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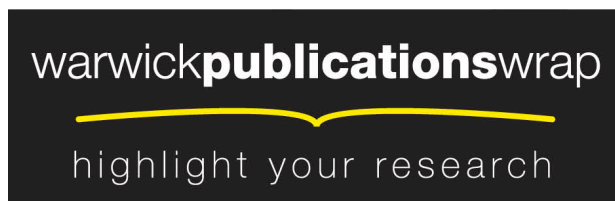
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# Eileen Agar at Home: Domesticity, Surrealism, and Subversion

Louise Campbell

Louise Campbell is Professor in the History of Art Department, University of Warwick, and is a specialist in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century architecture. She has published widely on British architecture and modernism, public art in the postwar period, and the studio environment in England and France in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She holds a Senior Fellowship from the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art for 2011-12 in order to complete a book on artists' habitats in the twentieth century.  
[L.E.M.Campbell@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:L.E.M.Campbell@warwick.ac.uk)

*ABSTRACT This article examines the work of Eileen Agar, one of several women to participate in the 1936 London International Surrealist Exhibition, as a patron of modern design and an originator of remarkable assemblages, costumes, and interiors. In 1932, Agar, a wealthy, Slade-trained painter and patron of the arts, took possession of a London studio flat remodeled for her by the architect Rodney Thomas. This place - customized by Agar later that decade - was instrumental in Herbert Read's decision to include her in the exhibition. The decor of Agar's studio flat, with its dense mosaic of images and objects, contrasted with approaches to interior decoration in 1930s England and embodied a critique of both old and new modes of domesticity. This article suggests that the domestic interior, with its Victorian associations of privacy and family life, a place redolent of hidden secrets, was of great interest to English*

*Surrealists. It also explores the ways in which Agar - an upper-class beauty whose participation in the Surrealist exhibition fascinated the press - deftly took advantage of the publicity she attracted in order to parody the preoccupation of the contemporary debutante and society hostess with furnishing, dress, and entertaining, and to provide a subversive reconfiguration of it.*

KEYWORDS: Surrealism, women and fashion, domestic interior, Eileen Agar, the Surrealist studio, modernist design, Rodney Thomas

### Introduction

Herbert Read's provocative essay of 1935 entitled "Why the English Have No Taste" suggested that the Industrial Revolution and Protestantism had encouraged a utilitarian approach to the arts. Capitalism had blighted taste and morals worldwide, suggested Read, but in England — when combined with pressure to conform to a bourgeois norm — it produced an indifference to art and resistance to ideas. While enjoying the material benefits of capitalism in abundance, the English paid for this in a degraded physical environment and in what Read termed the "death of the spirit." The English home, he wrote, demonstrated in its full horror a national obsession with goods and social convention (Read 1935, 1938). Read's essay, published in the Parisian magazine *Minotaure*, provides a starting point for considering the links between Surrealism and architecture, particularly interior architecture. Recent exhibitions devoted to Surrealism and design have tended to focus on examples from France (Wood 2007; Alison 2010). This article suggests that, in interwar England, with its deep divisions of class, wealth, and privilege, architecture and design assumed a different and arguably greater significance. The extraordinary work commissioned by Edward James for his London home and for Monkton, the Sussex shooting lodge transformed by Dail and the architects Christopher Nicholson and Hugh Casson, is well documented (Coleby 1998; Wood 2007: 205-12). Far less well known is the architectural patronage of the artist Eileen Agar, and the way in which her work and living space facilitated her entrée into Surrealist circles and had a lasting impact on her subsequent career (Figure 1). This article uses archival sources to reconstruct the habitat of Agar, and considers reactions to it in terms of the myths of creativity current in Surrealist circles, the reception of Surrealism by an English public, and the wider significance of the domestic interior in 1930s England.

### Modern Women, Modern Art

Agar belonged to the generation of women who had gained the vote in 1918 but who, until the Equal Franchise Act of 1928, were not able to use it until they reached the age of 30. The art world mirrored such

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**Figure 1**

Exhibitors at the International Surrealist Exhibition, London, 1936 (from: Agar 1988).  
Agar is seated in the center of the front row.

anomalies. The Royal Academy was slow to respond to increasing numbers of female students and practicing artists in the 1920s. Despite the conspicuous showing of women at the 1921 Summer Exhibition (the so-called Flapper Academy), it was 1927 before Laura Knight — although enjoying enormous success — was made an Associate of the Royal Academy and 1936 before she was elected a full Academician (Deepwell 2010: 105-9). In contrast to this slow recognition, women were successfully laying claim to many professions closely connected with the home — housing reform, social work, and interior design. Meanwhile, starting with the introduction of a gossip column in the *Sunday Express* in 1926, there was close scrutiny of society figures, details of whose clothes, activities, and homes featured in the popular press (Ross 2003: 41). It was during these very years that Agar matured as an artist. And it is in the light of the reconfigured relationship between the private and the public arena that her habitat should be viewed, a habitat which suggests that some women artists regarded the legacy of the Victorian home with as critical an eye as novelists like Ivy Compton-Burnett, and proposed a different kind of framework in which to conduct their lives (Light 1991).

