

Large Format: The Agony and the Ecstasy

by

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*The why and how
about photographing with
a 4"x5" large-format camera*

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Why 4x5?

I was once asked, during an interview for the Luminous Landscape Video Journal, why I decided to use a 4x5 camera. My immediate answer was the one you would expect: I use 4x5 because of the superb detail available from such a large original, the superlative lens quality, the movements afforded by a view camera, and so on. In one word: quality.

Later on that same day, while still being interviewed, I found myself under the dark cloth composing an image on the ground glass of my Linhof field camera. In this intimate setting, shielded from prying eyes by the black cloth, I thought of another, more honest answer: I use a 4x5 view camera because I have tried all the other available formats and found none to be as satisfying as 4x5. In other words I attempted to avoid using 4x5 but was forced to accept that only 4x5 would allow me to create the kind of images I wanted to create.

For many years I searched for a camera which would give me 4x5 quality without the problems associated with 4x5 cameras: I went from 35mm to medium format to panoramic cameras. From Olympus, to Leica, to Hasselblad, to Fuji and so on. I was afraid of the weight of 4x5 equipment, of its cost, of the difficulty of loading sheet film, of the problems focusing the camera and of one thousand other details.

I have an entire closet full of cameras to attest to this fact. For years I went from one system to another before giving-in and purchasing a Linhof 4x5. After receiving the film back from my first shoot with this camera I was sold out. This was the format I had been looking for all these years. Forget all the other cameras because none would give me what this one was giving me. 4x5 was the medium that I should have been using all along to create the photographs I want to create.

This last sentence is very important: “to create the photographs I want to create.” In my case I wanted to create stunning color landscape photographs, photographs such as those David Muench, Elliott Porter or Jack Dykinga could create. This fact is of crucial importance.



*Sunrise from Yaki Point,
Grand Canyon National Park
Linhof Master Technica 4x5,
Schneider 47mmXL with center filter,
Fuji Provia 100F.*

2-Finding the ideal format:

My first photography teacher, Scott McLeay, once told me that for each photographic subject there was an ideal photographic format and hence camera type. Certainly this is a debatable topic as boundaries are meant to be crossed but it makes for a fairly simple point which can be easily illustrated: while I use 4x5 daily for landscape work it would not cross my mind to use it for reportage work. For this work I would consider 35 mm to be the format of choice. While I value the quality of the images created with 4x5 it would not cross my mind to use it for a wedding. For this I would consider medium format to be the format of choice.

In the field of Landscape photography 4x5 is my format of choice. Of course as I say this the names of landscape photographers who use 35mm or medium format will probably cross your mind. Galen Rowell for example, one of the prominent contemporary landscape photographers, uses only 35mm. However his specialty is mountain climbing and his most well known book is called “Mountain Light.” If I was going to climb Everest I wouldn’t take a Linhof 4x5. I wouldn’t take a medium format either. Instead I would most likely use a 35mm, like Rowell. Similarly other landscape photographers have their own unique reasons for using a specific format.



Sunset over Lake Powell
Linhof Master Technica 4x5,
Rodenstock 210mm,
Fuji Provia 100F.

3-Four reasons why I use 4x5:

If I was asked again why I use 4x5 I would simply answer “because it allows me to do what I want to do.” To be more specific here are the four main reasons why I use a 4x5 view camera:

First, unlike reportage photography for example, my subject isn’t going to go anywhere. Most landscapes show little geological changes from natural forces in hundred or thousand of years so it is unlikely that much will happen in a few hours. I have therefore plenty of time to set up my tripod and my camera and to compose the image carefully on the ground glass.

Second, in landscape work very small details are often of prime importance in the finished print. Such small details are not always easily visible in the viewfinder of a 35mm or medium format camera. The 4x5 ground glass, plus the 8x magnifier I use to check focus, allow me to see these details clearly and make them stand out.

Third, the isolation afforded by working under the dark cloth creates a setting propitious to reflection and careful image creation because it isolates the photographer from its immediate surrounding and leaves him in the sole presence of the image in front of him.

Fourth, the inverted image on the ground glass creates a more direct visual impression because the brain does not have to flip the image upside down. This last remark is based on the fact that our eyes act as lenses and thus project an upside-down image of the world to the brain which then has to flip it right side up. Because the ground glass image is inverted it is projected to the brain right side up thereby nullifying the need for the brain to rectify the image.

