

Review of *The Art of Lee Miller*  
Victoria and Albert Museum, 2007

Peter Barberie

Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University

*The Art of Lee Miller*, the most comprehensive survey of Lee Miller's (1907-1977) photography to date, was organized by Mark Haworth-Booth, former curator of photographs and Honorary Research Fellow at the Victoria and Albert Museum, who also wrote the accompanying book of the same title. The exhibition traveled to the Philadelphia Museum of Art in January 2008, where curator of photographs Katherine Ware oversaw its installation. It opened at its final destination, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, on July 1, 2008.

This retrospective reveals Lee Miller as one of the most compelling camera artists who emerged in the 1930s, despite long gaps when she simply abandoned photography and an oftentimes-casual approach to her work. Because of these factors the exhibition does not feel much like the retrospective of a career, but rather a series of installations reflecting Miller's periodic engagements with the medium. In Philadelphia the exhibition was organized loosely chronologically, reflecting the division of Haworth-Booth's book into six chapters: "The Art of the Model," "Paris 1929-32," "New York 1932-34," "Egypt 1934-37," "War," and "Post-war." The first section, as installed in Philadelphia, did not include Miller photographs at all, but portraits of her by others—private pictures by her father, and professional ones by figures such as Arnold Genthe and Edward Steichen, made when she debuted on the New York scene as a model for Condé Nast publications. There was also an illustrated cover of a 1927 issue of *Vogue* magazine, by Georges Lepape, for which Miller modeled. These works are of varying interest themselves, but installed together they establish Miller's initiation into the realms of photography and magazine journalism. They also provide a great foil for the rest of the exhibition, demonstrating that Miller's own work repeatedly conformed and yet undermined the aesthetic of fashion pictures. This suggests an interesting parallel between Miller's photography and

Peter Barberie: barberie@princeton.edu

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the later work of Diane Arbus, who began as a fashion photographer in the 1940s, and who made many of her photographs in a similarly negative dialogue with fashion photography and magazine picture stories.

By dint of its many portraits of Miller, the first section of the exhibition also seems to suggest that her work must be understood in terms of her biography. Indeed historians often discuss Miller in terms of her personal beauty and the men with whom she was involved, treating her photographs as a product of her formative romance with Man Ray (if not her beginnings as a fashion model). Miller was to some degree complicit in this, as she herself dismissed and neglected her camera work in later years; her son, Antony Penrose, was unaware of most of his mother's photography until he discovered it after her death. However, as Haworth-Booth argues in his essay, and as the exhibition makes ringingly clear by its end, the sexist clichés of model, muse, and sidekick are specifically wrong applied to Miller. To begin with, consider her brilliant photographic collaborations with Man Ray, which must be understood as lacking any specific author. His films and photographs of her are as much the product of irrationality, accident, and creative fusion as are the prints they made together following their famous "discovery" of solarization in the midst of darkroom hijinks. Miller emphasized this when she recounted the story of the photograph *Lee Miller: Neck*, which twists her profile into a shocking and alluring phallic shape. In 1976 she told the photographer David Hurn that she made the picture by retrieving a negative Man Ray had thrown away, then cropping it and enlarging the print. Man Ray was furious at this usurpation of his art, threw Miller out of his studio, and proceeded to alter her print with slashes and red ink. The misogyny of Man Ray's actions does not matter much: Miller soon returned to the studio, and their surrealist enterprise continued. It seems they agreed that Surrealism, of all the modernist movements, did not need fathers.

When we move outside the intense engagement between Miller and Man Ray, her photography is manifestly not about herself, even when it was made in the years of their relationship, 1929-1932. We must separate Miller's work from her biography. Carolyn Burke's superb 2005 book, *Lee Miller: A Life*, offers a fascinating narrative, one certainly worth knowing. But it doesn't bring us far in understanding the particular qualities of Miller's photography, whether we speak of the unsettling, unidentifiable objects and textures of her surrealist pictures, the sumptuous modern technophilia of her portraits, or her World War II reportage, for which she paired tough journalistic pictures with equally bracing prose in stories for *Vogue*.

And yet we cannot dispense entirely with biography in the case of Lee Miller. So frequently a model for others, she made the representation of women one of the

most potent subjects of her photography, a point this exhibition makes well. Miller's pictures of women or of the female body sometimes seem to refer back to pictures of herself. Consider an extraordinary pair of photographs she made of a severed breast from a radical mastectomy, around 1930. Miller placed the breast on a dinner plate and photographed it with a table setting on an otherwise empty table, a horrifying meal awaiting a perverse, solitary patron. She evidently designed the two views to be shown side by side, thus mimicking the anatomy of a woman's chest but also evoking the antiquated photographic format of the stereograph that was itself designed for three-dimensional delectation and also a prime mode for photographic erotica. The stereograph format was familiar to Miller because her father, an avid amateur photographer, employed it to record a variety of subjects, including nude studies of Lee, that he made into her adulthood (the exhibition includes an example from around 1928).

