

The Dekkam File

THE CONTAX T

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In the year or so since the Contax T was discontinued, its price has just about doubled. Neither a trend-setting design nor necessarily a perfect one, it nevertheless has become an almost instant collectors' item.

The Contax T was the beneficiary of some West German Zeiss engineering, a Zeiss Sonnar lens design, further design work by Yashica, a little Porsche configuration work, and the Kyocera assembly process. It was shipped in a nice little kit, complete with a dedicated flash unit that fitted neatly onto the left side of the camera whenever it was needed. Two versions were issued, one basic black and the other silver chrome and gray. I guess that the true collector will feel that he should have one of each.

The T is certainly one of the smallest 35mm pocket cameras that has been available in recent years, as well as one of the best. The design and execution of this little masterpiece deserve more than passing attention. But one of the major assets that make the Contax T appealing to collectors is the fact that it had a long historical background, and now seems to be the last in its family line. It summed up a long line of Zeiss products that began more than sixty years ago. Its ancestry is illustrious. Let's examine its family tree for a few moments.

Many of us are at least slightly familiar with the lovely folding Kodak Retinas, introduced during the 1930s, and the Voigtländer Vitessas of twenty years later, both of which started as 35mm folding cameras. But antecedents of the Contax T in the conglomerate Zeiss line of development go back even farther, into the 1920s.

The desire for a small, precise, pocketable camera really preceded the ability of available film stocks to support it. This was certainly true of the very early 35mm cameras, even in the beginning days of the Leica. Nevertheless, as soon as relatively narrow-gauge film stocks, no matter how crude and grainy, were introduced to the profession, there were designers who aimed at developing cameras to take advantage of them.

Possibly the first small folding camera of this type from the Zeiss conglomerate was the Bobette II of 1927, the first miniature rollfilm camera to offer an *f*/2 normal lens, an Ernostar of 42mm focal length. Folded, the Bobette II measured only 2.25 x 4.25 x 1.25 inches. The Bobettes, originally designed by the Ernemann firm before its merger into the Zeiss trust, did not use standard perforated 35mm film, but made 22x31mm images on a special rollfilm size designated No. 552 by Zeiss. The film was available in twelve and twenty-four exposure lengths.

The Bobette II was also available with *f*/3.5 and *f*/4.5 lenses at reduced cost, and had a lesser brother in the Bobette I which used a simpler shutter mechanism. More importantly to this story, the Bobette I's front plate was simply pushed straight back to form the front of the body when not in use, but the fancier Bobette II used the hinged folding frontdoor arrangement that is also found on our Contax T.

Such special film sizes as the No. 552, with limited market availability, militated against any great success for cameras like the Bobettes. The two principal exceptions, coming along in the following decade, were Kodak's 828 film for the Bantam series of cameras, and Agfa's Karat-film; but even the rather nifty 828 size has long since disappeared along the wayside by now. After a brief revival as the Rapid-load 35mm system almost thirty years ago, so has Karat-film. Unless a number of makers adopt a single size as standard, we have learned, it is doomed from the start.

No one but Zeiss seemed to be entranced by No. 552. The later Kolibri thus turned to 127-film, a generally popular size on which it exposed 16 half-frame negatives per roll; it was nonetheless not a significant success in the shops of its day. Thus the next Zeiss venture in the pocketable camera vein used normal 35mm film loads, either in cassettes, much as we know them today, or in the form of spooled loads with paper leaders that many suppliers provided during the late twenties and the following decade. This camera was the Super Nettel of 1934.

The Super Nettel had a bottom-hinged frontdoor to conceal and protect its retracted lens so that it could be carried in a reasonably sized pocket. It incorporated a focal plane shutter quite similar to that of the contemporary Zeiss Contax I, with speeds between 1/5 and 1/1000 second. Also provided in the Super Nettel was a rotating wedge rangefinder coupled to the action of its permanently mounted lens.

