

A Camera for the train Spotter

In 1953 Ihagee of Dresden took some bits from their illustrious Exacta, simplified and shortened the body, stirred in a touch of ingenuity, added a cheap lens and produced a real interchangeable lens, chest-level view-finder SLR which was not only reasonably priced but also very well made. As it was half an Exacta they gave it half a name - 'Exa'. One can see why they decided against 'Kta'!

The ingenious part of the Exa is that the shutter is the mirror is the shutter - if you see what I mean. There's a curved metal plate which acts as a shutter, on top of which is fixed a mirror. The whole thing is pivoted so that it can swing up and down; in fact it is probably the only real development of the shutter/mirror arrangement of the earliest SLRs.

Any railway enthusiast will be familiar with the levers used by the man in the signal box to change the points. The Exa has a similar lever placed to the left of the view-finder housing, only in this case you move it to change the speeds - all the way from B to 1/150 - not the points. So to take pictures and and play trains at the same time - Wow! According to a contemporary review in AP this delightful arrangement was also accurate in its speeds.

The supplied lens was either a Meyer Trioplan or a Ludwig Meritar. Both 50mm three-element f2.9, please note f2.9 not f2.8. Everybody knows you can't stretch a three element much beyond f3.5, so f2.9 is obviously a vast improvement over f2.8. Neither lens has PDS, FAD or any other complicated initials whizzing around inside them, just gentlemanly click-stops at judicious intervals. Both lenses, but particularly the Meritar (a misnomer if there ever was one) were regarded with disdain by reviewers of the time as very inferior bits of bottle. Yet both focus down to about 2 ft and that f2.9 gives a nice bright screen. Stop it down to f8 and it will match any box-camera you care to name.

In use it has a good, uncluttered finder (replace it with an Exacta pentaprism if you must), a magnifier with a rather badly designed spring to raise it, and a little chromed guard over the shutter button in case you press it by mistake. A wind of the knob brings up the screen and sets the shutter, and a push of the button is rewarded by a quiet, gentle, satisfying 'toomp'. None of the whizzes and clanks you get from your modern plastic marvels. Mind you, there's just the suspicion of a quiver, like a maidens tremble at her lovers touch, but it doesn't seem to show on the prints. This lack of camera shake is probably because the shutter - release is Exacta style, at 2 o'clock on the front plate, and a damned sensible place too if you ask me.

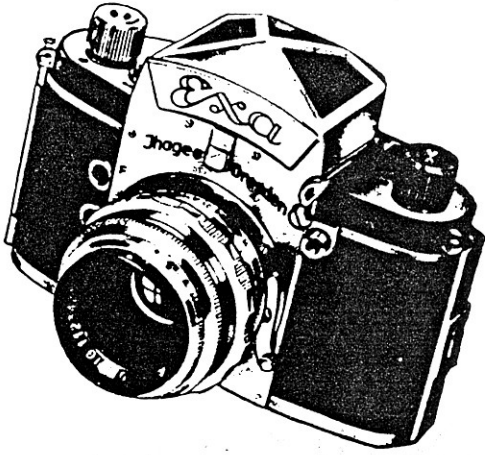
The Exa takes most of the Healeyflex's lenses and accessories(beware of cut-off on lenses of over 100mm though), has a pleasant, chunky appearance, is beautifully finished with deep, rich chrome, has a real non-plastic leather and well applied smooth satin chrome, none of you cheap glittery stuff. By 1956 those nasty people over the Berlin Wall were producing cheaper versions of the Contaflex and others were getting in on the act as well. To strike back Ihagee flattened the chest level finder, stuck a bit of leather on the top, introduced lever-wind and generally tidied it up a bit. They then replaced that elegantly scripted nameplate with an ugly silver-on-black-upper-case-print effort bearing the legend 'Exa IA'. Having ruined the look of the thing they then lowered the standard of construction and finish. Overcome with excitement by this piece of vandalism they built a conventional, permanent bump on top, replaced that lovely shutter/mirror with curtains to let the light through and had the cheek to name the resulting mediocrity 'Exa II'. Ihagees fortunes now touched their nadir because the Russians made a Zenith. Anyway, by 1960 the Exas and their contemporaries were all withered by the growing heat from the Rising Sun. Ah me and Lack-a-day!

But my little Exa, with viewfinder proudly raised, looks good on the shelf and is a joy to use. A small monument to the idiosyncrasy and individuality of days gone by. All this nostalgia at a current value of ten to twenty quid!

Threfor T. Neign

(To make amends for this excellently crafted in sult to someones pride and joy, there is more on Exas overleaf.....)

EXA!



1956 EXA



1965 EXA Ia

1965 EXA IIb



1965 EXA 500



OUTLINE OF EXA DEVELOPMENT

Date and model	Shutter/Film Wind	Logo	Identification Points
1951 Exa	1/25 - 1/150 + B lever and knob	Engraved double line script	2 pin Flash terminals V and E, interchangeable chest level finder
1956 Exa	"	"	PC Flash terminal F and X, finder as above
1963 Exa I	1/30 - 1/175 + B Combined knob	Block letters on black background	New body as Exa II. X only synch. Flatter, black leather covered chest level finder.
1965 Exa Ia	ditto speeds Combined lever	"	"
1959 Exa II	Focal plane 1/2 - 1/250 +B Combined lever	Engraved single script	Fixed prism plain fresnel screen, all Exa IIs X synch
1963 Exa IIa	"	"	Fixed prism rangefinder screen; rewind crank.
1965 Exa IIb	"	"	As above but with instant return mirror
1966 Exa 500	1/2 - 1/500 + B	"	

Notes: Dates are for year of introduction to this country.
Actual model dates are usually about one year earlier.
There are other minor variations (including logo) between
models which are not really classifiable.