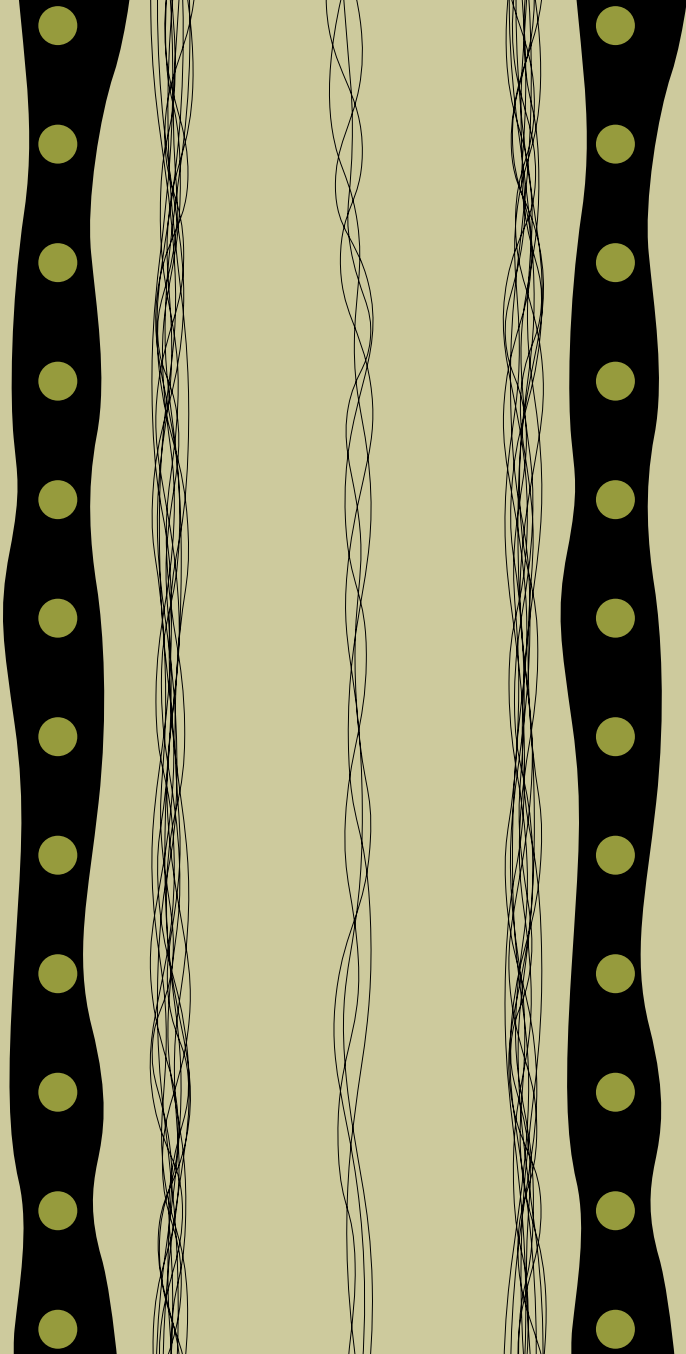


# Grim Glory

LEE MILLER'S BRITAIN AT WAR



By Ami Bouhassane



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Dedicated to:  
**Suzanna Penrose**  
Co-founder of the  
Lee Miller Archives  
and daughter in law  
of Lee Miller.

Whose early death meant  
she never witnessed the  
development and success  
of the Archives.

*'it became a matter of  
pride that work went on—  
the studio never missed  
a day—bombed once and  
fired twice—working with  
the neighbouring buildings  
still smouldering'*

**Lee Miller**

London, Letter to Theodore and  
Florence Miller, Poughkeepsie,  
USA autumn 1940



Lee Miller, Portsmouth, England 1943 by David E. Scherman

lee miller

## Grim Glory

LEE MILLER'S BRITAIN AT WAR

### FROM EGYPT TO LONDON

*'If it's war scares that makes you hesitate, all I can say is that here everyone is so used to them that they are beginning to treat them as weather forecasts, never to be relied on.'*<sup>i</sup>

By early 1939, the year Britain entered the Second World War, Lee Miller had been married to her first husband Aziz Eloui Bey and living mostly in Cairo, Egypt for nearly 5 years. Her early career as a top fashion model in New York and Paris during the late 20s and early 30s, successful photography studios in Paris and New York and involvement with the surrealist art movement were of a different world to the stiff British expatriate society she found herself living amongst in Egypt.



Self Portrait, Modeling Jean Patou, Paris, France 1930

Aziz was a successful businessman so there were social appearances that were expected to be upheld, but Lee was still a surrealist at heart with a thirst for adventure. Openly admitting that she was 'so lousy at housekeeping I just don't bother & when everything goes wrong, as its sure to, I get as much of a laugh as anyone.'<sup>ii</sup> In reality her social life was grim and she found it insufferably boring playing poker and bridge with the society women she referred to the 'black satin and pearls set'.

In her first years there, to try and feed her intellect, she enrolled on a chemistry course and in Arabic lessons at the American University in Cairo. She stepped back from photography initially, having 'got a loathing for it'<sup>iii</sup> after coming from the highly demanding role of running her own successful commercial photography

studio, Lee Miller Studio's Inc. in Manhattan, New York during the American economic depression of the early 30s.

Lee re-discovered her camera and love for photography when she found a small group of friends who also enjoyed exploring Egypt, the Red Sea area, and trying out crazy ideas like skiing on the sand dunes in the western desert. For the first time in her life she was free to photograph what she wanted, without having to fit a client's brief, worry about if the picture would sell or if she could afford new film and paper. The imagery ranged from touristic photography to experimenting and using her surrealist eye to find the unusual in the ordinary. After meeting Roland Penrose in Paris in 1937 she went on to share several trips with him, first to Cornwall in England, then to Greece and the Balkans and a long exploration of Romania to document the lifestyle of the Roma and others in rural communities.



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Mary Anita Loos and  
Robin Fedden sand skiing,  
Egypt 1937



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Gypsies, Porumbacu de Jos,  
Sibiu, Romania 1938

They travelled as lovers and worked together as artists, but Lee always returned to Aziz. Roland wrote to her devotedly in the years that followed. At times her only connection to her surrealist friends in Europe, he sent her exhibition catalogues and news of what was happening in the art world. She became connected to the Egyptian surrealist 'Art and Liberty' group through Maria Cavadia-Riaz and Amy Nimr, and by 1938 her Egyptian period photography was being published.<sup>iv</sup>



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Amy Nimr, Gezira Sporting  
club, Cairo, Egypt 1937

Despite her deep connection with Roland, Lee still cared greatly for Aziz and was fiercely loyal even though their lifestyles were a mismatch and she was very unhappy living in Egypt. She wrote to Roland in October 1938; '*Aziz and I had long conversations about you and my situation in general. The result is that I'm going*