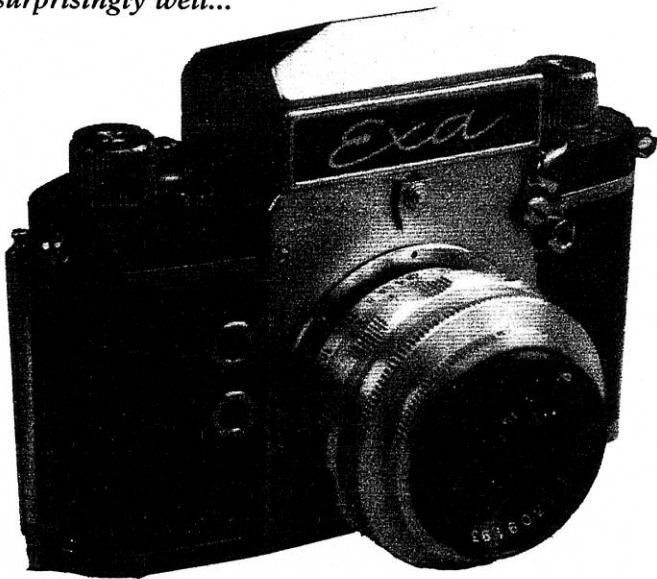


Back to Basics

Using an Exa camera

By Eric Lock

Small but perfectly formed — that's the Exa, made by the makers of Exakta in the 1960s. But how would one of these little SLRs match up to today's cameras? The answer is surprisingly well...



MY COLLECTING interest is mainly in 35mm cameras, leaning towards SLR cameras, of any make, roughly within the period 1950s to 1980s. In other words, like many other members of the Club, collecting the cameras they would have liked but could not afford, when starting out on the road to adult life.

A brief description, as there are some folk who may not have seen and handled this very small SLR camera, made in the early 1960s. And they are small, even by today's standard of small, electronic SLR cameras. The Exa was made by Ihagee, the Exakta manufacturer of Dresden, Germany. The early models looked quite like their bigger brothers, and those made since 1961 can be identified by the straight nameplate. This model seems to have been built to last forever and a day. Having a small but interesting group of group of Exa cameras and accessories I decided to use the most recent model I have obtained, which is also the oldest one. It was made in 1961 — the 6th version of the Exa — and has a modest speci-

Above: Exa type 6 of 1961 with standard 50mm f/2.9 Meritar lens and the pentaprism viewfinder

fication even for that period. This small camera is not the most perfect camera in existence, by a long way. It has more of the Heath Robinson look about it. That feeling, however soon vanished when I started using it.

Included in the outfit was a camera body complete with a Meritar 50mm f/2.9 standard lens, a waist level finder, plus a pentaprism, close-up lens, and bellows. To complete the outfit there was a Meyer-Optik Görlitz Orestor 135mm f/2.8 lens with lens hood and U.V. filter, all in good condition, plus a non-working 30mm Lydith wide angle lens, which had been dismantled and was nearly in bits.

Would the little Exa still work and what was the Meritar lens like in use? These were my first thoughts. With the question in mind, "Can they still turn out acceptable results?" I began to check that everything was working, to find that the Exa was similar to a modern SLR embodying all the main features, such as eye level reflex focus, interchangeable waist level finders, to eye level viewing. Other important points such as a synchronised focal plane shutter and interchangeable lenses were to be found on this 1961 camera. The only apparent problem was that the film wind and rewind knobs were very small.

The Exa in use.

