

Lee Miller and the Archives at Farleys House

Background Notes

Antony Penrose — 6 December 2023



Self portrait with headband, Lee Miller Studios Inc., New York, USA,
c 1932 by Lee Miller.

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Lee Miller was born in Poughkeepsie, New York, 23 April 1907 to Theodore and Florence Miller. Introduced to cameras at an early age through her father's hobby, Lee Miller first entered the world of photography in New York as a model to the great photographers of the day such as Edward Steichen, George Hoyningen-Huene and Arnold Genthe.

In 1929 she went to Paris and worked with the well-known Surrealist artist and photographer Man Ray and succeeded in establishing her own studio. She became known as a portraitist and fashion photographer, but her most enduring body of work is that of her Surrealist images. She returned to New York in 1932, and again set up her own studio which ran for 2 years and was highly successful. It closed when she married a wealthy Egyptian businessman Aziz Eloui Bey and went to live with him in Cairo, Egypt. She became fascinated by long range desert travel and photographed desert villages and ruins.



Portrait of Space, Al Bulwayeb, Near Siwa, Egypt, 1937 by
Lee Miller.

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During a visit to Paris in 1937 she met Roland Penrose, the Surrealist artist who was to become her second husband, and travelled with him to Greece and Romania. In 1939 she left Egypt for London shortly before World War II broke out. She moved in with Roland Penrose and, defying orders from the US Embassy to return to America, she took a job as a freelance photographer on Vogue.

Between the start of the war in 1939 and mid 1944, Miller's fashion work was published on over 400 pages of British Vogue, and its fashion export and knitting pattern books, with her wit and rapport with models often evident. In December 1942 she became a correspondent accredited to the US Army and teamed up with Time Life photographer David E. Scherman. She followed the US troops overseas on D Day + 20. She was probably the only woman combat photo-journalist to cover the front line war in Europe and among her many exploits she witnessed the siege of St Malo, the Liberation of Paris, the fighting in Luxembourg and Alsace, the Russian/American link up at Torgau, and the liberation of Buchenwald and Dachau. She billeted in both Hitler's and Eva Braun's houses in Munich, and photographed Hitler's house in Obersalzberg, near Berchtesgaden, in flames on the eve of Germany's surrender. Penetrating deep into Eastern Europe, she covered harrowing scenes of children dying in Vienna, peasant life in post-war Hungary and finally the execution of Prime Minister Lazlo Bardossy.

After the war she continued to contribute to Vogue for a further 6 years, covering fashion and celebrities. In 1947 she married Roland Penrose and contributed to his biographies of Picasso, Miró, Man Ray and Tàpies. Some of her portraits of famous artists like Picasso are the most powerful portraits of

the individuals ever produced, but it is mainly for the witty Surrealist images which permeate all her work that she is best remembered.

Post-war, the effects of what she had witnessed during the war touched her deeply and she experienced what would today be diagnosed as post-traumatic stress disorder. She struggled with depression until, through her fascination in food, she reinvented herself as a gourmet chef and found a way to recover using her creativity.

Lee Miller died at her home, Farleys, East Sussex in 1977.



Farleys House, East Sussex, England, 2018 by Tony Tree.

Tony Tree©Courtesy Lee Miller Archives, England 2023.
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Lee Miller Archives History

Soon after Lee's death, Antony's wife Suzanna discovered a vast collection of her negatives, photographs and manuscripts stored in boxes in the attic. Many dated from her early days in Paris, but it was her war dispatches that immediately captivated Antony. Her compassionate and incisive prose showed a side of Lee he felt he had never seen. With raw support of his father, Roland, he started sorting and archiving the material, much encouraged by Valerie Lloyd of the Royal Photographic Society. The publishers Thames & Hudson heard about the find and, as a huge act of faith, commissioned Antony to write Lee's biography, *The Lives of Lee Miller*. Roland died when he was half way through the writing and if it had not been for the help and encouragement given to him by David E. Scherman, the task would have been difficult to complete.



Lee Miller ephemera, Farleys House, East Sussex, England by Tony Tree.

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The Archive occupies five rooms on the first floor of Farleys and opening Farleys House to the general public meant growing at a rate that could never have been imagined. Antony's daughter Ami Bouhassane is now Antony's co-director with a core staff of twelve people keeping track of 60,000 negatives, 20,000 vintage prints, manuscripts, ephemera and maintaining our online presence. We have further seasonal staff responsible for helping to run tours of the house and take care of our visitors. There is always at least one major exhibition current somewhere in the world and annually we contribute to eight or ten others. We also frequently work on TV and radio productions, production of new books and catalogues and even a forthcoming feature film. Our Copyright and Photo Library department not only represents Lee Miller and Roland Penrose but also the private images of David E. Scherman, Theodore Penrose and works by Andrew Lanyon and Annabel Moeller.

When Roland died, he left few specific instructions for the disposal of his books, papers and his own work. Suzanna and Antony decided to catalogue everything and had the great good fortune to engage Michael Sweeney, an art historian, who worked for eight years archiving Roland's work. The incredibly detailed catalogue Michael produced made it possible to sell the major part of Roland's library and papers to the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art in Edinburgh, which now houses them as the Roland Penrose Archive. In this way the material is accessible to the increasingly large number of people who regard it as an important resource for the study of Surrealism.

People who knew Farleys in my parents' day find the atmosphere today very similar to how it was and the constant activity of the Lee Miller Archives ensures that life around the old house is never static. Josh Fifer who took over the gardens some 25 years ago has done a marvellous job of restoration, so that the gardens now give those who visit the same sense of pleasure as they did in Roland and Lee's day.

Further reading

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