The design, decoration, and arrangement of Agar's home which was also of course her workplace — reveal the diversity of her practice, her nuanced engagement with modernist design, and the theatricality which accompanied Surrealism's introduction to the English public. Agar's studio flat belonged to the privileged genre of the artist's studio home, something that had been the hallmark of the successful artist in Britain since the 1870s (Valkley 1994). Agar had the confidence conferred by her wealth and social position to commission an architect, to work with him, and then to customize and adapt his design in order to create an environment appropriate to her artistic practice. The commission was part of Agar's patronage of the arts, which included giving funds to Leon Underwood to enable him to travel to the United States in 1925 and subsidizing the publication of *The Island*, a magazine devoted to art and literature, in 1931 (Neve 1974: 91, 133). Agar's flat provided a place for the private delectation of a collection of objects as well as a venue for meetings and social events, a dualism that Fijalkowski suggests was an important aspect of the Surrealists' use of architecture, providing both a space of poetic encounter and a social space (Fijalkowski 2005: 19, 21).

Agar was born in 1899 in Argentina, one of the three daughters of a successful Scottish businessman, and came to live in England with her family when her father retired in 1911. Agar's parents envisaged no career for their daughter, but were persuaded to let Agar attend the Byam Shaw School of Art, then Leon Underwood's Brook Green Academy, and finally in 1921-4 the Slade School of Art (Simpson 2000: 89). Although she disliked the academic nature of teaching at the Slade, she found there the courage to leave her parents' house in Belgrave Square for a flat in Chelsea in 1924. The Slade also introduced her to a fellow student, Robin Bartlett, whom she married in 1925. On her father's death that year, Agar inherited an annual income of £1,000, allowing her to cut free of Bartlett and to go to Paris in 1927 to study art, accompanied by a new partner, the Hungarian writer and editor Joseph Bard.

In Paris, Agar took painting lessons with Frantisek Foltyn, a Czech-born artist who had made an intensive study of Cubism (Agar 1988: 85). Foltyn belonged to a loose group of abstract artists who exhibited with Mondrian, Hans Arp, and Sophie Taeuber, and joined the group *Cercle et Carre* in 1930 and *Abstraction-Creation* in 1934 (Simpson 2000: 34 n.14). Women were made welcome in this circle, which included the Englishwomen Winifred Nicholson, Marlow Moss, and Marjorie Watson-Williams, alias Paule Vézelay (Derouet 1987: 167-73; Nicholson 1987: 105-6). What little survives of Agar's work from this period suggests that, despite her subsequent identification with the Surrealists, her affiliation in Paris lay not with them but with the abstract artists. This helps to make sense of the environment into which she moved on her return to London in 1930.

## Design for Living

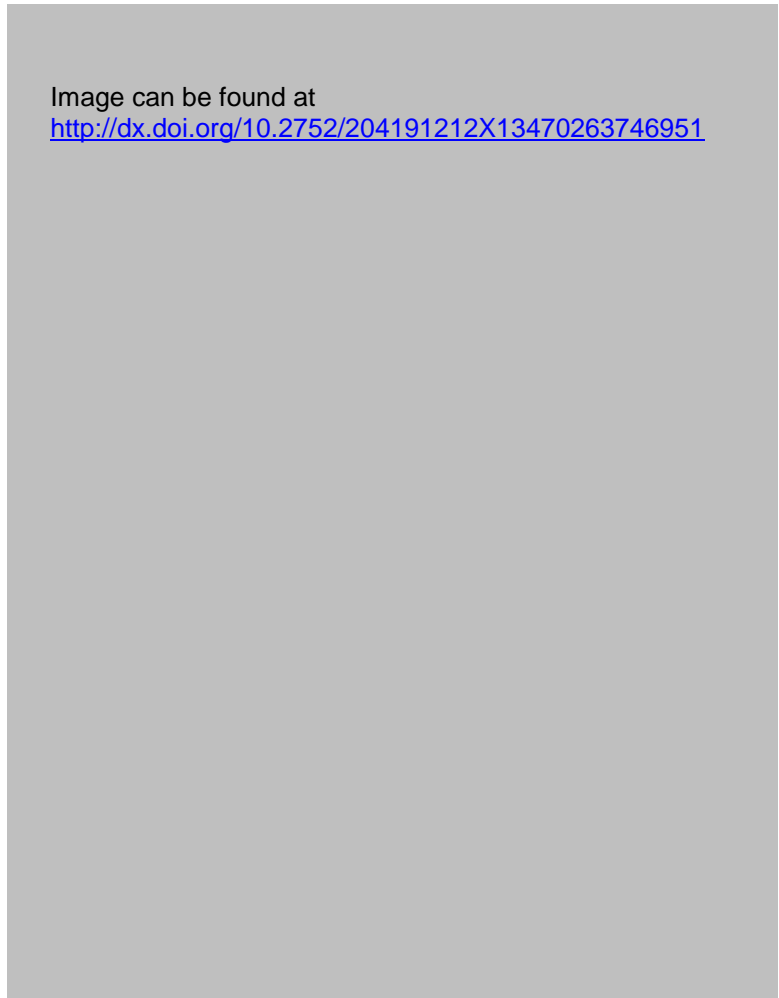
Agar asked Rodney Thomas, an architect whom she had met at the Slade, to remodel two flats in a Victorian building in Bramham Gardens, Earl's Court, for herself and Joseph Bard. Bard, like Agar, had recently extricated himself from a bad marriage and this arrangement allowed them to live in close proximity while retaining a measure of autonomy. She recalled: "Neither of us liked being too much on top of each other, but the right porcupine distance is not always easy to achieve" (Agar 1988: 84). Agar characterized Thomas's approach as rational, concerned with compact, economical solutions and emphasizing function and structure as a means of liberating the dwelling from ornament (Agar 1988: 41-2). Thomas had trained with his uncle, the architect Brumwell Thomas, and supplemented this with classes at the Bartlett School of Architecture, from which he occasionally escaped to attend drawing classes at the Slade. An admirer of Le Corbusier, Thomas communicated his enthusiasm to Agar and brought to the commission a highly original approach to materials (Williams 1995: 41-50). Through Bard's friendship with Adolf Loos, then living in Paris, Agar encountered the new architecture and the distinctive studio houses that Corbusier, Lurcat, and Mallet-Stevens built for artists in that city during the 1920s (Delorme 1987). Foltyn and the Abstraction-Creation group may also have led her to the remarkable house at Meudon designed by Sophie Taeuber, whose robust stone exterior contained studios for Taeuber and her partner Hans Arp (Jaeger 2007: 54-61). On Agar's return to London, Thomas introduced her to a circle of people interested in modern design — Ashley Havinden and Edward McKnight Kauffer, who worked at Crawford's sparkling advertising agency designed by Frederick Etchells 1929-30, and Wells Coates, who completed the streamlined Special Effects studio interior at Broadcasting House in 1932 (Havinden et al. 2003: 59).

