

## PRESERVATION:

### Conditioning the Leather

One of the easiest and most effective ways to improve the appearance of a camera is to touch up or repair the leather.

It's not unusual to find desirable cameras, often in excellent working order, marred by scrapes or worn spots in the leather. Fortunately, these cameras can be made to look much better, even when the black finish is scuffed to the underlying brown.

You will need black leather dye and black shoe polish, preferably a liquid or semi-liquid. Paste polish should not be used because, however much you buff, the paste will tend to fill in the pebbling of the leather and make it appear to be smoother than it actually is.

If you want to do a really thorough job, begin by applying a leather conditioner such as Lexol, available at leather shops. Lexol is a liquid, so don't put on too much at once. The easiest way to control the application of Lexol is to rub it on with your finger. Another excellent conditioner is Leather Preservative No. SP-89, manufactured by the Polychem Corporation, 12 Lyman Street, New Haven, Connecticut 06511. More like a paste than Lexol, this dressing is made specifically for fine leather book bindings, and is often available from dealers in rare books.

After the conditioner has had time to penetrate the leather, the dye should be applied generally over the surface, and especially to scuffs, scratches, and worn areas. If the dye gets on metal parts (the flash sockets are especially susceptible to this) it can be removed by a paper towel with a dab of alcohol. When the dye is dry -- see the instructions on the package -- apply the polish and gently buff.

Doing this won't improve smoothed areas, and it won't hide abrasions or other marks, but the leather will be significantly rejuvenated.

Occasionally Exaktas have body leather with more serious wear or damage. Some collectors like to replace such leather, but you should think twice about doing this, and think again, because replacing leather compromises the historical integrity of the camera. I would rather have an Exakta -- especially an old one -- with the original leather, even if it's been through the wars, than with fresh new replacement panels.

However, it certainly does make sense to replace pieces that are missing from a camera or prism. It's not always possible to find an exact match for the leather on the rest of the camera, but larger leather shops can usually help. Tandy, for example, supplies a black pebbled pigskin that is nearly a match for the leather on V, VX, and VXIIa cameras, and it's just the right thickness. You can also find ads in Shutterbug and elsewhere offering replacement leather specifically for camera restoration. An exact match is problematic, because Exaktas have sported a variety of textures over 35 years of production, but you can approximate it well enough that only a close look would tell the difference.

When you replace a panel, cut a template from stiff paper and fit it until you have the shape just right, then use it as a pattern for the leather. This is especially important if the leather is to fit a prism, where the panel has to fit an indentation and imperfections are immediately apparent. It's hard to cut a straight line with scissors, and a sharp knife and straightedge

are recommended. When the panel has been cut, and a "dry" fit shows that it looks right, use contact cement (such as Elmer's) to glue it on. And save your template!

Contact cement can also be used to reattach original leather. Sometimes the old leather is peeling up at the corners, and occasionally a whole panel tries to come off, especially from the back.

Sometimes, too, you will deliberately remove the leather to make repairs. One of the virtues of the classic Exakta is that it does not require you to remove leather to get at screws for disassembly (although the RTL1000 does). However, on many older Exaktas corrosion forms under the leather of the back. You can recognize this by the unsightly lumps in the leather. Remove the leather by gently peeling it up, using a broad-bladed knife to help it along. Leather in this condition usually comes up quite easily, but it is sometimes very fragile. Also, be careful not to stretch it -- if you do it won't fit right when you try to reattach it -- and be careful not to cut it or yourself. After cleaning the camera back and the underside of the leather, reattach the leather with contact cement.

Routine reconditioning also does wonders for camera cases and other leather accessories. Most older Exakta cases (VXIIa and before) are

various shades of brown, so you'll need brown dye and polish.

The leather on the camera bodies is glued in place and is not subjected to flexing and similar strains, but carry cases need to be supple and flexible or they will look bad and eventually separate at the hinge. This is where the leather conditioner is especially useful. When you acquire an old case, especially if it's dry, rub in a generous amount of Lexol and set it aside for a few days. Then rub in another, lighter coat. But be careful not to get any on the underside of the strap or on any other unfinished areas of the leather, because it will darken these areas permanently. (You need to be aware of this also when you use leather conditioner on bellows or other leather parts of antique cameras.) Then apply the dye as needed, and finally the polish. Ordinary paste polishes work fine on the smooth surfaces of carry cases.

Speaking of straps, don't expect any leather treatment to undo damage to the leather itself. Straps are often very weak from strain and twisting near the attachment points, and the leather hinge at the bottom front of a well-worn case may also be damaged and weak where the dried leather has been flexed. Treatment may make such areas look much better, but they will remain fragile.

John O. Schoenbeck

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Exakta Collecting Rule #1: No two Exaktas are quite alike, especially when you think they are.

Exakta Collecting Rule #2: If an Exakta has good, light-tight shutter curtains, the mechanism won't work.  
If the shutter mechanism works like new, the curtains leak light.

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