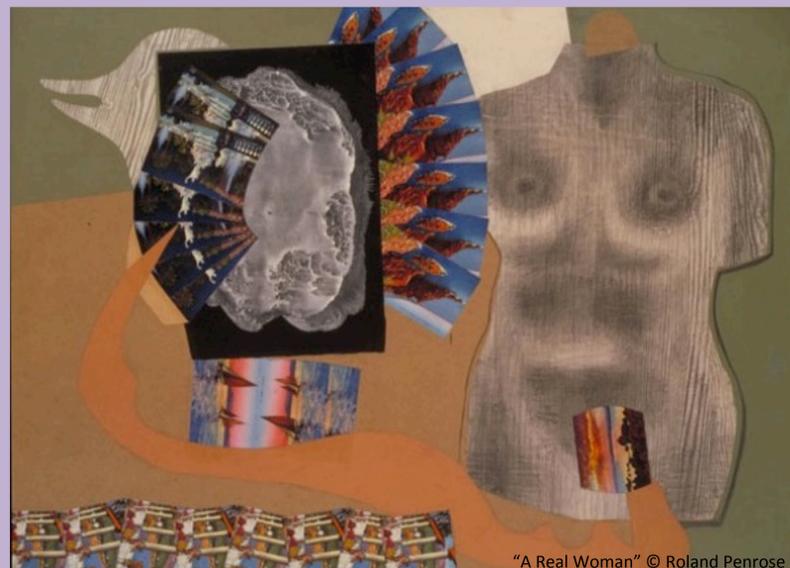


# Lee Miller's Criticism of Surrealist Beauty

**Abstract:** My research demonstrates how Lee Miller uses traditional Surrealist techniques to critique the genre for objectifying the female form. This project offers insight into the adversity female avant-garde artists faced while trying to achieve the same level of respect as their male contemporaries. Through analyzing Miller's body of work, I prove that she takes a powerful stance against this male-dominated art form, criticizing the genre using its own techniques

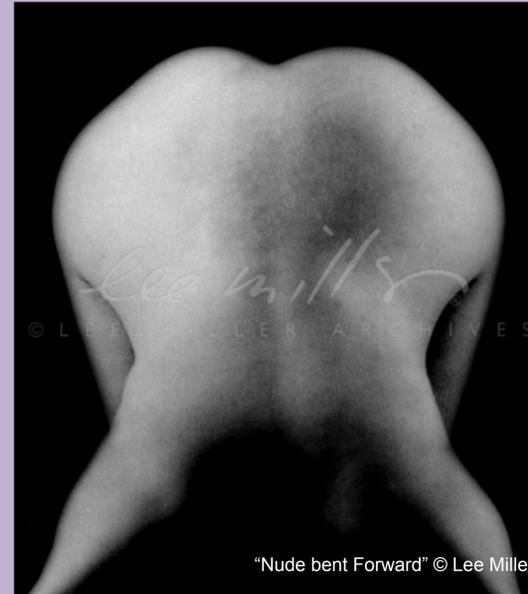
## What is Surrealism?

- Surrealism was an artistic and literary movement founded in the 1920s. It sought to achieve a higher reality by examining the connections and barriers between the subconscious dream world and the waking material world. It was obsessed with defining and discovering absolute beauty. This goal of uncovering beauty led to very essentialist works of art and writing.
- The female form was worshiped and objectified as a symbol and representation of true beauty. The works of art that emerged from this idolization showcased the female form in an aggressive, invasive, and violent manner. Works of art showcased disembodied female torsos, fetishized breasts isolated from the female body, or female body parts painted or arranged in dismembered collages. These representations dehumanized women, and were the primary target of criticism in Lee Miller's most famous photographs.



"A Real Woman" © Roland Penrose

## Female Fetishization and Fragments



"Nude bent Forward" © Lee Miller



"Untitled" [severed breast from a radical mastectomy] © Lee Miller

## "Where are the women?" Approach & Research Question(s):

Originally, the purpose of my research was to analyze the career of one woman within an early avant-garde movement. After selecting Lee Miller as my subject and completing some preliminary research, I became interested in why studies of Surrealism and avant-garde movements fail to recognize the contributions of the women who were involved, despite the fact that artists like Lee Miller are just as prolific and just as talented as their male contemporaries. Miller's work suggests that the reason why women are left out is because of their gender, and the ways in which Surrealism objectifies women in its quest to define absolute beauty. From here I was able to narrow down and identify my research questions and thesis.

- How did Lee Miller contribute to the Surrealist movement?
- Why is her work not celebrated to the same degree as her male contemporaries?
- **How does Lee Miller use Surrealist techniques to criticize Surrealism for objectifying the female form?**

**Thesis:** Lee Miller employs Surrealist techniques such as double-image, juxtaposition, and drawing attention to women as outsiders in order to shock the viewer and ultimately challenge the genre's obsessive objectification of the female form.

## Lee Miller's Techniques

Lee Miller employed **double-image** (displaying one image that brings to mind a second image or idea) in photos like *Nude Bent Forward*. This photo displays the female body contorted in a way that brings to mind male genitalia. Miller criticizes the male Surrealist obsession with the female torso, and essentially turns their fetish back on them.

Miller uses **juxtaposition** (comparing two images that don't seem to relate or belong together). *Untitled [severed breast from a radical mastectomy]* juxtaposes a severed breast with a delicate place setting. The breast is served for dinner as a piece of meat. Miller simultaneously criticizes Surrealism's dehumanizing tendency to feature dismembered female body parts, and traditional female roles such as preparing and serving meals.

Miller served as a wartime photojournalist for Vogue Magazine. During this time she drew significant parallels between the destruction caused by hyper masculine warfare, and the violent obsession Surrealist artists had with the female body



"Fire Masks" © Lee Miller

Surrealism was concerned with portraying outsiders as focal points in their art. In *Fire Masks*, Miller portrays women as outsiders. Just as the glamorous models are hiding the entrance of the bomb shelter from view, she argues that the glamorization of warfare by mainstream propaganda obscures its ugly reality from view.

**Conclusion:** It is evident that Lee Miller has an incredible understanding of the commandments of Surrealism, and uses this knowledge to make a calculated critique of Surrealism's tendency to dehumanize women for the sake of finding "true beauty." Her body of work exposes the dangers of overlooking abuses of the human form for the sake of art and war.