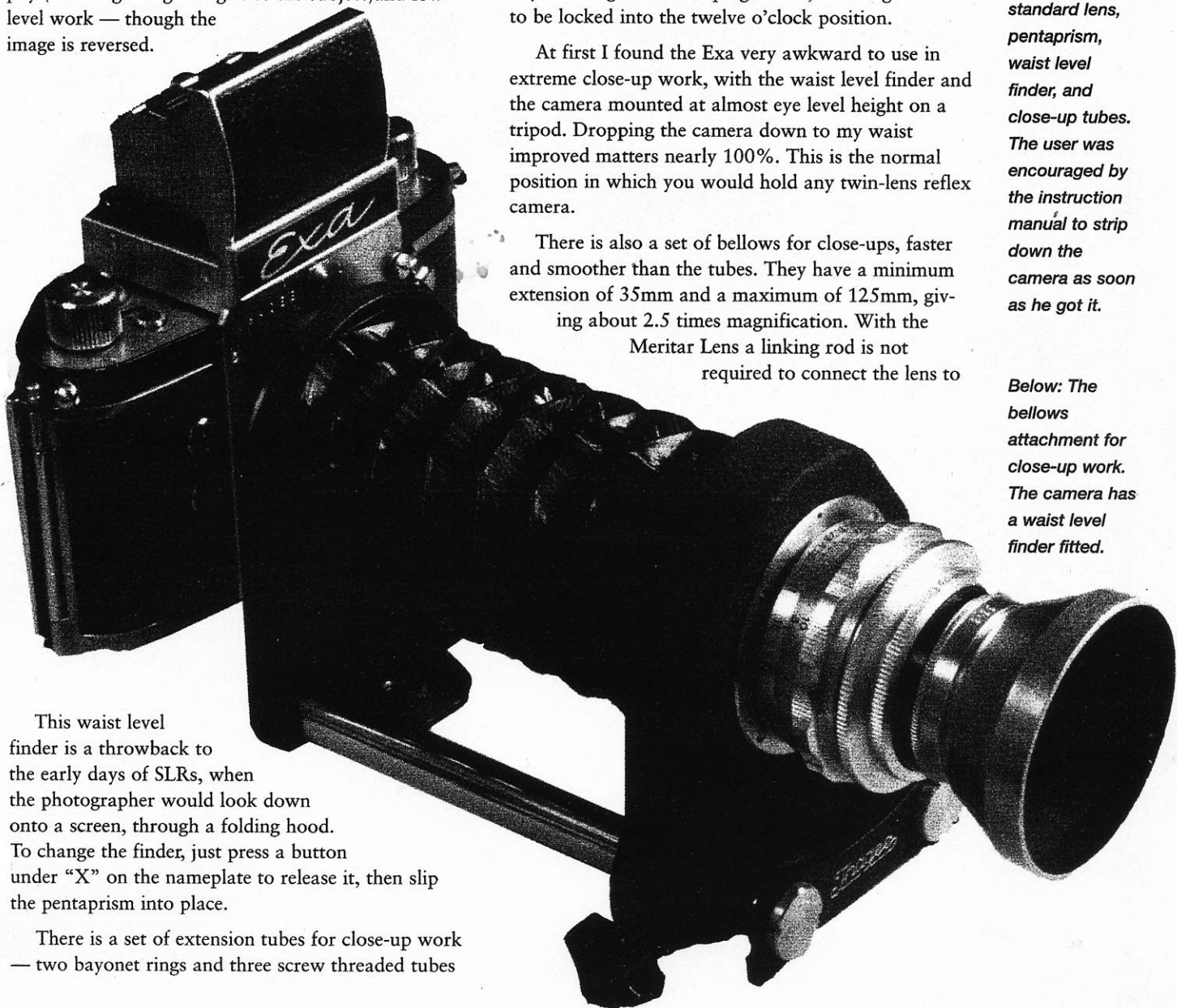
A dry run with an old film, to gain experience of operating the camera was time well spent. Changing the waist level folding hood for the pentaprism was practised a few times along with changing lenses. All this was like my Pentax LX.

So back to basic photography. As an Old Grey Hair, who has converted to slightly more modern equipment, I had to relearn the 1950s style of photography. Doing everything by the book, I was surprised how slow photography was with the left hand focus and shutter button positions and the right hand used for the manual film winding. (If you are right handed, place the camera on a tripod and use a cable release to fire the shutter).

After manually setting focus, shutter speeds, apertures and remembering how to use an old Weston

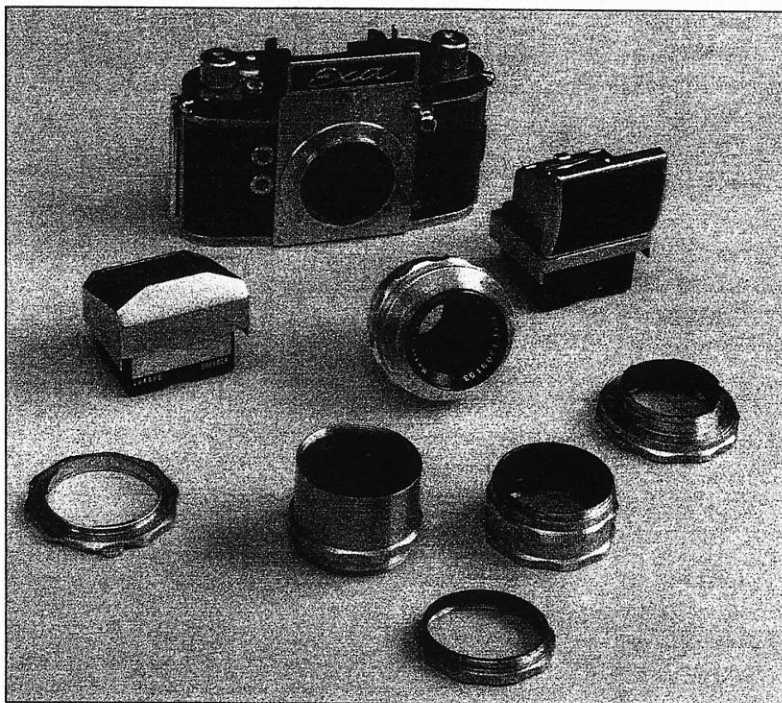
meter, I finally got around to dusting off the tripod. This first film proved that the Exa could produce excellent quality 6 x 4 inch photos, and the short period using the camera brought back some interesting insights as to how photography has changed since 1961.

