

How to Restore an Antique Camera



Perhaps you found it in an attic, or you've just rushed home from an auction, a garage sale, or a pawnshop with your treasure—a vintage camera. Upon close examination, perhaps your enthusiasm changed to dismay as you noticed the scratches and scars on the outer casing, the tarnished metal parts, and the dry, brittle bellows. These are honorable scars, attesting to many years of faithful service. Don't be discouraged. A few hours of work can make an amazing difference in the appearance of your camera.

The first thing that needs attention is the leather covering of the camera. Repairing the covering first will help to keep pieces of leather from breaking off as you handle the camera. If the covering is separating from the camera body, gently lift it as far from the body as you can without breaking it, and brush or blow away any accumulation of dried glue or dirt. Then glue the covering back in place with white glue. When the leather covering is in safe condition for handling, remove all the parts that will need attention. On most cameras, the lens and shutter assembly are held in place by a retaining ring inside the bellows. Close the bellows as far as possible, and remove the retaining ring from inside the back of the camera. Then remove the lens and shutter assembly.

With those cameras that have a separate lens and shutter, you can leave the lens mounted right in the camera body when you remove the shutter. On most other cameras, the lens board is attached to the bellows by several screws. Remove the lens board and slide it off the focusing track. If you remove the sliding bars that lock the front cover open, you can swing the cover out of the way and have better access to the bellows. Next, remove any metal parts from the outside of the camera. This will allow you to re-dye the camera covering without getting dye on the metal parts. You'll also be able to clean the metal parts much more easily without damaging the covering material.

Disassembling the camera will probably take you about an hour. With the simpler models, it will be easy to see where each part will go during reassembly. If you have a complicated model, lay the parts out in order of disassembly; then reassemble them in reverse order. Notes or diagrams may help.

Now carefully clean the leather parts of the camera to remove dust and dirt. A mild detergent will probably work, but for stubborn stains, cleaning fluids or a commercial

leather cleaner may be required. Extend the bellows—gently—to clean all the crevices and folds. Do not use detergent, cleaning fluid, or leather conditioner on paper bellows. After cleaning, allow the leather to dry thoroughly.

Now you can probably see scars, scrapes, and gouges that were covered up by dirt. Just apply some leather dye of the proper color to the leather parts, including the bellows (if it is leather). Allow the dye to become completely absorbed. If necessary, use a second coat to cover the leather evenly. A good coating of leather conditioner will complete the job. Let the leather absorb as much conditioner as possible. Wipe off any excess; then polish briskly with a clean, soft cloth.

The bellows is a particularly critical area. Let the leather conditioner soak in for several hours to make the bellows as flexible as possible. If it is in really bad condition, you may be able to purchase a new one from one of these suppliers:

Universal Bellows Company
25 Hanse Avenue
Freeport, NY
(516) 378-1264

Flexible Product Company
14504 60th Street North
Clearwater, FL 33520
(727) 536-3142

Be sure to supply the measurements of your bellows. These companies may not have a replacement bellows of the exact size you need, but they may have one in stock that is close enough to fit your camera. If you don't want to tackle replacing the bellows, the above companies may do it for you. Just be sure to ask before sending your camera.

The following company makes custom bellows to fit older cameras:

Turner Bellows, Incorporated
526 Childs Street
Rochester, NY 14606
(716) 235-4456

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Now that the leather is finished, look at the metal parts. Most of them are nickel-plated or solid brass. Either type can be restored to its original brightness with metal polish. If you plan to keep the camera on display, a coating of paste wax will protect the metal from air and slow the formation of tarnish. For brass parts, polyurethane varnish, clear lacquer, or clear enamel will provide better protection than paste wax.

Clean the lens and viewfinder by brushing off surface dirt and then using lens-cleaning tissue or a cotton swab dampened with KODAK Lens Cleaner (or equivalent). Do not use papers or solutions intended for eyeglasses, because they can damage lens coatings. If any black-painted metal parts are chipped, a bit of flat black enamel will restore them to their original appearance.

After everything is dry, reassemble your camera and display it proudly!

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