Lee Miller, rescued from obscurity?

Former V&A photography curator Mark Haworth-Booth shines a spotlight on the photographer

I t is now over 20 years since the publication of Antony Penrose’s moving study of his late mother, The Lives of Lee Miller. His subsequent book on her astonishing work as a photo-reporter for Vogue during World War II came out in 1992. Since then there has been a steady flow of publications, exhibitions and documentary films on Miller. Prominent among these was the full-scale retrospective of her photographs at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art in 2001, my 2002 monograph on her portraits, the National Portrait Gallery’s exhibition in 2005 and Carolyn Burke’s well-researched biography, published the same year.

With the Victoria and Albert Museum’s (V&A) decision to mark Miller’s centenary with an exhibition from 15 September and accompanying book, it looks as if Penrose’s efforts to rescue her mother from the obscurity that she perversely encouraged, seem finally to have paid off. (For the last two decades of her life Miller moved away from photography and seemed determined to put her previous work behind her.)

Mark Haworth-Booth, recently retired as curator of photographs at the V&A, is clearly indebted to all the pioneering research into Miller’s life-enriching art and unconventional life. But he has thrown his native skill at the subject a scholarly knowledge of the history of photography and a keen eye for process and technique that serve in position and contextualise Miller to an extent that has not been done before. His use of the Man Ray archives in Paris helps fill gaps in the story of a professional (as well as a physical and emotional) relationship that quickly became one of creative equals rather than master and pupil, each learning from and exploiting the other.

What Miller took, from Man Ray is best seen in her studio portraiture: stark, sculptural outlines, neutral backgrounds, clear, bright, lighting and an all-encompassing directness. A good portrait, she said in 1932, catches its subject “not when he is unaware but when he is his most natural self”. A number of Miller’s photographs are published here for the first time.

The author occasionally illustrates variants to demonstrate how and why Miller selected the image she did. This is particularly interesting in the case of her haunting Egyptian desert landscapes from the mid-1930s, when she no longer had a darkroom and therefore had to “crop” and “enlarge” her compositions through the viewfinder.

Haworth-Booth analyses Miller’s “survivior” sensibility, highlighting the influence (which she acknowledged) of cinema—in many respects the ideal Surrealist medium, with its capacity to disorientate, subvert and render the familiar strange. She later wrote about the transformative experience of acting in Cocteau’s film The Blood of a Poet as a 23-year-old, which left her with an unshakeable faith in the importance of improvisation and chance. Coupled with her eye for the incongruous and overlooked, she was—although she didn’t know it—ideally prepared for the bizarre sights and general sense of unreality she was to encounter in wartime.

In discussing Miller’s prolific work as Vogue’s war correspondent, Haworth-Booth relates it to her written dispatches from the front and to the layouts of Alex Knoll, the magazine’s designer. Knoll’s eye for the lead picture and for startling juxtapositions gave Miller’s words and images an added punch. The June 1945 issue of American Vogue and British Vogue contain her most outraged, yet slyly urbane, accounts of Nazi atrocities, in which text and pictures are interdependent.

Buchenwald and Dachau marked a defining moment, imposing on her an obligation to bear witness to what she saw.

The disappointment of this book is that it devotes so little attention to Miller’s post-war work. 12 pages out of a total of 224, or more than ten photographs out of 180. Presumably this imbalance will be reflected in the V&A & exhibition Haworth-Booth excludes virtually everything except Miller’s Vogue assignments, which by the early 1950s had dried up completely. Her heart was never really in fashion photography, which, after the suffering and destruction she had witnessed in the war, seemed irrelevant. She turned instead to photographing creative people—artists, writers, composers—and to trying to preserve the memory of what she had experienced.

Some of these portraits—of T.S. Eliot, Stephen Spender, Dylan Thomas—were commissioned by Vogue but others were not, such as those taken on her visit to the USA in 1946 with Roland Penrose, the artist and critic who later became her husband. On this trip she memorably photographed Strawinsky, Noguchi, Wilfred Lum and her friend Francis Ray and Max Ernst—the latter in the rocky Arizona desert resembling an enormous painting on the wall of a dry cave. A particular interest was painters and sculptors whose work she found inspired by their work. Photographers of the world, in the south of France, taken over 20 years, was one of her most impressive projects and yet not one of them is reproduced in this book.

Her rejection of the post-war portraits may explain why the catalogue of the 2002 National Portrait Gallery show is mis-titled and why my 2002 monograph is omitted from the bibliography altogether. Moreover, the author’s claim that the V&A show brings together the first time Miller’s vintage prints alongside photographs by her mentors and by those for whom she was a muse, as well as the original magazine spreads in which her own photographs were published, is false. The 2001 retrospective in Edinburgh included several photographs by Man Ray, Hovingh-Hiene, Steichen, Horst, Murray and Gentil, along with Miller’s vintage prints and all her Vogue spreads. While such omissions and inaccuracies are hard to justify, they do not detract from what on balance is a valuable contribution to our understanding of one of the 20th century’s most remarkable women.

Richard Calvocoressi
Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art

Lee Miller and Women with Fire Masks, 1941

Q Lee Miller’s son and director of her archive, Antony Penrose, has announced plans to open a new £1m (51m) arts centre celebrating her work at Purley Farm, her home with her second husband, the surrealist artist Roland Penrose, in Chiddingfold. East Sussex. It is scheduled to open to the public for groups of 12, email: tours@leemiller.co.uk or call: +44 (0)18 285 7699.

Land of hope, but not much glory

Sixteen years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia is still undergoing major social, economic and political upheavals. While the authorities try to project an image of widespread affluence, Simon Roberts’s photographs show a drier side. His images, shot during a year-long journey of over 75,000 km through Russia’s 11 time zones, depict a society struggling to adjust to Western capitalism, where a desire for personal gain still jells with the socialist legacy of working towards a collective “greater good”.

The most striking images are those that contrast uniformed McDonald’s workers with memorial busts of Lenin, but it is the portraits of locals and photographs of the architectural landscape that offer more insight. Roberts shows us a society looking forward to what it reckons are the trappings of capitalism. Clothing is the most telling signifier, with subjects typically wearing decade-old US fashions, while interior designs reflect a mixture of late 1950s and early 1980s taste.

This book also analyses Russians’ emotional connection to their country. As Rosamund Bartlett points out in the introduction, the title, Motherland, alludes to the three words used to describe Russia. Orchestral, “fatherland”, is used in official, unquestionable discourse. Ochotnya, although suggesting birth and generation, is mainly a political synonym for country or nation. Patriots, however, is “motherland” and is used at all levels of society to convey a sense of belonging and national pride.

Whatever the contradictions and contrasts, Roberts records in Russia, the people depicted are nevertheless united by a distinct love of their country.

William Oliver