

Medium Format for the Masses:

THE HOLGA

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You know medium format: the large film or sensor area means big cameras, heavier weight and higher costs.

Or do you? A sizable if not the greater share of medium-format images of the past quarter century have been taken in rapidly developing low-income countries, using basic models weighing a tenth and costing a hundredth of a Hasselblad. In the U.S., a version became a classic medium-format “student camera.” Thousands of budding American photographers have had their first medium-format experience with this instrument.

Enter the Holga, which has been mass-produced in China since 1982, and exported to some 20 countries. China went for popular photography in a big way. When the rest of the world was into dinky little 35mm film cameras, China was into mass medium format. The most renowned of these instruments is the Holga. Its period of market dominance was brief—China moved to 35mm format by the late 1980s—but the Holga attracted and has retained a global following.



The Holga Defined

In a word, the camera has often been described as funky. The Holga claim to fame is an otherworldly, modishly distorted kind of imagery. Characteristics of the camera include a soft-focus lens, an interior alignment resulting in mild vignetting, and light leaking through seams of its molded plastic body. As a promotional brochure from a Holga distributor puts it:

Holga's history is a thing of myth and legend. A Holga is a study in imperfection, and to use it is an exercise in breaking free from dependence on technology, precision and 'uber-sharpness.' The slight softness of images, uncontrollable vignetting and peculiar light leaks create a partnership between you and the Holga. These 'flaws' accompanied by your creative choices result in quasi-serendipitous art.

Photographers excited by the opportunity to break free but not sharing a passion for light leaks may take corrective measures, as advised in the paragraph, "Leak Remediation":

Run pieces of tape along the seam where the back fits onto the body. Cover the metal clips that secure the camera back. This will prevent them from falling off the camera—especially when you use the strap.

That being said, it's been my observation of Holga images in magazines and on the Internet that the camera can indeed take impressive, surreal-looking images. Yet it's difficult to predict results. The position of the camera in relation to the sun, for example, will affect the impact of light leaks; and no two Holgas leak the same.

Camera Specifications

The Holga has a fixed 60mm lens, roughly the equivalent of a 40mm lens in 35mm photography. The camera takes 120-size medium-format film. A film mask affords a choice of two image sizes: 55x55mm square (12 images per roll) or 43x55mm rectangular (15 images per roll).

The Holga has a simple viewfinder, absent parallax correction. Focus is achieved by visually estimating the distance to subject, then focusing according to one of four icons: single portrait (about 3 feet); family portrait (9 feet); group portrait (18 feet) and mountain (30 feet to infinity).

The primary means of setting exposure to available light is selection of film of appropriate speed. The shutter nominally operates at 1/100 sec, but with use the speed slows as the spring begins to wear out. Two aperture settings, f8 and f11, provide little

discretion, but multiple exposure is easy. It's also possible for the camera to operate in "Bulb" mode (i.e., manually opening and closing the shutter).

Built-in flash was introduced in two advanced versions of the Holga in recent years, but is reportedly somewhat of a wild card.

Availability

The basic Holga without flash presently sells for \$20 at the B&H photo superstore in New York. The flash versions begin at \$30. Holga filter sets and holders are available at under \$10. To stylishly convey your Holga, consider the customized carrier priced at \$20. Such has been the camera's popularity that until recently, Polaroid sold a back for the Holga at a cost of \$85, for photographers desiring a preview of what they are shooting.

As of this writing, there are no plans for the Holga to go digital.

If cost or weight have dissuaded you from trying medium format, consider the Holga, notwithstanding its limitations that aficionados consider a window to the surreal.