Roland Penrose and the Impulse of Provence

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Roland Penrose was my father. He was a poet, a painter and a dreamer who lived by his love and desire for art. He was a Surrealist and a hedonist who shamelessly enjoyed the pleasures of life, a ground-breaking curator and the biographer of Picasso. In his youth, at the age of 24, he went to live in Cassis. It was 1924 and from this moment onwards Provence shaped his taste and perception, creating a prism through which the rest of his life was defined.

It is paradoxical that behind the pleasure seeker, there was a steel core of rectitude and industriousness directly traceable to his Quaker ancestry which was also the source of his wealth. Lord Alexander Peckover, Roland’s grandfather, was a prominent East Anglian banker who lived at Peckover House in Wisbech. As a Quaker, he was denied a university education; but he was a diligent self-educated scholar and assembled a library that contained a wonderful selection of rare books and incunabula. In this library, on the bottom shelf, Roland found a book which changed his life. It was Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts*, illustrated by William Blake. Here he found images that were always stimulating although sometimes terrifying. He could not know their nightmarish quality of dreamlike violence and intensely erotic images presaged the works of the Surrealists.

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1 Formerly Bank House, now renamed Peckover House and a National Trust property.
Lord Peckover had three daughters but only Josephine married. She became my grandmother. Her husband was James Doyle Penrose, a Quaker from Mitchelstown near Dublin, an itinerant portrait painter of considerable merit. Roland, the third of four brothers, was born in 1900. During World War I he served briefly as a driver for the Quaker organization ‘The Friends Ambulance Unit’, and after demobilization went straight to Queen’s College, Cambridge. There were no fine art courses, so he studied architecture. He later said he found the place a cultural desert but fortunately he met fellow Quaker Roger Fry, an exciting figure in the arts who knew Picasso and had been responsible for bringing the works of the Post-Impressionists to England. Fry introduced Roland to Bloomsbury luminaries – Maynard Keynes, the famous economist, Clive Bell, Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant. Penrose also met Virginia and Leonard Woolf. It was these Francophiles who were to kindle Roland’s own passion for France.

After graduating in June 1922, Roland followed Fry’s advice and went to Paris to study art. His father, reluctant to let his son loose in the ‘sinful’ city, made him promise to avoid studios where they used nude female models. Roland’s first teacher was André Lothe whose studio abounded with beautiful naked young women. Roland later gratefully said Lhote had introduced him to the “startlingly heterosexual lifestyle of Montmartre and to Cubism”.

Braque was the first major artist Roland met, and it was in part Braque’s total absorption in his art that showed Roland that painting was far more than the Victorian decorative and religious art of his former surroundings.

THE YEARS OF CASSIS

After eighteen months in Paris, Roland settled in Cassis with Yanko Varda, a Greek painter friend. Cassis would soon become a hub for the Bloomsbury people, with Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant settling first in town and then in the adjacent valley of Fontcreuse. Roland bought Villa des Mimosas, a small Italianate villa on Chemin de St. Joseph. With Yanko’s help Roland built a studio in the garden and settled down to live there happily as an expatriate. Roland first found a style that owed much to Cubism and a little to architecture. It showed great sensitivity and observation. His work Pequod (1923) also shows the influence of Braque’s trompe l’oeil technique, but his work at this stage would never leave much of a mark in the world.

A catalyst was needed and one appeared in the form of Valentine Boué, a young poet already known to Paul Éluard and André Breton, who one hot afternoon in June 1923 arrived at Villa des Mimosas signalling a seismic

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3 Private conversation.
change in Roland’s life and starting a chain of events that caused Roland to deliver Surrealism to Britain 12 years later. Roland and Valentine married in 1925 and to begin with lived in Cassis, making frequent trips in Paris where they bought an apartment, Rue des Saints-Pères. Through Valentine, Roland met Paul Éluard and the then pope of Surrealism, Breton, who declared Roland Penrose was “Surrealism in friendship”. Breton bestowed sobriquets on those he regarded as part of the movement and in Roland’s case may be he meant that it was surreal for a shy Englishman, a bit of an outsider in Paris, to have such intimacy with this highly select movement.

