

Photography

Lee Miller, rescued from obscurity?

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

It 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 were 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's) decision to mark Miller's centenary with an exhibition from 15 September and accompanying book, it looks as if Penrose's efforts to rescue his 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-enhancing art and unconventional life. But he brings to the subject a scholarly knowledge of the history of photography and a keen eye for process and technique that serve to 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 portraits: sharp, sculptural outlines, neutral backgrounds, clear, bright, lighting and an unselfconscious 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 "surrealist" 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 formative experience of acting in Cocteau's film "The Blood of a Poet" as a 23-year-old, which left her with an unshakable 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 Kroll, the magazine's designer. Kroll's eye for the lead picture and for startling juxtapositions gave Miller's words and images an added punch. The June 1945 issues for American and British *Vogue* contain her most outraged, yet icily sarcastic, 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: 15 pages out of a total of 224, or a mere ten photographs out of 180. Presumably this imbalance will be reflected in the V&A show. 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—as if trying to expunge 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 Stravinsky, Noguchi, Wifredo Lam and her old friends Man Ray and Max Ernst—the latter in the rocky Arizona desert resembling an enormous bird of prey. A particular interest was painters and sculptors at work, or surrounded by their work. Her photographs of Picasso 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.

Haworth-Booth's neglect of the post-war portraits may explain why the catalogue of the 2005 National Portrait Gallery show is mis-titled and why my

□ Mark Haworth-Booth, *The Art of Lee Miller*, (V&A Publications, 2007), 224 pp, £35, ISBN-13 9781851775040



Self-portrait in Headband, published 1933

2002 monograph is omitted from the bibliography altogether. Moreover, the author's claim that the V&A show brings together for 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, Hoyningen-Huene, Steichen, Horst, Muray and Genthe, 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's son and director of her archive, Antony Penrose, has announced plans to open a new £500,000 (\$1m) arts centre celebrating her work at Farley Farm, her home with her second husband, the surrealist artist Roland Penrose, in Chiddingfold, East Sussex. To schedule a tour of the farm for groups of 12, email: tours@leemiller.co.uk or call: +44 (0)18 2587 2691.



Lee Miller, *Women with Fire Masks*, 1941

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 dingier 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 jars with the socialist legacy of working towards a collective "greater good".

The most striking images are those that contrast uniformed McDonald's workers with monumental 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




Twins Elena and Vera Magadan, Far East Russia, August 2004

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. *Otechestvo*, "fatherland", is used in official, unemotional discourse. *Otchizna*,

although suggesting birth and generation, is mainly a political synonym for country or nation. *Rodina*, 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**

□ Simon Roberts, *Motherland* (Chris Boot, 2007), 192 pp, £25 (hb) ISBN 10: 1905712030, ISBN-13: 9781905712038



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