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In Focus/ Leica 'abandons' film cameras in shift to digital, lens crafting

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2010/08/23

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Leica M7 (2002) The first M series Leica, equipped with an automatic exposure function. The first Leica camera with aperture-priority AE, a feature highly desired by users. Its use of a unique horizontal-traveling cloth focal plane shutter was surprising. / Leica MP (2003) A mechanical Leica with a classic look. Omits the M6TTL's TTL auto-flash control. The size of an M6, with a rewind knob. Design based on the M2. Reminiscent of Leica's "golden age" in the 1950s. (KOICHI AKAGI)



Leica A (1925) Silver halide Leicas began here! The first commercially available Leica. It uses a fixed lens, but has many different variations. It was this model that defined a "standard lens" as one with a focal length of 50 mm, and forms the basis for all 35 mm cameras to this day.



Leica S2 (2009) An outstanding 37.5 megapixel medium format Leica. Leica's first medium-format digital SLR. Its imaging area is 30 mm by 45 mm. It captures at 37.5 megapixels, and provides detailed high-definition images that easily surpass those of 35 mm full-size digitals. Its entire system, including the lens mount and interchangeable lenses, were newly developed. Priced at 2.6 million yen (\$30,400), it is well suited for professional use.

"Leica Camera has already ceased production of film cameras."

This shocking statement emerged abruptly from Leica Camera AG owner Andreas Kaufmann at a lecture on May 30 organized by the Japan Camera Industry Institute (JCII).

The company has discontinued its mass-produced silver salt film cameras, the M7 and the MP. Does this mean that the film camera, which made its debut as a Leica mass-production model in 1925, has finally been doomed to total obsolescence?

Kaufmann, who is also the managing director of Austrian asset management company ACM Development LLC, is the major shareholder of Leica Camera with a 97-percent stake in the company.

In his presentation, he traced the company's history of development, culminating in their current M9, X1 and S2 models. Kaufmann also spoke passionately about his plans for future change and progress, saying he would uphold the company's traditions while continuing to make premium products that strive to utilize the best in optical technology.

Kaufmann also indicated that Leica would move into manufacturing lenses for movie cameras.

Listening to his words, I realized once again that since the debut of the M8 in 2006, Leica has not resisted the digital wave, but is riding it confidently.

Kaufmann made his stunning statement, but at a news conference held afterward he revealed that production of its standard MP and M7 models had already been discontinued in 2009.

He claimed the main reason for this had been the near-complete absence of demand for film cameras, but I was considerably shaken by his matter-of-fact wording. However, thinking about it more calmly, his judgment was a natural one in his capacity as the proprietor of Leica Camera.

The current market for film cameras is extremely small, and sales of new and second-hand products alike are sluggish, even at specialist Leica stockists.

"Even if we were to make a successor to the Leica MP, the price would have to be around 500,000 yen to 600,000 yen (\$5,800 to \$7,000)," Kaufmann added. "That would effectively put us in competition with second-hand Leicas, which would be pointless."

I can understand this point of view well when reflecting on my own situation. I use digital cameras exclusively in my work, and if I bought a new film camera, it could never pay for itself.

Well, despite being fully aware of that risk, I've gone out of my way to buy a brand new M7 and MP as a gesture of support to Leica and I use them regularly. But one glance at the used camera market reveals a glut of inexpensive secondhand Leica cameras in good condition.



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Even for budding photographers who want to experience the challenge and joy of working with film cameras, I would probably recommend a secondhand Leica, and not an expensive new MP or M7.

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According to Kaufmann, market conditions make it difficult to produce a new model film camera unless there is a realistic demand for at least 5,000 to 6,000 units in the market.

Kaufmann's move recognizes the loss of balance between supply and demand for film cameras. In the present market conditions, even Leica purists would have a hard time attacking him for this.

It's not a complete end to the Leica era.

Retailer Leica Camera Japan has announced they are still taking orders for the Leica a la carte, user-customized units. It will also continue to produce limited edition models such as the M7 Hermes edition released last year.

A big part of Leica's early heritage was that their cameras were not produced in mass. This has enabled Leica to offer models that can be customized according to individual user orders, such as the a la carte. Therefore, the production of all Leica film camera models has not ceased entirely.

However, the Leica a la carte is more expensive than regular models, and limited edition models are even more expensive, being produced in smaller quantities. Both are specialized products that differ from regular models.

One item of growing concern is that the traditional manufacturing know-how for Leica's film cameras might not be passed on. Attrition of Leica's highly skilled film camera designers and experienced factory workers due to retirement or other reasons could close the curtain for their legendary film camera line.

The title of Kaufmann's presentation was "Leica: The Future of Memories." As his speech drew to a close, the implications became more clear.

How will casual users and other camera makers respond to Kaufmann's news?

Leica has always been held up as the "gold standard" for 35 mm cameras. As one of the originals in the industry, its standard 24 mm by 36 mm format is known as "Leica format."

Development of the next-generation "full-frame" digital cameras may rewrite the specifications, but until then the format established by the Leica A camera, first sold in 1925, lives on in the digital era as the standard.

However, with digital cameras, since there is no physical film, there is increasingly less debate about formats than in the past. Thus, the venerated Leica frame size, like the 35 mm Leica film cameras, for so many years serving as standards, could be de facto retired.

Sadly, it would seem that those who entered the world of photography straight into digital cameras aren't even aware of the importance of different formats.

Leica has announced that its S2 was made not as a digital version of their medium-format camera, but as a brand new medium-format beauty dubbed the Leica Pro Format. As we can see from this, Leica Camera is widening its aperture on the 35 mm format.

For now, photographers amateur and pro have the freedom to decide whether to keep film cameras as their standard rig and to keep using them, as long as there is available film.

Leica's moves are giving its devotees the option to eventually switch over completely to digitals such as the M9 or the S2.

However, it is certain that the 35 mm silver salt photographic culture that has lasted for 85 years is entering a fragile phase.

From now on, companies that have continued to produce film cameras on a small scale such as Nikon Corp., Canon Inc., Fujifilm Corp., and Cosina Co., and those that continue to supply film such as Fujifilm and Eastman Kodak Co., will inevitably feel the brunt of the effective end of Leica film cameras.

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