It was Éluard who introduced Roland to Max Ernst who became a close friend and often visited Cassis with his wife Marie-Berthe and a stream of other artists, poets, friends and relatives from England. Ernst became Roland’s close friend and his tutor. He had just invented the technique of frottage: pencil or crayon is rubbed over the paper which is placed on a textured surface. The hidden surface is ‘discovered’ in this way, involving an element of chance. It was an ideal technique for Surrealism and Roland readily adopted it in many of his works on paper.

The relentless Mistral and the harsh light of Cassis irritated Valentine. Tensions had quickly begun to surface between her and Roland as expressed in his painting *Conversation between Rock and Flower* (c. 1930), where the flower hints at Valentine’s identity. We see the profile of her beautiful torso; she is animated, her face filled with bright colours as she regards the rock but the reverse of her face is the very disagreeable profile of a witch-like demon, perhaps an allusion to the violent and unpredictable mood swings she was well-known for. This may tell us why Roland painted himself as the rock, finding the only answer to her rages was to become strong and solid. He is peeping up nervously but he has an olive branch ready in case she wanted to make peace. The lower surface of the rock shows an agonized face, perhaps an image of internal pent-up feelings. A stick leans against the rock face, perhaps connecting to Roland’s deep knowledge of the Bible. He would have known the story of Moses striking a rock in the desert with his staff and water flowing out. Water, often occurring as the metaphor for emotion in his work, would have been under extreme pressure in Roland’s rock (fig. 21).

The oil on board *Portrait of a Leaf* (1934) shows a gentler perception of Valentine. We can make eye contact with her but she is at the same time gazing sideways, a reminder that she was clairvoyant and could see things invisible to most. Roland loved Valentine passionately and tenderly, and seeing her dislike for Cassis he sold the house. In 1930, they moved to Château Le Pouy in Valentine’s native Gers. For a while they were happy in Le Pouy,
and Valentine loved the place and its abundance of wildlife. But the enchantment of the place was not enough to dissipate the growingly strained situation. Valentine studied Sanskrit and Hindu religion at the Sorbonne, wanting a life of peace and a journey to Nirvana. In an opposite polarity, Roland gripped with a missionary-like zeal opted for the excitement of changing the world through Surrealism, an echo of his parents’ desire to create a better world. Seeking reconciliation, Roland took Valentine to India. The style of his Indian works suggests he left Surrealism in Paris, perhaps as a peace offering. Valentine loved India; but on their return, the tensions resurfaced with increased severity.

In 1936 Paul Éluard invited Roland and Valentine to join him, his wife Nusch and his daughter Cécile for a holiday in Mougins with Man Ray and other friends. Picasso was already there with Dora Maar and the friendship between Penrose and Picasso began in this moment. It was a wonderful carefree surrealist romp but a dark shadow lurked in the background. The escalating Spanish Civil war alarmed everyone and Picasso above all. Wishing to join the Republican cause, Roland and Valentine went to Barcelona with Christian and Yvonne Zervos and the English poet David Gascoyne. During their six-week stay in Catalonia, they met the Republican forces and various members of POUM; their purpose being to survey the works of art in Republican hands with a view of reporting back to England that, contrary to Franco’s propaganda, the treasures were safe and well looked after. The following year Zervos published the chronicle of their findings.

SURREALISM, FROM PROVENCE TO SPAIN AND BACK

Back in Paris later in the autumn and thanks to Éluard, Roland bought from Picasso his *Nu sur la plage* (1932), a painting probably related to the opposing personalities of the two key women in Picasso’s life at the time, Marie-Thérèse Walter and his wife Olga. Its blatant eroticism and the fraught feelings of tension made it a painting that would not sell. Picasso recognized that the quiet, shy Englishman could, unlike any others, understand the difficult and significant painting enough to love and buy it. The friendship of the two artist endured 37 years until Picasso’s death in 1973.

Valentine and Roland were divorced in 1938. In Roland’s last picture of her, *Winged Domino*, her face is blue, the blue of infinity or perhaps Nirvana. Birds nestle in her hair and butterflies cluster around her eyes and lips. The

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5 Acronym of Partito Obrero de Unificación Marxista.

painting has a deep sadness about it: Roland thought he would never see Valentine again and with her gone from his life and the Villa des Mimosas sold, the physical connection with Provence came to an end though Cassis, the sea and the languages of the region were ingrained in Roland’s art and imagination.