The Meritar lens was a simple three-element optic made by E. Ludwig, (East Germany). With bayonet fitting, it is easy to remove after pressing the release catch. Made in 1950s the all-silver lens looks different to the 1960s version, which was silver and black check. The Meritar has a preset diaphragm, $f/2.9$ to $f/16$, with deep hooded front, focussing down to .30 inches. Having checked the aperture blades for stickiness or other gremlins, I found no faults, but was surprised how dim the viewfinder image was. Fifty years later, the lens is still capable of producing acceptable 6 x 4-inch colour prints, using the middle aperture range $f/6.6$ to $f/11$, and either waist level finder or pentaprism. When wearing glasses, the problem with a lot of viewfinders on modern cameras is not being able to see all four corners, but this was not so with the waist level finder or the pentaprism on this Exa. Waist level finders can be useful for candid photography (shooting at right angles to the subject) and low level work — though the image is reversed.



This waist level finder is a throwback to the early days of SLRs, when the photographer would look down onto a screen, through a folding hood. To change the finder, just press a button under "X" on the nameplate to release it, then slip the pentaprism into place.

There is a set of extension tubes for close-up work — two bayonet rings and three screw threaded tubes



— allow limited variation in close focusing. The rear bayonet ring has a clamping device, allowing the tube to be locked into the twelve o'clock position.

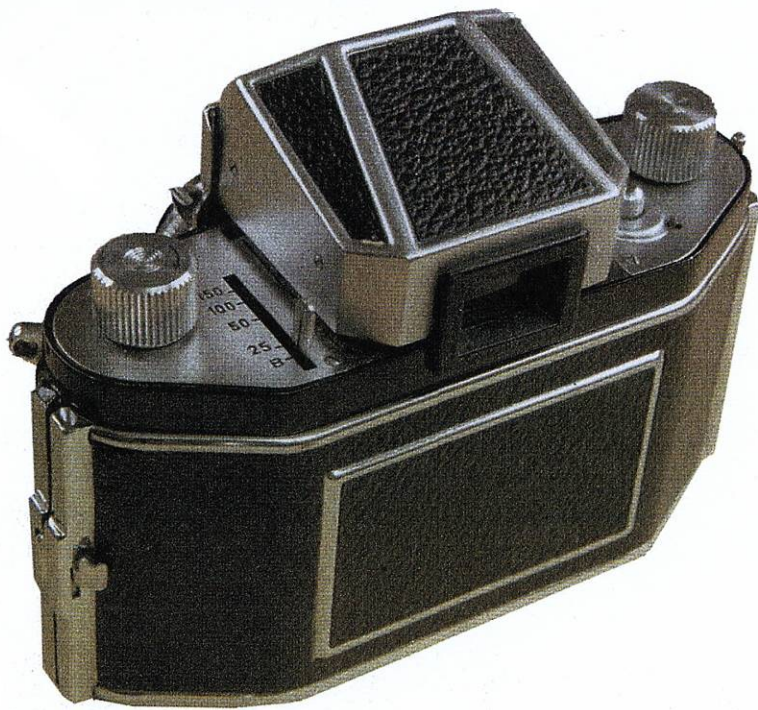
At first I found the Exa very awkward to use in extreme close-up work, with the waist level finder and the camera mounted at almost eye level height on a tripod. Dropping the camera down to my waist improved matters nearly 100%. This is the normal position in which you would hold any twin-lens reflex camera.

There is also a set of bellows for close-ups, faster and smoother than the tubes. They have a minimum extension of 35mm and a maximum of 125mm, giving about 2.5 times magnification. With the

Meritar Lens a linking rod is not required to connect the lens to

Above: Exa body with standard lens, pentaprism, waist level finder, and close-up tubes. The user was encouraged by the instruction manual to strip down the camera as soon as he got it.

