

# Lee Miller retrospective: “I didn’t waste a minute of all my life”

**Paul Mitchell**  
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*Lee Miller, Tate Britain, London until February 15, 2026 and then at the Musée d’Art Moderne, Paris and the Art Institute of Chicago*

The Lee Miller retrospective at Tate Britain—the most extensive ever staged in the UK—seeks to shift public perception of Miller (1907–1977) from muse and model to a pioneering photographer who shaped modern visual culture and bore witness to some of the 20th century’s most harrowing events.

The curators assert: “Yes, she was very beautiful and very well connected, and she had an interesting, exciting life, and lots of other artists painted or photographed her. But she was also a really major artist, and that’s the story we want to tell.”

However, the curatorial perspective leans heavily on gender politics—emphasizing her resistance to objectification, her reclaiming of agency, and her navigation of male-dominated artistic circles—largely omitting the deeper ideological and historical events and issues that shaped her work and political engagement.

Spanning over five decades of creative output, the exhibition assembles more than 230 vintage and modern photographs—some previously unknown or rarely seen—alongside film, archival material, and personal items. It traces Miller’s evolution from fashion model to Surrealist photographer, war correspondent, and post-war chronicler of artistic and political life. The breadth of material—from early *Vogue* covers to searing images of liberated concentration camps—reveals a restless, radical eye attuned to both beauty and brutality. Her independent spirit, which she once described as “a matter of getting out on a damn limb and sawing it off behind you,” permeates the show.

These experiences, relationships, and creative choices deeply informed Miller’s political orientation. Though never formally affiliated with any party, she was staunchly anti-fascist and deeply humanist. After World War II the MI5 spy agency launched an investigation into her “communist sympathies” and the presence of left-wing artists in her circle.

The exhibition unfolds across six thematic rooms, each illuminating a distinct phase of her life and work.

## Room 1: *Before the Camera*

This opening section presents family portraits and early experiments. Photographs taken by her father show Miller as a child and young woman—often nude or semi-nude. These images, ostensibly intended to help her “reclaim” her body and confidence after being sexually abused at age seven by a family friend, are

troubling to contemporary viewers. Yet they mark the beginning of Miller’s complex relationship with the camera and her body.

Miller began modelling professionally in New York in 1926 while studying painting at the Art Students League. Her entry into fashion was shaped not by the oft-repeated myth of *Vogue* publisher Condé Nast saving her from traffic, but by her artistic background, striking appearance, and early photographic experience with her father.

Her breakthrough came in 1927 when she appeared on the cover of *American Vogue*. Tall, androgynous, and self-possessed, Miller embodied the “modern girl” ideal of the 1920s. She quickly became one of the first stars of professional photographic modelling, working with leading photographers of the era.

Controversy soon followed. In 1928, her photograph was used in a Kotex advert—the first menstrual hygiene ad to feature a real woman. Miller objected to its use, and some accounts suggest the ensuing scandal effectively ended her modelling career. Disillusioned, she left for Paris in 1929 determined to become a photographer and artist.

## Room 2: *Surrealist Collaborations*

Paris offered Miller the intellectual and creative freedom she craved. Drawn to the city’s avant-garde energy, she sought out Surrealist artist Man Ray, declared herself his student, and quickly became his muse, lover, and collaborator. A wonderful home cine film captures their playful intimacy.

Another short film excerpt from Jean Cocteau’s *Le Sang d’un poète* (*Blood of a poet*) featuring Miller in a central role as a statue coming to life is also included in the exhibition.

Miller’s partnership with Man Ray launched her photographic career and introduced her to other leading figures in the Surrealist movement. She absorbed their radical ideas and contributed her own, co-developing the solarisation technique and experimenting with photograms. Miller began accepting commissions and establishing herself as a serious artist with images such as those of puddles of tar in Paris resembling alien life forms.

## Room 3: *Cairo and the Desert Eye*

After marrying Egyptian businessman Aziz Eloui Bey in 1934, Miller moved to Cairo. The treatment of her time there is an example of how the exhibition downplays the radical historical context of the period and the country politics. Central to this was Miller’s connection to the Cairo-based group Art et Liberté, a collective of Egyptian and expatriate artists and writers who used Surrealism to oppose fascism, Stalinism, colonialism, and

bourgeois nationalism. The wall texts mention Art et Liberté once but don't explain what it was.

