

Erwin Puts

THE LEICA PATH

LEICA photography in the 21st century



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Leica M4-2 Gold

PREFACE

Why another book about Leica photography? There are more books written about Leica than an interested person can read in a lifetime. Most books however cover the same ground and present the same information. An out-of-the-box approach is needed to see the Leica world in a different perspective. One of the books that does present a balanced view on the Leica M6 has been written by Alfons Scholz in 1991.



It is easy to categorize books about Leica in a few groups. The books about the evolution of the Leica camera and its specifications cover the family tree of the Leica since the Ur-Leica. Depending on the expertise of the author(s) every model is described in detail with all versions, variants and special editions. This type of book appeals primarily to the collector and to a lesser extent to the historian of camera technology.

The number of books with advice about the proper

Alfons Scholz, German writer of non-fiction books about photography

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technique for a specific Leica camera (M6 or M9) is surprisingly large. The content has changed from the selection of film emulsions and the appropriate topics to the advice about the treatment of the image file during the post-processing stage of the digital work flow.

The books about specific styles (street photography, portrait photography) are scarce. The authors state without explanation that the Leica camera (most often one of the rangefinder models) supports a unique approach to photography. Many authors do argue that the Leica camera, in the right hands and with the right technique, is capable of results that no other camera can equal or surpass.

A recent (2014) book about Leica M photography by Solcher has this to say:

“Shooting with a Leica slows you down and demands your full attention at every stage of the image creation process. This is a challenge that has its own rewards.”

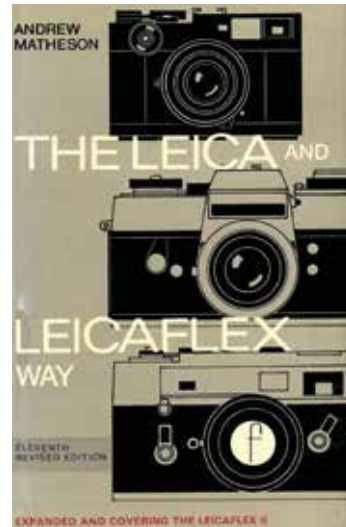
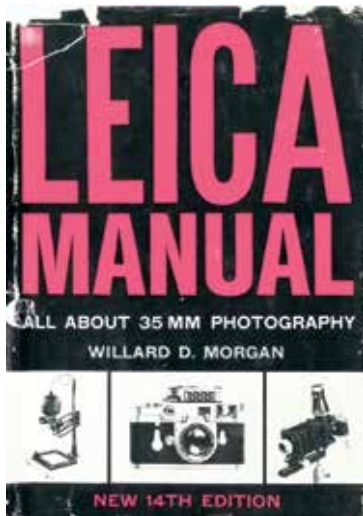
I am puzzled by this statement. Why should using a Leica slow you down? Why is this a challenge and why has this its own rewards? Statements like these can be found by the dozen in books about Leica cameras and Leica photography.

The literature about Leica is full of myths and prejudices. The perspective with which a reviewer looks at current Leica cameras is often taken from and influenced by the photographic culture of the period 1936 to 1963 when the Leica rangefinder was the most influential 35 mm camera in the world.

During this period two books were published that had a strong impact on the appreciation and use of the Leica camera: “The Leica Manual” by Morgan and “The Leica Way” by Matheson. Both books have lost much of their

Bertram Solcher, (1961 -) *Leica M Photographer: Photographing with Leica's Legendary Rangefinder Cameras*, 2014.

relevance in the current visual culture and the world of digital photography. The topics and methods were tuned to the characteristics of the technique of silver-halide emulsions.



The current visual culture takes photography for granted. The billions of photographs that persons upload every week or day show a remarkable correspondence to the cliché-style of the traditional snapshot. The only way to distinguish pictures made with a Leica from others is often the caption (made with Leica).

