

Thirty years after Lee Miller's death and almost a century beyond her comfortable, middle class childhood in Poughkeepsie, New York, the American photographer's mystique remains as durable as ever. At twenty two, her haunting beauty launched a stellar career as a cover model for American Vogue in New York - and a certain celebrity. According to Miller's biographer Carolyn Burke, the young model "had more love affairs than Lorelei Lee ..."

But Lee Miller determined on a different career - working behind the camera - not in front of it.

When Miller sailed for Paris in 1929 (with a promised letter of introduction from eminent US photographer Edward Steichen) to study with expatriate American photo artist Man Ray, Burke writes: "(her) compliant lovers flipped a coin to decide who would see her off ... (one) followed in his biplane, then swooped close to the liner's sundeck to let loose a cascade of roses."

In Paris, Miller met Man Ray in a café and announced she was to be his new student. This first meeting underscored her boldness, according to Carolyn Burke. Man Ray replied that he didn't take students and anyway, he was leaving for a holiday in Biarritz.

"I said, I know, I'm going with you - and I did." recalled Miller later in Burke's "Lee Miller On Both Sides of the Camera" (Bloomsbury 2005). "I guess he fell for me. We lived together for three years and I learned a great deal about photography."

Ten years later Miller would be one of only a handful of women combat photographers to cover the Second World War.

How deeply Miller embraced Europe's artistic and political world as it pivoted through social change, Surrealism, and ultimately to war is well illustrated in the Lee Miller exhibition at Byron McMahon Gallery.

Miller's time with Man Ray in Paris gave her intimate access to Europe's changing artistic currents. Cubism and Surrealism were not remote ideas to the provocative, charismatic American, but what she saw Picasso, Man Ray and Rene Magritte actually fashion with hand and eye. Miller's intimate friends - before and after the war - dominate this exhibition. Picasso is seen by Miller engaging with her lens and Miller's second husband, Sir Roland Penrose.

But one photograph quietly resonated for me - symbolizing how war, and photographing Nazi death camps like Dachau may have influenced her troubled later life, Miller's simple still life of a smashed portable typewriter, "Remington Silent, 1940", suggests the emotional dislocation Miller would later experience after constantly witnessing tragedy.

As one of a handful of women photographers covering the Second World War, Miller discovered an unreality far beyond the elegance of art.