At Bramham Gardens, Bard's flat, tucked under the eaves of the building, comprised a bed-sittingroom and kitchen-diner. The bed-sittingroom was fitted with a built-in divan bed, shelving, and high-level cupboards with distinctive peg-like knobs as handles (Figure 2). The dining recess contained a banquette seat curved to fit against an internal wall with a backlit false window, an oval table surfaced in white linoleum and supported on four raked trapezoidal forms set into a black lacquered oval base, and a sideboard with a top surface covered with white rubber (Williams 1995: 44). The contrasts of color and texture (matt linoleum and rubber, glossy lacquered hardwood, hand-woven textiles for seat covers, cushions, and bedspread, and reflective chrome for door handles), the gentle play of curves, and the complex shapes of the dining table suggest the architect's powerful sculptural imagination. It was also a witty response to the brief of a twentieth-century bachelor's dwelling.

Agar's own flat, on the floor below, had larger, higher rooms: a studio-living room, a bedroom, and a kitchen-diner. Her studio had

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**Figure 2**

Bed-sittingroom for Joseph Bard, 47 Bramham Gardens, London, 1930-2; architect: Rodney Thomas (RIBA Library Photographs Collection). Interior destroyed.

built-in furniture around three walls. A work table under the window was flanked by mahogany drawers and cupboards; against the opposite wall was an upholstered banquette with a rack for canvases and storage shelves above (Figure 3). At right angles was a fireplace with a clock set into the wall above it. The division between living space and workspace was marked by a vertical strip of smoked mirror glass set into the wall, like a pilaster. Pale walls and flooring and a minimum of freestanding furniture enhanced the size of the room. Concealed light fittings above and beneath the canvas store washed the ceiling with light, and suspended from the ceiling was an enormous adjustable lamp of the kind used in operating theaters. A light fitting set into the wall illuminated the Roman numerals marking

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**Figure 3**

Studio for Eileen Agar, 47 Bramham Gardens, London, 1930-2; architect: Rodney Thomas (Architectural Press Archive/RIBA Library Photographs Collection). Interior destroyed. The clock and the plan-chest are in the Victoria & Albert Museum.

the hours cut out of a concave metal clockface; a frosted glass back-plate served to diffuse the light.

