

SURREALIST LEE MILLER

Exhibition dates:

4 November 2023 – 14 April 2024

Curator/s:

Antony Penrose
(Project Curator: Kendrah Morgan)



Exhibition installation view, *Surrealist Lee Miller*, Heide Museum of Modern Art 2023, photograph: Clytie Meredith

This Education Resource has been produced by Heide Museum of Modern Art to provide information to support education institution visits to the museum and as such is intended for their use only. Reproduction and communication is permitted for educational purposes only. No part of this resource may be stored in a retrieval system, communicated or transmitted in any form or by any means.

ABOUT LEE MILLER



Lee Miller

Self-Portrait with headband, Lee Miller Studios Inc., New York, USA c.1932

digital C-type print

© Lee Miller Archives England 2023. All Rights Reserved. www.leemiller.co.uk

Born: 23 April 1907, Poughkeepsie, New York, USA

Died: 21 July 1977, Farleys House, Muddles Green, Chiddingly, East Sussex, England

SUMMARY OF THE ARTIST

Model, muse, photographer, artist, war correspondent and gourmet chef, Lee Miller was one of the most original photographic artists of the twentieth century. Defying the expectations placed on her as a woman and an artist, she was as unconventional in her life as in her work and captured the intensity of her experiences in unforgettable images that have earned her a key place in the history of art.

Lee Miller's work is represented in numerous public and private collections internationally, including:

Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois

J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Museum of Modern Art, New York

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Tate Gallery, London

Victoria and Albert Museum, London

INTRODUCTION

A surrealist before she even knew of the movement, Lee Miller was one of the most original photographic artists of the twentieth century. From early on she rejected the expectations placed on her as a woman and an artist and set her own rules, demonstrating the self-determination that would sustain her creativity for more than 30 years. This exhibition of 100 photographs spanning Miller's career takes the viewer on a remarkable journey, revealing her unerring ability to capture the marvellous in the everyday, create new perspectives onto the world, synthesise beauty and horror, and express her deep humanity.

Miller was born in 1907 in Poughkeepsie, in upstate New York. A chance encounter on a Manhattan street with Condé Nast, the owner of *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair* magazines, saw her embark on a successful modelling career before travelling to Paris in 1929 to study with the experimental photographer Man Ray. During her time in Paris she developed the hallmarks of her mature style and formed enduring friendships with many famous figures of the European avant garde, including Picasso.

The ensuing decade saw Miller establish an innovative photographic studio in New York, live in Cairo following her marriage to an Egyptian businessman, then move to England to join the surrealist painter and writer Roland Penrose, who became her second husband. From the outbreak of the Second World War she worked for British *Vogue* and as a war correspondent recorded the horrors of the Holocaust.

From 1949 Miller lived with Roland Penrose between London and Farley Farm in East Sussex, which became a creative hub with many parallels to Heide and the lives established here by John and Sunday Reed. After her death in 1977 her son Antony Penrose discovered 60,000 of her negatives in the farmhouse attic and since then has worked tirelessly to bring her the recognition that she deserves.



Lee Miller

Picasso and Lee Miller in his studio, Liberation of Paris 1944

digital C-type print

© Lee Miller Archives England 2023. All Rights Reserved. www.leemiller.co.uk

TIMELINE

1907 Elizabeth (Lee) Miller born in Poughkeepsie, New York, the second child of Theodore Miller, an engineer and amateur photographer (who used his daughter as a model), and Florence Miller.

1925 At age 18, after being expelled from several schools, Miller is sent to Europe to attend finishing school but instead begins theatre studies in Paris.

1926 Theodore Miller escorts his daughter back to America where she studies at the Art Students League and trains as a dancer.

1927 A chance meeting with magazine publisher Condé Nast, who pulls her from the path of an oncoming vehicle, launches Miller as a model. She finds success but is unfulfilled and becomes more interested in a career in behind the camera than in front of it.

1929 Returns to Paris and seeks out photographer Man Ray, asking him to take her on as a pupil. He refuses but she persists and they become partners. Together they would develop the photographic technique of solarisation.

1930 Appears in Jean Cocteau's surrealist film, *Blood of a Poet* playing a classical statue that comes to life.

1932 Miller leaves Man Ray and heads back to New York. She opens a photographic studio that becomes popular with aspiring film and stage actors, socialites and celebrities.

