

The NeoLucida could help you draw like an Old Master

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If you've always wanted to draw or paint like an Old Master, then the vital piece of equipment you were missing to help you reach your goal was the camera lucida.

Once a common tool for artists, architects, illustrators and anyone else drawing from life, a camera lucida (literally "light room") lets its user trace the image of what they see. Pablo Garcia and Golan Levin -- both art professors, from the School of the Art Institute in Chicago and Carnegie Mellon University respectively -- want to bring it back, with a Kickstarter (<https://web.archive.org/web/20130607043822/http://www.kickstarter.com/pr-a-portable-camera-lucida-for-the-21st-ce>) raising funds to manufacture a cheap and simple modern version they call the NeoLucida (<https://web.archive.org/web/20130607043822/http://neolucida.com/people/>).

Garcia and Levin subscribe to the controversial theory (<https://web.archive.org/web/20130607043822/http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H>) expounded in David Hockney's *Secret Knowledge* that the great advances made in western art during the Enlightenment were made possible by the parallel advances in optic technology. Better lenses and mirrors, and devices like the camera obscura, made drawing from life easier than ever before. The camera lucida was one of these tools.

Patented in 1807 by English physicist William Hyde Wollaston, the camera lucida works on a very simple principle. Looking through a four-faced glass prism on an adjustable arm, the artist sees both the paper they are drawing on and an image of whatever is directly in front of them superimposed onto the paper. It makes tracing over the image incredibly simple.

The invention of modern photography left many old reflective tools like the camera lucida seeming redundant, and it's since become something of a niche collectible. Antique versions can be expensive and there aren't too many being sold (a quick search (https://web.archive.org/web/20130607043822/http://www.ebay.co.uk/sch/Co_sop=15&_sac=1&_from=R40&_nkw=camera+lucida) for a camera lucida on ebay.co.uk brought up one for close to £100, and one more bidding at £10).

Garcia and Levin write: "We like to think of it as a disruption to widespread assumptions about art-making and art history. Our design is lightweight (0.25kg), sturdy, compact enough to fit in a handbag, highly adjustable, totally non-electronic, and released with a liberal open-source hardware licence."

Garcia and Levin also claim that the NeoLucida "is the first portable, authentic camera lucida to be manufactured in nearly a century", but that's clearly not true, as even a cursory search on the web (<https://web.archive.org/web/20130607043822/http://www.cameralucida.org>) brings up a number of different suppliers from around the world. However, the portability, practicality and price of the NeoLucida is clearly impressive - one NeoLucida only costs \$35 (£22.52) for a backer on Kickstarter, and its flexible gooseneck arm is a big improvement on the antique system of adjustable knobs.

The Kickstarter has proved immensely successful in a very short space of time -- only two days after launch, the \$15,000 (£9,651) goal has been reached many times over. Right now, almost \$100,000 (£64,000) has been pledged, forcing Garcia and Levin to post an update to make it clear that the initial batch of 2,500 units has already been snapped up and they'll have to "hand off our open-source designs to capable and understanding commercial partners" so that there's actually a chance the thing will continue to be made.

Edited by LIAT CLARK