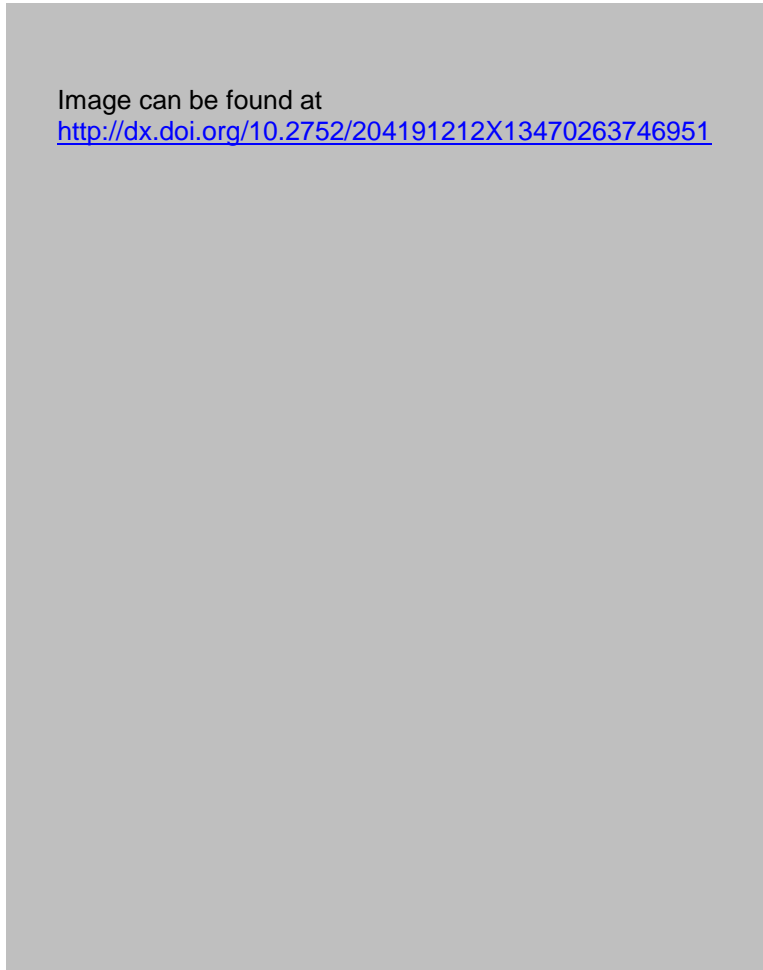
From this account, Agar's flat might appear orderly and functional, its compact nautical quality resembling the Minimum Flat shown by Wells Coates at the Dorland Hall exhibition of 1933, or the cabin-like flat created for Coates's own use in 1935 in the top floor of a pre-existing building in Chelsea. Agar's environment suggested mobility and modernity, and a life unfettered by inherited furniture, dependent children, or resident partners (Darling 2008: 85). But alternative readings, suggesting other qualities, are possible. The light radiating from the circumference of the clock made it appear to float in front of the wall plane. A thin disc painted on the wall around it contributed to its unsettling quality; it resembled an eyeball, its iris formed by the clockface complementing the domed shape of the ceiling light, which appeared as a half-closed lid. Other features made this a mysterious interior: the reflections in the concave chromed surface of the clockface and the gray mirror glass, and the wave-like patterns of the veined, sea-green marble fireplace surround, the piece



selected by architect and client (Williams 1995: 49). Agar's bedroom was dominated by a giant wardrobe, a majestic mahogany quarter-cylinder occupying the corner of the room. The architectural character of this "room within a room," complete with an integral light fitting, was accentuated by an adjoining mirror that, in a series of sensuous curves, aligned the wardrobe with the curve-fronted dressing table in the opposite corner (Figure 4). Agar's dining room, which, like Bard's, was equipped with a curved, built-in seat, was presided over by a carved wooden figure, the relic of a saint acquired in Menton in 1929 that she called her "Household God" and later rechristened "The Golden Tooth" (Figure 5) (Simpson 2000: 17, 74).

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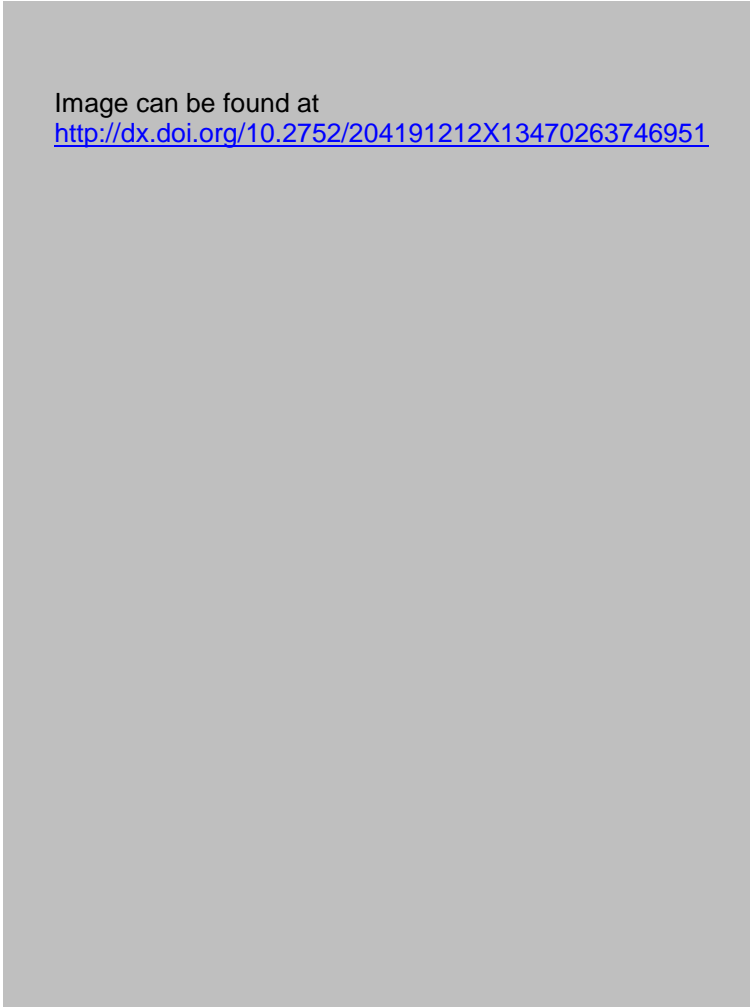
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**Figure 4**  
Bedroom for Eileen Agar, 47 Bramham Gardens, London, 1930-2; architect: Rodney Thomas (from: Duncan Miller, *Interior Decorating*, 1937). Interior destroyed. The wardrobe and corner cupboard are in the Victoria & Albert Museum.