The questions that almost naturally follow from this state of affairs are simple: why, what and how to photograph with a Leica. The luxury element is invariably associated with owning a Leica camera. In this case the Leica is a style and prestige icon and will be hardly used for photographic purposes. A luxury watch falls in the same category: the function of indicating the time is secondary to the element of prestige.

Willard Morgan (1900 - 1967) wrote the first Leica manual in 1935. The book was quite successful and had fifteen editions. Andrew Matheson wrote several books about Leica cameras.

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I became impressed by the performance of the Leica when I bought my first Leica camera, a second-hand CL with the Summicron 1:2/40 mm. Then I acquired a second-hand M2 with a classic seven-element Summicron 1:2/50 mm because I was convinced by the photographic community that there was no better camera than a rangefinder Leica model. I had gradually moved upward from a Pentacon to the Asahi Pentax S1A to a standard Nikon F with the famous Nikkor-H 1:2/50 mm.

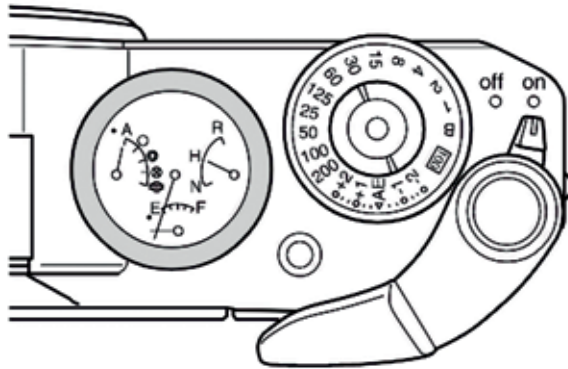


The direct comparison between the Nikkor and the Summicron proved that the myth surrounding the Leica glass was simply this: a myth. I bought a six element Summicron-M to get better image quality. After years of experimentation with film and developers, I found the ideal combination: Ilford Delta 100 and Paterson FX39. Both were recommended by Geoffrey Crawley, then editor of the British Journal of Photography. Crawley also wrote reviews of Leica cameras, which are the most neutral and serious reports about Leica gear ever written.

The Asahi Pentax S1A was a very successful reflex camera manufactured from 1962 to 1968.

The original Nikon F was a strictly modular camera concept.

My second Leica camera was the M4-P because I wanted the Summilux-M 1:1.4/75 mm lens. Then I steadily progressed from M6, M6 HM, M6 TTL to M7 which became my preferred camera because of its silent shutter and convenient operation. In these days I was an ardent admirer of the style of the candid photography in urban environments and I took pictures from dusk to dawn. When the Leica Company developed the digital M8 (inspired by the trial with the Digital Module for R and the introduction of the Epson RD), I followed the company and bought the M8, M8.2, M9, M9P, M240 and M 246. Then I stopped buying new cameras.



As I did in the days with silver-halide technology, I experimented with many software programs, including the industry-standard Photoshop, to extract as much information from the image file as possible. With a very careful darkroom technique I was able to equal the results of the digitalized photographic process. The M8.2 gave acceptable results at ISO 640 which were produced very casually. They were comparable to the results with an M7, loaded with film at ISO 100 which were produced very carefully. The prints from the film negatives were, on very close inspection, better than the screen images of

Part of the top cover of the Epson RD1 camera with the peculiar 'analog' display.

the digitally processed files and certainly better than the prints made with an Epson ink jet printer. But who does compare prints with screen images?

It has been said that crossing the divide between the analog and digital world (not only the photographic world!) is final: there is no return. No engineer chooses to work with the slide rule after getting accustomed to the advantages and accuracy of the electronic calculator. I only know of a handful of photographers who have returned to the silver-halide technique or have never abandoned it. In the movie world a handful of directors use film and the rest has adopted the digital format.

The digital technology has surpassed the silver-halide technology in many respects (efficiency, performance, flexibility). Photography started with taming the silver-halide grain. Since the invention of the image sensor in 1969, it could be called a traditional technology. The history of technology shows that old and new technologies can co-exist. There are advantages when using silver grain as an image capture medium.

