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Figure 1: Lee Miller: *Portrait of Space, Al Bulwayeb, near Siwa, Egypt 1937* [E1905].

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***Portrait of Space:* Lee Miller's Photograph as Surrealist Contact Zone**

Abstract Katharina Upmeyer's chapter focuses on the emergence and reception of the famous photograph *Portrait of Space* taken by American photographer Lee Miller in 1937. Due to its publication in the surrealist magazine *London Bulletin* in June 1940, it became an emblem of exile. This reduction contradicts, however, its origin as a surrealist photograph first and foremost negating also other possible interpretations. It will be shown how it functioned as a contact zone between the surrealist movement in Europe and in Egypt highlighting also the artists' network that spanned globally. Moreover, it analyses the perception / appropriation of Egypt by the surrealists.

Keywords Cultural Transfer, Orientalism, Appropriation, Expanded Contact Zone, Networks

On 13 October 1937,¹ American photographer Lee Miller took one of her most renowned photographs titled *Portrait of Space*. The vast Egyptian desert is seen through a torn mosquito tent to which an empty picture frame is attached. Although it seems as if there is no sign of life in this area, a sand road running from the bottom left to the horizon on the right offers a trace of civilization. In the vast sky, which dominates the picture, clouds take on the shape of a bird. The image exudes an intense sense of isolation and forlornness, throwing its inherent creativity and freedom into sharp relief. This may be one of the reasons why E. L. T. Mesens decided to publish the photograph in the surrealist magazine *London Bulletin* in June 1940, opposite to the Paul Delvaux painting *Les Phases de la Lune* (1939) and Paul Éluard's poem "Exile," (Haworth-Booth 2007, 141). As a result, the image became not just an emblem of the displacement and fundamental loss experienced in exile but, more importantly, a symbol of creative freedom. Numerous scholars have analyzed *Portrait of Space* in terms of Miller's psychological state during her stay in Egypt. Patricia Allmer, moreover, sees in Miller's photograph a deliberate deconstruction of the patriarchal colonial gaze which had dominated the Orientalist (► **Orientalism**) view of Egypt since the eighteenth century. Against this background and based on a close reading of the photograph, this essay focuses on the reception of the image during the Second World War. In the process, it aims to identify the ways in which the image functioned as a surrealist contact zone with regard to Surrealism in the West as well as in Egypt itself.

The composition of *Portrait of Space* with the torn mosquito tent specifically points to a (positive) effect of exile described by Edward Said in his famous essay *Reflections on Exile*:

The exile knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity. Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience (Said 2013 [2000], n.p.).

Unlike many other artists of the period, Miller was not forced to emigrate due to the political situation in her country, but deliberately chose Egypt as her new home because of her marriage with the Egyptian businessman and engineer Aziz Eloui Bey in 1931. The frequent reading of *Portrait of Space* as an image of exile and displacement is based mainly on Miller's statements in her correspondence. The term "exile" which appears in a letter to Roland Penrose, the British surrealist and Miller's future second husband, describes her rather negative perception of Egypt in terms of being displaced from the surrealist network (Burke 2007) in Europe and

1 Mark Haworth-Booth convincingly proposes this date based on a postcard Lee Miller sent from Siwa to Roland Penrose on October 13, 1937. See Haworth-Booth 2007, 133.

the fashion world in the United States (Conekin 2013) where, as a model and photographer, Miller had been a fixture of both the American and the French *Vogue* in the late 1920s and early 1930s. These circumstances also suggest a date for *Portrait of Space* after her trip to Europe in 1937. She spent most of the summer of that year in France and England with, among others, Roland Penrose, Picasso, and Man Ray, meeting Magritte and Paul Delvaux, and reconnecting with the surrealist network (Haworth-Booth 2007, 132).