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**Figure 5**

Dining room for Eileen Agar, 47 Bramham Gardens, London, 1930-2; architect: Rodney Thomas (RIBA Library Photographs Collection). Interior destroyed.

### **A Playful Modernism**

The clean lines of Agar's studio flat in 1932 signaled a distinctively modern way of living. But, while its sparse decor echoed the critique of the over-furnished Victorian home voiced by journals like the *Architectural Review*, it differed markedly from the interiors created for other women of her generation and her class (Sparke 2008). Its industrial materials and references made an interesting contrast with the Art Deco interiors created by Oliver Hill and Betty Joel, interiors that were characterized in the early 1930s as frivolous and expensive in relation to the perceived economy and efficiency of modern design (VVoollcombe 1932). Historians have pointed to the artificial character of this polarity, suggesting that both writers and practitioners of modern design employed functionalism as a rhetorical device and

not a descriptor (Benton 1990). Wells Coates's 1939 suggestion that architects should "plan for delight" alerts us to the playful aspects of Agar's flat, and to the fact that practicality was never entirely dominant in these interiors (Darling 2008: 85). It seems that Agar's flat was not especially cheap, with studio furniture custom-made in Honduras mahogany by the Army and Navy Stores (Williams 1995: 41).

Even in 1932, when Thomas finished work, the inventive character of the interiors at Bramham Gardens and the unconventional spatial arrangement of Agar's flat hint at the gamut of artistic activities and personal relationships accommodated there. Agar and Bard's flats sheltered a variety of connected and mutually enriching artistic and literary practices, rather in the way that the Taeuber-Arp house contained the studios of an abstract artist and a Surrealist sculptor. As in that house, male and female artist's workspaces were neatly stacked above each other and ultra-modern furniture happily coexisted with organic forms. During the 1930s, Agar exacerbated the playful element in these interiors, decorating the inside of the front door to suggest a face, with a letterbox as a mouth, a plaster hand the nose, and twisted ironwork forming eyes and hair. The original decor of the studio became encrusted with a dense, colorful mosaic of images. She described the process as follows:

Around the clock I made a huge collage of images — small drawings and postcards mostly. Other objects were constantly changing: drapes and sculpted plaster heads, textures, fabrics, stone and metal shapes — throughout the thirties my studio transformed itself, it seemed at the blink of an eye, one day suggesting Magritte, the next de Chirico ... I was collecting and storing ... surrounding myself with raw material which could be transmuted into paintings and objects ... the decor changed like sea-wrack cast up by the tide. (Agar 1988: 101)

The connection that Agar suggested between her physical environment and the art she made were registered in her painting of this period. The interest in transparency and post-Cubist complexity of space and form evident in Agar's *Movement in Space* of 1931 gave way in the years immediately following to an interest in mythology, in the layering of paint and other materials, and in strong color. Agar's seven-foot-wide painting, *The Autobiography of an Embryo* (Tate), in its original state around 1933 contained semi-geometric forms and shapes arranged in four rectangular panels in a frieze-like composition (Simpson 2000: 39). Round, oval, and elliptical shapes, and ones resembling cogwheels, dominated the composition. Agar subsequently reworked the painting and, although she retained the same format, the precision of the shapes and transparent overlays of paint gave way to greater figuration and more freely painted forms. The circular and oval motifs suggestive of wombs, eggs, uterine sacs, and eye sockets continue to dominate the painting;

clustered within and around these was a cornucopia of richly colored images from classical antiquity and the natural world — shells, sea horses, fish, birds, wings, stars, and an embryo-like creature — their exuberance contained by a pictorial grid. A.S. Byatt has observed percipiently of the canvas: "It is as though in the case of this artist the embryo she carries is an eye, which makes colour, and is also a pinhole camera opening on the dark" (Byatt 2004: 4). There is in the work an explicit connection between biological conception and the generation of visual images, something to which Agar alluded in an article in *The Island* in 1931 in which she praised the feminine type of imagination over the male: "the intellectual and rational conception of life has given way to a more miraculous creative interpretation, and artistic and imaginative life is under the sway of womb-magic" (Agar 1931: 102). By the late 1930s, however, artistic creativity had taken precedence over the interest in bearing children, something Agar later presented in terms of a personal decision (Courtney 1990: 35).

### **The Surrealist Studio**

It was to Agar's studio that Herbert Read and Roland Penrose, at the suggestion of Paul Nash, came looking for English artists to include in the International Surrealist Exhibition being planned in London for June 1936. The visit was apparently instrumental in Agar's identification as a Surrealist. Read compared Agar's flat to an "Aladdin's cave" (Courtney 1990: 55); David Gascoyne, who visited it later, described it as "a sort of grotto-bower, full of cunningly arranged objects" (Gascoyne 1991). Rather as Andre Breton had characterized Frida Kahlo as an exotic seductress and an intuitive Surrealist, Read and Penrose wrote of Agar as the possessor of "a highly sensitive imagination and a feminine clairvoyance" (Ades 1980: 37).

