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Classic Gear: The Kodak Carousel

Rob Halliday takes a nostalgic but instructive look back at the tools that have shaped the industry . . .

Probably, you hadn't even noticed. Possibly, it hadn't even occurred to you, another example of our once-analogue, mechanical world moving to an all digital era . . . In October 2004, Kodak stopped making their entire Carousel range of slide projectors.

Once you hear the news, you suddenly feel foolish not to have realised: when was the last time you heard that once familiar ka-cha-chunk sound, mechanics lifting one slide up, rotating it out of the way then letting the next drop into place - accompanied by the flash of darkness as the projector blacked out its gate? Or heard the cursing as a carousel was dropped, the slides scattered everywhere? In fact, when was the last time you saw any kind of presentation that didn't involve a video projector and PowerPoint?

Kodak's decision to discontinue the line - announced in late 2003, to give those who did rely on Carousels plenty of time to stock up - was as inevitable then as their decision to discontinue most photographic film will surely one day be. It ended a range with roots stretching back to the 1930s and Kodak's first Kodaslide projector for 2" slides, and more directly to 1961 when Kodak's engineers instigated one of those simple in retrospect, dramatic at the time revolutions: replacing their linear slide carriage trays with a round version - a carousel.

The innovation was introduced to the public as the Kodak Carousel model 550. The round tray offered easier access to slides as well as being able to cope with slides in a wide variety of mounts. Slide changes took about a second, with the unit offering automated timed changes; a 500W lamp gave a good output while an impeller-type fan protected slides from damage.

Two years later, the Carousel 800 introduced the more compact form familiar to Carousel users for the next 40 years, together with

a connector for a hand-held remote. The 'Ektagraphic' (brighter output) and 'Ektapro' (advanced control) ranges from 1969 onwards added features that professional users demanded, including more accurate slide registration for ensuring 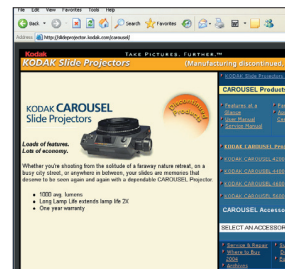image alignment across multiple-projector set-ups. In Europe, Kodak introduced the 'S-AV' range (the S for Stuttgart, Kodak's European base), able to switch between voltages and so travel the world, and with a 12-pin connector opening up even more external control possibilities.

The Carousel became the darling of anyone trying to project slides - compact and reliable for a single speaker, easily adaptable for those wanting more refinement with two cross-fading projectors, highly versatile for those creating spectacular multi-projector extravaganzas - and with Kodak offering tacit, if unofficial, support for those hot-rodding their projectors for the ultimate in brightness. It played everywhere - lectures, museums, shops, car launches, trade shows, theatres, extravaganzas. Tommy, with its 56 Ektapro 4010 projectors, remains etched in my mind.

And then it was gone, killed by the convenience and reliability of digital projection and the possibilities offered by a whole new class of product, one day to be classics: the digital media server . . .

Described as a "snapshot view, frozen in time as of November 2004", Kodak maintain a section of their website devoted to the Carousel at

>>> //**slideprojector.kodak.com/index.shtml**