Reflecting on the myths and hype surrounding the Leica products and the reduced significance of the "Leica Way", my primary question was: why do we photograph with a Leica at all these days? The underlying question is obvious: why photograph, now that photography is omnipresent, and billions of images are distributed every week or day.

The answer to the first question is affirmative. There are sound reasons to use a Leica camera for taking photographs. A few choices have to be made in any case. Which Leica camera and what and how to photograph are the practical topics to discuss. I am very much in favour of the manually focusing rangefinder models.

While AF is a necessary feature for sports and possibly journalistic photography (especially when using telephoto lenses), it is not required when the object is static (landscape, portraiture, groups of persons). In these cases, manual focusing will function adequately. The technique of manual focusing includes pre-focusing and zone focusing and with a suitable aperture will suffice. This book presents a novel perspective on Leica photography in the 21C. Photography is seen as a practical art and the camera as an artefact with the simple function to record reality as it is and unfolds for our eyes. The connection between artefact and its function is the design of the camera. Very flexible tools, like a pencil, can be used for a variety of goals. The more specialized the tool, like a power drill, the more limited will be the function and the goal. The Leica camera sits in the middle of this range from flexible to specialized tools.

The Leica is an excellent instrument for the 'hastily taken picture', as photographers from Cartier-Bresson to Winogrand discovered. This style of the 'image à la sauvette' is firmly embedded in the traditional culture of the amateur photographer. The snapshot is fully neglected without an artistic flavour and put away in the family album. Barnack designed his Lilliput camera as the ultimate snapshot camera. Leica and the snapshot style are intimately related. I will propose a specific style of photography with a Leica for the next decades in the 21C. In order to understand and apply this style, I will present a number of scientific and historical facts about perception, reality, snapshots and the technical details of the process of photography (both silver -halide based pictures and computational images).

There are three parts in the book.

Part One discusses the scene of the Leica camera in the 21st C after the company made the full and integral digital turn. The questions to answer are: why take photographs with a Leica and which camera to select from the current range of Leica cameras?

Part Two covers the necessary scientific, technical and social foundations of the technical process of image production. Here the question is: why do we take photographs?

Part Three describes the most appropriate techniques for taking the pictures that suit the choices made in the first part. The questions are: how and what to photograph in order to avoid the trap of the conventional canon?

This last remark deserves an elaboration. Many Leica photographers follow the canon of the iconic pictures and feel themselves constrained by the prescribed artistically oriented rules. The common complaint about the snapshot is its conventional and predictable style and content. Personal photography should be individualistic and innovative. This is at least the usual opinion. That is why adopting the snapshot style and subject is an anathema for most photographers. The plain truth however is that most pictures are predictable and conventional.

A good example is the genre of street photography which for many is the ultimate artistic challenge. The argument goes something like this: Winogrand used a Leica and made iconic street photographs. Therefore, I use Leica and take photographs in the same style. Geoff

PREFACE

Dyer, in his book "The ongoing moment" (2005) notes that every street photographer has taken a picture of a blind person, of the front of a barber shop (even inside a barber shop) or of a young woman in a provocative pose. This voyeuristic tendency may be explained away by the notion of cultural commentary, but it disguises the characteristics of the gaze and the chance in photography.

The number of pictures of sunsets in the public domain has been estimated as at least sixty million and the number of cats and babies in awkward positions is impossible to estimate. The paradox to face in photography is the claim of individuality and the fact of conformity. There is a shortage of suitable events and a limited amount of camera parameters to play with. The upshot is a high level of conventionality in picture taking. There is nothing wrong with a conventional picture.

My sincere gratitude goes to my partner, Els, who supported me during the two years of writing the book and expertly handled a grumpy old man. I also thank Cledwyn Lewis, who gave valuable comments and Geoff and Cheryll Float, who did the editing of the text. All three are members of the British Leica Fellowship.

Erwin Puts, Houten, March 2019.