Agar contributed three paintings and five objects to the London exhibition. Although she did not exhibit *The Autobiography of an Embryo*, another canvas, *Quadriga*, representing four profiles of a horse's head, each overlaid by different configurations of lines and shapes, used a similar device of repeated silhouettes to convey accelerating movement and disintegration, and thus provide "an inside view of the quadriga's movement" (Robertson et al. 1986: 46). Agar also showed several "found" objects, and according to the catalog, contributed some "natural objects interpreted" and "Surrealist objects." Her work was included in the exhibition of Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism in New York in the winter of 1936-7, the Surrealist section of the Artists International Association in London in 1937, the International Exhibition of Surrealism in Tokyo in June 1937, Surrealist Objects and Poems in London in November 1937 (whose catalog illustrated Agar's *Angel of Anarchy* on the cover), and the International Surrealist exhibitions held in 1938 in Amsterdam and Paris. The publicity generated by the Surrealist exhibition in London, together with Agar's own striking beauty and her wealthy background, were to prove irresistibly attractive to journalists. Agar later

conceded that being a Surrealist was an excellent way to get noticed as a painter and she was frequently photographed and interviewed in the press (von Joel 1989).

She exploited that publicity astutely in order to generate images of an existence that appeared almost a parody of that led by the young women featured in the society pages of the *Daily Sketch* or the *Sunday Express*. Photographs taken for publication recorded the state of the studio in the late 1930s, its previously pristine appearance transformed. In one, Agar is shown in the act of winding her clock, now embedded in a dense mosaic of images (Figure 6). According to a journalist in 1936, Agar's bathroom contained "a length of rope, a propeller, a chart and lifebelt, with a toy swan mounted on a Bath Oliver biscuit. The curtains are of fine fishing-net material" (Tate Gallery Archive). The bathroom sounds like a parody of the fantastic and glamorous rooms created at this time for society women, like Oliver Hill's all-glass bathroom for Lady Mount Temple (Powers 1989: 32). Although Agar's involvement in the decor of her flat invites comparison with the work of the professional decorator Syrie Maugham, who created private environments for female clients where personal identity rather than social status was paramount, the approach and the results achieved were very different (Sparke 2008: 83-4). Agar employed a collage-like approach and the effect was improvised and ephemeral rather than immaculately crafted and luxurious. The interiors that Thomas had designed were thus gradually reconfigured by Agar in a way that provided an extension of her practice as a Surrealist.

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**Figure 6**

Agar in studio with clock, late 1930s? (from: Agar 1988). Agar dates the photograph 1936; however, similar photographs were published in an article in *The Bystander* in 1940.

## Surrealism in Mayfair

The development of Surrealism in the 1930s has been characterized as a movement in retreat from the public sphere (Suleiman 1994: 154). Suleiman draws attention to Andre Breton's reaction to the "June days" of 1936 in which — a few days before the opening of the Surrealist exhibition in London — French workers occupied the factories and took strike action to demand better conditions. While praising the spontaneity of their action, Breton (unlike Georges Bataille) refrained from advocating armed proletarian struggle. Suleiman underscores the anomalous position in which the Surrealists found themselves by 1936, isolated from the political left by aesthetic differences and their aversion to the strictures of socialist realism, ideologically opposed to the right but — ironically — finding support from enlightened bourgeois and aristocratic patrons like Charles and Marie-Laure de Noailles. In London, the Surrealists set out to entertain the public as a means of communicating ideas, something to which the English press responded with enthusiasm (O'Neill 2007: 98). At the opening of the London exhibition, Sheila Legge moved through the New Burlington Galleries as a personification of the Phantom of Sex Appeal, wearing a satin evening dress and elbow-length rubber gloves, her head covered with a mass of roses and ladybirds (an image derived from Dali's painting, *Three Young Surrealist Women Holding in Their Arms the Skins of an Orchestra*) to create an inexpressive fashionable mask. The extraordinary photographs of the Phantom standing among the pigeons of Trafalgar Square suggest that, if in France the focus of Surrealist activity had moved from the street to the salon, in England, where Surrealism attempted to infiltrate the spaces of everyday life, the reverse may actually have been the case (Suleiman 1994: 154; O'Neill 2007: 92).

Surrealism's engagement with haute couture, sometimes interpreted as a sign that the "historical moment of major innovation" had passed, in England assumed a different aspect (Belton 1991: 58). O'Neill highlights the significance of the 1936 exhibition as the occasion on which the relationship between Surrealist art and fashionable dress was reconfigured (O'Neill 2007: 78). Underpinning this process was the English public's close scrutiny of dress, voice, and manners as indicators of social class, and the liberating effect of the recent enfranchisement of young women.

Elsa Schiaparelli, who in 1927 established her Paris fashion business, opened a shop in London's Mayfair in 1933. The photograph of the exhibitors at the London Surrealist Exhibition of 1936 shows Agar wearing a pointed Schiaparelli hat, known as the "Mad Cap" (Figure 1). It begs the question of the significance of Surrealist fashion when worn by artists and not simply women of fashion (O'Neill 2007: 81). Agar placed particular emphasis on the elegant and distinctive dress of female Surrealists, which she regarded as a badge of membership of the group and a means of distinguishing themselves from the ostentatiously paint-spotted clothing of the

professional woman painter: "the juxtaposition by us of a Schiaparelli dress and outrageous behaviour ... was simply carrying the ideas of Surrealism into public existence," she recalled (Agar 1988: 120). Dress had a still more personal significance for Agar. In the later 1930s, she devised a series of witty costumes and assemblages that supplied a subversive critique of the roles for which her mother had imagined her, as debutante, society bride, mother, hostess, and homemaker. She concocted her *Ceremonial Hat for Eating Bouillabaisse* in 1936 by inverting a cork dish used for serving bouillabaisse, which she found in St Tropez, and decorating it with a lobster tail, starfish, and seaweed; it was apparently inspired by the enormous and theatrical hats created for her mother before the First World War (Figure 7). At the midnight opening of the exhibition of Surrealist Objects and Poems at the London Gallery in 1937, Agar