Buyers were offered a choice among three standard Zeiss optics: Triotar f/3.5, Tessar f/3.5, or Tessar f/2.8, all in 50mm focal lengths. Although this fact essentially divided the Super Nettel into three models, since its lenses could not be exchanged, the three are often now thought of as one. Finished in black enamel with some nickered parts, this Nettel was somewhat larger than the Bobette II and the Kolibri; on 35mm film it produced a slightly larger negative image than the Bobette, and one essentially equal to the image area of the Kolibri.

In 1936 it was joined by another version, the Super Nettel II, with a more modern chrome metal finish but otherwise basically the same specifications. The standard lens of the model II was the f/2.8 Tessar, though some were produced with the Tessar f/3.5. The somewhat softer three-element Triotar design was obviously no longer considered adequate for the fancier new version of this camera.

By and large, Zeiss seem to have thought of and marketed the Super Nettels as less expensive alternatives to the Contaxes that they made between 1934 and 1938, when Super Nettel production ended. In fact, though, the Super Nettles were exceptionally able folding pocket cameras, convenient to carry and capable of producing very good results. Retinas, in fact, were considered at that time to be the poor man's version of the Zeiss Super Nettel.

It's hard to understand why that able Zeiss camera was phased out. True, at that time, just before the second world war, Zeiss seem to have been intrigued with novel extremes in engineering: developing and marketing such exotica as the original twin-lens Contaflex, the IkoFlex III, the Tenax II, and the Nettax to accompany their Contaxes. Whatever their reasons, Zeiss did not return to the theme of the pocketable, precise miniature camera until 1950, when the Contessa-35 was introduced by the West Germany branch of the now-divided Zeiss family.

Most Contessas mounted 45mm f/2.8 Tessar lenses which when not in use were hidden behind the cameras' folding frontdoors; focusing was done with the aid of a built-in coupled rangefinder. They had built-in selenium exposure meters with high and low ranges that were controlled by a slotted cover door; meter readouts had to be transferred manually by the photographer to the camera controls.

Originally these cameras used an early postwar version of the Compur Rapid shutter with X-synchronization only; a second type marketed in 1953 incorporated a fully synchronized Compur. Later Contessa models did away with the folding frontdoor in favor of less expensive permanently mounted protruding lenses, but the two early versions were directly in the line of ancestry that we are tracing toward the Contax T. They were notably more compact than the prewar Super Nettels, incorporated exposure metering capability, and could produce results fully as good as those of their Bobette and Nettel predecessors, despite having considerably less mechanical complexity than the latter.

The Zeiss Contina I and II, introduced in 1952, were very similar in their general specifications to the Contessas, but did not include exposure meters and had uncoupled rangefinders whose readings had to be transferred by hand to their focusing scales by the user. Most came with Novar f/3.5 lenses in Prontor shutters, but some had the Tessar f/2.8 in a Compur like their more expensive siblings. These two early Contina models also had the downward opening frontdoor type of construction, but the Continas that followed them abandoned this feature, as the Contessas had done, in favor of rigid front lens standards.

In fact, all major manufacturers including German Kodak and Voigtlander abandoned folding construction for their leaf-shuttered 35mm cameras by the later 1950s. The combination of leather bellows and strut-type frontdoors which doubled by fixing the location of the lens standard was somewhat delicate; so long as folding cameras were being used by serious photographers this fact did not much matter, but as the practice of home photography by folk who were essentially non-photographers became widespread during that decade, the traditional folding design grew less tenable.

For most of the following fifteen years home-use cameras were designed with fixed lens assemblies, and the miniature folding precision camera seemed dead and gone. At the beginning of the 1970s, however, Rollei introduced a remarkably small precision miniature camera whose Zeiss-designed Sonnar f/2.8 lens retracted on a tube into the camera body when not in use, much as the early lenses for the Leica and similar cameras had done years earlier. In the new Rolleiflex, however, the lens was permanently fixed to the camera rather than being exchangeable, and leaf shutter elements were cunningly arranged around and behind the tube in which the lens was mounted.

