

The Kine

Exakta:

A Sixtieth Anniversary

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At the Spring Fair, held in March at Leipzig in 1936, Ihagee introduced a new concept in 35mm. camera design - a single lens reflex (SLR). It is now generally agreed that this was the first 35mm. SLR and pre-dated its rival claimant, the Russian 'Cnopm' (Sport) camera.

The 1930s was an era of remarkable technical, engineering and design progress in all mechanical products: Between 1932 and 1934 came the Leica II, the first Contax and the Rolleiflex Standard, which, between them were to revolutionise photography. Almost as important was the first small rollfilm SLR - the Exakta, introduced in 1933, and using 127-rollfilm. But the real genius of its brilliant young designer, Karl Nucherterlein, was to develop this rollfilm camera to become the first 35mm. SLR which, with hindsight, can be seen as eventually developing into a more influential camera than the other three landmark designs.

It is only when closely comparing a 127 Exakta with the Kine that it becomes obvious that the 35mm. camera is not an original design, but a development of the latter instrument. Apparently the idea of converting the 127 camera to accept 35mm. film began in 1932 when the design was still in its developmental stage. Many major characteristics of the Kine Exakta were inherited from its rollfilm forebear, notably the focal plane shutter, speed controls and, most importantly, its film loading and transport system. It is this latter characteristic, which no other 35mm. camera manufacturer ever copied, which irrevocably brands the Kine for what it is - a rollfilm camera that uses 35mm. film.

From the introduction of the folding rollfilm camera in the late nineteenth century the vast majority of the breed loaded and transported film via a knob or key situated on the top right-hand end of the body. This was an eminently sensible and practical system. The user held the camera in the left hand whilst winding on the film with the right hand and observing the next negative number slowly appear in the little red window. Such was the traditional method used in the 127 Exakta, only instead of a knob or key a very long throw lever was employed. The very clever innovation was that it also cocked and set the focal plane shutter, thus overcoming the perpetual, 'Did I wind on the film before or after taking a photograph?', syndrome. The fast speed setting ring was adjacent to the lever and the slow speed control on the opposite end of the top-plate.

This was the system which was transferred to the new Kine plus an added bonus that sprocketed film allowed exact negative transport so that a top plate film counter could replace the dreaded red window at the back and that the lever could become a true 'single wind-on' with a shorter throw. This, in turn, meant that winding-on and (as the fast speed setting wheel was under the wind-on lever) shutter speed setting, had to be operated by the left hand with the camera held horizontally rather than that being managed by the right hand with the instrument held vertically. This led to much unnecessary spillage of words and fallacious arguments as to the Kine being carefully designed as a 'left-handed' camera, when this characteristic was merely an inheritance from the older design.

The transfer of the focal-plane shuttered 'heart' of the 127 Exakta, along with many of its fittings and catches must have considerably reduced development costs. Even the lens lock was similar to that of the infinity lock on the 127. But the major step forward was the Kine's viewfinder system. For such a small camera, the 127's SLR finder was surprisingly good, but that fitted to the Kine must have been a revelation. Based on a one-inch thick condenser and patented by Nucherlein on 13 November 1934, the chest-level viewfinder was amazingly bright, even by today's high standards. The early small round focusing magnifier, taken straight from the 127, was rapidly made obsolete by a proper rectangular magnifier which covered most of the screen. Many owners were wise enough to replace the early round magnifier with the later, more efficient, rectangular design which is probably why collectors seem prepared to spend at least an extra £250 over the price of a later or converted model to obtain the rarer round one.

How did this landmark camera match up against its rival 35mm. designs? Well, it had many fair criticisms from the Leica and Contax brigade as to its lack of speed in operation and the characteristic 'left/right' SLR viewfinder movement and the TLR fans derided the tiny 35mm. negative. Yet Leitz and Zeiss had to design very expensive additions to enable their products to cope with the close range photography the Exakta managed with ease and the TLR could barely manage such photography at all with its parallax problems.

Looking at costs by referring to the 1939 Wallace Heaton *Blue Book*, we find that the Leica IIIb with f/3.5 Elmar cost £34, the Contax II with f/3.5 Tessar was £40.10 and the Kine Exakta with f/3.5 Tessar £34.50. The latest Rolleiflex, incidentally, also with f/3.5 Tessar, cost £31.25. So, the Kine was Leica priced, but cheaper than the Zeiss (what was not?). Production figures for the rangefinder model Leicas between 1937-1939 were 87655 whilst pre-war Kine Exaktas numbered 36,000 odd. Again, this is probably an unfair comparison, as the Leica was an already established design.

What is interesting is that the addition of either the Leitz or Zeiss reflex attachments would more than double the price of the cameras, whilst the Kine merely needed an extension tube or bellows. Both rivals advertised their reflex attachments as suitable for long range lenses but seemed less interested in really close-range work, a task for which the Exakta was eminently suited. This, coupled with the Exakta's extraordinary range of speeds from 12 to $\frac{1}{1000}$ second as against 1 to $\frac{1}{1000}$ (or a dubious $\frac{1}{1250}$) second explains why the main customers for the Kine came from universities, laboratories, hospitals and commercial photographers who found it an ideal tool for record work.

