

Into the Wild with a Field Camera

di Michele Vacchiano

versione

With this issue there begins a series of articles, edited by Michele Vacchiano, on the aspects and problems of field photography in large format. This is a much debated topic in the United States (both in the web and in specialized magazines), that we believe will also be of interest to the European professional, especially at a time when nature photography seems to be acquiring an increasingly wider niche in the market and the large format seems to be enjoying a rebirth - thanks also to the range of possibilities offered by digital backs, which further increase the large format's versatility -. We do not want however, this series of articles to be reduced to a sort of treatise in parts: the elasticity and versatility of the web allow us to transform this into an occasion of continuous dialogue with our readers, who will be able to take part in the choice of topics and the running of the series. Therefore if you would like us to deal with specific problems relating to field photography in large format, please write to our editor (immagine@portfolioitalia.com). Michele Vacchiano will see that from time to time your suggested topics are inserted into his articles.



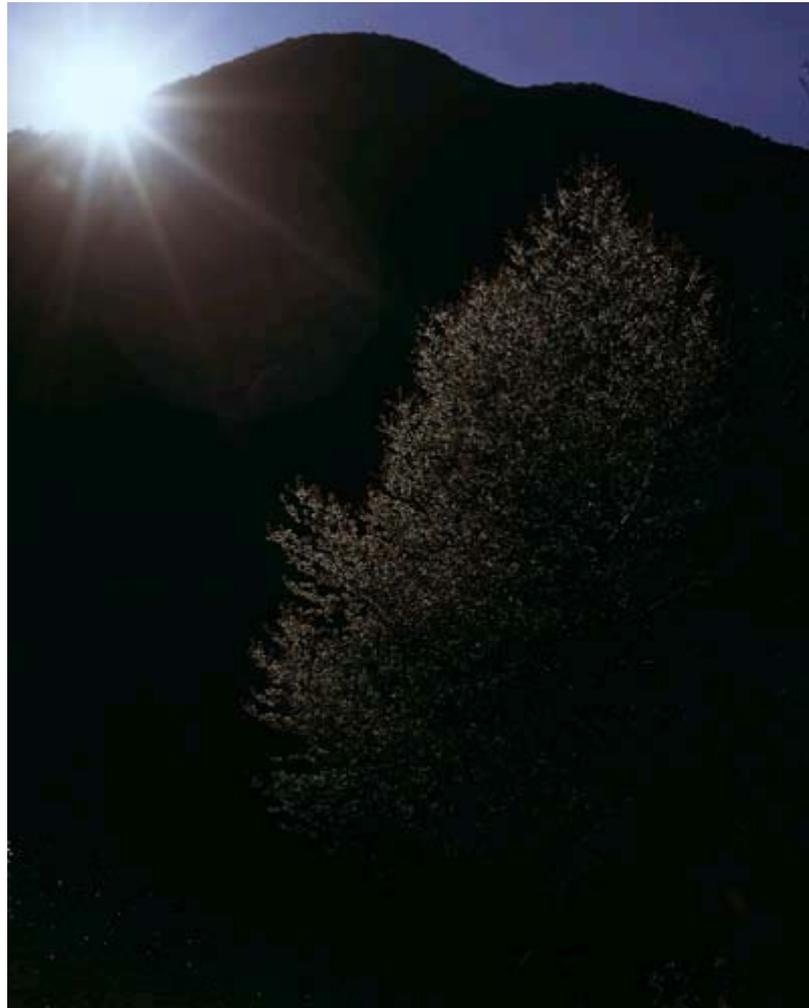
Introduction

In the United States for decades the reportage has been synonymous with large format. The field and press cameras 4x5", which were practically unknown to the European amateur photographer (but also to the photo-journalist), have been the favorite media of photographers such as Wegee (Arthur Fellig), who with his Speed Graphic immortalized the life of two generations of Americans. As regards nature photography instead, how not cite - as an example for all - the great Ansel Adams and his landscapes suspended between formal perfection and evocation? Even today not few are the nature photographers who prefer to use the large format, especially for landscape. I personally know of professionals who would not give up their Wisner Expedition (a camera whose dimensions would send shivers down the spine of Europeans) even for the most sophisticated last generation reflex.



On the Internet there certainly are a great variety of sites (all, or almost all of which American) especially dedicated to large format photography, with discussion groups, FAQ and

mailing lists. A subject that not only interests professionals, but also amateur photographers, those who, animated by real passion - in the steps of Adams and Weston- prefer to spend their free time in their dark room rather than be satisfied with the hurried and mediocre prints made in the mini-lab across the street. It is true that the costs involved belong to a decisively different range from those that the average amateur is used to, but it is also true that not much is needed in terms of lenses and indispensable equipment, and that these do not require a substantially different investment from that of a range of high level reflex equipment. The use of a large format camera allows the creation of an image that can be considered a work of art. The complexity of the operations involved in taking the photograph force one to concentrate on the quality of the image and its composition, more than on the extra-photographic suggestions which - often - make one want to capture a moment that, though maybe emotively connoted, is in itself incapable of being translated into the abstract bi-dimensional quality of the photograph. The image that forms on the ground glass appears upside-down and with inverted sides, accentuating the forms, lines, tonal values and colours with a vivid abstraction capable of rendering immediately clear and perceptible the photographic parameters, without the distraction that derives from the direct vision of the subject.



The wide area of vision (4x5 inches or more) invites the eye

to explore the entire composition, noticing every single detail and difference in tonal value. The world that is outside the composition (that world that does not appear in the frame but that often drives the amateur to take a photograph that will reveal itself impiously banal) is rigorously left out. All that is there is that abstract agglomerate of lines and tones to be worked upon with geometric precision. The vast possibilities of control over the image allow photographers to transform the surrounding world and to transmit "their" reality to the viewer, which is indeed the ultimate aim of creative photography. The front and rear movements allow a total control on the subject's perspective and form, not to mention the increase in the depth of field, an effect that is often characterized by a dramatic visual impact. If to these movements we add the possibility of rotating the back 360 degrees, we can see how the photographer can achieve a complete control of the image. But the advantage of the large format lies especially in the possibility of treating sheet films singularly and separately, which allows a complete control of the photographic process and - notably - the total application of the zone system. The lack of automation and the simplicity of usage highlight the technical superiority of the large format. The whole process of shooting leads the photographer into another dimension, where the level of concentration translates into a greater expressiveness and a more refined creativity. The way a photograph is taken is also different: the costs of acquiring and developing a single sheet film are equivalent to those of an entire 35 mm film, therefore one cannot afford the luxury of shooting successively, in the hope that something will come out in the end. Normally I use a reflex (of small or medium format) as a "note pad", to shoot different images of the same subject. But when I finally find the composition that really interests me, then I screw my field camera onto the head of my ice-axe and expose a good sheet.

(to be continued)