

THE PRAKTISIX II



A REVIEW

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The earlier model of this camera was reviewed in full in this Journal, January 4, 1963, and it is interesting to survey the 6 × 6 cm roll film single lens reflex field in the intervening two years. This in fact is a brief task, since apart from the appearance of the model forming the subject of this present review, there has been no progress. It is a curious fact that although many professional photographers regard themselves as being forced into 35 mm photography despite their inclination to 6 × 6 cm work by the manoeuvrability of the cameras and the easy interchangeability of lenses and accessories, there is still a dearth of 6 × 6 cm SLR's. The twin lens reflex field is of course very fully and ably represented by West German and Japanese production.

The absence of a wide range of choice in the 6 × 6 cm roll film SLR models may be somewhat due to the economics of manufacture. In turn this means that the camera will not compete with 35 mm SLR's in the mass amateur market and sales will be restricted to professionals; therefore since fewer will be made, the price will remain high. In view of this the Praktisix has always been a most interesting camera, since its price is well within the advanced amateur's pocket, being less than that of very many 35 mm SLR's, in addition to providing the professional with a very enviable specification. One

of the debatable points about 6 × 6 cm SLR's is over the type of shutter employed. If a focal plane shutter is used, there will be restrictions on flash synchronisation, but there is a great gain in reduction of price of interchangeable lenses over those using mid-lens shutters. The mid-lens shutter SLR gains in latitude of flash synchronisation, but has the disadvantage of much higher priced interchangeable lenses. On balance, so long as the focal-plane shutter is an efficient and reliable one, and unless a great deal of work is being done with fill-in flash, the focal plane 6 × 6 cm SLR is as preferable as the focal plane 35 mm SLR.

General Features

The overall dimensions of the Praktisix II remain identical with those of the earlier model—165 mm wide, 120 mm long including lens, either Tessar or Biometar, and 117 mm in height. The weight is 44 oz. The identical die casting is used as in the earlier camera, and all external features remain as before. In one or two details of styling, the new camera shows a somewhat sharper eye for elegance than the earlier. For example the milled thumb grip on the leverwind is now part black anodised, as is the head of the delayed action lever, and the push button which opens the focusing hood. One

other detail in which the improvement is of somewhat greater importance is that the shutter speeds are now engraved on the shutter speed dial which moves in click stops. On the earlier model they were inked on so that some users found that they became indistinct if they came into contact with grease and some organic solvents. Apart from such details, the later model can be distinguished by the name Praktisix II on the scutcheon.

In reviewing the earlier model, the writer queried whether the design of the thumbgrip on the transport lever might not be bettered, however with the new model the designers have decided to stick with the original design. The writer remains unrepentant however, and now that an improved pentaprism is available, a longer lever shank with a short stand-off would seem a possible improvement. The leverwind has to do much more work than that on a 35 mm SLR, and in winding on with the Praktisix there comes a slightly awkward change of grip midway in the 270° sweep. Operating at eye level is quite simple, but a small stand-off would give a better pick up and grip at the beginning of the lever wind stroke, allowing quicker shooting. Despite these criticisms, most users would find the Praktisix the quickest in action of all 6 × 6 cm SLR's, handling in this respect very similarly to a 35 mm camera.

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Film transport is semi-automatic, the arrows on the '20 paper leader being lined with a white dot on the side of the film gate. Then, the back having being closed, a small chrome headed button on the back of the camera just below the leverwind is pushed to spring back the counter to zero. A red dot shows in the window, and the lever is then given four cycles, releasing the shutter each time, whereupon No. 1 will appear in the counter window. After twelve exposures an E appears, and the film is now wound off.

Camera Interior

A sliding catch on the left-hand side is pulled down to open the hinged camera back. Care should be taken not to slam the back too haphazardly, as the flange may jam the wrong side of the light-tighting recess. Spools of film can be inserted rapidly, the lower pivot on both sides being spring loaded. It is much easier to load the Praktisix if the camera itself is on a neck strap, rather than when it is used hung by the ever-ready case. The latter method necessitates unscrewing the fairly heavy camera and holding it in the hand with the back flapping open whilst the take-up spool is switched over, a role of film inserted, its band broken and the leader pulled across to the take up spool. The operation is much simpler and swifter if the hands are free for loading the camera, rather than if they have to hold it as well as fiddle with the film.

The film track on the Praktisix II remains as before with the ten offset diamond shaped studs providing the register plane. One of the important advantages of the Praktisix is the way in which the film tracks flat. It runs straight across from spool to spool with no sharp turns. The pressure plate is well sprung with air vent grooves. An interesting feature of the interior of the Praktisix is that the film speed reminder dial visible on the outside of the camera back is operated from the interior. This means that it cannot be disturbed accidentally once the back is closed, but it also means that the operator, if he wishes to use this facility, must remember to reset the dial before closing the back.

The dark chamber of the Praktisix remains, as before, roomy and well blacked out to prevent internal reflections.

