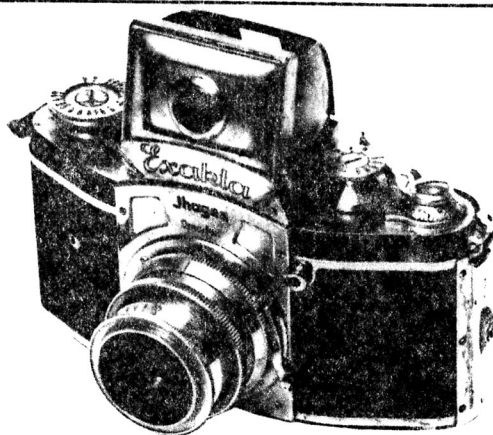


The Exaktas...



The first model of the Kine Exakta of 1936 is distinguished by a round magnifier in the finder hood. This landmark camera was the forerunner of modern SLRs.

landmark cameras in quantity

By Norbert Nelson

If the definition of a landmark camera is one which affected the basic design direction of those that followed, I doubt any camera more clearly qualifies for this accolade than the Kiné Exakta. Yet, these capable and interesting instruments have not captured the imagination and interest of camera collectors. Perhaps, if you have the luck to find the first model with the round magnifier showing in the viewing hood, you have a collectable in the \$100-plus range, but later models are simply "used cameras," out of style and priced for their still considerable utility value.

The term Kiné is, of course, German for ciné, since the camera used 35mm motion picture film. It is thus distinguished from its year-older brother, the V.P. (vest-pocket) Exakta, so called because it employed 127, or vest pocket, film. Consider these qualifications for a 1936 camera: 35mm standard film load, film advance coupled to shutter winding, built-in flash synch for F, P and M bulbs, bright, through-the-lens parallax-free viewing, shutter speeds from 12 seconds to 1/1000, delayed action (variable timer), and, perhaps most important, a bayonet mount which accepted lenses in their own, complete focusing mounts!

This extraordinary design was the first 35mm production model SLR and it clearly set the trend for those that have followed. The Kiné Exakta, which has become the Exakta I (never so marked) only because it was followed by the model II, etc., was made with few significant changes until 1946.

The story of Ihagee, the camera's manufacturer, is as interesting as the camera

itself. Ihagee is an acronym for *International Handels Gesellschaft*, which means International Trading Company. Herr Steenhagen, its founder, was an enterprising Dutchman who, initially, simply contracted with various photographic equipment manufacturers to produce cameras and lenses under his own trade name. The Dresden-based company prospered and produced a number of interesting designs of its own. Quality was generally good, although the cameras lacked the fine finish associated with prewar German cameras. While the Exakta was certainly the company's most important camera design, others like the Parvola, Serian Reflex, Patent-Klapp Reflex and Duplex models would all command higher prices today! As usual, the successful design is the least valuable. Steenhagen, at a point, did buy Ernemann as a cornerstone of his manufacturing activities.

It should be remembered that 35mm film, despite the herculean efforts made by Leitz to promote its high quality capabilities, remained essentially an amateur format until well into World War II. The films available, and the chemical processes to develop them, simply could not produce the desired detail available in larger formats. Thus, with the coming of the war, production on the 35mm Exakta was halted and shifted to making the 120 Exakta for the German army. Reportedly, most of these rare larger and highly collectible Exaktas that were produced, were made for the military. Thus, when the war ended, there was a large stock of parts for the Kiné Exakta. Those parts that were not available were hurriedly put into produc-

tion and cameras began to roll out of Ihagee once again. One of the parts made in haste was the nameplate and the Exakta misspelling appeared on many "I" models and on a few early model II cameras before it was corrected.