1934 Marries Egyptian businessman Aziz Eloui Bey and honeymoon at Niagara Falls. They leave America to live in Cairo. Miller becomes increasingly bored with expatriate society and takes up long range desert travel.

1937 Travels alone to France. Meets surrealist artist Roland Penrose at a dress-up party in Paris.

1939 Miller leaves Aziz Eloui Bey and Egypt shortly before World War II breaks out. Returns to London to join Penrose. War is declared on 3rd September.

1940 Defies orders from the US Embassy to return to America and takes a job as a freelance photographer for British *Vogue*.

1941 Takes photographs for the book *Grim Glory: Pictures of Britain Under Fire*.

1942 Becomes a war correspondent accredited to the US Army for Condé Nast Publications in December, teaming up with Time *LIFE* photographer David E. SCHERMAN. She is one of very few female war correspondents, and probably the only woman photo-journalist to cover the front line war in Europe.

1943 – 1945 Miller files stories and photos of the war in Europe for *Vogue*. She witnesses the siege of St Malo, where she takes photographs of the first 'jelly bombs' (early Napalm), followed by the Liberation of Paris, the fighting in Luxembourg and Alsace, the Russian/American link up at Torgau, and the liberation of the Buchenwald and Dachau concentration camps. In April 1945 she is photographed by David E. Sherman in Hitler's bathtub, washing off the filth from Dachau. Her documentation of the atrocities of the Buchenwald concentration camp is published in *Vogue* under the headline 'Believe It'.

HEIDE EDUCATION RESOURCE

1946 Continues to photograph the impact of war on Europe. Penetrating deep into Eastern Europe, she covers harrowing scenes of children dying in Vienna, peasant life in postwar Hungary and finally the execution of Prime Minister László Bárdossy. Returns to London.

1947 Marries Roland Penrose, and gives birth to their son, Antony Penrose (the curator of *Surrealist Lee Miller*). They buy Farley Farm, which becomes a mecca for artists. Although she continues to contribute to *Vogue* for a further six years, covering fashion and celebrities, Miller struggles with PTSD and misuse.

1950s Miller reinvents and heals herself as a chef and delights in cooking surrealist-inspired food.

1977 Dies of pancreatic cancer at Farley Farm. Her son Antony Penrose and his wife Suzanna discover her photographic work in an attic and begin archiving and documenting her life and career.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

The following information can be used to assist in the interpretation of Miller's work from 1929 to 1943 through historical and cultural frameworks.

SURREALISM – CULTURAL CONTEXT



Lee Miller

Charlie Chaplin with light fixture, St Moritz, Switzerland 1932

digital C-type print

© Lee Miller Archives England 2023. All Rights Reserved. www.leemiller.co.uk

Surrealism is a twentieth-century avant-garde movement in art and literature which sought to release the creative potential of the unconscious mind, for example by the irrational juxtaposition of images. The cultural movement developed in Europe in the aftermath of World War I in which artists depicted unnerving, illogical scenes and developed techniques to allow the unconscious mind to express itself. Surrealist artists used strategies such as chance, psychological metaphor, deadpan wit and juxtaposition.

In the exhibition *Surrealist Lee Miller*, the artist's photographs showcase her natural instinct for incongruity, dislocation, dark humour and the marvellous in the everyday. For instance, ordinary things, framed to detach them from context and create a dreamlike or amusing effect, recur in Miller's early photographs of Paris.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

PARIS 1929 – 1932



Exhibition installation view with a scene from Jean Cocteau's film *The Blood of a Poet* in *Surrealist Lee Miller*, Heide Museum of Modern Art 2023, photograph: Clytie Meredith

Lee Miller first visited Paris in 1925 at the age of 18 and was captivated. It was the Paris described by writer F. Scott Fitzgerald; a city of artistic revolution and libertarianism. She returned in 1929 to meet the American photographer and artist Man Ray, a central figure in the emergent surrealist movement, and during the next three years was his pupil, collaborator, model, and lover.

She circulated in a progressive milieu that included Jean Cocteau—who cast her in a leading role in his film *The Blood of a Poet*—along with the artist Max Ernst and poet Paul Éluard. Her relationship with Man Ray was not exclusive, and when he became overly possessive Miller decided to return to New York. On the night of her departure in late 1932 he stood beneath her studio window in the pouring rain and 'howled his grief'.