Viewing

The Praktisix II has not yet gone over to an instant return mirror now standard on 35 mm SLR's, the introduction of which into 6 × 6 cm SLR's presents certain difficulties. The mirror is a long one, to provide maximum efficiency

with long focal length lenses, and flips up into a velvet light trap. There is a remarkable minimum of mirror jar, considering the size of the mechanism involved.

The Praktisix II retains the plain unimpeded ground-glass screen of the earlier model. In fact the screen is the underside of a condenser lens, which provides excellently even illumination into the corners. It is not generally known that the focusing screen of the Praktisix is interchangeable. The makers have five special screens in their list. These include a flat—i.e. without condenser top—ground-glass screen, and one with a crossed-wedge range-finder.

The waist-level focusing hood is interchangeable with a pentaprism, and either finder is removed by pulling it sharply back against a spring clip, and then lifting clear. With no finder in position, full access is obtained to the focusing screen, and attachment of special purpose custom built focusing accessories is very simple. The waist level finder is automatically erected by pushing the opening catch, and holds itself away as it is pushed down. There is a sportsfinder opening flap in the front, and a focusing magnifier swivels down to give a full field view of the focusing screen. The hood offers good protection for the screen, and there is no difficulty in focusing with it in bright surrounding light. The pentaprism is a weighty addition to the camera, but in East Germany the improved model which has now been available for some time is very widely used. The screen shows slightly less than will appear on the exposed frame, providing the so-called safety factor. This amounts to about three inches extra all round at a subject distance of six feet. The film gate measures 55.5 × 55.5 mm.

The Shutter

The difficulties which have been encountered in designing and putting into production an efficient and durable focal plane shutter for any format larger than 35 mm are well known. Even with 35 mm cameras, some of the best makes are far less accurate after some months hard working than is realised. The writer is fortunate in having his own shutter speed test equipment, and consequently is in a position to observe the behaviour of the shutter in an individual camera over a long period of time. Out of the wide range of his own and review equipment he has found no focal plane shutter which has retained an accurate 1/1000th or 1/500th over a period of months. The average drop in the better quality camera is to around 1/700th and 1/350th second

respectively. Such differences are of course of little importance in practice, the important thing being that the speed given should be consistent. With the better quality camera, once the shutter has settled down, consistency can usually be maintained for a year or two according to the degree of usage. One of the best shutters the writer has come across was in the earlier model of the Praktisix reviewed in 1963. This particular sample was used for nine months to give the shutter an opportunity of settling down, and even after this period the shutter was accurate to within $\pm 15\%$ —never more than some 1/6th stop faster or slower. Some correspondents then expressed dissatisfaction with the Praktisix shutter which could be traced sometimes to the purchase of well-used secondhand samples, and in other cases the model purchased was an earlier type without the shutter improvements of the one then current.

The upshot of it all seems to be that owing to the greater demands placed upon mechanism of a 6 × 6 cm focal plane shutter, it is advisable, if the camera is put to hard professional usage, to have the shutter tuned and served say every year or two. In this way any deterioration induced by hard use can be checked in time, and if there is stretching of the tapes or any other factor influencing the speeds creeping in, this can be put right. The same advice naturally holds good with 35 mm focal plane shutter cameras.

The writer has raised this point in the light of personal experience, since the efficiency of focal plane shutters is a continual debating point. The shutter in the Praktisix II is described as an improved design, but curiously enough the sample tested did not start out with the same remarkable consistent accuracy over the whole range of speeds as the earlier model, but after the same period of time—about nine months—it settled down with its slower speeds remaining very accurate up to the 1/30th, with a slow 1/60th—about 1/48th, a 500th about 1/325th, and the 1000th at about 1/700th. Parallelism of the slit travel was perfect, and figures for beginning centre and end of travel showed only a 2 per cent variation. A spot test made on another sample obtained from a dealer gave better figures.

Since the appearance of the model II, a large number of queries for a review of the camera have arrived at this office, and invariably the question of the shutter is raised, as is the case also with verbal comment. Consequently any review which skirted this question would fall short in the one point on which information from would-be purchasers is required. Whilst in

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East Germany for the Autumn Leipzig Fair, the writer noted that the Praktisix II was the most widely used camera amongst press photographers and made a number of inquiries. In each case the answer was that the earlier model had been found variable in shutter efficiency, but that the press fraternity were now quite satisfied with the model II.

The shutter is speeded from 1 sec to 1/1000th with 'B', and flash setting at about 1/20th second. Speeds are set by a continuously rotating click stop dial on the left-end of the top plate. Synchronisation is X type for electronic flash and short burning flash bulbs, and 1/8th second for long burning bulbs. The flash contacts worked efficiently throughout.

