

LEE MILLER

FASHION IN
WARTIME
BRITAIN



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With our deepest gratitude.

LEE MILLER

FASHION IN WARTIME BRITAIN

LEE MILLER PHOTOGRAPHER

'When I got to London, the day of the war here, September 3rd 1939. I'd barely settled in to Hampstead when Condé Nast (British Vogue), collared me and I found myself running their studio...'

(Lee Miller, 1976)

by Ami Bouhassane

'When I got to London, the day of the war here, September 3rd 1939. I'd barely settled in to Hampstead when Condé Nast (British Vogue), collared me and I found myself running their studio. They had little choice, poor things, all their photographers had been called up, the Americans just wanted to go home. The British, unless they had a hole in their heart were put in war jobs of various kinds, even if they couldn't fight. I made out alright.'¹

Wrote Lee Miller, in 1976, speaking of her fashion work in Britain during the Second World War, less than a year before she died, still as quick to dismiss her photographic achievements, as she had been throughout her life. By then for over a decade, she had had a different career focus which, although she'd moved away from fashion photography, still earned her features on the pages of British and American Vogue in her re-invented form of a gourmet cook.

At first in 1939 Lee couldn't work because as an American she needed a work visa. She had not been photographing fashion since closing her commercial studio 'Lee Miller Studios Inc.' in New York 1934, so she volunteered at British Vogue from the winter of 1939. As America were not yet involved in the war she had other restrictions on her which she wrote to her older brother John Miller in a her jokey tongue in cheek way:

'no war work, as Americans are only allowed to spend their money or serve on begging committees (with a few snob exceptions). I'm also curfewed at midnight and can't own a seaplane, bicycle or howitzer, go away for the weekend, sleep out... even accidentally, speak my piece, roll a bandage, ship my property home or fly a kite.'²

Wanting to do what she could and in the knowledge that many of her friends in France where in danger Lee found the best way she could contribute was with her camera.

Her first camera, a Box Brownie had been given to her by her engineer and amateur photographer father, Theodore Miller, in the 1920s when she was a teenager. He and Florence, her mother, had always tried to treat Lee the same as her brothers John and Erik, encouraging her love of chemistry and fascination in machinery. Not being excluded from things because of her gender and her family respecting her intelligence meant that in adulthood when she did start to experience inequality, she was determined

to overcome it or in some cases possibly did not even think it might be an issue.

She had known the fashion photographer Edward Steichen since she was a child but her first direct relationship with fashion was on the other side of the camera, posing for pictures as a model. Appearing on the pages of Vogue and Vanity Fair, she was a cover-girl for American Vogue a month before her 20th Birthday. Modelling for Steichen, Horst and Genthe she had many opportunities to learn their approaches to lighting, exposure and set dressing all of which she would draw on as she learnt to hone her craft as a fashion photographer in Paris.

Her main camera became a Rolleiflex, she got her first (Old Standard) in c1930 which she started to use in Paris. At the Lee Miller Archives we only have a few Rolleiflex negatives from her Paris days, these include her famous 'Exploding hand' surrealist found image. She used the camera extensively for her Egypt photography and her travels through the Balkans, France and England. In her Paris studio and when working with Man Ray initially as his assistant she mostly favoured a studio camera.



Untitled [Exploding Hand], Guerlain Parfumarie, Paris, France 1931

Horst and Hoyningen-Huene were getting very important in the 30s, usually fashion. Cecil Beaton was starting too, with his little folding vest pocket Kodak which he didn't know how to load.



Self Portrait, modelling Jean Patou, Paris, France 1930

It was in Paris 1929-1932 that Lee learnt the expectations and high standards *Vogue* had of a fashion photographer. Man Ray was already a frequent contributor and she knew and modelled for George Hoyningen-Huene, head of French *Vogue's* studio. Within a year, whilst still appearing in American and French *Vogue* as a model she was also being published as a photographer. Her first self-portrait as a model appeared in American *Vogue* in the September issue 1930.

In considering how she would navigate her career in a male orientated world, Lee decided against taking the route that Dora Maar had taken chosen in combining her name with the male designer and photographer Pierre Kéfer with whom she shared a studio and some work, (thus presenting her work initially as Maar Kéfé). Lee had seriously considered combinations of Man Ray and her name, such as *Lee Man* or *Man Lee*. Instead she set up her own solo Paris studio at 12 rue Considerent, a short walk away from both Dora Maar and Man Ray's studio. During Lee's Paris period in 1931 she took a commission in Britain working at Elstree film studios as 'second camera and stills photographer'³ and had work exhibited in the *Group Annuel des Photographes* exhibition at *Galerie de la Pleiade*, France. By 1932 Lee started to have her own photography students, one of her first being André Durst, who went on to photograph fashion.