NEW YORK 1932 – 1934

On her return to New York in October 1932 Miller established a studio with the assistance of her brother Erik, who had experience in fashion and advertising photography. Her premises on East 48th Street comprised two apartments decorated to convey a Parisian ambience. Although her given name was Elizabeth, she used 'Lee' Miller as a business name to circumvent any potential gender bias.

The studio's focus was portraiture and Miller utilised contacts made in her modelling days to build a clientele from the worlds of fashion, theatre and film. Her profile increased after her first, well-reviewed solo exhibition, at Julien Levy Gallery in late 1932, and the screening of Cocteau's *The Blood of Poet* (screened here in the adjacent gallery) at the Fifth Avenue Playhouse in November 1933.

Being photographed by Lee Miller became 'quite the thing to mention at a cocktail party' and her more famous subjects included Elizabeth Arden, Helena Rubinstein, and the British-born German

actress Lilian Harvey. She also won a commission to photograph the all African-American cast of the ground-breaking opera 'Four Saints in Three Acts', by composer Virgil Thompson and playwright Gertrude Stein. Inspired by famous art historical depictions of saints, the aesthetic of the shoot resonated in other portraits from this period such as *Floating Head, Mary Taylor, 1933*.

In 1934 Miller reconnected with Aziz Eloui Bey, a wealthy Egyptian businessman whom she had met in Paris and whose infatuation with her had contributed to her break up with Man Ray. They married that July and honeymooned at Niagara Falls before leaving the States to live in Cairo.

EGYPT 1935 – 1939

Arriving in Cairo in September 1934, Miller was caught up in social engagements with the privileged expatriate community and Egyptian elite. However, she soon tired of the 'black satin and pearls set' and sought to alleviate her boredom by making long-range excursions into the desert with a changing cast of companions and her portable Rolleiflex camera. As her expeditions became more adventurous she travelled to more distant locations, capturing the exotic allure and abstract beauty of the desert from the perspective of the displaced Westerner.

Although the trajectory of her professional career had paused, this period is often seen as marking the beginning of Miller's mature style and it gave rise to some of her most iconic images. *Portrait of Space, 1937*, for example, presents an enigmatic vision of an empty landscape viewed through a large tear in a fly screen across a window. The window was in a rest house built for King Farouk of Egypt on his journeys to Siwa. It was built in a European style, hence the square window and the flyscreen. The building was completely erased at the beginning of WW2 because it provided too good a land mark for the Italian aircraft on their way from Libya to attack Egyptian targets. Widely read as an expression of Miller's ennui in Egypt and her desire for freedom, the image plays with the notions of inside and outside, entrapment and escape. In *From the top of the Great Pyramid, c.1937*, the 'presence of absence' forms the underlying theme. Here Miller turns her lens away from the edifice itself to instead register the pyramid's immense shadow falling across the village at its feet, suggesting the far-reaching power of the ancient Pharaohs.

Whereas many of her Egyptian images are melancholic and haunting, others demonstrate that Miller's playful surrealist wit was as sharp as ever, as seen in the portrayal of the English writer and mountaineer Robin Fedden perched in his skis atop a vast slope of sand, and the oval-silhouetted *Untitled (Legs ...) 1939*, in which a line-up of disembodied legs appears like a mirrored reflection in an eye.

NEW BEGINNINGS 1937 – 1942

In June 1937 Miller travelled from Cairo to Paris for a holiday and to visit old friends. A chance encounter at a party with the painter, poet and art collector Roland Penrose marked the beginning of a new love affair. Penrose invited Miller to his surrealist summer camp in Cornwall and she became 'his tutor in the study of personal liberation'. Later that year they joined Picasso and Dora Maar, Man Ray and Ady Fidelin, and Paul and Nusch Éluard on the Côte d'Azur, where Picasso painted Miller's portrait, which Penrose acquired and presented to her as a gift.

