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LEICA MP.

The Leica M6 is dead..

Long live the Leica M6…..!

According to an official company press release, Leica Camera Ag will stop manufacturing the M6TTL body introduced in 1998 and concentrate instead on the new electronic M7. To replace the mechanical M6TTL, the company have launched the new M6…er, sorry, the new MP. While we wait impatiently for this exciting addition to the range to arrive on dealers shelves, a special edition of the M6TTL, numbering some 999 pieces, will come to the market soon.

The prototype MP I have been using for the past three months, is essentially a standard 1984 M6 design fitted with some furniture from the 1954 M3. The top plate is simply engraved in script with the word *Leica*, the model designation MP appearing next to the serial number. The camera does not have the red Leica badge on the front face. The prototype is in silver with a black vulcanite body covering similar to the original M3; serial production models will be available in black and silver chrome, but the vulcanite look seems to have been reserved for the special edition MP-6 produced a few weeks ahead of the MP for a Japanese dealer. A superficial appraisal might stop here, but there is more.

Crucially, and for reasons yet to be explained, the new MP duplicates more or less exactly, the original sound of the M3. Indeed, while the M6 and its successor could claim quietness, they lacked something. The new MP is the only model since the M4-P to get anywhere near close to the uniquely quiet noise of an M3; the result of really fine quality miniature engineering. A lot of people will want one just because of this invisible feature.

But to many, the introuction of this new model seems a retrograde step. Having finally brought to market last year, a camera it was pressed to design and build for well over twenty years, one could see a sound economic reason for Leica wanting to maintain alongside the M7, the mechanical option of the M6TTL. There is something comforting about the knowledge of one's kit being driven by whirring cogs and levers and while I may not want the TTL flash feature most of the time, it was at least available should I need it.

According to Sven Sturm, technical director of Leica Camera for M and R products, the company received many complaints about the shape of the M6TTL.

" Customers want the 'classic' design. They don't like the extra 2.5mm we had to add to the top plate [of the TTL]. Neither did they like the new style shutter speed dial. And many customers kept saying to us the M3 was the best camera we ever made."

He wouldn't tell me the origin of these complaints. But if figures are anything to go by, not many came from the UK or the U.S.A. Dealers have reported a healthy demand for the M6TTL version, with some London outlets shifting units in the ratio of 2:1 against the M7. What we in Britain tend to forget is that Leica Camera Ag is a German company. Most of their production is sold at home and I suspect, but cannot prove, that is the source of discontent.

This notwithstanding, arriving at an objective view of the new MP requires a deeper appreciation of the philosophy that drove Leica to take this latest step, especially after having so recently launched the multi featured electronic M7.

The M7 forerunner, the M6TTL, was launched to much acclaim in 1998. It was the first Leica M rangefinder camera to feature through the lens flash exposure measurement, albeit not totally automatic and subject to the constraints of the $1/50^{th}$ second traverse time of the focal plane curtains. Nonetheless, it worked; along with the improved viewfinder exposure measurement display, an enlarged and repositioned shutter speed dial with the same directional rotation as Leica's reflex cameras and a slight increase in overall height (2.5mm) necessary to accommodate a new CPU, it has been a great success.

In time, the outcry (from Leica 'purists' [what are they?]) against the slight but significant change in perceived elegance of the classic M6 and the new and different shutter speed dial, faded. Personally, I like the new larger and repositioned shutter dial. It's easier to get at, can be manipulated with the forefinger while the camera is still at eye level and rotates in harmony with the veiwfinder exposure data display. The extra body height goes unnoticed, until one reverts to an older M6.

Still, where else could Leica go with the TTL concept?

It left little choice but to move on to the M7, a better specified rangefinder model, offering more accurate control over exposure measurement as well as enhanced flash features. The incorporation of not one but *two* mechanical shutter times was not just a nod to acknowledge the traditionalist Leica M following, but a genuine and well thought out back-up device to keep the camera operational when the batteries pack up. After a sticky start, (electro magnetic shutter curtain release solenoids hanging up because of lubrication problems.) initial demand outstripped manufacturing capacity.

On the surface, Leica Camera AG appears to be a stuck-in-the-doldrums hi-tech company, currently as confused as half of the rest of the photographic world about what direction to take next in the face of the digital onslaught.

This is not the case at all.