Of her contemporaries during she wrote 'Horst and Hoyningen-Huene were getting very important in the 30s, usually fashion. Cecil Beaton was starting too, with his little folding vest pocket Kodak which he didn't know how to load.'⁴

Lee also used a larger format studio camera when she went back to America in 1932 establishing her New York studio, Lee Miller Studios Inc., doing her own electrical wiring and constructing her darkroom.⁵ Despite the

economic depression Lee's hard work paid off and she had become successful by the time she closed the studio to go to Egypt with her first husband Aziz Eloui Bey in 1934.

Later in around 1937 Lee bought two more Rolleiflex (3.5 Automat) cameras with an attachment mounted on the side to allow synchronised flash. They became her main cameras and we still have them here at the archives. It was with these cameras she took her most famous surrealist image 'Portrait of Space' and when she left Egypt she carried them on the streets of London capturing the destruction during the Blitz for the British government propaganda publication 'Grim Glory: Britain Under Fire'. In America it was published as 'Grim Glory: Bloody but Unbound' and geared towards showing them the devastation caused by the war in Britain. Lee was the main photographic contributor and the only one credited in the book. It was paired with an exhibition 'Britain at War' in MOMA 1941 where the majority of Lee's photographs were also presented. After D Day Lee also had a Zeiss Contax c1940 which she used as her back up camera when reporting in Europe but her weapon of choice was always the Rolleiflex.



Lee Miller's rolleiflex

When Lee had started to work at British *Vogue* (Brogue) in 1939 it was under the editorship of Elizabeth Penrose who when on a trip to American *Vogue* got stuck there due to the war and was unable to return. Audrey Withers was her replacement; she and Lee became a formidable duo. Having lost most of its male photographers to the war effort and being distanced by the war from its parent magazine American *Vogue* the two were able to form Brogue into the vehicle that carried it through the Second World War and never in the 6 years missed an edition.

Lee's fashion photography contribution to the magazine was prolific. She had to draw on all of her previous experience, her imagination and her surrealist roots for new ideas for presenting the garments, hats and hairstyles especially for features that were regularly repeated. The way she worked in the studio can be seen in some of the examples held here at the Lee Miller Archives for example her red marks on this contact print show the cropping she wants and where the model's hair needs to be tidied up for cleaner lines and her name 'Lee' written at the bottom to show it was her directive.



Hats, with original markings, Vogue Studio, London 1939

*Digby Morton [cinched waist],
London 1941*



During the photographic printing process Lee enhanced the image by dodging out or burning in the exposure on parts of the print. Retouching was widely used in fashion photography and was not as easy as using Photoshop or similar digital manipulation programmes today. It wasn't just tidying up hair; sometimes wrinkles were removed, double chins reduced and waists cinched, sleeves uncreased and outfit silhouettes adjusted (Page 114). Some blemishes could be removed from the print with a scalpel and/or touched up with inks. The negatives themselves could also be manipulated. When photographing a long exposure in Brogue's studio with their large plate cameras it was common practice to have a metal stand behind the model to help eliminate their movement. These stands were then painted out on the negative. In Lee's bathing feature image where the model is holding a fish the white marks around her feet are where the stand has been removed from the negative (Page 97). Interestingly Lee seems to have worn block heeled shoes when working in the studio, which can be seen in the shadows of the image of her working in the studio by David E. Scherman (Page 18 & 19) possibly because she needed the extra height as the equipment was originally set up for the male photographers.

An issue that needed promoting frequently in Brogue as being fashionable was having hair tied up or short. This was key to the safety of many women working in factories as should their hair get caught in machinery the results could be fatal. In the face of the demand for yet another feature on short hair, Lee turned to her surrealist roots and the Sabatier effect that she had re-discovered by accident when working in May Ray's Paris studio. The two of them had then worked on and adopted the technique which Man Ray called 'Solarisation'. Lee had continued to use it in her New York studio and now chose to use it for the 'Neat Heads' hair article, published in British Vogue February 1942. Interestingly we have several of the negatives that she produced for the spread. She initially photographed the models normally then re-photographed the negatives. It was then the copy negatives she solarised in the darkroom with a second exposure to light during the developing process.

*Neat Heads, Elizabeth Cowell,
[solarised], Vogue Studio, London 1942*



*Neat Heads, Deborah Kerr, Lesley Blanch and
Coral Browne, [solarised], Vogue Studio, London 1942*



This produced the reversal where areas that should have been black became white, giving the hairstyles a strong outline and dark patches where there should have been highlights. For the layout these solarised negatives were then put onto reversal film, cut up and then stuck together in different trial layouts.

A couple of months later Lee is showing her technical skill again. For the August 1942 edition of Brogue she was asked to photograph a series of exercises for an article that urged the reader to not neglect their figure. As 'only by keeping your body firm and supple can you hope to do you fair share, to be an asset rather than a liability'. To show the different stages of the movements Lee used double exposures, and in some case triple with the different shots on the same negative in the camera. The model is lit in one pose and moves to a new position for the subsequent pose without moving the camera between the exposures.



*Exercises,
triple exposure,
Limbering up for
the big push,
Vogue Studio,
London 1942*