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**Figure 7**  
Agar wearing her *Ceremonial Hat for Eating Bouillabaisse* with *The Hand of Fate*, 1936 (from: Agar 1988). The hat was remade by Agar in 1948 and is in the Victoria & Albert Museum.

wore gloves made of flesh-colored kid, with stitched-on red leather fingernails, designed by Schiaparelli in collaboration with Dail; an outrageous version of the gloves that English debutantes wore for formal occasions, these were later incorporated by Agar into another hat (now in the Victoria and Albert Museum). In 1937, for a dinner organized to bid farewell to the former Bauhaus teachers Gropius, Moholy-Nagy, and Breuer, who were leaving England to work in the United States, Agar devised a menu that included pink potatoes, "toasted soprano savory," and "crème passionnelle." The meal was "served on a ping-pong table spread with enormous linen napkins ... inherited from her mother's family"; she scattered "strange objects" among the dishes and devised an elaborate centerpiece using a pedal-operated fretsaw, decorated with crackers, fruit, and flowers (Mallin 1991: 222) (Figure 8).

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**Figure 8**  
Centerpiece for Surrealist dinner party, 1937 (from: Agar 1988).



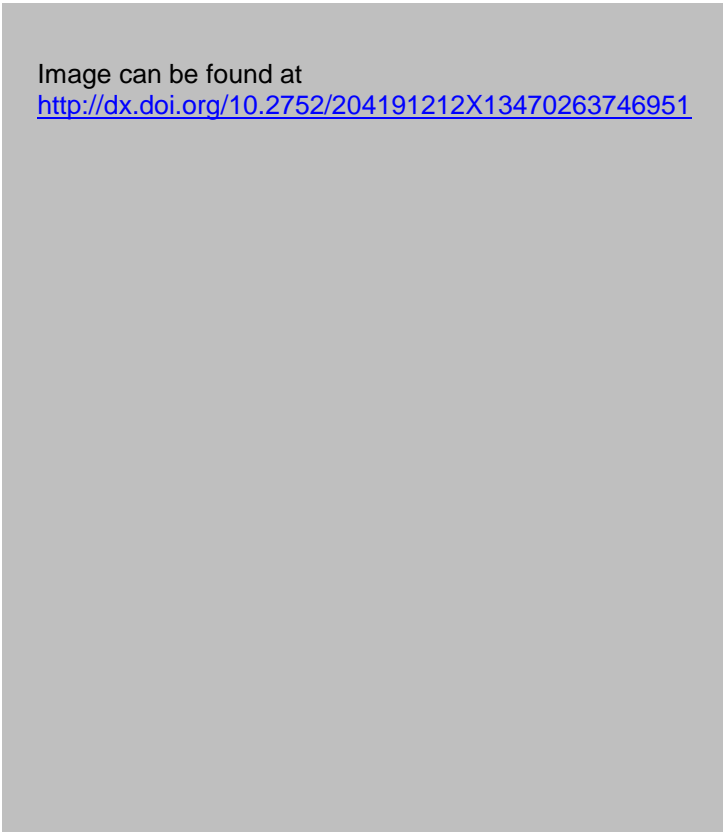
### Household Goods and Household Gods

The legacy of the nineteenth-century domestic interior as a place of refuge, a safe haven from the pressures of public life, and a family stronghold, was one that interwar writers and artists found deeply distasteful (Light 1991). One of Agar's exhibits at the 1936 exhibition was apparently "a black paper-covered box, fur-lined, the size of a dolls' house [entitled] *The entrance to the Underworld*," suggesting that the home was a domain of hidden secrets and suppressed desires (Tate Gallery Archive). Like Victorian architecture, Victorian bric-a-brac was associated in the 1930s with acquisitiveness and sham (Bertram 1938: pls 40-1). But, although the simple modern interior was often presented as an admirable alternative to the cluttered homes of the past, individuals like Paul Nash drew attention to the enduring power of curious objects, rich patterns, and unexpected juxtapositions. Nash's article "Surrealism in Interior Decoration," published in 1936, discussed the suggestive qualities of objects in domestic interiors, including Agar's dining room, presided over by the figure of her "Household God." Nash called it "a disquieting figure, but somehow welcome in this interior." He described the "infinite, strange beauties" of tree veneers in relation to the walnut dining table: "dramatic oppositions, subtle changes from harsh to smooth — the sense of touch, now, becomes more acutely alive" (Nash 1936: 11). The article included a photograph of the dining table (Figure 9). The presence of three glasses on the table, placed beside a knot of rope, under the gaze of the "Household God," introduced a further, private dimension of surveillance and desire, a veiled reference to the tensions generated by the affair that Agar had been conducting with Nash. By 1936, it had become clear that their relationship had to be conducted clandestinely to avoid destroying Nash's marriage and Agar's partnership with Bard; it was at this time that Nash dubbed Agar's wardrobe "Fortress Agar," suggesting that she concealed her other lovers from sight within its depths (Agar 1988: 164).