This Rollei design set a precedent from which further Rollei models with exposure automation and extra or fewer features were derived. Production of the Rolleis shifted away from Germany to the new subsidiary plant at Singapore fairly soon after the earliest miniature models appeared, however, and

quality problems encountered there at first hit hard at the Rolleiflex reputation. Rollei also came upon a period of financial straits, and ultimately manufacture of the miniature Rollei cameras was suspended, apparently forever.

But Japanese designers working for firms such as Olympus were intrigued anew by the concept of truly pocketable precision cameras. A host of them have appeared from the late 1970s onward; the more recent incorporate autofocus, automatic film advance and even rewind, automatic built-in flash, and often lenses of adjustable focal length. Such facilities in turn required enlarging the size of the cameras again: they no longer fold, and many have become a difficult fit for the lesser pocket.

Even when it was introduced at the beginning of this decade, the Contax T was never quite at the forefront in its versatility, but it certainly was so far as quality and pocketability are concerned. And it stands at the end of a very long line of descent which was traditional to Zeiss as well as to the world of camera design in general. Combining some of the best features of old with some of the more convenient ones of the present, it may not have perfectly suited the tastes of every user, but it was a pocketable camera of unusually high quality among its contemporaries.

The Contax T is a small pocket camera that features rangefinder focusing and automatic exposure control. Available in two finishes, black on black and chrome on gray, it was always sold in a kit that included, in addition to the camera, the dedicated T14 Automatic Flash, a soft case that holds both units, and a carrying strap. The outfit was boxed in a neat presentation case and included good instructions. Early Contax Ts were manufactured by Yashica, later ones by Kyocera, the company that took over Yashica in its time of troubles. Thus, I suppose, if you want a complete collection of Contax T variations, you will need four: a black one and a silver one marked "Yashica," and a similar pair with "Kyocera" inscribed.

We have already discussed the fact that, by the end of the 1950s, increased amateur and family use of miniature cameras caused manufacturers to shy away from the potentially somewhat fragile folding frontdoor design as an adjunct to pocketability. By the close of that decade, most small cameras had fixed, protruding lens-shutter turrets. Two decades later, however, the Contax T solved the general problem of impermanent rigidity of the frontdoor design by removing from the frontdoor any need for adding mechanical stability to the camera's structure. Its major function is simply to protect the lens's front element during storage, a tremendously valuable asset; it also acts to turn the camera's electric circuitry on and off. The lens itself is carried in a retractable tube like that of the first small Rolleiflexes: this configuration avoids the vulnerable folding bellows design of the earlier pocket 35mm cameras, but still provides the protective cover of the frontdoor.

The five-element Sonnar 38mm f/2.8 lens with which the Contax T is equipped is unusually fine when considered against the general run of pocket cameras, whether at the time it was introduced or even today. The Sonnar incorporates a seven element diaphragm, closes down to f/16, and can be focused by the camera's coupled rangefinder anywhere between three feet and infinity. There is no autofocus arrangement.

The Contax T shutter is also unusually precise for this sort of camera. Its operation is timed by use of a quartz crystal, just as is the case for the focal-plane shutters of recent Contax SLR cameras. It produces speeds between eight seconds and 1/500, using a five-blade design where many cameras of this size make do with a simple and less accurate two-blade system.

Shutter speeds, however, are entirely controlled by the camera's automatic exposure capability. The shutter speed is selected as a resultant factor of the aperture set by the user in combination with the ambient light value read by the camera's built-in metering system. It is impossible to set manual shutter exposures on the Contax T. For some of the more advanced photographers among us, this lack of a manual mode was unfortunate in a camera so precise and otherwise useful.

The camera's automatic exposure range extends from EV0 to EV17 with ISO 100 film, and a 1 1/2 stop backlight correction switch is a part of the design; exposures can also be modified by adjusting the ISO film speed to a false reading. Nevertheless, these attributes do not allow for quick independent adjustment of what the user might consider to be the ideal combination of f-stop and shutter speed; if an approximately specific shutter speed is wanted, he must fiddle with the very narrow f-stop adjustment ring until that speed range is indicated in the finder. This is an awkward procedure to follow, but of course it has to be done anyway if the exposure meter indicates the likelihood of overexposure, underexposure, or camera shake. There is no program mode for the Contax T, either. Two 1.55v batteries provide the necessary oomph, and the camera will not operate if they are dead or missing.

