bursting into tears when anyone disagreed with him.

On Mustique, Messel became a pioneer of the holiday beach home in a variety of simple Caribbean, colonial styles. He also designed the island's first hotel, the Cotton

"We now get enquiries, particularly from the States, asking specifically for a Messel house. It's seen as fundamental to what people understand about Barbadian style"

House (pictured left) – still an essential meeting place for today's elite holidaymakers, including Princess Margaret's great-niece and -nephew, the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, as well as Kate Moss, Johnny Depp and Bill Gates. "Oliver appreciated scale; he got the rhythm, scale and taste just right for Mustique," said Lord Glenconner.

Nowadays, the entry level for property purchase on one of the world's most exclusive islands is about \$4m. "The market has really matured and there are nearly 100 houses on Mustique," says Paddy Dring, partner in leading international estate agents Knight Frank. "But the Messel houses retain their charm – and, of course, are often in the best locations."

The majority of property sales on Mustique today are brokered through the Mustique Company, and those looking for their must-have Messel will always have a relatively small selection. At the moment, there's just one: Yellowbird (pictured on the previous page). Built in 1976 and fully renovated in 2005, the three-bedroom villa is perched in the Endeavour Hills, with wonderful sea views and the fluid open design and ornate, wooden fretwork characteristic of Messel's "Gingerbread" style.

Meanwhile, those looking for a Messel masterpiece rooted in the plantation tradition will welcome the news that Fustic House has come to the market. Described by The Barbados National Trust as "one of the jewels of the Caribbean", the Fustic House estate stands in 10 acres of gardens on a ridge on the north-west of the island.

Messel worked here in the late 1960s for Vivien and Charles Graves (brother of the poet Robert), redesigning the original Great House, which was built in the 18th century, and a two-storey wing. His approach was to draw out the essential character of the older house while adding a series of new spaces with exciting vantage points. "Everything with Messel is framed," says William Gordon. "You often see three vistas, looking through a window or a door, onto a courtyard and then again onto the sea."

Fustic is made of the island's traditional coral stone and is full of Messel trademarks – slender Greek

columns, flattened arches, floors of cement scored to look like tiles. It is, of course, painted in Messel green. The house has had a number of owners since the Graves – including Tetra Pak heiress Sigrid Rausing – and each has sympathetically updated both house and garden while retaining the essence of Messel's work. Gordon has replaced an unsightly irrigation tank with a pavilion equipped with state-of-the-art conference equipment. "We rent out the house when we're not here and it covers most of our operating costs," says Gordon.

The rental market in Messel-designed houses both on Mustique – where holidaymakers can hire Les Jolies Eaux for \$26,000 a week in high season – and on Barbados remains buoyant. "We now get enquiries, particularly from the States, asking specifically for a Messel house," says Richard Young, managing director of West Coast Villas at Sotheby's International Realty, Barbados, which is letting Leamington Pavilion (pictured above), the villa Messel designed for Jack Heinz, from \$3,200 a night in high season. "Messel's work has also been influential in top-end developments such as Sugar Hill and Royal Westmoreland," explains Young. "It's seen as fundamental to what people understand about Barbadian style."

William Gordon could not agree more about Messel's enduring influence. "A house designed by Messel is a bit like that ad for Patek Philippe," he says. "You feel you never really own it, you just look after it for the next generation." ♦

CARIBBEAN DREAM

Cotton House Resort, (+1784-456 4777; www.cottonhouse.net) from \$630. **Fustic House**, see Knight Frank. **Knight Frank**, 55 Baker St, London W1 (020-7629 8171; www.knightfrank.com). **Leamington Pavilion**, see West Coast Villas Sotheby's International Realty, from \$1,920. **Les Jolies Eaux**, see Mustique Company. **Mustique Company**, +1784-488 8000; www.mustique-island.com. **West Coast Villas Sotheby's International Realty**, 020-7993 6508; www.westcoastvillas.com. **Yellowbird**, see Mustique Company.

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