

# Lee Miller: Photographer of the First Electric Century



[Lee Miller](#): iconic beauty, model, muse to **Man Ray**, war photographer; the star of a rich and varied life. Born in Poughkeepsie, New York, Lee was just 20 years old when she was pulled from the path of a car in a Manhattan street by none other than Vogue founder **Conde Nast** himself; the rest is indeed history. Would Lee have had such an eventful life without that fateful meeting? Last month at the [National Gallery](#) Lee's son **Anthony Penrose** gave a fascinating talk about his mother's life and work, a talk that left the audience in no doubt that falling into the arms of one of America's most famous publishers was but a step along the way for this extraordinary woman.

Anthony (Tony) had an unusual childhood. Growing up at his parents' farmhouse in Sussex he had no idea that not everyone had **Picasso** round for tea. Lee had married his father, **Sir Roland Penrose**, a celebrated biographer and surrealist painter, in 1947; Penrose and Miller moved in artistic circles, routinely hosting **Man Ray**, **Miro**, **Max Ernst** and all the leading modernists of the day. Picasso painted Lee eight times; Tony recalls a friendly old man who played bullfights with him. When Tony famously bit him, Picasso bit back – an incident that Tony has now used as the basis of a highly successful children's book, **The Boy who Bit Picasso**. Life was not all rosy however; Lee was a depressive alcoholic, a 'hopeless mother' who had no idea what to do with a baby (Tony was brought up by a nanny.) It was only after her death in 1977 that Tony and his late wife Suzanna started to go through the contents of the Farley Farm attic: what they found there opened his eyes to his mother's rich and varied life 'I'd seen her as a useless drunk, now I had to re-evaluate.'

After that chance meeting in a New York street, Conde Nast made Lee into a Vogue model. She was photographed by all the greats of the day and one of them, Edward Steichen, introduced her to the surrealist artist and photographer Man Ray. Bored with fashion modelling, she decided to apprentice herself to Ray and moved to Paris, becoming his collaborator, model, lover and muse: soon she too was taking photographs. She had no formal training but this gave her freedom of eye, 'she became a surrealist photographer by being apprenticed to the best in the business.' Lee inspired Man Ray hugely and he photographed her obsessively in 'a trail of erotic images'; she also covered his fashion assignments for him so that he could concentrate on his painting. It is likely that many photographs attributed to Ray were in fact taken by Miller, but when Tony questioned her about this in later life, she replied that she didn't care, 'we were so close that it just didn't matter.' It is thought that Lee also invented the process of **solarisation**; a rat ran over Lee's foot in the darkroom – she put on the light (a complete disaster in traditional photographic development) , and a wonderful surreal effect emerged. There will always be problems of attribution between Miller and Ray, but it seems unlikely that he would ever be as unbothered about it as Lee.

Miller worked with Man Ray for two years before returning to New York and later marrying an Egyptian businessman.

Unimpressed with life in Cairo she returned to Paris, there meeting Roland Penrose who had coincidentally bought one of Man Ray's photographs of her eight years previously. They were living together in London when war broke out in 1939. Lee became **Vogue's** official war photographer, often working with American LIFE correspondent **David E Scherman**; eventually they became the first photographers to witness the liberation of **Dachau**. After recording some of the most horrific images of the war Miller and Scherman went that night to **Hitler's** apartment in Munich and whilst the Fuhrer was shooting himself in the bunker Miller took a bath in his tub, dried herself

with his monogrammed towels and slept in his bed. She was there 'not as a guest but as a victor.' The photograph Scherman took of her in the bath, her muddy boots still standing on the bathmat, became one of the most famous images of their partnership. Miller took from the apartment Hitler's drinks tray and **Eva Braun's** perfume bottle and powder compact; the ostrich feather puff is, says Tony, one of the 'creepiest' items in the archive and is rarely lent out, 'it touched the skin of a human being who was also a monster.'

In the attic at Farley Farm, Tony and Suzanna found many thousands of photograph, letters, manuscripts, plates, negatives and prints. It is now clear that Miller, who never spoke about the war, was suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and hid all of her work away to try to avoid thinking about her terrible experiences. For fourteen years Suzanna painstakingly catalogued the cache; new plates were made, negatives were housed in acid-free containers, new contact sheets were made. The archive is gradually being digitalised, but even after thirty years of work there remains much to be done. Everything is recorded on an online database and on the Lee Miller website so that students can see what was important to the **Surrealists**.