Now living in London, Roland worked with David Gascoyne to set up the first International Surrealist Exhibition at the New Burlington Gallery, Piccadilly. Surrealism was barely known in England and the show, opened in June 1938, created a scandal in the press and a sensation with the public: more than one thousand persons a day attended for 23 days! At the opening André Breton gave an impassioned speech in French which escaped the comprehension of most people. Even worse was Salvador Dali’s lecture, famously delivered in Catalan with the speaker dressed in a diving suit; a costume chosen to penetrate the depth of the subconscious which nearly provoked the artist’s death by suffocation.

When the show closed, Roland went to Paris to visit Max Ernst. Hearing of a fancy dress party and impersonating beggars, they went along. Penrose was later to describe what followed as like being struck by lightning. He had met Lee Miller. Born in Poughkeepsie, upstate New York in 1907, she was famed for her beauty and already known for her surrealist photography perfected as the pupil and lover of Man Ray. Together they had discovered the technique of solarisation and a central part of Lee’s style can be identified as image trouvée, the counterpart to the surrealist objet trouvé. Roland wasted no time in whisking Lee off to Cornwall where they were joined for a sort of surrealist summer camp by Max Ernst, Leonora Carrington, Paul and Nusch Éluard, Man Ray and his new lover Ady Fidelin, Eileen Agar, Joseph Bard and E.L.T. Messens. Then they returned to Mougins where Picasso and Dora Maar were residing in the Hôtel Vaste Horizon.

Picasso had set up a studio in his bedroom and everyday painted portraits of his friends. Nusch, flamboyant with her beautiful profile and small firm breasts; Paul, unaccountably dressed as an Arlésienne breast-feeding a cat, and Roland, also dressed as a voluptuous Arlésienne. But it was Lee on whom he bestowed the greatest attention, portraying her six times as an Arlésienne. Picasso’s selection of Arlésienne women to epitomize female beauty and the power of seduction probably goes deeper than the well earned reputation the women of Arles have for their great beauty and their very becoming traditional costume. It almost certainly refers to Alphonse Daudet’s short story, first published in 1866 before its inclusion in Lettres de mon Moulin (1869). The story is based on a real tragedy which had hit the family of Frédéric Mistral, the Provençal poet and folklorist and Daudet’s friend. It casts the twenty-two-year old son of a farmer, Jan, in love with an Arlésienne against his parents’ advice. On the eve of their wedding her lover of
two years turns up, acquainting Jan’s family with the truth and leaving him broken-hearted and beyond consolation. Having apparently recovered, Jan seems ready to celebrate the festival of Saint-Éloi with the traditional gaiety. That night, however, he hurls himself to his death out of a window. His last words are for the woman he loves too much. Perhaps Picasso and the Surrealists took this story as a cautionary counterpoint to what Breton and his friends thought of l’amour fou, a parable of the danger inherent in falling for a beautiful woman with reckless abandon. It is also interesting to note that Lee Miller was at the time married to Aziz Eloui, known for his patience and saintly qualities, and whose name is strangely close to the Éloi of Daudet’s festival, a coincidence which may have struck the Surrealists’ love of puns.\(^7\)

Meanwhile, the free holiday atmosphere was overshadowed by desperate news from Republican Spain. Only a few weeks before coming to Mougins, Picasso had completed the masterpiece of the twentieth century, Guernica. Roland, for whom peace, freedom and justice were irreducible values, undertook a tour to exhibit the picture around Britain, to raise both awareness and funds for the Republicans. Of the three venues, the first one was the New Burlington Gallery, where the painting was ignored. It did not fare much better when next exhibited in a car showroom in Manchester but the later showing in the working-class Whitechapel area of London drew an audience of 15,000 and brought the money and press attention Roland wanted.

During his enchanted holiday with Lee Miller, Roland had started making collages with picture postcards of Provençal scenes. Lee photographed him crouching on the floor of their bathroom while he was starting the first series. Unsurprisingly, one of the early collages depicts Lee with the title The Real Woman (1937). Her physical presence is shown on the frottage on the right; she is there, visceral, hot and sexy, in complete contrast to Valentine who was ethereal and not drawn to men. Lee’s bird-like alter ego beside the torso is composed of brightly coloured local scenes. The postcard images stop being local scenes and merge like the tonal patches used in Cubist compositions clothing the bird with brilliant plumage and great vitality. Many Lee Miller-inspired works were to follow (fig. 22).

