

The Argus Model 21 Camera

Argus Collectors Meeting, Eden, NC, May 2010

by Bob Kelly

Introduction

At one of the first post-war photographic trade shows, in March of 1946, Argus displayed an as-yet-unnamed prototype camera in a glass case, where it could be admired but not touched. It was called simply “the new Argus.” By February of 1947 Argus described this new Model 21 to dealers as “a completely new interpretation of modern camera design.” Hype generated by the introduction of the camera resulted in extensive coverage in the trade press.



Model 21 Marketing

The early buzz created by showing the unnamed prototype shortly after the war aroused interest in the public. Advertising emphasized the concept of “military gun sight technology” in the viewfinder providing consumers with a connection to the success of the military. Much of the

advertising for the Model 21 used simulated scenes through the viewfinder demonstrating how action could be framed. Perhaps the best line in advertising was “Out of the crucible of war has come the application of optics.”



Design

Considerations for the camera design dictated a simple, clean exterior shape and a large, bright viewfinder based on techniques used by Argus on precision military optical equipment. The camera’s body elements were a combination of prior camera components, for example, the pre-war Model CC body was used.

Large knurled knobs were used for film advance, rewind, focus and aperture rings on the lens and for the shutter speed dial. The streamlined shape was covered with black leatherette, and the metal finish was brushed anodized-aluminum. Departing

from the past plug in-flash design, the Model 21 incorporated a hot shoe molded into the top of the body above the viewfinder.

Variations

A film guide device was used in early production to maintain tension on the film as it entered the take-up spool. These cameras also required that film be in the camera and advanced to cock the shutter. Later in production, at about serial number 20000, the film guide was removed. An “S” stamped as a prefix to the serial number indicates the camera has had the film guide removed and an upgraded mechanism installed.



The Speed Select Dial evolved over time from a solid cast aluminum disk, to a similar cast dial with an engraved groove around the edge and finally a thicker dial with an insert plate.



The M/F switch position for flash bulb synchronization was on top of the body to the right of the hot shoe for the majority of the production run. The switch was moved to the back of the camera on the right side of the viewfinder at about serial number 61000.

Serial Numbers.



S prefix indicates the camera was modified.

The serial number is located on the bottom of the camera on models prior to about number 30000. After about 31000 it is located inside the camera below the film window. Next it moves back to the bottom

as the serial number approaches 61000. Although the published serial number range is 9218–64785, ACG survey data shows many examples below 9218, with a range of 273–64692.



NUMBER OF UNITS SOLD: estimated at 65,000 based on camera serial numbers in a survey conducted by the Argus Collectors Group.

Later cameras included an Engraved Focal Plane mark etched on the top of the camera to identify the location of the film.

The accessory shoe is held on with three or four rivets.



Standard Argus Accessories

FLASH: The Model 21 operated with an “Argus Flash Unit” that mounted in the accessory hot shoe on top of the camera. This camera’s hot shoe was larger than what we see today.



“The Obituary of #64785” was the title of an *Argus Eyes* article in July of 1952. The story followed the last Model 21 through the factory on May 15, 1952. In this article Argus sums up the good and the bad of these cameras. The bad is reflected with quotes like, “Each 21 was an individual and each had its own particular idiosyncrasies.” On the good side of the article, the best quote is “The 21 was much like the little girl with a curl in the middle

of her forehead. When they were good they were very good and when they were bad they were very bad.”

In their book *Glass, Brass & Chrome*, Lahue and Bailey quote Burt Murphy as saying “that Argus design came of age with the Model 21.” They then add, “We would like to add that its great days ended with the passing of the Model 21 in 1952.”

Selected References

1. *Argus Dealer Talk* was a publication for retail stores providing the latest information about products, sales trends and methods and upcoming advertising campaigns.
2. *Argus Eyes* frequently provided product highlight articles. The Argus Museum has the most complete collection.
3. Two valuable reference books for the study of Argus products were written by photography industry authors. They are: Kenneth Tydings, *The Argus 35MM Guide* in 1953 and Burt Murphy, *Argus 35MM Photography* in 1959.
4. Excellent history and collector information about Argus comes from: *Collecting Vintage Cameras, Volume 1, The American 35MM, Glass, Brass & Chrome: The American 35MM Miniature Camera and Price Guide to Antique and Classic Cameras* by James M. and Joan C. McKeown.
5. Argus advertisements in photography magazines and store photography department catalogs such as the Montgomery Ward and Sears and Roebuck Camera Catalog provided valuable context for Argus products in relation to their competition as well as basic sales information.
6. Much of the information on the new “Markfinder” viewfinder came from company publications and from a *Popular Photography* article in May of 1947 titled “Argus 21 Features New Finder.”
7. The Argus Collectors Group has conducted an on-line Model 21 survey where members and the general public have input key features the cameras. The serial number range and variation changes have come from this data. The data is maintained by Dan Cluley.