Penrose subsequently visited Miller in Egypt and by 1939 it was evident that her marriage to Aziz Eloui Bey was over. She left for London and moved into Penrose's house in Downshire Hill on 3

September, the day that Britain declared war on Germany. Ignoring advice from the US Embassy to return to America to ensure her safety she offered her services to British *Vogue* and was soon shooting fashion spreads but also documenting the contribution of women to the war effort and the impact of the Blitz, with both compassion and her usual dark wit. Some of her metaphorically rich photographs of the devastation, including *Remington Silent* and *Revenge on Culture*, both from 1940, were illustrated in the book *Grim Glory: Pictures of Britain Under Fire* (1941), which publicised the bombardment to American audiences at a time when it was hoped that USA would enter the war.

WAR 1943 – 1946



Lee Miller
Fire Masks, Downshire Hill, London 1941
digital C-type print
© Lee Miller Archives England 2023. All Rights Reserved. www.leemiller.co.uk

In 1943 Miller received accreditation as an official war correspondent with the US Armed Forces, one of just four female photographers to do so. Her first assignment, in July 1944, was a photo-essay for US *Vogue* on American nurses working in a field hospital near Omaha beach in Normandy. A military communications failure found her at heavily besieged St Malo, where she captured the assault on the German-held port. As female war correspondents were prohibited from the front line, the fact of her presence as the only photojournalist in St Malo is as remarkable as her images, shot on her Rolleiflex without a telephoto lens, auto-wind or built-in light meter.

Miller subsequently accompanied the Allied forces on their advance through north-west France, documenting vital aspects of the country's liberation and seeking out old friends such as Picasso and

Jean Cocteau. While based at the Hotel Scribe in Paris in 1945 she covered the liberation of the Buchenwald and Dachau concentration camps and sent her confronting photographs and accompanying article to *Vogue* editor Audrey Withers with a note saying 'I IMPLORE YOU TO BELIEVE THIS IS TRUE'. By sheer chance, hours after leaving Dachau, she found a billet at Hitler's Munich apartment with her friend and LIFE photographer David E. Scherman, on the day that Hitler suicided. Scherman took the now famous image of Miller in the Fuhrer's bathtub, having trodden the mud of Dachau from her combat boots over his pristine floor.

Although Miller's personal mission was exposing war's inhumanity and the courage of ordinary people, while in Paris she was also directed by British *Vogue* to cover the relaunch of the French fashion houses. Her photographs of models wearing the latest looks, often shot in challenging conditions, stand in stark contrast to her war images, including those from late 1945 and 1946 when she travelled through Austria, Hungary and Romania, documenting scenes of both despair and hope while trying to make sense of all that she had witnessed.

SURREALISM AND BEYOND 1947 – 1977

When Miller finally returned to London in the spring of 1946 to be reunited with Roland Penrose, the physical and emotional toll of her war experiences was visibly evident. They took a restorative trip to the United States to visit Miller's family, whom she hadn't seen for twelve years, and dear friends including Max Ernst and Dorothea Tanning in Arizona, and Man Ray in California. Miller's photographs of these reconnections suggest that despite her recent traumas her surrealist sensibility and spirit of irreverence remained part of her life and creative practice.

Back in London, Miller and Penrose's son Antony was born in 1947 and two years later they purchased Farley Farm, a 180-acre property in East Sussex that became a mecca for the creative world. Penrose had recently co-founded the Institute of Contemporary Art in London and his and Miller's circle continued to expand, with new faces joining familiar figures on weekends at Farleys, which took on 'the air of a perpetual arts congress'. No matter how eminent, every visitor was given tasks around the farm and some of their efforts—both productive and otherwise—were captured by Miller in her final photo-essay for *Vogue* titled 'Working Guests', published in July 1953.

Increasingly however, Miller turned away from photography and channelled her creativity into the culinary arts, entertaining friends with surrealist-themed dinner parties and her award-winning creations; thus finding a panacea for her depression.

Lee Miller died of cancer in 1977. In the words of her son Antony, 'she faced her death fearlessly, with both interest and candour, as at the beginning of a great new adventure'.

Discussions



Exhibition installation view, *Surrealist Lee Miller*, Heide Museum of Modern Art 2023, photograph: Clytie Meredith

Encourage students to engage critically with the historical and cultural context of Lee Miller's life, recognizing the interconnectedness of her personal experiences and artistic evolution.

1. Early Life and Formative Years:

- How did Lee Miller's early life experiences and education shape her unconventional approach to art and photography?