Founded in 1938 by poet Georges Henein, Art et Liberté was one of the staunchest supporters of the Fédération Internationale de l'Art Révolutionnaire Indépendant (FIARI), a global network of revolutionary artists initiated by André Breton and Diego Rivera, with Leon Trotsky's political vision providing the group with a framework to reject both Nazi aesthetics and Stalinist socialist realism. FIARI is mentioned in the catalogue once but, again, no explanation is forthcoming.

Though not a formal member of Art et Liberté, Miller took part in the group's activities and acted as a crucial link between British and Egyptian Surrealists. A special issue of the *London Bulletin* reprinted their "Long Live Degenerate Art"—an ironic reference to Nazi denunciations of modern art.

Miller's photographic work from this period—restless, experimental, and politically charged—embodied the group's ethos of "subjective realism", which fused dream imagery with local symbols and political critique. Her landscape photograph *From the Top of the Great Pyramid* is regarded as an "anti-nationalist" image, using the shadow of the pyramid to undermine its national significance and suggest the potential for a future not bound by triumphalist myths or right-wing politics. Her Cairo images—desolate landscapes, fragmented bodies, surreal juxtapositions such as *Portrait of Space* (1937)—echoed surrealist preoccupations with dislocation and the unconscious.

According to French Surrealist Peter Shulman, Miller's departure to London in 1939 to live with her new partner, Surrealist artist Roland Penrose left a "psychic wound" in the Surrealist scene. In a poem dedicated to her after she left Henein wrote:

The flag of the harbour is half-mast  
The eye of the lighthouse only focuses on the awful past  
However no one yet know the news  
The sole female passenger has disappeared  
But there is another island on the map

#### Room 4: *Fashion in the Blitz*

Once in the UK Miller joined *British Vogue* as a freelance photographer and writer, determined to document the impact of war. Her Surrealist training shaped her vision: she photographed not just destruction, but the uncanny juxtapositions war produced—mannequins decapitated in shop windows, bombed-out churches beside blooming gardens, and fashion shoots staged amid ruins.

Her writing for *Vogue* was equally radical. In articles, which line the walls of room 4, like "Women in Wartime," she chronicled the psychological toll of the Blitz, the shifting roles of women, and the surreal normalcy of life under siege.

#### Room 5: *War Correspondent*

This room showcases Miller's powerful frontline photography, often in the company of David Scherman, blending raw reportage with surrealist composition. In 1944, she joined the US 83rd Infantry and became one of the few accredited female correspondents with frontline access. Her images are singular and haunting—capturing not just devastation, but the surreal contradictions of war: beauty amid brutality, composure amid

collapse.

At the siege of St Malo, she was the only journalist present, documenting the effects of napalm bombing. At the 44th Evacuation Hospital, she photographed surgeons and nurses working in tented operating rooms. In 1945, she witnessed the fall of the Nazi regime and the burning of Hitler's Berchtesgaden house. The exhibition displays the iconic image of Miller in Hitler's Munich bathtub, a framed photo of the dictator looming over her juxtaposed to her muddy combat boots. "I washed the dirt of Dachau off in his tub," Miller declared.

Miller was among the first to document Dachau and Buchenwald. Her photographs, some of which are on display—emaciated inmates, skeletal bodies and suicided SS officers—were so graphic she pleaded with *Vogue*, "I IMPOSE YOU TO BELIEVE THIS IS TRUE." After the war, many of these images were suppressed, deemed too disturbing for public consumption.

#### Room 6: *Postwar and Psychological Landscapes*

Miller described the postwar period as one of profound disillusionment, saying, "I was not prepared for the aftermath. I had seen so many horrors that I was not able to cope with peacetime."

After her marriage to Penrose in 1947, the couple settled in a small village in rural Sussex. While Penrose thrived publicly, Miller turned to cooking and entertaining and photographing still lifes, shadowed interiors, and symbolic landscapes. Miller's experiences had left deep scars, and she likely suffered from PTSD, depression, and alcoholism. Her son, Antony Penrose, described her as "a volcano of suppressed emotion," recalling a childhood marked by emotional distance.

Miller's decision to store her prints, negatives, and writings in the attic symbolised this retreat. Penrose only discovered the archive after his mother's death in 1977, revealing an immense hidden body of work.

Lee Miller lived a life of extraordinary intensity and transformation. Her own reflection, "I didn't waste a minute all my life... but if I had it over again, I'd be even more free with my ideas, with my body and my affection," captures both her defiance and her regrets. Her legacy is one of radical creativity, emotional complexity, and a lifelong struggle for artistic freedom.



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