

LEICA M DIGITAL: THIS IS THE WAY

We have known since last February that Solms is working intensively on a digital Leica M camera. But what will it look like? And when will it become available to customers?

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Leica World News: Mr. Cohn, Leica is celebrating '50 Years Leica M System'. But a recent press release confirms plans for digital Leica M, isn't that a contradiction?

Hanns-Peter Cohn: No. Both products conform to our philosophy of combining traditional values with current innovations in such a way as to provide Leica photographers with the greatest possible usefulness.

LWN: The Leica M System in particular, stands for good value, extraordinary longevity and great value retention. Are these considerations still current?

H.-P.C.: Such values will always be of enormous importance to certain individuals. And we, as a small, specialized enterprise cultivate these values. A concept that is prevailing at a time when the camera industry is increasingly concentrating on short-lived, fleetingly fashionable products.

LWN: At the PMA trade show in Las Vegas at the beginning of this year you confirmed rumors about a digital Leica M camera. What is the state of its development?

H.-P.C.: We informed the public very early about both the Digital-Modul-R as well as the Digital Leica M camera. Both projects involve components that complement an existing system. Photographers who use a particular system naturally want to know what the future holds. The M- as well as the R System has high quality standards that must also be maintained when a new technology, like digital imaging, is incorporated. As soon as we were convinced that this is feasible, we made our plans public.

LWN: But for a long time, the word was that a digital Leica M was not possible technically.

H.-P.C.: Yes, but the statement that a digital Leica M could not be built also had a sup-

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plementary clause, which stated: With the sensor technology that was available at that time. Leica always follows the policy of preserving compatibility, both with preceding model generations and also with preceding lens models. In other words, no breaches of that policy. Our partner Kodak has worked out a new sensor solution that features a significant increase in the acceptance angle of the incoming light rays. And it with this new generation of sensors, a digital Leica M camera became feasible with the very high quality criteria that we ourselves demand.

LWN: In the design of the digital back for the Leica R camera you worked with Kodak and with Imacon. Are they also your partners in the design of the digital Leica M camera?

H.-P.C.: Indeed they are: Our partners are to be the same.

LWN: To what extent does a digital Leica M camera benefit from the experience you gained during the development of the digital back for the Leica R camera?

H.-P.C.: As a matter of fact, we only need to perform a large part of the work once. This means: The two products pollinate each other. Because we are working with the same manufacturer of sensors, the control of the sensor and subsequent data processing are similar to those of the Digital-Modul-R.

LWN: Will a hybrid solution similar to that of the Leica R be possible for the Leica M?

H.-P.C.: A Leica M camera has always been a compact, easily transportable and light-weight camera. A digital back would be counter to those highly important characteristics.

LWN: How does that affect the design?

H.-P.C.: The digital Leica M camera is to be instantly recognizable as a Leica M camera.



LWN: What can be said at this stage about its technical features?

H.-P.C.: The camera is definitely going to have an optical viewfinder. A combined range- and viewfinder as befits a Leica M camera. It will be equipped with a blade shutter, because the traditional cloth focal plane shutter cannot be used in conjunction with the digital feature. We cannot comment on other technical details at this time.

LWN: Did the success of the Digilux 2 reinforce the idea of developing a digital Leica M more vigorously?

H.-P.C.: No, our core competence is and will continue to be the optics as the primary prerequisite for better pictures, and this is also the most important consideration for Leica photographers to use our product. That is the reason why we set out from the very beginning to subordinate the digital technology to the optics. Why should a new technology simply ignore recognized, well-established values?

LWN: Regarding compatibility: Leica has just introduced a new standard lens for the Leica M camera. Will we be able to use such a lens on a digital Leica M in the future?

H.-P.C.: Yes. But in principle, this applies to all Leica lenses. In other words: If they are very good on film they will also be very good digitally!

LWN: When will the digital Leica M become available?

H.-P.C.: We plan to show the digital Leica M either at the PMA in February 2006 or at the photokina in September. This depends on whether we will also be able to deliver cameras a few weeks after announcing them.