

WHY THE LARGE FORMAT

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What is a large format camera? When they see one amateur photographers can hardly disguise a smile: that antediluvian equipment furnished with bellows and that photographer disappearing under a dark cloth recall certain illustrations or comedy films of the beginning of the century. In actual fact the general appearance of large format cameras has changed very little in the last hundred years: after all a camera is nothing other than (nor should it be) a black lightproof box with a hole in the front for the lens and a hole at the back for the film. What has changed (and can hardly be seen) is the technology that today lies behind the photographic process and that has transformed the view camera into a sophisticated instrument of creativity. To be sure, there are no LCD screens, electronic buzzing sounds, or the futuristic bip-bips that beginner photographers love so much and that make the reflex seem like a game boy. However, there is an optics technology of a very high level that - combined with an absolute versatility - makes the large format one of the best suited cameras to integrate with the incessant evolution of the very concept of image. Thus, as we shall see, it is precisely this type of equipment, whose structure has remained substantially unchanged over the course of the last century, that will lead photography towards the innovations of the new millennium.



The advantages of the large format compared to the smaller formats are certainly more numerous than those which we will limit ourselves

to list here below.

1. The larger format of the negative: from 4x5 inches (10x12 cm) to 8x10 inches (20x25 cm) or more. The most common format is the 4x5", practically the only one that can be used on the field with a certain convenience;
2. The possibility of using smaller formats. Every camera has the possibility of substituting the standard back with backs for roll films (6x7, 6x9, 6x12 cm);
3. The maximum versatility in managing the image for the single film sheets are impressed and treated separately, which allows one to intervene in each phase of the photographic process (optimal application of the zone system). Moreover, it is very easy to pass from colour to black and white or Polaroid, or to use film with different sensitivities, without necessarily having to replace the entire film;
4. The greater competitiveness that derives from an increased vendibility of the product. Publishers continue to prefer a photograph of larger dimensions, whereas in Europe especially there are increasingly fewer photographers who work with the medium and large format. The few that still do so enter into a market range that is relatively free and rich in possibilities;
5. The camera movements of which we have already spoken about in the introduction allow a complete control over perspective, the depth of field and the image's dimensions;
6. The large dimension vision on the focusing screen guarantees accuracy in considering the finest details;
7. One can use lenses of different makers without the problems deriving from the incompatibility of the various lens mounts: once the lensboard is set, the lens is ready for use;
8. The photograph's large format, together with a gelatine that is thicker than that present in the smaller formats, not only guarantees a greater sharpness and finer grain, but also a richer tonal and chromatic range: a 4x5" sheet has a surface area that is thirteen times greater than that of the 24x36 photograph.
9. When working with the negative film it is possible to make much more accurate, clearer and contrasted contact prints than those obtainable by using an enlarger (a method that subjects the image to a loss of quality due to the optical aberrations of the enlarging lens);
10. The maximum concentration on the image: the complexity of the procedures and the time required by each individual shot facilitates what I call "a meditative approach" to photography. The photographer is compelled to invest time, experience and attention in each action, and this cannot but favour the creation of an image that has been "thought out" during all the phases of its realization.
11. The total compatibility with digital imaging: the large format's digital backs (which can be used advantageously in the studio but also - with some additional problems - in the open air) guarantee a quality of image that is unknown to the digital cameras destined to the amateur market.



The large format's peculiar characteristics, however, represent also the cause of the disadvantages that such a photographic system entails.

1. Everything is manual. Aperture priority, electronic shutter or autofocus do not exist. The electronic applications for the large format (with exception of the already mentioned digital backs) are normally limited (when they are present) to certain essential functions. There certainly does not exist the delight in the gadget (at times completely useless) that characterizes the amateur market. There is no possibility to mount zoom lenses, which are not contemplated in the large format. The very need to carry out manually the various adjustments can give rise to a great number of mistakes (certainly more than the amateur photographer can imagine).
2. It is expensive. The equipment and lenses are not much more expensive than those required for a high level reflex camera, but the acquisition and processing costs of each single sheet film are little less than those required by an entire 35 mm film. This means that for every 4x5" photograph one will spend almost as much as for thirtysix small format photographs.
3. The considerable weight and clumsiness, which is increased by the fact that the tripod is almost always indispensable (we will explain further on the reasons for this almost);
4. The critical depth of field. One should consider that a 24 mm wide-angle lens for the small format, corresponds in the 4x5" format to a focal length of about 90 mm. Since with an increase in focal length the apparent depth of field diminishes, the issue becomes important when one passes from the wide-angle lens to normal lenses (150 mm for the 4x5") or lenses greater than normal. The solution that consists in diaphragming a lot involves proportionally longer times: a problem when the breeze makes the trees rustle in the woods. The optimal adjustment (typical of the large format) consists in resorting to tilt and swing movements, but this requires a perfect mastery of the medium and of its technical possibilities and it is not always easily feasible in the open air;
5. The lenses present an aperture that is much reduced compared to their equivalents in the small and medium format: f/5.6 is already considered a more than satisfactory relative maximum aperture, f/8 is more common. This poses some not irrelevant problems when

focusing and composing the image on the ground glass, especially in the open air and in the presence of a strong natural light. This is the reason for the dark cloth and the various focusing hoods applied to the back of the camera;

6. To photograph wild animals in their natural environment becomes almost impossible, not only because of the limited depth of field, but also because it is impossible to mount very elevated focal lengths on these cameras. One should consider that a 480 mm lens becomes little more than a moderate telephoto lens;

7. The shooting of flowers and insects is also problematic: a reproduction scale of 1:1 means a framed field of 10X12 centimeters, too large for a butterfly to conveniently fill the negative;

8. The long preparation times. The sheet films have to be inserted one by one into the film holders, and this task must be carried out in the darkroom, which requires a lot more time than loading a film into a camera in full daylight. It is true that there are more practical systems available on the market, especially for those who work in the open (such as Kodak ReadyLoad or Fuji QuickLoad), but they require the acquisition of a particular film holder and are generally rather expensive;

9. The reduced productivity. If by using a small format one can allow oneself to shoot an entire film on one subject (both to have the possibility of choosing among different frames and exposures, and to submit the photos to different editors or agencies), with the large format this is impossible, unless you have a lot of time and a lot of money available. This is for a photographer quite rare, in these days.

(to be continued)