Lens fitting

The lens flange is part of the camera body casting, which ensures the strength necessary to hold some of the heavy long focal length lenses used with the Praktisix—such as the Novoflex lenses—without distorting the body. The lens fitting itself is of possibly the best type of all—a triple bayonet type with a locking collar. The lens is faced up to the camera flange with a locating stud fitting in a recess in the flange. It is locked in position by turning a large milled collar which locates on the bayonet pads on the lens mount. With this method there is no rotation of the rotating surfaces, and consequently no wear whatsoever. Also the outside locking ring forms the best possible assurance of elimination of sag in the mounting of long heavy lenses. The distance from lens flange to film plane is 75 mm, and the throat diameter is 60 mm, allowing a wide range of lenses to be adapted to the camera. Bayonet fitting attachments can be simply made for special purposes. The distance between the forward edge of the mirror and the locating surface of the lens flange as the mirror flips up is 18 mm at the optical axis, and at the top of its travel 10 mm.

Standard Lenses

The standard lenses for the Praktisix are semi-automatic, as are the most used interchangeable ones. When the camera is wound on, the diaphragm opens to full aperture, closing before exposure as the shutter is released. The diaphragm is tripped by the slackening of pressure on a spring loaded stud on the lens flange as the shutter is fired. The camera naturally blacks out after exposure, with the lens opening again to full aperture and the mirror returning as the camera is wound on. The lenses have click half-stop linear aperture scales, and there is a spring-loaded preview lever which stops the lens

down to the preset aperture for depth of field assessment.

Performance

The performance of the Jena Tessar for the Praktisix was described in the earlier reviews as follows and retesting confirmed the description.

The lens has a crisp flare-free central field at full aperture, and stopping down to f/4 crispens the image noticeably and extends sharpness well towards the edges. Between f/5.6 and f/8 the field is covered perfectly for all practical purposes, although the furthest stopping down to f/11 improves crispness of the corners. There is no fall off down to f/22. The field is sufficiently flat for exacting work and illumination perfect to the corners at f/4, for ordinary purposes it is even enough at full aperture. The lens can record really microscopic detail, and the writer was able to take enlargements from the central area to 500× linear without break up.

The difference in performance between the Jena Tessar and the Jena Biometar are those which would be expected from the difference between a four glass cemented triplet and a compound lens. The Biometar is a Planar type design, being the East German equivalent of the 80 mm f/2.8 Planar. As might be expected, the difference in performance is quite marked, particularly in terms of covering power, in which it equals at f/4 the Jena Tessar between f/5.6 and f/8. At f/4 it also equals the maximum resolving power of the Jena Tessar, and a further improvement in resolving power into exceedingly microscopic detail can be observed down to f/8, beyond which only increased depth of field contributes to enhanced picture sharpness. The Jena Tessar gives its really microscopic detail fairly centrally only, whilst the Biometar covers the frame to an enhanced standard at its optimum apertures. As will be expected, the contrast of the Tessar type is slightly higher than that of the Biometar. In the earlier report the writer described it as poised between the brilliance of the modern West German Tessar and the more medium contrast of some compound lenses.

The choice between the two lenses will depend largely on the nature of the work to be undertaken. For scientific work and where other maximum covering power and field flatness are essential, the Biometar will be very preferable, particularly if colour is used. On the other hand if more general work is to be undertaken, and for pictorial photography, the Tessar should be found entirely adequate. The off axis spherical aberration of the Tessar type at wide

aperture, with the falling away into shapelessness of out of focus areas consequent, has traditionally made it an excellent lens for making the subject stand out brilliantly. Owing to the facility of lens interchangeability, the user is of course not committed *in perpetuum* to the standard lens in the initial purchase.

Accessories

In addition to the standard lenses, there is a full range of focal lengths available for the Praktisix from the 65 mm f/2.8 Flektogon up to the 1000 mm Jena mirror lens. In addition the camera fits perfectly into the Novoflex system, owing to its focal plane shutter.

The usual accessories are available, including a bellows extension unit and extension tubes. The automatic diaphragm facility can be retained by use of the special tube Z used in conjunction with the standard extension tubes. Other accessories are a hood with top magnifier, an eye cup for the pentaprism, and an angle finder also for the latter, an accessory shoe attachment, and a special pressure plate for the use of plates. It is in any case very simple to use a plate in the Praktisix.

The Praktisix is essentially a camera which almost every photographer would wish to use. First and foremost it handles like a somewhat overgrown 35 mm camera as regards convenience, ease and rapidity of use. With 220 film, the need for reloading at an inconvenient point is largely dispensed with, thus removing one objection to '20 cameras. It has a very wide range of lenses available for it, and it could hardly be simpler to adapt any favourite objective to it, or some inexpensive lens for a very occasional application. The shutter on the new model reviewed here seems to have been improved, and although in very hard continuous work it may benefit from an annual overhaul, the majority of users should find it trouble free. The design of the camera is eminently functional and workmanlike, with no frills whatsoever. As such it will always appeal to the true photographer, professional or amateur. From the more mundane point of view, it has remained for some time, and will probably always remain, unique for its price.

The Praktisix is made by the VEB Pentacon Kamera- und Kinowerke Dresden, East Germany and is distributed in this country by J. J. Silber Ltd., 11 Northburgh Street, London, E.C.1. With Jena Tessar lens it costs £139 10s. and with Jena Biometar lens £139 10s. The ever-ready case (still without detachable snout) costs £5 19s. 6d. extra.