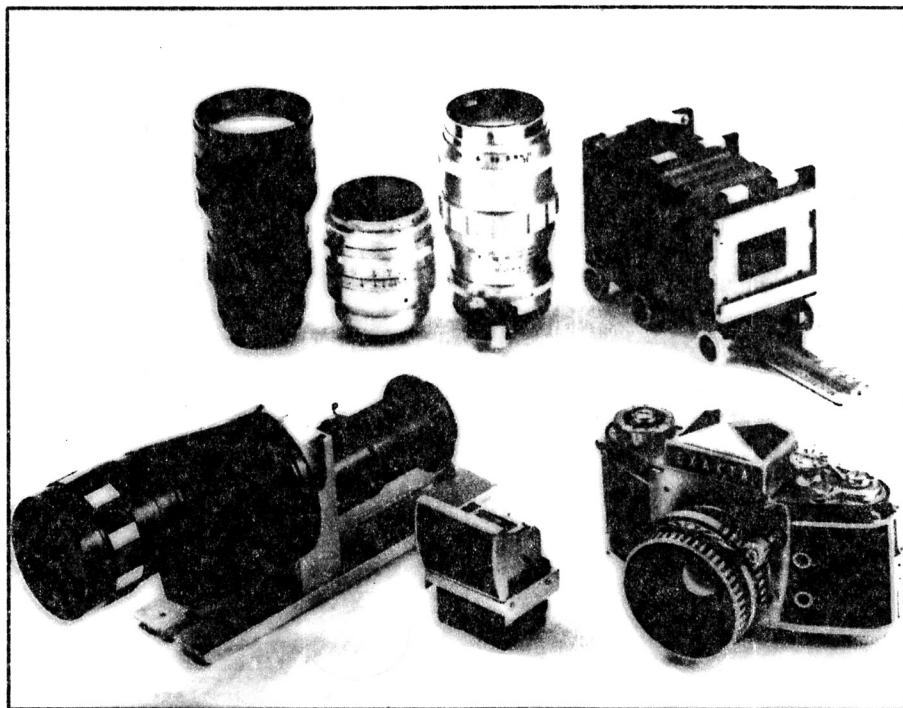
In 1949, the model II was introduced. Its most recognizable change was a protective cover over the magnifier in the focusing hood. It was marked with the model designation II. The waist-level finder was still fixed, but an eye-level prism finder was introduced which slipped over the folding hood and re-reversed the image. We now had the eye-level 35mm SLR!

Before the Exakta II made its appearance, the first competition entered the field with the Alpa, made in Switzerland in 1947. However, a special situation kept the Exakta selling briskly. After the war, Germany had to pay reparations to the Allies. East Germany owed the Russians reparations. The Exaktas were shipped to Poland in huge quantities as payment. Obviously, there was a limit to the number of 35mm cameras Poland could absorb, so the Poles, in turn, exported them. The U.S. was a prime market, where they sold briskly in the \$125 range. Originally, the cameras were equipped with an uncoated, 50mm f/3.5 Zeiss Tessar lens with standard diaphragm (the pre-set diaphragm was a U.S. innovation). These were made in Jena, Germany, which was in the Eastern zone.

By 1951, the Exakta V appeared with a standard, interchangeable eye-level prism finder. It added a second set of flash contacts for the new X synch electronic flash units. Interchangeable focusing screens,

Probably more different lenses were made for the Exakta than for any other 35mm SLR. All models accept the early Exakta lenses and lens mount accessories. Finders and screens were in-

terchangeable from the Model V on. Because of the Exakta's current lack of popularity, lenses and accessories are often great bargains, and the system can probably rival any other.



cluding the split-image rangefinder type, became available. Pre-set lenses were used with this model and the excellent f/2 58mm Biotar offered a popular price lens of speed and exceptional quality. A year later, the VAREX, or VX as it was known in the U.S., added the convenience of a film-transport warning signal, a film speed indicator and improved frame counter; and pre-set auto lenses began to come into use. By then the 35mm SLR race was on, and Exakta quickly fell behind in the battle for commercial acceptance.