Certainly, all the fears I originally had about using 4x5 have proven true: the equipment is heavy and I could easily do without the 20 or 30 pounds of gear I have to lug on my back. Loading holders in the field is time which I would rather spend scouting for locations or composing images. Windy conditions may make photography impossible because of the frequent need to use exposure times of several seconds. Focusing the camera can be tricky when the situation is critical and every second counts. So can calculating the exposure, accounting for bellows extension, filter factors, and so on. However I have become used to this way of working and it bothers me less and less as time goes by.



Spring Sunset with Yuccas in Bloom. Canyon de Chelly National Monument, Arizona. Linhof Master Technica 4x5, Schneider 75mm, Fuji Provia 100F.

4-My 4x5 equipment:

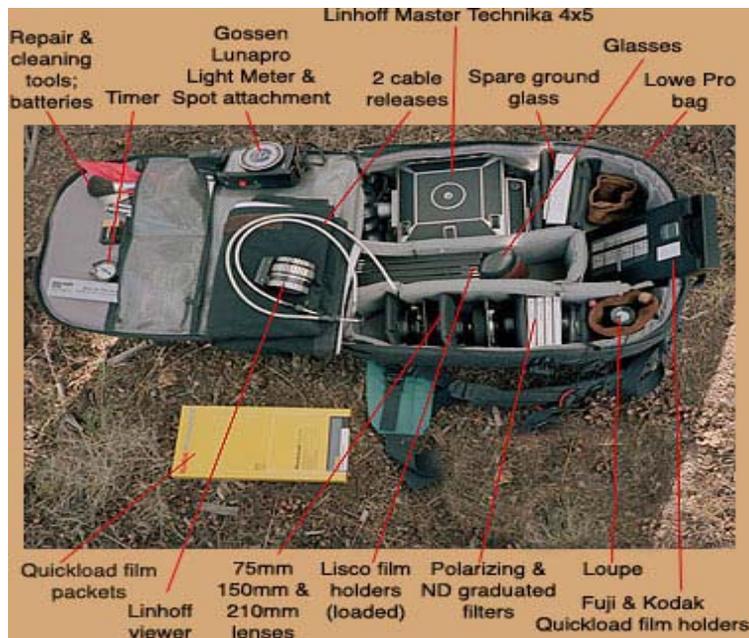
Here is a breakdown of my equipment. I use a Linhoff Master Technica 4x5. This is a field camera meaning it has a folding bed which can be closed, with the lens attached, to form a box when not in use. A field camera is both easier to carry and less prone to damage since essential parts are protected from shocks during transport. It took me a long time to learn where each of the controls are located but now I have them memorized and can operate the camera from under the dark cloth without actually looking at it. For this reason I would be unwilling to switch to another camera brand.

Although the Linhoff features a folding viewing hood on the ground glass I prefer to work under the dark cloth. The viewing hood is nice but does not do a perfect job of shielding bright sunlight and does not allow me to back up far enough from the ground glass to see the full picture.

I use the Linhoff optical viewer to visualize images and try different compositions. This viewer is somewhat similar to a zoom lens without a camera attached to it. It is an optical device, somewhat like a viewfinder, which allows me to vary the focal length at will. The current Linhoff viewer has settings for 4x5 lenses from 75mm to 360mm thus allowing me to visualize a composition using any of my lenses without having to actually set up the camera. This is an invaluable tool which I usually carry in my pocket at all times.

At this time I use the following lenses: Schneider 47XL f5.6, Schneider 75mm f4.5, Rodenstock 150mm f5.6, Rodenstock 210mm f5.6 and Schneider 400mm compact f5.6. This line up will soon be completed with a Schneider 110mm f5.6XL. I favor the latest lens designs and always look for lenses with the widest maximum aperture so as to get a bright image on the ground glass. This is particularly crucial with 4x5 wide angle lenses which tend to project a relatively dark image even at full aperture.

I use a Wista 8x loupe to check for perfect focus on the ground glass.