The house is now a museum and gallery, a place of pilgrimage for people interested in Miller and the Surrealists; Tony has tried to preserve it as it looked at the time (a tile by Picasso set into the wall above the Aga has 'survived sixty years of bacon fat'), although this itself has presented many challenges: the buildings are over 300 years old and require frequent work. The house sometimes has to be divided into two halves and the entire archive moved into one half whilst work is carried out on the other. A climate controlled store in the garden – essential to deal with problems of humidity and temperature – was funded by the sale of duplicate works; the dehumidifiers are powered by solar panels on an adjoining farm building.

When Miller died Tony had to find somewhere to house much of his parents' work, and was delighted when the **Scottish Gallery of Modern Art** stepped in, offering accommodation first at **Inverleith House** and now at the Dean Gallery, whose **Gabrielle Kieller** library still has much of the archive (viewable by appointment.) Meanwhile at Farley Farm, Tony and his staff, many of whom have a long personal connection to the family, continue to examine and preserve more material. The house, gallery and garden (which has many sculptures) are open to the public at certain times. There is an educational programme, run by a separate charity, the Farley Arts Trust, and the gallery exhibits the work of new young artists as well as Miller's; the Farm runs courses and competitions, 'Everything', says Tony, 'is consistent with my parents' passion for encouraging young people: art is one of the best ways of communicating their ideas about peace and justice.'

Many people come to Farley Farm looking for information about their parents. **Marianne Sweeney** had searched far and wide to find her late father, a doctor and army captain. She found nothing in Miller's papers, nor in the many photos of field operating theatres (in which it was impossible to discern one masked face from another), but then she mentioned that Captain Sweeney had been at the liberation of Dachau. Lee and David Scherman had arrived at Dachau on 29th April 1945, the day after liberation; like them, Sweeney had taken photos of what he saw, including a train wagon full of corpses, people who had died whilst being transported from Auschwitz to Dachau.

The only survivor of the horrific journey was found alive in that same wagon, pulled out by some of the Allied soldiers.

Marianne and Tony managed to identify Captain Sweeny by working back to calculate where he must have been standing when he took his photos, then pinpointing him in Miller's.

Marianne discovered that her father had been one of those two soldiers who had pulled the only living man from the truck.

Tony and Marianne had gained a new chapter in each of their parents' histories.

In 1979 Tony was commissioned by Thames and Hudson to write Lee's biography; **'The Lives of Lee Miller'** is still in print, and he has also written **'Portraits of a Life'** and, with David Scherman, **'Lee Miller's War'** (a new edition of the latter has been produced for the anniversary of the D-Day Landings.)

Tony's **'The Home of the Surrealists'** (written with Alen MacWeeney) is about Farley Farm itself, and Lizzie Cowling drew on Roland Penrose's letters and notes to write **'Visiting Picasso'** – a book that Tony particularly praises for its easy style.

There have been many exhibitions of Miller's work in the UK, US and Japan. In 2002 Richard Calvin mounted *The Surrealist and The Photographer* at Modern Art One and Two in Edinburgh. Tony was especially thrilled with *The Art of Lee Miller*, curated by Mark Haworth-Booth at the V & A. There has even been a musical, *Six Pictures of Lee Miller* by Jason Carr, which was performed at the Chichester Festival Theatre in 2005, and Tony has contributed to three documentaries about his mother's life. Whenever works are sent abroad, a member of Farley Farm's staff travels with them in the cargo plane and attends the hanging.

Tony travels to research more about his parents. He visited Egypt with Mark Haworth Booth (Honorary Research Fellow and former curator at the V & A), to try to find the location of the huge landscape image *'Portrait of Space'* that Miller shot whilst living in the country. Despite extensive searches – they even hired camels at one point to take them into the desert – they were unsuccessful, but they know that the photo was taken near the Libyan border and Tony plans to return one day for another try. He has also visited the site of Hitler's Berghof. In 1945, Miller, Scherman and two GIs were the first people on the scene to see it burn: sixty years later, Tony stood on the same spot, now a wildlife area full of the sound of birdsong.

At the end of Lee Miller's life, and largely thanks to

Suzanna, she and Tony were reconciled. The Lee Miller Archive and Farley Farm stand as a fitting memorial to this remarkable woman. Man Ray said of Lee 'she was the best person ever at creating work for other people' – she has certainly created more than enough work for Tony, but it is work that he undertakes as a true labour of love.

Part of the Miller-Penrose archive can be seen by appointment at the **Gabrielle Keiller Library, Modern Art TW0**, Belford Road, Edinburgh.

**Farley Farm House** is open every Sunday April-October 2014 and at certain other times. Farley Farm Gallery is adjacent to the house and has a rolling programme of exhibitions throughout the year. See [website](#) for more information.

More information about Sir Roland Penrose can be found at [www.rolandpenrose.co.uk](http://www.rolandpenrose.co.uk)

The [Fine Art Library](#) in Edinburgh Central Library has many books about Lee Miller available for loan.