But can Miller's photograph really be reduced to an emblem of exile, as it was perceived following its publication in the *London Bulletin* in 1940? A close analysis of its composition and subject demonstrates that it is first and foremost a surrealist photograph. Clearly, Miller was particularly interested in the boundary between interior and exterior space marked by the torn fly screen. This is indicated by four variations of the photograph preserved at the Lee Miller Archives in England. The particular focus of the final composition causes that boundary to be blurred, creating a sense of "in-betweenness"—a device frequently used by surrealist artists to achieve "transcendence" and "sur-reality." The Egyptian desert is presented in a romantic, "primitive" (► **Primitivism**) light suggesting natural nativeness, a state advocated by the surrealist avant-garde as an antidote to modern, industrial society. The tent itself, moreover, refers to a nomadic life or "nomadic space," as Patricia Allmer terms it (Allmer 2013, 2). Against this background, it becomes evident that Miller's composition incorporates surrealist elements and, in some ways, even explicitly references works by other surrealists. Especially her acquaintance with Magritte in 1937 is of significance for *Portrait of Space*, as Miller's photograph shows similarities in composition and form to Magritte's 1936 painting *La Clef des Champs* (see Fig. 2). To date, this influence has not received any attention. We do know that Magritte saw *Portrait of Space* at Roland Penrose's house in Hampstead in April 1938 and took inspiration from it for his 1938 painting *Le Baiser* (Haworth-Booth 2007, 141).

Magritte's painting *La Clef des Champs* similarly offers a view of a landscape through a broken window. According to André Breton, windows and mirrors signify freedom, and Magritte's title, *La Clef des Champs*, alludes to a figure of speech which in French means "liberation" (Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza. n.d.). It seems possible that Miller saw Magritte's painting in Belgium or discussed it with him. The appropriation of Magritte's composition plays an important role in the reception of *Portrait of Space* as an emblem of exile and creativity during the Second World War. The way in which the photograph was then contextualized in the *London Bulletin* in 1940 further underscored the state of "in-betweenness" of the exile. Furthermore, because the exile crosses borders of experience and thoughts, as Edward Said writes, the experience of "borders" played an important role for expatriate surrealists. This is prominently illustrated by Marcel Duchamp's so-called *Mile of String*, a work he created for the exhibition *First Papers of Surrealism* organized by André Breton in the United

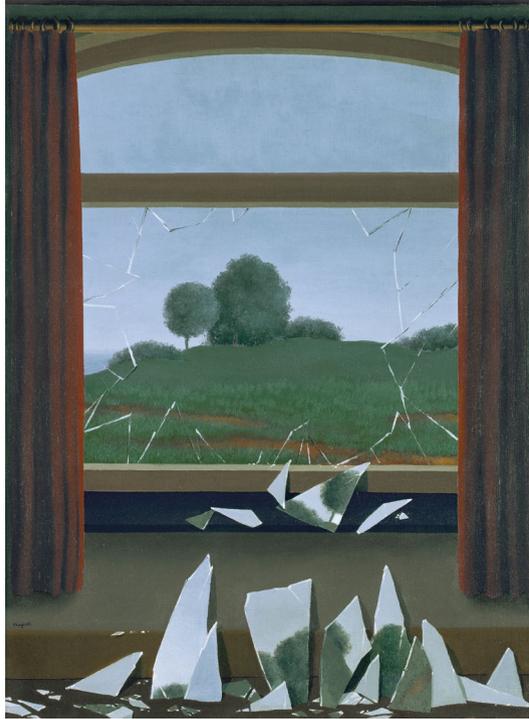


Figure 2: René Magritte: *La Clef des champs*, 1936, oil on canvas, 80 × 60 cm, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid.

States in 1942 (see also Eckmann 2013, 35). Duchamp's installation consists of a dense web of twine crisscrossing the exhibition space and creating a palpable sense of disorientation and displacement for visitors to the exhibition (see Eckmann 2013, 35). Miller's photograph also challenges the boundaries of the medium by depicting a motif that appears to hover between life and death, reality and dream, perception and imagination, past and present. She thus appropriates (► **Appropriation**) an aesthetic and symbolic language, which references the ideas of Surrealism. The desert is depicted as a timeless and monotonous place, devoid of any modernity and untouched by the development that changed Egypt in the 1930s. Miller's visualization of the Egyptian desert is thus consistent with the surrealist view of Egypt and of the "Orient" in general: "Ancient Egypt thus becomes one of the various pre-Modern cultures, along with those of the Americas, Oceanic, and the British Columbian cultures for example, that are seen to appreciate more fully the aspects of the human experience neglected in the modern Occident, including the integration of the mythical, the oneiric, and the magical into the very economics of the everyday" (Roberts and Allmer 2013, 3). André Breton celebrated the "Orient" as an antipode to the rationalism and capitalism of the "Occident": "Orient, victorious Orient, you

who have only symbolic value, do with me as you please. Orient of anger and pearls! Orient, lovely bird of prey and of innocence, I implore you from the depths of the kingdom of shadows! Inspire me!" (Antle 2006, 5).