In the summer of 1938 Lee and Roland met in Athens and they set off on a journey through Greece and Romania in Lee’s Packard which she had shipped from Egypt. Roland wrote an account of the journey as The Road is Wider Than Long,\(^8\) a surrealist poem that conjures his remembrance of the places visited with Lee in lines redolent of his love and the uncertainty of their relationship. Roland put the original manuscript in his case when

\(^7\) With thanks to Michel Rémy for his contribution to this research.
\(^8\) The Road is Wider Than Long First published by the London Gallery 1938. Currently in print with the JP Getty Museum, Los Angeles.
he visited Lee in Egypt in 1939. Aziz had long recognised how unhappy she was and how in spite of the ease of her Cairo existence she pined for the artistic life of Europe. Aziz had promised Lee he would let her go when she found someone who would look after her as well as he did and when he met Roland, he saw the moment had come to part.

Lee and Roland briefly toured Europe, visiting Picasso in Antibes before hurrying back to London. Lee moved into Roland’s house at 21 Downshire Hill, in Hampstead, on the day of the first air raid. Roland joined the ARP (Air Raid Protection Corps). By night he helped to rescue people from the bombs and the fires and by day he painted scary pictures to chase away the fears of the night. Lee enrolled as a free lancer at Vogue Studios and also did her own work, finding many images trouvées as she went around London.

CONFLICT

Early in 1942 David E. Scherman, already a distinguished LIFE Magazine photographer arrived in England. He and Lee met, two Americans in the blitz, and became lovers. Roland encouraged this ménage à trois because by now he was running the British Army Camouflage School in Norwich and wanted to be sure there was someone with Lee who loved her as much as he did and could be utterly relied upon to look out for her during the blitz. Roland published his definitive work on camouflage illustrated with his own drawings. His fascination with nature provided him with source material. Although his role was non-combatant, it still required a compromise with his pacifist principles as he wanted to make a contribution to defeating Hitler. At 41, besides, he was too old for active service. As to Lee’s role in the war, it was becoming a source of anxiety.

In 1942 the Americans entered the war, which gave Lee the opportunity to become a fully accredited war correspondent for Vogue Magazine. She immediately began reporting on the work done by women in the armed forces as armourers, mechanics, searchlight operator, nurses, air transport pilots and signallers. Then came the Normandy landings and in July 1944 Lee was covering a field hospital at La Cambe, behind Omaha beach. A few weeks later, the only reporter around, she witnessed the siege of Saint-Malo, a scoop that established her as a combat photographer. All this made Roland feel a little inadequate, being in a safe rear position while she was taking risks in the front line. But what really got to him was Lee’s arrival in Paris on the day of Libération to find Picasso in his studio Rue des Grands Augustins. Roland soon smuggled himself on a supply plane for a joyous reunion in Picasso’s studio. He was horrified to discover how much his friends had suffered during the German occupation: Paul and Nusch Éluard had gone
through extreme hardship. Paul’s poem, Liberté j’écris ton nom, had become the rallying cry of the French Résistance. Originally a love poem addressed to Nusch – Nusch j’écris ton nom –, it was re-written to become the haunting refrain of free and resistant France. The poem had been smuggled out of the country into England where Roland translated it and the War Office made it into a leaflet. The RAF dropped countless copies of Liberté, j’écris ton nom over occupied France. As a result, the Gestapo put Nusch and Paul very high on their wanted list, forcing them to spend the war on the run. Due no doubt to the privations endured, Nusch died in 1946 and Paul followed her in 1952. As many others, they died as peace-time casualties of war.

After the war Fernand Léger illustrated Éluard’s poem and Roland framed a copy which hangs at Farley Farm House, his Sussex home. It was clearly of great importance to him but still raises the question of its consequences: Would Roland have translated the text and condoned the leaflet drop had he known it would endanger his friends’ lives? The answer may be found in the last verse:

And for the power of one word
I recommence my life
I am born to know you
To name you
Liberty.