.....

.....

.....

.....

- In what ways did her modelling career and interactions with influential figures like Condé Nast contribute to her artistic development?

.....

.....

.....

.....

2. Paris 1929 – 1932: Surrealist Influences:

- Discuss the cultural atmosphere of Paris in the 1920s and 1930s, particularly in the context of the surrealist movement.

.....

.....

.....

.....

- How did Lee Miller's collaboration with Man Ray and her involvement in the avant-garde scene contribute to the development of her surrealist style?

.....

.....

.....

.....

3. New York 1932 – 1934: Transition and Career Development:

- Analyse the transition in Miller's work upon her return to New York. How did her experiences in Paris influence her photography studio in New York?

.....

.....

.....

.....

- Explore the significance of her role as a photographer, especially in capturing the essence of well-known personalities and cultural figures of the time.

.....

.....

.....

.....

4. Egypt 1935 – 1939: Exploration and Artistic Evolution:

- How did Lee Miller's experiences in Egypt influence the thematic and stylistic elements in her photography?

.....

.....

.....

.....

- Discuss the balance between melancholic and playful elements in her Egyptian images, considering the socio-cultural context.

.....

.....

.....

.....

5. New Beginnings 1937 – 1942: Personal Life and War

- Discuss the role of metaphorically rich photographs, such as those depicting the impact of the Blitz, in communicating the wartime experience.

.....

.....

.....

.....

6. War 1943 – 1946: War Correspondence and Personal Transformation:

- Examine the role of Lee Miller as a war correspondent and the challenges she faced, including her documentation of concentration camps.

.....

.....

.....

.....

- Discuss the intersection of personal and professional aspects of Miller's life during and after World War II.

.....

.....

.....

.....

7. Surrealism and Beyond 1947 – 1977: Post-War Life and Legacy:

- How did Lee Miller's post-war life at Farley Farm reflect her surrealist sensibility and creative spirit?

.....

.....

.....

.....

Further Discussions



Exhibition installation view, *Surrealist Lee Miller*, Heide Museum of Modern Art 2023, photograph: Clytie Meredith

These questions can be used as a springboard for discussions, research, and creative reflections on Lee Miller's multifaceted life and contributions to art and photography.

1. Feminist Perspective:

- Investigate Lee Miller's life and work through a feminist lens. How did she navigate gender expectations, particularly in fields dominated by men such as photography and war correspondence?

.....

.....

.....

.....

- Discuss specific instances in her career where Miller challenged traditional gender roles.

.....

.....

.....

.....

2. Photography Techniques and Innovation:

- Discuss how Lee Miller's technical innovations contributed to the visual impact and unique character of her images.

.....

.....

.....

.....

3. Comparison with Contemporary Artists:

- Investigate whether there are contemporary artists whose work resonates with Lee Miller's surrealist approach. How has surrealism influenced subsequent generations of photographers and artists?

.....

.....

.....

.....

- Discuss the enduring relevance of Miller's themes and techniques in the context of contemporary art.

.....

.....

.....

.....

4. Ethics and Responsibility in War Photography:

- Delve into the ethical considerations surrounding Lee Miller's war photography. How did she balance the responsibility to document historical events with the potential impact on her mental health?

.....

.....

.....

.....

- Discuss the role of war photographers in shaping public perceptions and historical narratives.

.....

.....

.....

.....

5. Interactions with Other Artists:

- Discuss the collaborative aspects of Lee Miller's work, such as her connections with Man Ray and Roland Penrose.

.....

.....

.....

.....

6. Representation of Women in Lee Miller's Work:

- Analyse how Lee Miller's photographs represent women. How did she challenge or conform to societal expectations in her portrayal of female subjects?

.....

.....

.....

.....

- Discuss the feminist implications of her work, especially in the context of her time.

.....

.....

.....

.....

7. Personal and Artistic Resilience:

- Examine the resilience demonstrated by Lee Miller in the face of personal and professional challenges. How did her ability to adapt and evolve contribute to her lasting impact on the art world?

.....

.....

.....

.....

- Discuss the lessons that students can draw from Miller's life and career in terms of perseverance and creativity.

.....

.....

.....

.....