Read and Penrose's identification of Agar as a clairvoyant has intriguing parallels with the characterization of Frida Kahlo by Andre Breton as an exotic seductress and subsequent analyses of Leonora Carrington's *Self-portrait* of c. 1937-8 as a "metaphor of originary female creativity" (Orenstein in Belton 1991: 52). At first glance, a photograph of Agar's studio showing the artist seated at her work table, surveyed by her cat, appears to reinforce the impression of a sorceress in her lair. However, the photograph — for which Agar posed carefully and which she included in her autobiography shows the artist's arms and face flooded with light, touching a giant plaster hand with the gesture of a creator, Pygmalion-fashion (Agar 1988: fig. 10a). Agar's engagement with photography provided a helpful corrective to her characterization as an intuitive Surrealist, suggesting a determined grip upon both her artistic direction and her own image. Agar's power as creator and her status as artistic

Image can be found at

<http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/204191212X13470263746951>



**Figure 9**

"Surrealism in Interior Decoration": walnut veneer table, Bramham Gardens, 1936 (from: *Decoration*, 1936).

agent rather than as subject were underlined by the photographs that she took at about the same time of her young nephew Julian Mackintosh in the studio, wearing two plaster hands (Tate Gallery Archive, 3.42.1).

Agar had been taking photographs since she was given her first camera at the age of sixteen (Simpson 2000: 27). During the summer of 1935 in Swanage, where Helen Muspratt was experimenting with solarized photographs, Agar became interested in more experimental approaches to photography. Paul Nash, whom she met there, was exploring the potential of the photograph for recording unexpected juxtapositions of the natural and manmade. She and Nash photographed the shell- and pebble-encrusted anchor chain - the "bird-snake" renamed by Nash the *Seashore Monster* and featured in his photocollage illustrated in the *Architectural Review* in 1936 (Walker 2007: 46). On a visit to Brittany the following year, Agar bought a Rolleiflex camera in order to take photographs of the extraordinary rock formations at Ploumanac'h (Walker 2007: 52-72). The same year she began a witty exchange of images with

her friend, the photographer Lee Miller. Miller photographed Agar outside Brighton Pavilion, her shadow cast onto a column. Remy observes: "The shadow, deformed by the undulation of the column, reveals a non-existent pregnancy, while the excrescence at the level of the abdomen, the shadow of part of the camera she was carrying, is a no less non-existent penis" (Remy 1999: 144). Agar made a portrait drawing of Lee Miller in 1937 which she embellished with a collaged flower, and reworked and modified her own image. She superimposed sinuous lines, hands, discs, and stars upon a 1937 photograph taken by Bard of her dancing naked on a holiday in the South of France holding a sheet of transparent plastic in order to create a highly eroticized image, *Ladybird*, and in 1943 gave Miller a photograph of herself as a wide-eyed ingenue that she had reworked with elements of collage (Simpson 2000: 81).

Just as her dress satirized that of women in fashionable society, Agar's environment rebutted the values of her parents and her class, privileging compact living over home and inherited possessions, artistic creativity and sexual freedom over conventional ties of marriage and children. Conceived in the early 1930s as an alternative to the over-furnished bourgeois home, Agar's studio flat, later repainted in terracotta and blue, with a layer of images and objects overwhelming the original decor, provided an amusing contrast both with the lush all-white and all-cream interiors of Syrie Maugham and Oliver Hill, and also with the more austerely rational approach of Wells Coates. As customized by the artist, Agar's flat became an ironic riposte to both the fashionable interior and the modernist interior, a place of emotional encounter and a stage for Surrealist sociability as well as for creation.

### Conclusion

Read's essay "Why the English Have No Taste," written in 1935 in the aftermath of his conversion to the ideas of the Bauhaus and the publication of his book *Art and Industry*, suggested that the English did not "exercise those faculties of sensibility and selection which make for good taste" (Read 1935, 1938). It was a piece designed to provoke reactions. No doubt Read relished the irony that this anticapitalist squib appeared in *Minotaure*, described by Suleiman as "a luxurious apolitical magazine destined for a wealthy public," financed by Edward James (Suleiman 1994: 149). By 1938, when it was reprinted in England, the essay assumed a slightly different significance. Eileen Agar and Leonora Carrington had emerged to join Roland Penrose and Edward James as key members of the Surrealist group; the wealth of all four individuals derived from the business or industrial enterprise of their parents. To Read in the late 1930s Agar's habitat appeared a marvelous place, its subversive quality deriving from the artistry of its occupant. Read's appreciation of her work and her environment may have been enhanced by her identity as the daughter of a wealthy entrepreneur. It may have

seemed to Read appropriate that the wealth and creative energy of the children of English capitalists should be used to underwrite Surrealism, dedicated to excavating repressed instincts and deadened sensibilities, and to the practice of art of a non-utilitarian kind, intended not to encourage manufactures (which, as he pointed out, was the rationale behind the foundation of English museums in the nineteenth century) but to counter the damaging effects of industrial society upon the psyche of the individual.

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