Despite the Kine's convertible eye-level viewfinder, there is no doubt that, at the time, the rangefinder eye-level camera instituted the instant 'journalistic' type of photography and its fast lenses created new opportunities in sport and theatre photography. Out-of-doors the necessity to stop-down the lens to taking aperture and the slowness of screen focusing as compared to that of the rangefinder counted heavily against the Kine. It is interesting to read the occasional querulous letter asking why Kine Exakta pictures so rarely appeared in their magazines. One suspects that although the apparent compositional advantages of looking down at a landscape formatted viewing and the Kine's incredibly bright focusing screen would be attractive to the many 'pictorialist' photographers of the time, the quality obtainable

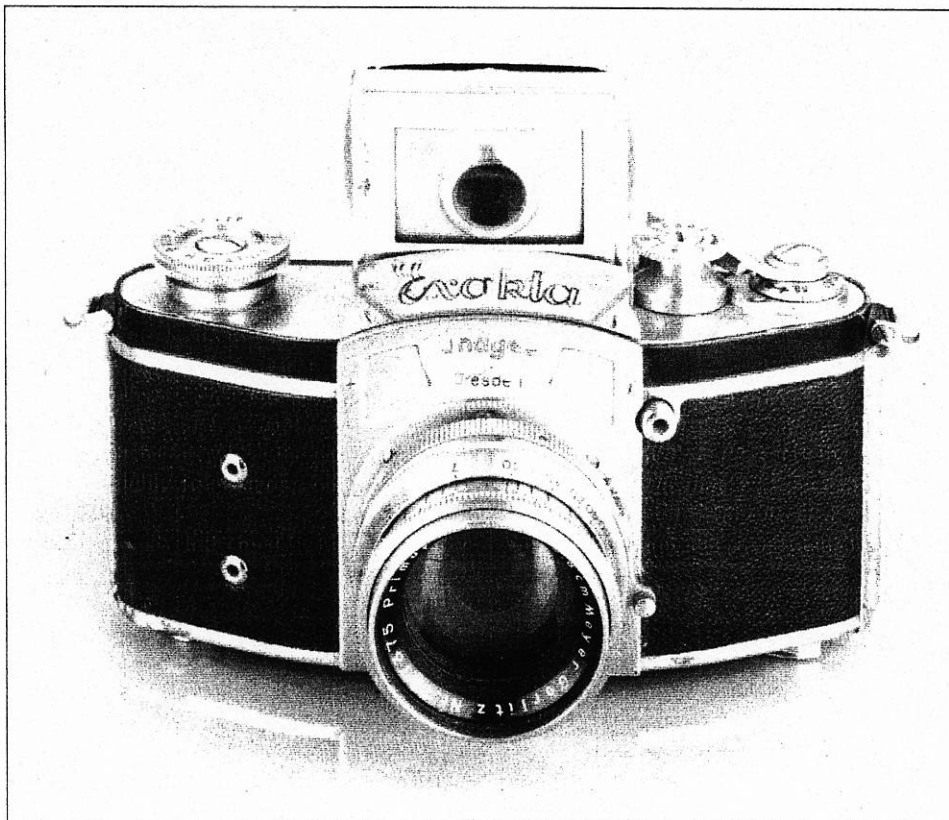
from contemporary 35mm. film when enlarged would not have satisfied them. It is something of a shock to read that even the great Zeiss Ikon only claimed that their Contax pictures were 'capable of enlargement to postcard size'. However, 1934 saw the coming of Kodachrome and the projected colour transparency which had obvious attractions for lecturers, teachers and demonstrators - another plus for the Ihagee camera.

Decades were to pass before improved film, diaphragm control, screen focusing aids

and the instant-return mirror negated the rangefinder's lead. But, for contemporary users the Exakta's unmatched flash synchronisation again enabled it to be superior in standardised record photography which took place indoors and needed controlled and repeatable lighting conditions. Furthermore, remembering the incredibly (to us) slow film speeds of the time, its unparalleled range of slow speeds down to twelve seconds must have been a boon.

It became apparent with the introduction of the 127 camera and even more so with the Kine that Ihagee were seriously determined to provide a 'system' cameras to match the Leica, albeit directed towards a different market. A steady stream of lens makers supplied an increasing range of lenses for the cameras, whilst the parent firm produced specialised attachments ranging from stereo, microscope and flash to endoscopes.

The basic design, with surprisingly little modification, lasted for



some thirty years until 1969. During the 1939/45 war, Karl Nucherterlein proved uncooperative to the Nazi regime, was dismissed from his post, made to join the German army as a private and was killed on the Russian front.

At first, at least for amateurs, the camera was not as successful as the 127. Its time was to come with post-war developments. Today, for us collectors, the Kine Exakta remains a highly desirable and historically important camera that is still very usable - except that, for convenience, fitting a modern aperture controlled lens makes life a lot easier! For the final comment on this first 35mm SLR, here are some results from a questionnaire about the cameras completed by one hundred photographers whose work was considered for the first issue of the Focal Press *Exakta Guide*. It should be pointed out that the users were of both the 127 and the Kine. In view of modern comments on these cameras, some of these results are most unexpected!

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The Exakta camera - For and Against

Features of the Exakta most liked

Adaptability for all types of work from tele- to micro-photography	88
Accuracy in focussing with extension hood & magnifier	60
Ease in holding & focusing	60
No need for special finders. Correct image for any lens & extension	55
Multi-speed shutter	25
Ability to compose on reflex image	22
Controlling depth of focus on reflex image	7
Shutter release on camera front	4

Characteristics most disliked

Inconvenience for upright pictures	82
1/2 second shutter speed missing	18
Slow speeds seem inaccurate (1/10)	15
Slow speeds superfluous	10
The 'kick' of the focal plane shutter	10
Slowness in readying for fast action	7
No parallax in frame finder	2

%	Subjects where the Exakta inconvenienced it's users	%
	Vertical shapes	82
	Following moving objects	11
	Synchronised flash with fast speeds	2

%	Subjects where Exakta proved helpful	%
	Portraiture	92
	Copying	91
	Close-up	87
	Children	52
	Landscapes	50
	Telephotography	42
	Low viewpoint	23
	Nature	18
	Table top	12
	Living microscopic animals	9
	Medical	4
	Industrial	4
	Flash	3