LEE MILLER: TRAINING, AND INFLUENCES

EARLY TRAINING

Miller learned the rudiments of photography in her father's amateur dark room and absorbed ideas about lighting and spectacle through early theatre studies and her work as a fashion model.

PARIS 1929 – 1932

Miller travelled to Paris in 1929 to study with the experimental photographer Man Ray. She gained a thorough grounding in the technical aspects of photography and the use of different cameras, while cultivating her natural surrealist eye. She created some of her most radical images during this time, often using found objects or devices such as close cropping to force new perspectives.



(centre portrait)

Lee Miller

***Solarised portrait [thought to be Meret Oppenheim]*, Paris, France. 1932**

modern digital C-type exhibition print.

© Lee Miller Archives England 2023. All Rights Reserved. www.leemiller.co.uk

Together she and Ray invented the now widely used technique of solarisation, whereby the tones of the picture are reversed and a ghostly outline forms around the image, as seen in *Solarised Portrait* 1932. The silvery effect and strong dark outlines in this image are achieved through the technique of solarisation, created by re-exposing photographic paper during the development process. Miller discovered the technique by accident in the dark room and shared her findings with Man Ray. Together they experimented to find ways of controlling the process and produced many compelling images.

The technique of solarisation was discovered accidentally by Lee Miller and Man Ray while they were developing a 'cut' negative that had to be 'dish developed' in total darkness (as opposed to roll film which is usually developed in a little light proof tank and therefore can be done in the light).

'Whilst Lee was developing some work something, perhaps a mouse, made Lee jump, engaging her instinct to turn on the light at a vital stage. Knowing what she had done she quickly turned the light straight back off. The effect that resulted was a reversal of the tonality of the photograph—the dark areas became light and vice versa....' (Lee Miller Archive).

Both Miller and Ray used the technique in their portrait photographs, using the halo-like outlines around forms and areas of partially reversed tonality to emphasise the contours of the body.

Miller would go on to independently set up her own photography studio in Montparnasse and pursued portrait and fashion assignments while also working as a model for French *Vogue*, where she was mentored by their chief photographer, George Hoyningen Heune.

WAR 1943 – 1946

As a photojournalist, Miller hybridised a surrealist-inflected approach with incisive documentary photography to produce an extraordinary and influential record of the times.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SURREALISM



Lee Miller

Portrait of Space 1937

digital C-type print

© Lee Miller Archives England 2023. All Rights Reserved. www.leemiller.co.uk

Surrealism provides artists with an exploration of the inner self and their feelings about life.

The characteristics of surrealism include strange images or bizarre juxtapositions, unconsciousness as a valid reality, dream-like scenes or symbolic images, distorted figures or biomorphic shapes, and elements of chance or spontaneity. Surrealist techniques such as automatism (the relaxation of conscious thought to release unconscious ideas and feelings for artistic expression) are used to create random effects. Mysterious shadows are a recurring motif in surrealist art.

These and other elements can be seen in Lee Miller's photographs, such as:

- sense of disquiet and impending threat
- repetition of a visual element in a pattern
- combinations of disparate/incongruous objects
- irrational, dreamlike imagery and spaces
- skewed perspective and scale
- manipulation of shadows
- sense of the marvellous in the everyday
- combination of wonder and horror

- dark humour
- *objet trouvé* (chance encounters of found objects used for surrealist subjects)

Examples of Lee Miller's use of Surrealism in works in the exhibition:

***Nude bent forward*, Paris, France c.1932 (modern digital C-type exhibition print, Lee Miller Archives, England)**

By using an unexpected viewpoint and close cropping Miller presents the nude like an abstracted modernist sculpture.

***Tanja Ramm under a bell jar*, Paris, France 1931 (modern digital C-type exhibition print, Lee Miller Archives, England)**

Miller's friend and fellow fashion model Tanja Ramm, who travelled with her from New York to Paris in 1929, posed for this image. With her eyes closed, Ramm appears in a dreamlike state, lending the image a gothic undertone.

The writer and artist Claude Cahun also explored the concept of the bell jar as a surrealist object for a series of self-portraits from the mid-1920s. Cahun's images differ from Miller's, however, in that her eyes remain open, engaging the viewer and perhaps even challenging them.

