

DOES IT WORK?
OR
HOW NOT TO BUY AN EXAKTA IN A POKE

You're at a camera show, and you've finally squeezed through the milling throng to get to the dealer table where you've spotted an Exakta that seems to have your name on it. How do you make sure it's what you really want?

We'll assume it's not a long-sought model that you need to fill a gap, and we'll assume that you haven't yet simply made up your mind to buy it. So you need to evaluate this Exakta, and you need to know what to look for to give you a quick indication of its mechanical condition.

First, cock and fire the shutter on a fast speed. Do this gently, because if there is something wrong with the shutter you'll make it worse by forcing it, and the dealer won't be pleased with you either.

Does it fire properly? If so, fire it again at around 1/100 or 1/150, holding the camera up near your ear. Does the shutter make an odd, off-key clunking sound? This is a sure indication of shutter bounce, and while the camera may be worth buying it will need adjustment and possibly repair if you expect to use it, or if you want it to be just right.

Now it's time to look inside. Take off the lens and check the condition of the mirror. It's not unusual to find bright, clean mirrors, even on very old Exaktas, but all too often you'll discover that they've been rubbed, scratched, or worked on by a Neanderthal with hammer and pliers. And some mirrors are just plain dark, with areas of corrosion ranging from a few spots to the whole surface. Mirrors can be

replaced -- although you will probably not get an exact replacement for mirrors in older cameras -- and in many cases you can do this yourself. You probably wouldn't want to pass up a desirable Exakta only because of a corroded mirror anyway, but you should know what you're getting, and in most cases the dealer will make a price adjustment for such a defect.

Okay, now open the back, or remove it if it's an older model. What do the shutter curtains look like? Again, even very old Exaktas may have shutter curtains that look as dark and healthy as when they left the factory. Or do these curtains look thin and dry? Dry curtains will not be light-tight, and they will nearly always have thin areas. You can't always see these in the bright lights of the room where the show is taking place, but you can look for them in the capping (second) curtain by firing the shutter so that the mirror is up and out of the way, then putting your eye right up to the lens opening and waiting a minute or two for your eye to adjust. (Do this only if you don't mind having people look strangely at you.) Move the camera slightly, and if thin areas are present you should see them as dim patches of light.

You can also test for thins by shooting a roll of film. If thins are present you will see spots or patches on your pictures, light spots if you're using positive material such as slides or dark spots if you're using black and white negative film.

Shutter curtains which are dry and aged will also have wrinkles. A little waviness in the fabric is not

unusual, but if the material looks like it's been folded in the bottom of a suitcase you should not expect to make pictures with the camera.

Shutter curtains can be replaced, and sometimes it's worth doing, but the job -- like most Exakta repairs -- will usually cost more than the camera itself. Parts are not always available, and the repairman will often need to make new curtains from material which is sold for the purpose. On the other hand, if you plan to use the camera for display or just keep it as part of your Exakta collection, you probably won't worry about thin curtains. But, again, even if a defect doesn't matter you should know about it, especially since far too many cameras are sold at high prices as "mint" or "exc++" when in fact dry, thin shutter curtains make them unuseable.

While you've got the camera open you should check the operation of the slow/delay mechanism. Set the fast-speed dial to "Z" or "B" and cock the shutter. Now try to wind the slow/delay knob. It won't move? Fire the shutter to see if the mechanism has already been wound. (People have been known to leave a camera this way for years.) If the mechanism doesn't respond, it's obviously inoperative. This is not unusual for older Exaktas, but the price of the camera should reflect this defect.

Maybe you've been lucky enough to find a slow/delay mechanism that

works. Set the slow-speed dial to 12 seconds and fire the shutter. Does the shutter open as it should, stay open while you count slowly to twelve (don't worry about being too exact), and then close as it should? Try it at several speeds from 1 to 12 seconds.

Now set the dial to the delay speeds (red numbers) and wind it. When you fire the shutter you should hear the mechanism and you should see the mirror jump a short way to its intermediate stop. After about 6 seconds the mirror should go all the way up and the shutter should open for the speed that has been set. Try it at a few speed settings, and try it with the fast-speed dial set to 1/100 or so.

Note that even when the slow/delay mechanism works, one or two speed settings may not function properly. You're looking at a camera with some years on it, and it may need adjustment to work perfectly.

By now, you have a good indication of whether your Exakta is a jewel, a wreck, or, like most, somewhere in between. Your decision to buy it will also be influenced by its cosmetic condition (another subject entirely), by the lens or other accessories that come with it, by its price, and most of all by your frame of mind. In the final analysis, wasting your money is not a matter of paying too much for what you get, but of not knowing what you're getting.

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