Yet Miller's image specifically contradicts the Orientalist (►**Orientalism**) notion of Egypt as a mere agglomeration of archaeological sites and famous monuments, a view notably conveyed, for instance, by the frontispiece of *Description de l'Égypte* (1809–1829).² This encyclopedic work had been commissioned after Napoleon's conquest of Egypt in 1798 and came to be a symbol not just of the territorial, but also of the scientific penetration of this country. In *Portrait of Space*, all the famous Egyptian monuments so often featured in Orientalist photographs and paintings³ have disappeared, leaving nothing but the void of the desert.

Against this background, it is important to note that Miller's photograph(s) functioned as 'contact zone' (►**Expanded Contact Zone**) not only for the surrealist avant-garde in Europe, but also for the early surrealist movement in Egypt. In recent years, scholarly interest in surrealism in Egypt has increased, yet research mainly focuses on the Art and Liberty Group. In the late 1930s, several artists met in Cairo to discuss recent developments in art and signed a manifesto, espousing surrealist-influenced ideas; in 1938, the poet Georges Henein and other Egyptian surrealists then officially founded the group *Art et Liberté* in Cairo.⁴ Miller had regular contact with these "rebels," as her letters to Roland Penrose indicate (Miller January 23/27, 1939). In those letters, she also mentions a collaboration with Georges Henein for a planned "semi-surrealist magazine" (Miller January 30, 1939), but the increasingly dangerous political situation prompted Miller to abandon the idea again in 1939. Still, her important role as an intermediary between the Egyptian surrealists and the surrealist avant-garde in Europe should not be overlooked (see also Bardaouil 2017, 11). Roland Penrose would send her the latest surrealist magazines and books that, in turn, brought the surrealists in Egypt into contact with, and allowed them to participate in, contemporary surrealist trends in Europe. At the same time, those artists could study surrealist artworks by Picasso and Man Ray in the original in Miller's house in Cairo. In this way, the ideas and concepts of the surrealist avant-garde in

2 In this context, Allmer argues that Miller deconstructs the colonizing gaze onto Egypt. See Allmer 2016, 4; see also her important publication, Patricia Allmer, *Lee Miller: Photography, Surrealism, and Beyond* (2016). However, it should be emphasized that this deconstruction can be regarded only as a side effect; Miller's focus was clearly on artistic production and playing with aesthetic norms.

3 For a (critical) overview on this topic, see Maria Golia, *Photography and Egypt* (2010); Derek Gregory, "Emperors of the Gaze: Photographic Practices and Production of Space in Egypt, 1839–1914" (2003).

4 Art and Liberty's manifesto of December 22, 1938 was also published in the *London Bulletin* in April 1939 with a preface titled *From Egypt* written by Roland Penrose. See Sam Bardaouil, *Surrealism in Egypt: Modernism and the Art and Liberty Group* (2017, 10). For further information on the Art and Liberty Group, see also Bardaouil, Sam, and Till Fellrath, *Art et Liberté: Rupture, War and Surrealism in Egypt (1938–1948)* (2016).

Europe—with Paris at its “center”—spread and migrated to its perceived “peripheries” such as Egypt (► **Cultural Transfer**). In fact, a photograph by the Egyptian artist Mamduh Muhamad Fathallah titled *Peak* (1944–1945) shows similarities in composition to Miller’s photograph *Portrait of Space*,⁵ but while appropriating (► **Appropriation**) Miller’s composition, Fathallah decontextualizes the scene. Miller’s impact on Egyptian art still requires further analysis. However, Miller’s picture perfectly fits to the issues generated by the Art and Liberty Group artists. In order to criticize the nationalist exploitation of Pharaonic Egypt, they challenged the beholder’s common perception of ancient monuments and artifacts via playful compositions and absurd juxtapositions.

In 1939, Miller left her husband and moved to London to be with Roland Penrose. She never returned to Egypt but continued to portray space and countries in her photographs documenting the destruction caused by the Second World War. As inherent in *Portrait of Space*, all these pictures demonstrate a state of “in-betweenness”. In this regard, Miller’s photograph can be considered as a key to her entire oeuvre.

Figures

Fig. 1: www.leemiller.co.uk.

Fig. 2: VEGAP, Madrid © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2020.

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5 Both works are analyzed and printed in the exhibition catalogue. See Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath 2014.

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