
TRADITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY; TALKING ABOUT THE CAMERA

FROM THE jbhphoto.com BLOG

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**MUSINGS, OPINIONS, COMMENTARY,
HOW-TO AND GENERAL DISCUSSION
ABOUT TRADITIONAL WET DARKROOM
PHOTOGRAPHY TAKEN FROM THE PAGES
OF THE jbhphoto.com BLOG.**

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ONLY A LIGHT-TIGHT BOX

This entry was posted on March 31, 2011.



"He tried to impress upon me that, though a camera is nothing but a tool, it can be (therefore it must be) used for a higher purpose than the meaningless transference of already visible information onto a sheet of paper. Because camera could describe a worker's vision of his world, like a cello or a paintbrush, or granite block, camera held the capacity for art."

-Fred Picker- Discussing his experience with the Ansel Adams Workshops. Zone VI Newsletter, Number 39, June, 1984, p. 5

A camera is just a tool. . . a thing. It is only a light-tight box that holds the lens and film. It is no different than a carpenter's saw, a painter's brush, a pianist's piano, or a sculptor's mallet and chisel. Any of these tools in the hands of the inexperienced will create little more than noise or a mess. Likewise, in the hands of a beginner, the camera is no more than a thing. In the hands of an experienced photographer it becomes a tool for creating art.

If you want to become a photographic artist the first goal is to become an accomplished master of the equipment. But, how do you get there from here? It starts with ambition and drive. Like any skill, you will only learn, and become a master, if you are dedicated. The mechanics of photography are not difficult to learn. It does take time and determination to get there, but it is not an unachievable task. You just have to have the desire and drive to work through the process of learning how best to use the tools.

Think of when you were a kid and you thought that taking piano lessons was a great thing to do, since some of your friends were already enrolled. Then after a while you get the usual threats from your parents to get in there and practice! You get the customary, we bought you that expensive piano and are paying for lessons, so get to work. Truth is, you really didn't want to learn the piano in the first place. It was just something you thought would be neat. If you really wanted to learn, your parents would have to be lecturing you about spending too much time with the piano and limiting your keyboard time.

It is that drive. . . that obsession with learning that makes for the great artist. You have to eat, sleep and breathe photography to be really successful. Just a casual interest will lead to little more than a few casual photographs. Or, maybe you are just obsessed with the hardware. Maybe you would be better off collecting and trading equipment. There is always that possibility that the light-tight box is your obsession and not the photograph. Only you can make that determination.

That Light-Tight Box is just the camera. . . a tool to be used in the creation of your art. I hope that you learn to use your tools to your best advantage! Invest your time wisely. Learn the tools of your chosen craft well. Do not stumble around in the dark, it belongs inside the camera.

JB

UPSIDE DOWN

This entry was posted on October 28, 2013.



Seems that a large view camera always attracts curiosity. Everyone either gives you a long wondering look or asks questions about that big box on a tripod. Mostly they want to know how old the camera is and if you can still buy film. Is that a Hasselblad is a question that comes up from time to time?

For those that are truly interested, a peek under the dark cloth is always a good way to confuse them even more. The first thing they do is stick their nose right up against the ground glass. With that point blank view you see nothing. I have to explain that they need to back up. That it is like looking at a TV screen. After getting a good look they suddenly realize everything is upside down. I have to explain that it is also reversed left to right. Comments range from silence to questions about how can

you do anything when the world is upside down and reversed? I usual just say that you get used to it and it becomes part of how you and the camera work.

The truth is, nothing will improve your overall composition more than looking at it upside down. It is a way to trick your left brain into shutting up and allowing your right brain to take over. The left brain is your engineering side. . . it deals with facts and figures. Your right brain is the creative side. . . it deals with form and shape. We are taught from an early age to be left brain dominant, so we get used to ignoring our creative side. The quickest way to shut your left brain up is to show it something it cannot readily identify. With the composition upside down, the right brain is in its natural environment and unimpeded by the chatter from the left side.

With the inverted view on the ground glass it seems that the subconscious sees things that the conscious mind does not pick up on. I see things on the ground glass that are interesting, they have absolutely no meaning, yet there is something inside that says this is something of interest. There are abstract images that I have made that did not register until I looked at the proofs. There are times that something just calls out to be framed and photographed. It may have no rhyme or reason at the time of exposure, but later becomes something of great interest, even something totally different than originally envisioned.