I meter the scene with a hand-held Gossen Lunapro F equipped with a 7.5 degrees spot attachment. I favor this meter, which I have used since 1980, because of the 7.5 degree of view. Many photographers prefer 1 degree spotmeters but I personally find them too precise and tend to make erroneous calculations when using them. I normally bracket each exposure at least one stop in both directions (underexposure and overexposure).

I use both quickloads (pre loaded 4x5 film packs) and film holders. I load the film holders in a Shadow-box film tent (see picture on my web site) and keep the quickloads handy in case I run out of holders or go on a long hike since they are much lighter than holders. I work mostly in color and at this time my films of choice are Fuji Velvia and Provia. I occasionally use Kodak T-Max 100 quickloads for black and white work

The filters I carry are the Schneider center filters for the 47 and 75mm lens (necessary to compensate for light fall-off at image corners), polarizing filters in the different necessary sizes, and split plus regular neutral density filters.

I use a Gitzo carbon fiber Mountaineer tripod with a Gitzo magnesium center ballhead with a quick release attachment. I almost never leave the camera on the tripod while I walk from one location to another due to fear of having the camera fall off.



I also carry an assortment of screwdrivers, cleaning tools and tape for quick fixes in the field, a compass to check for sun and moon locations, and a notebook.

I pack all this equipment in a Lowe Pro Trekker Pro LW camera backpack. The tripod is carried in a separate Gitzo tripod bag. I consider carrying the tripod in a bag very important. In my experience most tripod damage is caused by sand or shocks and the bag does an excellent job protecting the tripod from both.

5-A reflective medium:

4x5 isn't for everyone and certainly isn't the answer to all photographic needs and problems. Rather, it is a specific means to a specific end, namely the creation of carefully controlled photographs in which as many "variables" as possible are controlled (an upcoming article will explore what those "photographic variables" consist of). It is a tool which, because it demands careful and deliberate use on the part of the photographer, forces one to reflect at length upon the various aspects of image creation.

To this end one must sometimes trade spontaneity for reflection. Using a 4x5 often means seeing the image slowly come to life onto the camera's ground glass, in the confined and intimate space under the dark cloth where image and photographer are face to face. As a result large format cameras tend to promote inwardness and meditation.

It is a tool which has to be wrestled into operation, a tool which at times can be unyielding, frustrating, slow, awkward and often blamingly backwards in technological terms. View cameras have benefited little from all the developments that have been bequeathed upon 35 mm cameras and in turn upon medium format cameras. Auto-focus, auto exposure, vacuum film plates, spot metering, eye controlled focusing systems, image stabilization lenses and other technological wonders have passed the world of 4x5 by leaving view cameras as antiquated as they were before this technological revolution took place.



And yet it is this very lack of technological takeover which makes 4x5 so attractive. Devoid of all this technology, ignored by computerized takeover, the 4x5 is left very much like what it was a 100 years ago. Except for films a view camera is very similar to what it was a hundred years ago. In fact, one could take a 100 years old 4x5, fit it with a modern lens, expose the image on a modern film, and obtain an image probably undifferentiable from one made with the same lens and film but with the latest 4x5 model. For example the difference between the Linhof Technika III (released in the 40's) and the Linhof Technika 2000 (released last year, as its name implies) consists of first, the ability (for the 2000) to easily accept wide angle lenses down to 47mm and second the lack of a rangefinder. In fact it is possible to fit a 47 mm lens in a Linhof Technika III (albeit awkwardly) and to remove the rangefinder, thus effectively making the 2000 a convenience more than a necessity. Yet, 60 years separate these two cameras.

6-The right tool for the job:

4x5 is the right tool for the type of photographs I want to create at this time. To forfeit its use, because of the difficulties expressed above, would be to forfeit the image quality I am seeking. As David Muench said in an interview “4x5 allows me to make final statements.” I could not agree less.

With all other formats, whenever I capture a worthwhile image, I usually think “I will have to return to this location and photograph it with 4x5.” When I get a successful image of a specific location on 4x5 film I know I have made a final statement. This means I am now free to move on to a different location and to new and more challenging images. I may decide to revisit the same location but it won't be to try getting the same image again. It will be to look for possibilities I either missed or ignored on previous visits. To me this feeling is priceless.

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Chinle, Arizona
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Arch near Chinle, Arizona
Linhof Master Technica 4x5,
Schneider 47mmXl
center filter,
Fuji Provia 100F.