***Untitled [Rat tails]*, Paris, France 1932 (modern digital C-type exhibition print, Lee Miller Archives, England)**

Ordinary things, framed to detach them from context and create a dreamlike or amusing effect, recur in Miller's early photographs of Paris. Here she combines atmospheric lighting and tight cropping to eliminate a sense of the location and give a mysterious, fairy tale quality to the depiction of rats in a pet shop.

***Solarised portrait [thought to be Meret Oppenheim]*, Paris, France 1932 (modern digital C-type exhibition print, Lee Miller Archives, England)**

The portrait sitter is thought to be the surrealist artist Meret Oppenheim, who moved to Paris from Basel in 1932 and set up a studio in the Hotel Montparnasse. The silvery effect and strong dark outlines in this image are achieved through the technique of solarisation, created by re-exposing the negative during the development process.

***Detail of Joseph Cornell*, Lee Miller Studios Inc., New York, USA 1933 (modern digital C-type exhibition print, Lee Miller Archives, England)**

Alongside her stylish commercial portraits Miller also took more experimental photographs of artists and friends. She was introduced to the eccentric, self-taught sculptor and collagist Joseph Cornell by the art dealer Julien Levy, and they admired each other's work. In this striking image she blends Cornell's profile with one of his surrealist assemblages so that he appears to be part of his own creation.

***Eileen Agar at the Royal Pavilion*, Brighton, England 1937 (modern digital C-type exhibition print, Lee Miller Archives, England)**

Miller photographed the surrealist painter Eileen Agar against the backdrop of the exotic architecture of the Royal Pavilion. Mysterious shadows are a recurring motif in surrealist art and an apt means of representing Eileen Agar, whose work often included natural organic forms. The visible

protrusion from her belly in the image is her camera, while the shadow to the left is Miller's own as she takes the picture.

Untitled (Stairway), Cairo, Egypt c.1936 (modern digital C-type exhibition print, Lee Miller Archives, England)

Miller's photographs of Egypt are often read as visual metaphors for her feelings of isolation and confinement as she became disillusioned with the expatriate existence. Contact sheets from the period show her drawn to certain motifs including staircases leading to nowhere and darkened, barred or blocked doorways.

Untitled (Bleached snail shells), Western Desert, Egypt c.1936 (modern digital C-type exhibition print, Lee Miller Archives, England)

When she began to venture into the desert on long-range excursions Miller soon found the surreal in the everyday. Here her attention was caught by a tree that appears to be budding snails instead of new leaves.

Portrait of Space, Al Bulwayeb, Egypt 1937 (modern digital C-type exhibition print, Lee Miller Archives, England)

This is one of Miller's most iconic works. *Portrait of Space* transforms a desert view framed through a torn fly screen into a dreamlike, surrealist space. The shape of the tear has many connotations, from an eye to an orifice, and gives the impression that someone or something has passed through it and vanished into the distant beyond. *Portrait of Space* is said to have inspired the painting *La Baiser*, 1938 by Belgian surrealist painter René Magritte, which similarly evokes a breach in reality opening onto another realm.

Dolphin Square, London, England 1940 (modern digital C-type exhibition print, Lee Miller Archives, England)

The use of windows as a framing device for dramatic scenes or landscapes is a thread that runs through Miller's work. In this composition the sheer curtain seems blown aside by the wind to reveal a scene of devastation in the theatre of war.

Remington Silent, London, England 1940 (modern digital C-type exhibition print, Lee Miller Archives, England)

The keys of this crushed typewriter form a strange cascade that flows into the streaming ribbon. The Remington Silent was a popular quiet typewriter model, here rendered permanently silent by the previous day's bombing yet ironically making an eloquent statement about the destructiveness of war. The composition's tight focus on one humble object, made abstract and unfamiliar, displays Miller's ability to create dislocations within the everyday.

ANALYSING THE SURREALIST ELEMENTS IN LEE MILLER'S PHOTOGRAPHY



Exhibition installation view, *Surrealist Lee Miller*, Heide Museum of Modern Art 2023, photograph: Clytie Meredith

Choose two works in the exhibition to analyse. Consider Miller's use of imagery, signs and symbols, and the historical/cultural context of the work in your analysis.

Discussion

1. How has Lee Miller incorporated surrealist methods and elements into her photograph?

.....

.....

.....