For many Surrealists liberty was more important than life, proving theirs was more than an artistic movement: It was a way of life, an ideal for which so many, including Robert Desnos, Max Jacob and the Éluards, paid for their lives.

Not even Picasso could keep Lee in Paris during the winter 1944-45. She covered the fighting in the Vosges during that bitter winter and was on the heels of the Allies when they crossed the Rhine into Germany. That was the moment in which the rumours became the awful truth. Lee visited four concentration camps in all, Orsdorf, Pening, Buchenwald and Dachau, where she arrived on the day after its liberation (30th April 1945). By now the war had become very personal to Lee Miller. Many of her friends were Jewish and a large number of them were missing. What had happened was now obvious and Lee searched the faces of the dead and the semi-dead as she went around the camps. She cabled her editor at Vogue, “I implore you to believe this is true”: American Vogue published many of her images in their 1945 issue.

The effect on Lee was catastrophic: She was overwhelmed by post-traumatic stress disorder and entered a downward spiral of depression and alcohol abuse. Then unexpectedly she found she was pregnant in the spring of 1947. Though I am evidence of a pregnancy gone full term, it was a difficult time for her. Roland painted her as she struggled with depression.
He shows her as a broken figure washed up on an inhospitable shore amid storm clouds. The internal radiance of her face fades into the hues of desperation and angers, orange and blue. Soon his career as an art historian, biographer and curator of exhibitions – Picasso, Miró, Ernst, Man Ray and others – would leave him no time to paint; but he never stopped making collages, particularly as birthday and Christmas presents for Lee.

**PROVENCE IN EAST SUSSEX**

Roland and Lee bought Farley Farm, in the East Sussex village of Chiddingly, in 1949 and we moved here in March. In 1950, Roland painted the mural on the fireplace. The sun of Sussex had now replaced the sun of Provence but echoes of the heady pre-war days were to be found in rural England (fig. 23). Paul Eluard was one of the first visitors, followed by Max Ernst and his wife Dorothea Tanning and soon Man Ray and his wife Juliette. Picasso came to Farley Farm in 1950, and we later visited him at Villa la Gauloise in Mougins and his other homes. As a child I liked his house because it was full of pets, wonderful tribal masks and musical instruments. Lee had virtually quit photography after 1954 but she still took many pictures of her friends Picasso and Sabartes clowning around. Braque came round during one of these stays. He and Picasso had not seen each other for some years but Pablo grabbed a handful of pottery doves and gave them to Braque in an ice-breaking gesture.

Roland’s biography, *Picasso. His life and Work*, was published in 1958. Picasso had by now bought the Château de Vauvenargues and was very excited that he had a view of Montagne Sainte Victoire, Cézanne’s favourite subject, which Picasso actually sketched on the flyleaf of the copy of Roland’s biography he signed. There is a face in profile which is definitely Roland’s with his furrowed brow, spectacles and thin lips. But why indeed should he have a naked woman fishing from his nose? A French scholar provided an answer: “It is easy,” he said, “It is a pun on the similarity in French between fisher and sinner, *pêcheuse*.” But whose edict defines sin? Perhaps she is simply a libertine harking back to their enjoyment of beautiful women in Provence. Picasso did not read English, but emboldened by the opinions of others he designed the cover for the French edition of Roland’s biography. Roland was nonetheless still apprehensive about the kind of reception it would elicit from Picasso. He need not have worried, Picasso greeted him very warmly: “I’ve read your book. It’s good – In fact it is so good that it is as though we sat at the same table and wrote it together!”

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9 Personal recollection.
10 Personal recollection.
land on the first page reads “For Roland Penrose, his friend Picasso” above three dancers bearing flowers.

