

lee miller Roland Penrose
FARLEYS HOUSE & GALLERY
HOME OF THE SURREALISTS



The Arts Society Sevenoaks visited Farleys House and Gallery on July 2nd in glorious sunshine and had a very splendid afternoon finding out about the amazing life of American model and photographer Lee Miller and her home life with Roland Penrose at Farleys.

Met by the very friendly and helpful staff we split into two groups to go on the house tour. Whilst one group went on ahead, the other could get lunch, view the galleries showing the photography of Dorothy Bohm, local artists' talent and mooch about the sculpture filled extensive gardens.

Exterior

The house itself is a red brick farmhouse of Georgian origins and nestles into the South Downs as if it had always been there. The splendid borders vie with the building, and it was very relaxing to hang out and discover the splendours.



We were most amazed by the sculpture of the fallen giant whose limbs and head had been hacked off in some sort of dreadful Surrealist fight and lay horizontal like a fallen tree in the meadow. One of our members thoughts were drawn to Shelley's Ozymandias and I can't help but agree with her that the concept of "colossal wreck" was effectively delivered by the statue and if the "antique land" is the past, then Farley's is certainly a great home for it, especially as it has hints of the desert. But no despair for us visitors, all around was calm, if a little quirky at times, with a clear sense of place. Lee Miller's place.



Ozymandias

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said—"Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away."



Interior

Inside was an absolute cornucopia of art, with every wall, every nook and every shelf brimming with curious and art works of her famous friends: Picasso, Man Ray and her husband Roland Penrose. The tour started in the kitchen, which is probably more about the tail end of her life and her fascination with cooking and cooking implements. Penrose had designed the kitchen, and it was vaguely American, not your usual Sussex country kitchen with built in units, dozens of gadgets, whacky angles and totally unique. Even without the Picasso wall tile, it would be very unusual. However, it was productive. With her habit of enrolling her famous friends, including the Spanish painter himself, to peel and chop, with the aid of her "digital control", her pointing finger- Lee produced surreal dinners using colours and forms that usually have no place at the dinner table but probably tasted better than they looked. She was an haute cuisine cook.

The married couple were pre-destined to become a magnet for Surrealist artists. He came from a very wealthy family, so had led a well-travelled life, with an artistic background and many international connections and she because she was Lee Miller, a woman of very many parts.

Unlikely Farm Girl

We got to know a little bit more about Lee, going back in time, in the sitting room. She was born in 1907, growing up on a farm in Poughkeepsie, with a father who was a keen amateur photographer. At 18 she managed to visit Paris and whilst there demanded to learn to become an artist, mixing with Rene Magritte and Max Ernst. Living a higher life than her family had consented to, her father arrived and dragged her back to the USA.

Vogue

Used as she was to modelling for her father, even in the nude, (different times) she naturally slipped into modelling, after a bizarre incident with Conde Nast; apparently he saved her life and launched her career as a beautiful model in his Vogue magazine. Her slim, tall figure was perfect for the sheath dresses of the 1920s and her naturally wavy hair crimped stylishly into bob cuts, made her the It girl of her day.

New York Photographer

We were told that her modelling days were temporarily curtailed by the Kotex advertisement her image appeared in and she was dropped by Vogue, sensitive times to other things apparently. So, she reinvented herself as a successful photographer, creating her own company, under the name Lee Miller Inc.

Man Ray Days

In 1929, she returned to Paris, working as muse and then collaborator to Surrealist photographer Man Ray, creating the “solarisation” technique by accidentally exposing a print to white light. Both Lee and Man Ray tried to take the credit for this well-used Surrealist technique that made portraits glow weirdly.

Men were drawn to her beauty and engaging personality, but she discarded them quite callously. Poor Man Ray who doted on her, was summarily dumped despite hundreds of love letters, imploring her to return to him.

Desert Sands

In 1934, he had been replaced by the rich Aziz Eloui Bey, her short-lived Egyptian husband, who she married in a fever, not really knowing him well. Her career needed a rich backer it would seem. Living in Cairo, gave her a different view of life and she created some wonderful imagery in her time there, the *Portrait of Space* for example. But she often hot tailed back to Europe, betraying Aziz with multiple affairs.

Arise Sir Roland

At a Surrealist party, in Paris back with old friend Man Ray, she meets Roland Penrose and her life changes direction again, as she falls in love with him. Aziz gracefully bows out of her life after giving her a portfolio of shares, such was his love for her, he let her go.

War Correspondent and Photographer

After persuading Vogue to take her on as a photographer, she lives in England for the first few years of the war and manages to bamboozle the American Army into taking her on as war correspondent to report on Operation Overlord. She landed on Omaha beach on August 1st 1944, and catalogued the bombardments of Normandy towns like St Malo. Some of her most dramatic shots are within the field hospitals; the infantry and Sherman tank crews often suffering terrible injuries and burns, she hauntingly photographed one man fully bandaged. After meeting up with Picasso in newly liberated Paris, she then went on to Dachau to shoot the images that would plague her for many years afterwards. She never wanted people to forget those horrors. But this all took a toll and not even her composed shots of herself in Hitler’s bathtub, in Prinzregentenplatz, mocking his existence and his Jewish genocide policies, could ease the traumas that she had experienced.

Finding Home in East Sussex

Then in stark contrast came a very domestic home life on the farm at Farleys with Roland and the hosting of parties for the Surrealist art movers and shakers. Fancy having Picasso as a house guest who admired your bulls...As time went on Lee slowly recovered her good mental health but her negatives and photographs, were stashed away in the attic, perhaps too much to bear. They were rediscovered after her death by her son Antony, who has done so much to ensure this incredible woman has her rightful place in history, as have the skilful tour guides of Farleys who gave us such a great insight into her life and her many art treasures.

NB All of the interior art works and Lee Miller's photographic work is covered by tight copyright, so you will have to satisfy yourself with my own attempt to capture Lee's beauty in a line drawing with tinting.

Elaine Johnson