.....

2. What symbols can you identify in the photograph, and what possible meanings do they suggest?

.....

.....

.....

.....

3. How does the historical and cultural context contribute to the surrealistic nature of the work?

.....

.....

.....

.....

4. Compare and contrast the chosen photographs, highlighting recurring surrealistic themes in Miller's body of work.

.....

.....

.....

.....

Further discussions



Exhibition installation view, *Surrealist Lee Miller*, Heide Museum of Modern Art 2023, photograph: Clytie Meredith

This exercise is to draw connections between the technical, symbolic, and emotional aspects of Lee Miller's photographs. The goal is to deepen an understanding of the complexity within surrealist art and its relevance across different contexts and time periods.

1. Artistic Techniques:

- How does Lee Miller's use of close cropping and unexpected viewpoints contribute to the surrealistic atmosphere in the chosen photograph?

.....

.....

.....

.....

- Explore the impact of the solarisation technique on the image. How does it enhance or alter the perception of the subject?

.....

.....

.....

.....

2. Symbolism:

- Identify three symbols from the photograph and delve into the possible meanings suggested by each. How do these symbols contribute to the overall surreal narrative?

.....

.....

.....

.....

- Discuss the role of found objects or devices in Miller's work as symbols. How does the use of such elements contribute to the dreamlike quality of her photographs?

.....

.....

.....

.....

3. Comparative Analysis:

- If possible, compare the chosen Lee Miller photograph with a surrealist painting or work from a different medium. How do the approaches differ, and what common elements tie them to the surrealist movement?

.....

.....

.....

.....

- Discuss any recurring motifs or themes across different Lee Miller photographs and how they contribute to a cohesive surrealist body of work.

.....

.....

.....

.....

4. Cultural and Historical Context:

- How does the historical context of the photograph influence the interpretation of surrealist elements? Consider the impact of the war period on Miller's work.

.....

.....

.....

.....

- Explore how Miller's experience in different locations (Paris, Egypt, London) influenced the surrealist elements in her photographs. How does the environment play a role in shaping the narrative?

.....

.....

.....

.....

5. Emotional Impact:

- Discuss the emotional tone conveyed by the chosen photograph. How does Miller evoke a sense of disquiet or impending threat through her composition and choice of subject?

.....

.....

.....

.....

- Explore the balance between the eerie and the beautiful in Miller's work. How does she achieve a surreal atmosphere without entirely abandoning aesthetic appeal?

.....

.....

.....

.....

6. Influence and Legacy:

- Investigate how Lee Miller's innovative techniques, such as solarisation, influenced other photographers or artists. Are there contemporary photographers who draw inspiration from Miller's surrealist approach?

.....

.....

.....

.....

- Consider Miller's impact on the perception of women in the art world during her time. How did her dual role as a photographer and model challenge traditional norms?

.....

.....

.....

.....

7. Narrative Exploration:

- Examine the narrative aspect of the chosen photograph. How does Miller tell a story or convey a message through the surreal elements in the image?

.....

.....

.....

.....

- Discuss the potential role of the model or subject in shaping the narrative. How does their pose, expression, or interaction with the environment contribute to the overall surreal atmosphere?

.....

.....

.....
.....

8. Technical Innovations:

- Explore the accidental discovery of the solarisation technique by Lee Miller and Man Ray. How does this element of chance align with the surrealist principles of spontaneity and automatism?

.....
.....
.....
.....

- Discuss the significance of Miller's experimentation with techniques in the darkroom. How did these innovations contribute to the evolution of surrealist photography?

.....
.....
.....
.....

9. Audience Engagement:

- Consider the viewer's experience when encountering a Lee Miller photograph. How does Miller engage the audience in interpreting the surreal elements?

.....
.....
.....
.....

- Discuss the balance between accessibility and complexity in Miller's work. How might different viewers interpret the same photograph?

.....
.....
.....

.....

10. Feminist Perspectives:

- Given that Lee Miller navigated both the worlds of fashion modelling and photography during a time when these fields were predominantly male-dominated, explore how her work may carry feminist undertones.

.....

.....

.....

.....

- Discuss how Miller's unique position as both artist and subject challenges traditional gender roles, and whether this perspective is reflected in her surrealistic works.

.....

.....

.....

.....