Alpa had introduced a prism reflex in 1950, but, because of high price, was never a strong competitor. Zeiss and other West German manufacturers had apparently been seduced by the shutter makers into designs like the Contaflex, using between-the-lens, leaf-type shutters and thereby severely limiting adaptability of their SLRs. The Contax D, also known as Pentacon, Consol and other trade names, entered the market with a built-in eye-level prism in 1954. Despite mechanical problems, its slick design and features coupled with an under-\$100 tag captured a significant part of the amateur market. However, this was another East German product. By late 1954, the Asahiflex was on the U.S. market and began to establish a reputation for quality from Japan. While Exakta was marketing the Auto VX in 1957, Pentax, Miranda and others entered the marketplace with no-blackout, instant-return mirrors, lighter body designs and excellent lenses at very low prices. From East Germany the Edixa and Practica joined the Pentacon in under-

\$100 promotional ranges. By 1961, Japan had clearly established its design superiority. A directory of that year lists 56 35mm SLRs, over 20 of which were from Japan. Many offered instant-return mirrors and built-in or coupled light metering. Exakta waited almost a decade to introduce these innovations in acceptable form.

Back to the Steenhagen saga. The founder returned to Holland after World War II. As a manufacturer, he had apparently been as progressive in his personnel policies as in his design predilections. Employees in his organization had, for many years, been given stock as bonuses. Thus, at the end of the war, he spent years advertising to contact former employees in Germany and buying up the now worthless stock. When he had acquired 50 percent of his stock, under German law he could make the decisions necessary to reconstitute the company in the Western zone and begin collecting royalties on Ihagee and Exakta cameras which reached the West. He then moved the company to Frankfurt and began, apparently encouraged by some large camera merchants in Berlin, to produce a hand-made camera. This was the Exakta Real, generally regarded as a total failure and a mechanical botch job.

The Exakta VXTL, made in 1973, was the last of the Exaktas of classic shape and bench-made quality. Quality, especially of finish, appears to have slipped steadily after the V model, but the cameras still performed very well. The cheaper Exa and Exakta 500 cameras, which were exported from the Eastern zone at ridiculously low prices, never met the quality standard of

the Exaktas and pulled down the image of these fine cameras. The Exakta RTL from Dresden was the last Exakta production from that location. It employed a metal shutter, very much like the Japanese Copal Square, and was a very decent performer. It took the Japanese, however, to put the Ihagee logo and the Exakta nameplate back on a high quality, adaptable instrument: the current Exakta Twin TL. This excellent contemporary SLR has the measurable advantage of taking, with an adapter, all the Exakta lenses ever made, and that probably means more variety than was ever produced for any other 35mm camera!

I've used a number of Exaktas in my time, and I've owned a few. I like them. Although they lacked the velvet smoothness of a Leica, they proved rugged, dependable, highly flexible cameras capable of absolutely top-quality work with good lenses. They're worth considering now as usable instruments available at low prices, and my guess is that they're an important collectible-to-come. First, as mentioned, there are innumerable lenses out there for these cameras: everything from Angenieux retrofocus wide-angles to teles in the 500mm and longer ranges were made in Exakta mounts! Macro quality, or high speed can be bought in Exakta-mount lenses for peanuts today, especially if you can live with a conventional iris or preset lens. And there are accessories! Just to list a few, consider:

Stereo attachments with a binocular finder.

Copy stands and focusing stages.

Microscope and telescope attachments.

Specialized medical equipment.

An early selenium cell meter measured the light in the camera for close-ups.

Finders of all types, and screens for them, even the Magnear finder which used Exakta camera lenses for varying degrees of finder magnification!

In brief, for the gadget-happy collector who really wants to spin out the challenge of a "complete" outfit, I can suggest that if he admits non-Ihagee products to his collection, it can keep him busy for the rest of his life, and if he's just into "house-brand" accessories, he still will have many years of aggressive collecting before him.

For the user, almost collector, the Exakta system probably offers adaptability to rival any modern system, save a few recent technical developments.

All in all, the familiar Exakta system should offer some interesting hunting and satisfying using! □

This article could not have been written without the considerable input of Mr. Carl Seymour of Seymour's, New York. As an Exakta specialist for the past 30 years, his fund of knowledge and anecdotal material on the breed is almost endless, and charmingly delivered. He still runs a fascinating "Exakta Store" and publishes a catalogue full of many odd and wonderful things.