The only frequently voiced complaint about the camera's operation apart from its lack of a manual exposure mode is that the focusing ring at the front of the lens is too small, thus difficult to use without either blocking off the rangefinder window or changing the desired aperture setting on the next ring to the rear. It is often true that on very miniature cameras, one or another control also turns out to be excessively miniature; here is the area where this proves true with this camera.

Apart from this single operating flaw, the Contax T was beautifully designed and built to function in the way that it does. Its right hand end incorporates rudimentary rubberized grips, both front and rear, which are unexpectedly comfortable in use. While the rangefinder has a short measuring base, it is adequate for the type of lens installed; and its two images are easily discriminated during focusing. The readout in the viewfinder displays a very limited number of shutter speeds, just three, but the diodes that light to tell you what speed the camera has chosen indicate a range between the three. Another viewfinder diode lights when the camera is placed in its self-timing mode.

Film is advanced by a small lever inset into the top back of the camera, and the counter goes all the way to 79 exposures in memory of the double-length, double-thin film that Ilford regrettably discontinued several years ago. Like those of other Japanese Contaxes, the shutter release, colored red on this camera, is an electric switch rather than a mechanical plunger, a design that reduces the possibility of camera movement during exposure.

The T14 flash, included with all Contax Ts as a part of the complete kit, screws onto the left end of the camera body and functions entirely automatically as a unit with the camera. It will not light if the metering system calls for an exposure faster than 1/125. Unfortunately, it cannot be readily adjusted for fractional fill lighting. On the other hand, few users of this camera will require such delicate control ability. Flash metering is done by the cell on the camera body rather than through the lens. The T14 accessory can produce several hundred flashes on its own power supply of two AA batteries, and at ISO 100 has a covering range of about fifteen feet at full aperture. Other flash units cannot be mounted on the Contax T as delivered; it has no standard PC or shoe contacts. Even with the flash attached, the combination of Contax T camera and T14 flash is quite easily pocketed when the lens has been retracted. The whole makes an elegant touring camera which will produce exceptionally good results once the user is familiar and at ease with its method of operation.

We should also note, at least in passing, the Yashica T-cameras that existed for several years. They were somewhat more in the forefront of contemporary trends than was the Contax T: they incorporated autofocus and built-in flash capability in a barely pocketable 35mm camera that was somewhat larger than their Contax cousin. Perhaps the most notable aspect of the Yashica T-series in conjunction with our discussion is that they were built around an optic named "Carl Zeiss Tessar 3.5/35 T*". This has so far been the only Zeiss-named lens available in an autofocus camera, albeit that it was Zeiss-designed but built under Kyocera's control.

The original Yashica T also featured automatic motorized film advance, and is altogether a Sunday snapshotter's concept of heavenly sent bliss. In features and appearance it is entirely unlike the Contax T, and despite its greater wealth of contemporary attributes it was also always quite a lot less expensive, more "plastic-y" and less attuned to the taste of a connoisseur.

In 1986 a new version of the Yashica T was introduced. Called the Yashica T2, it was essentially a Yashica T to which DX film load coding and automatic rewinding had been added. In addition, the styling of the T2 was slightly streamlined in comparison to the earlier model. In a more expensive version, the Yashica T2-D, the camera also had automatic date and time imprinting capabilities controlled by a quartz crystal in much the same way that it has been executed on recent data backs for the Contax SLR cameras.

The Yashica T emphasized convenience, the Contax T quality. As we all learned at our mothers' knees, "You pays your money and you takes your choice." Clearly, today's collectors have chosen the Contax T: its current market value emphasizes its lineage as well as its assets.

2007 NOTE: This is a revised version of an two-issue article that was published in Shutterbug in 1989.