A closer examination of the M7 reveals the potential for further electronic enhancements in future models. More importantly perhaps, Leica is a company which knows its market very well. Its products appeal to a small, niche area of photography which despite the advances made by auto focus and digital technology, are likely to remain as solid as ever, fluctuating year in year out as they have done for decades. What its customers appreciate above all is quality; fine quality miniature engineering matched to what is arguably the best quality optical glass and lens design. There are other marques with similar types of products which offer good value for money, but they are not the same.

So while some of us may spill a tear for the end of the M6TTL, from an objective commercial point of view, its demise was more or less guaranteed once the M7 was on the drawing board. What we have in place of the M6TTL is a piece of solid, elegant and classic Leica mechanical engineering. It's a product for photographers whose only aim in life is to churn film through a fine camera; it's only nod in the direction of modernity, the incorporated, proven and excellently accurate ttl exposure meter from the M6TTL.

But what the new MP is not, is a remake of the 1956 MP, even if some of the furniture on its sharply defined CNC milled hardened brass top plate might look familiar to veteran users. This is a new design based on the classic M6 and incorporating all of its frames in the 0.72 magnification version. In effect, it is an M6, with subtle but improved differences.

One of these is the adoption of the original M3 pull-up film rewind knob instead of the M4 type lever-wind. Older photographers may recall the often nail breaking experience of using an M3 rewind knob, especially in cold weather. I could counter this with numerous tales of sheared off M4 types, both my own and those of others. It wasn't that the fold-out lever was an inelegant solution to the busted nail syndrome, but it could be an expensive one. Returning to the pull-up system, which is very smooth and perhaps a tad better geared, seems to me a more pragmatic and perhaps, more durable solution. Leica will bring their own lever adapter for the knob, but there are already several independent suppliers of these devices in the UK and the USA.

The new MP also features the solid curved metal film advance lever found on the M3. It is not more efficient than the later hinged M4 type, but it is certainly more in keeping with the design aim – to produce a simply functioning artifact which hints at (and perhaps longs for) an earlier epoch.

The shutter speed setting dial returns to its roots with the M3 type, now also engraved **OFF** at the **B** setting, to remind users that battery power for the meter *can* be turned off completely. I remain somewhat baffled as to why this small detail was not attended to years ago during the 14 year life of the original M6, but never mind.

Importantly, the viewfinder of the standard 0.72 version incorporates all six projected focal length frames from 28mm through to 135mm, as well as, and

better still, the improved exposure measurement display from the M6TTL. Selected aperture and shutter time values are deemed accurate for the exposure measurement when only the red LED circle between the under/over arrows is lit. Instead of the flash symbol shown in the TTL version, the new MP offers a two stage 'low' battery display.

An interesting but barely noticeable feature is the increased brightness range of objects seen through the viewfinder, the windows of which have received improved and harder coatings. In a normal daylight, relatively high contrast situation, the almost imperceptible improvement is hardly noticed when changing camera (from say an M6TTL to an MP). The better dynamic is more noticeable however, in low ambient light situations, where discerning the differentaiation between darker tones is sometimes tricky.

Removing the base plate reveals a clue as to what might be in store for the MP. It features the standard Leica-M Motor drive lug connector. However, a little research highlights the fact that the original MP was supplied with a Leicavit winder as standard. This device is a mechanical finger driven rapid winder with a drop down lever enabling rapid frame sequences to be exposed at critical moments. It adds about half an inch to the depth of the camera when fitted. The original MP required a modification to materials used in the camera gear train; hardened steel replaced the mix of brass and mild steel. In the new MP, the gear train employs stainless steel, hardened brass and steel.

The Leicavit-MP has not been manufactured since 1966, so as you might imagine, it is hard to find and often expensive. Tom Abrahamsson in Vancouver (www.rapidwinder.com) designed his replacement **Rapidwinder** for it more than 10 years back and this product is avaiable to fit most M cameras and some L types. Leica Camera Ag are taking one more step in the retro-game with the new MP by offering a modern Leicavit winder for the camera. It is not as deep as Tom's, who will continue to offer his durable and reliable alternative, but the new Leicavit features more complex three stage gearing.

So what do we think of it so far?

Objectively, the MP comes close to providing every feature I want in a mechanical film camera; no frills, just simple, straightforward and familiar function in a durable, proven and superbly engineered form. Add to this the rapid film Leicavit winder (or Tom's version.), a range of new scalloped barrelled lenses and I have the camera I always wanted. Not a breath of ostentation, as quiet as a mouse; a camera to inspire creative imagination. If looks alone can sell a product then the new MP must surely be rocket powered; it's just gorgeous. I don't need it, but I have to have it.

Words 1980. Approx.