Miller and Berenice Abbott, both trained by Man Ray, emerged from his studio better portraitists than he was, in part because they were superbly sensitive photographers of women. Miller's portraiture is distinguished by her nuanced manipulation of studio lighting, which she employed to harmonize her subjects with their surroundings, and also to animate her overall pictorial compositions with the interplay of light and shadow. This is evident in a portrait of an unknown woman in a sari—titled *A Maharani* in the exhibition—and in elegant portraits of Nimet Eloui Bey and Renée Hubbel; the latter two prints are from the Philadelphia Museum of Art collection and possibly will not travel to the other venues.

Julien Levy, who gave Miller her only solo exhibition in her lifetime, in 1932-33, insisted that Surrealism was essentially a "point of view" rather than a movement or a style. His notion aptly fits Miller, who picked up Surrealist ideas in the hothouse of Man Ray's studio, made a small number of now classic Surrealist photographs, and then moved on, although she returned to Surrealist motifs and strategies whenever they were useful in her later work. Miller made her best Surrealist photographs on the streets and not in the studio. In this, again like Abbott, she is utterly distinct from Man Ray, who rarely strayed outside his studio with the camera. In her street pictures, we continue to see her canny eye for the patterning of light and shadow, now directed toward disorienting and even menacing views of the urban milieu. Looking at *Untitled (Ironwork)* from 1931, or the two versions of an untitled street scene from around the same time—for one version Miller simply enlarged the print and turned it 90 degrees—we know we are in a city, but it is impossible to say whether we are up, down, or sideways. The uncertainty continues in close views of patches of ground that evoke body parts or bodily excretions, three untitled

photographs of tar, stone, and rocks and sand, all made in or around 1931, which again leave the viewer without bearings. In this work, as in her views of the severed breasts, Miller relished photography's double-edged potential to at once reveal things with more scrutiny than the human eye sees them, and, conversely, to render familiar objects totally foreign.

Miller's war photography is her great accomplishment. She made virtually all of the World War II photographs as a U.S. Army War Correspondent attached to *Vogue*, where the pictures accompanied stories she often wrote. At first she did stories about London and the British home front, but as the European war neared its end, she traveled to the war front, documenting medical operations in Normandy, the siege of St. Malo, and the liberation of Paris. In all of the work she frequently focused on work by women, including the Women's Auxiliary Territorial Service in Britain, and nurses tending to the Normandy wounded.

In certain individual photographs Miller applied a Surrealist "point of view" to profoundly unreal wartime situations of violence and irrationality, showing, as Hawthorth-Booth notes, the strange banality in such unassimilable experience. This is evident in *Women with Fire Masks*, a photograph of two young women with their faces concealed behind evil-looking metal plates, seated at the entrance to an air raid shelter, or in *Remington Silent*, a still life of a bombed typewriter that recalls the disturbing amorphous shapes in her best Surrealist work. But Miller's war photography is great above all because of her courage to document and describe the worst things she saw. Most of the worst was at the Buchenwald and Dachau concentration camps, and, remarkably, some of the pictures were published in *Vogue* immediately after Miller made them. For the title of an article in American *Vogue*, the editors chose a two-word phrase, "Believe It," taken from Miller's text. Her photographs of stacked bodies, beaten victims, and incineration ovens, paired with her words about them, indeed seem like all the evidence anyone should need of the Holocaust.

It is a terrible challenge to deal with photographs of unspeakable acts. Yet however difficult Miller's concentration camp photographs are to exhibit and to look at, I wish this retrospective included more of them. In Philadelphia the most troubling images were shown in vintage issues of *Vogue*, in a vitrine, a sensitive and highly effective resolution. But one wonders how additional individual prints, framed on the wall, would have inflected the entire exhibition. The context of a museum retrospective, where the photographs could be read against Miller's previous engagements with photography—its glamour and deceptiveness, its Surreality, and, finally, its wrenching attachment to material facts—might have offered an appropriate surrounding to absorb the pictures. Then again, it might not have; Miller herself was

barely able to deal with them. In the mid-1960s, Carolyn Burke writes, she showed her war photographs to Anne-Laure Lyon, a young woman she had befriended, but she broke down in sobs when she came to the camp pictures.

Miller stared down the most horrendous aspects of life with what looks like unbelievable guts, even from a distance of decades. She was less equipped for the grind of day-to-day life. In that battle, Burke tells us, she ultimately armed herself with plentiful alcohol and a great kitchen. In the last twenty or thirty years of her life, she was best known as a gourmet cook who created unique and witty menus for a constant stream of guests. Her kitchen was stacked to the rafters with new-fangled gadgets. Between these gadgets and Miller's incredible recipes, often devised on the fly, one senses a substitute for the cameras, the dark room adventures, and the subjects she did not want to revisit.