Lee’s career was in the doldrums but Roland moved ahead and was chosen by the Arts Council to curate the Picasso exhibition at the Tate in 1960. He had earned a reputation as a safe pair of hands, a trustworthy operator in an area where intrigue is rife. Also his Quaker qualities counted. He was known as a good negotiator, someone who built bridges and resolved conflicts, a fact that allowed him to accommodate a major paradox: A former opponent of the establishment, he had now become a figure of it, responsible for showing the art of revolution in institutions that were previously enemy territory such as the Tate Gallery. The Picasso retrospective was an outstanding success, regarded by many as the show of the century. Roland was never happier than when he had a big Picasso project on the go. For five years (1960-65) he was busy negotiating the purchase of *The Three Dancers* by the Tate for a price amounting to half the actual value of the picture. It is still in the collection today, bearing witness to the friendship between Picasso and Roland. And there was also the Picasso sculpture show which toured to Paris, London and New York, one of the first exhibitions to boast a fabulous book-like catalogue, a copy of which Picasso dedicated to Roland. For years Penrose was also at the heart of painstaking negotiations with the architect Bill Hartman who wished to commission a giant sculpture by Picasso to stand in Daley Plaza, Chicago.

But at times it was not easy to be the ambassador at the court of Picasso, as when Roland had to face his friend’s mixed anger and despair: “Once it was so easy! We sat on the beach with our women, we laughed, we swam in the sea. Now it’s one thing after another. There is no end to it. Everybody wants something from me”.

But of course things cooled off quickly and then straight on with the next project: another exhibition, another book, another instance of Picasso’s generous support for the ICA. Picasso and Françoise Gilot had parted in 1951 and his new wife Jacqueline had a difficult time presiding over a complicated court often filled with intrigue; but she always had a special affection for Lee whose presence she appreciated. When Vauvenargues proved too remote from the sea, Picasso bought Notre-Dame-de-Vie, a large but secluded house in Mougins, his home to the end. His sudden death in 1973 took a huge chunk out of my parents’ lives and although Roland continued as a tireless promoter of Picasso’s work, the gap of his absence was unbridgeable.

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11 Personal recollection.
12 Institute of Contemporary Arts.
By the late Sixties, Lee had fought her way out of alcoholism and she became known as a gourmet cook written up in *Vogue Magazine* and *House and Garden*. By one of these miraculous coincidences dear to the Surrealists, Lee had bumped into Valentine during the London blitz, and they remained the closest of friends until Lee’s death, in 1977. Valentine spent long periods at Farley Farm where she died in 1978. In the space of two years, Roland had lost the two women he loved most. Fortunately, my wife Susanna and our two daughters Ami and Eliza became a focus for his life. And there was another woman of special significance in Roland’s life, Diane Deriaz. She had been his mistress since 1947 but played a much more prominent role in his life with Lee gone. Happily so, because things were getting more difficult for him, with failing eyesight and trouble with short-term memory putting an end to his writing. Diane, however, encouraged his working in the garden studio and the making of collages chronicling their stays in Paris or their travels. They went to Provence, visiting Roland’s friend, the photographer Lucien Clergue in Arles and proceeding then to Camargue. And to Malindi in Kenya or to Sri Lanka, each time bringing home collages reflecting Roland’s experience.

There were shows of his new work in 1982 and 1983, in London at the Mayor Gallery and in Paris at Galerie Henriette Gomis. And a much bigger exhibition was planned for 1984 in Brighton. In February 1984, on his return from the Seychelles with Diane, Roland suffered a massive stroke. He died on Lee’s birthday, 23rd April 1984, a few days before the opening of his Brighton exhibition of recent collages. Farley Farm House, the home he died in, is now a museum dedicated to his work and his memory, and also that of Lee, Valentine and the many artists they counted as their friends. Those who visit the collection or see exhibitions of my parents’ work are often moved by the enduring strength of the friendship among the members of their group. Friendships in most cases forged in Provence and in a curious way true to its warmth, its sensuality and its cultural heritage.

**References**


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14 It is possible to organize guided tours at Farley Farm House from April to October (tel. 01825 872856).
Fig. 21 - Roland Penrose, *Conversation between Rock and Flower*, 1928, oil on canvas. Roland Penrose Estate, England 2013, The Penrose Collection. All rights reserved.
Fig. 22 - Roland Penrose, *The Real Woman*, 1937, collage, coloured postcards, coloured paper, decalcomania, frottage and pencil on card, 43.3 x 69 cm. Roland Penrose Estate, England 2013, The Penrose Collection. All rights reserved.
Fig. 23 - Roland Penrose, Photograph of the fireplace in the dining-Room at Farley Farm House, 1950. Roland Penrose Estate, England 2013, The Penrose Collection. All rights reserved.