Below: The bellows attachment for close-up work. The camera has a waist level finder fitted.



Above: Rear view — the shutter speed selection is quite basic

the shutter. If the lens in use has FAD (Fully Automatic Diaphragm), a linking rod has to be used. The official Exa name for this rod is “Autocouple Release Rod.”

Loading and unloading film.

On the left-hand side of the body is a small sliding catch. The camera back opens fully, allowing easy loading. Unlike today’s autoloader cameras, loading film into the Exa goes back to the Dark Ages, but a word of caution here, do check the metal pressure plate for any rough edges, before putting film in the camera.

Place film into the left-hand chamber, firmly insert film leader into the slot on the removable take-up spool. Make sure this spool is replaced firmly into the empty right hand chamber and has engaged the wind on knob. Film winding can also be from cassette to cassette. As the winding and

rewind knobs are very small, film winding is a slow process. To rewind the film when finished, first push the rewind button, on the right hand side of the viewfinder. There is no auto rewind and the only slight hint that something is happening is the rotating transport knob.

The shutter is a simple rotary device, with a restricted speed range of 1/150, to 1/25, plus brief time, operated by a selector lever at the side of the viewfinder, which felt very positive moving through the range of shutter speeds. The shutter has a release lock against unintentional tripping. There are two flash contacts on the body of the Exa — the lower electronic flash “X” contact closes 11 to 13 ms after the “F” contact.

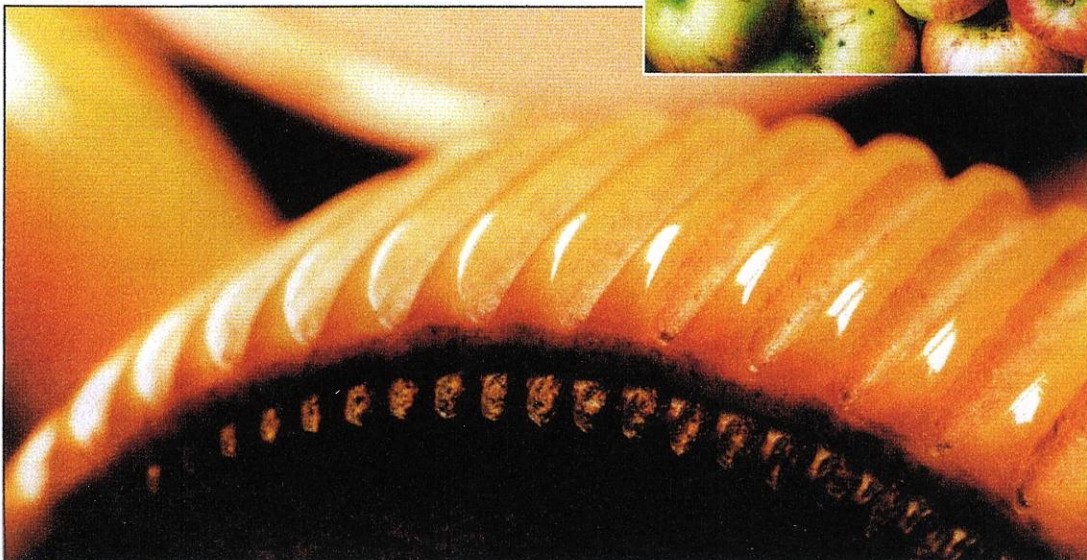
After changing the Meritar for the 135 mm Meyer-Optic Gorlitz Orestor f/2.8, some degree of cut-off was noticeable on two of my photographs. This is a classic sample of vignetting. The longest lens that may be used without vignetting is 100mm focal length.

To compare results of the Meritar lens, I took a couple of photos using the Domiplan 50mm f/2.8 lens. The verdict — no real difference on a mass-produced 6 x 4-inch colour print, at least to the naked eye. Now the experts will start shooting me, however that is all the public used the camera for. Not always 12 x 16-inch prints even in the 1960s.

The Exa is not as versatile as cameras made within the last 20 years and could not be pulled out of a pocket as easily as today’s compact lightweight SLR. But the modest Exa could be used, in effect, as a extra film magazine to the larger Exakta camera, I have enjoyed using the camera, which is the main thing, other than collecting them. The little Exa, was not a camera to buy today and throw away in 12 months time. If you have one, or can beg or borrow, use it.



Above: Apples — taken with Exa, Meritar and pentaprism, by daylight



Left: The focusing wheel of a pair of opera glasses using standard lens, waist level hood, and the bellows. The subject in the frame is about 12mm across — more than life size on the negative.