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The NeoLucida: Artists Revive an Old Master Tool

by John Anderson (/Search/John+Anderson/)



When artists Pablo Garcia and Golan Levin launched their latest Kickstarter project on May 7, aiming to raise money to produce an updated camera lucida, the \$30 NeoLucida, their big hope was to attract 500 backers before June.

By midmorning on the next day they were fully funded, and they sold out their available stock of 2,500 just 16 hours after their launch. And there was demand for more.

The camera lucida is an optical device that assists artists in drawing by projecting onto a drawing surface a image of what is in front of it. Patented in 1807, it amounts to a prism on a stick. The tool gained attention in 2001 thanks to David Hockney's book *Secret Knowledge: Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters*. His thesis: the old masters didn't eyeball their work; they used optical devices, like the camera lucida. While curators were skeptical, artists like Garcia embraced Hockney's argument. Garcia purchased his first camera lucida in 2003 for \$50. "I don't think the seller knew what they had. It was listed as a drawing tool," he admitted. Most camera lucidas sell upwards of \$300 on eBay.

Levin, an associate professor of computation arts at Pittsburgh's Carnegie Mellon University, happened upon Hockney's text in 2011. Soon thereafter he asked Garcia, then teaching at Carnegie Mellon, if he had heard of Hockney's book. Garcia took the opportunity to show Levin his collection of camera lucidas. Levin wanted to get one for

himself but the antiques can be difficult to find. They began considering a workaround.

"The prism is simple, but not common," Garcia said. "To get a prism we needed to have them custom made, so we needed to buy in bulk. To order in bulk from China makes the most sense." As they discovered, Chinese manufacturers made most of the other parts they needed too, like a desk clamp, a goose neck, and 1/4"-20 screws. The project required a large investment to buy thousands of parts wholesale. That's when they turned to Kickstarter.

Five hundred units was enough volume to keep unit costs low. They debated who would buy the thing: the curious, or people who had read Hockney's book? Of course, they also considered it might be successful, and pondered how many they would be willing to make before the end of summer: before it was no longer fun to make them. The ceiling was set at 2,500 units, a quantity the artists could produce without reducing the quality of the finished product, and without dedicating a year of their lives to becoming full-time NeoLucida manufacturers.

Then they sold out in a day, followed by a stream of e-mails, many from educators wanting to apply the tool in the classroom. They had anticipated this problem, but, as Garcia explained, "We thought we'd have a month to figure this out." Astonished by the demand, they announced a second edition on May 10th, and increased the price to \$40. Regardless, it is still the least expensive portable camera lucida available.

In the end, Garcia and Levin don't stand to profit much. After the second batch ships, they aim to launch a commercial edition at the same price, and open-source the designs and technical information. "There is probably a Venn diagram of our motives," Garcia suggests, "the center of which is provoking a conversation about imaging technology and what it is to draw." As both have experienced with incoming students, many have a naïve and purist notion that using a computer or other drawing aid is cheating. As new media artists—a title neither finds very fitting—they aim to have students embrace technology. "The notion that (merging) art and technology is this new idea is silly." Arguing the tight connections between the two, Garcia references Leonardo da Vinci. "He's inventing. He's an engineer." Garcia pauses. "He's an artist, also."