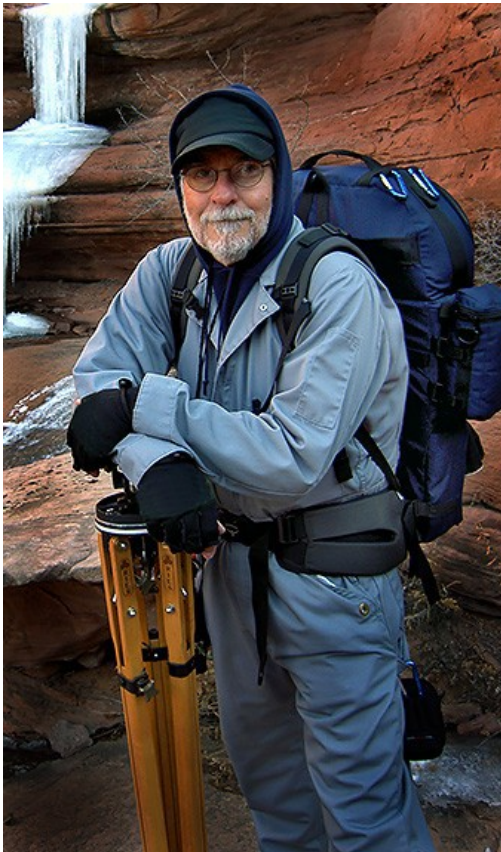
Do not be afraid of the inverted image. It is one of the most powerful assets you have when making photographs. You will quickly get used to seeing things this way. It rapidly becomes part of your connection to the camera and your subject. Do I recommend you get one of those reflex viewing hoods that turn things back around? Absolutely NOT!

Quit fighting what comes naturally and allow your creativity to flow from within. Quit trying to analyze the subject and allow that inverted view to work its own magic. As I said earlier; Nothing will improve your overall composition more than looking at it upside down.

JB

500 YARDS

This entry was posted on July 15, 2013.



Brett Weston is credited with saying, “Anything more than 500 yards from the car just isn’t photogenic.” That is particularly true when you enter the world of Large and Ultra Large Format. I would even venture to say that distance shortens exponentially as the camera size increases. You could say that distance is inversely proportional to size. We live by these laws of physics and it is darn hard to get around them.

I have given this a lot of thought and have deduced that;

1. The camera folded size is determined by the film size
2. The camera weight is determined by design and materials
3. My back can only carry so much

So, it is pretty clear that item number one is fixed and there is not much you can do to make any format camera much smaller in size. Also, my back has its load limit and that I do not want to exceed. This leaves item number two as about the only place you can experiment.

It is understood that making any mechanical device lighter makes it less rigid. You have to sacrifice some rigidity for a reduction in weight and size. There is always someone that starts complaining about how some cameras are not rock solid when they grab one end and twist. They complain about the camera not being stable. The reality is, it is just a function of the design. I always say the same thing, the camera only has to be still while the shutter is open. The rest of the time, who cares? The camera is just a tool and should not be obsessed over. Choose what works best for you.

Way back when I first started getting serious about photography I decided to buy a new 35mm camera. I did a lot of research and settled on three major brand names. The trouble was, I could not decide which best suited me. I knew that there would be no appreciable difference in the finished print. I challenge anyone to look at a framed print on the wall and tell me what brand of camera was used.



So, it all finally came down to making a decision. After some contemplation I decided to go to the local camera store and handle each camera. Actually I had done this several times, but what I was looking for as I neared my final decision, was which best fit my hands. My final choice was based on this one final criteria. I chose the camera that felt the most comfortable to me. Its controls were conveniently laid out and worked seamlessly. This is how I chose and I have never regretted that process.

Fast forward to today and little has changed with my thought process. I am always looking for what best fits my hand and my way of working. In any device design there are always trade offs. To gain one feature may require some sacrifice in another. Keep in mind that if you are going more than 500 yards with that LF or ULF camera, item number three above just may be the most important consideration.

JB

THE VIEW CAMERA IN THE FIELD

This entry was posted on November 25, 2010.



This Is How We Work With A View Camera. There is always a lot of discussion on how best to carry LF gear in the field. Seems that most people like to carry their camera in a backpack. That is our favorite mode of transportation in the field for sure. We like the backpack idea so much that Susan builds our packs to custom fit our cameras and accessories. All that we have learned about camera packs has been worked out the hard way. We have copied the features of commercial packs that we find useful and modified as required.

It seems that most people plop their pack down on the ground when they get ready to shoot. That is fine, unless you are in mud, water, or knee deep in snow. I have never liked the idea of setting my pack on the ground. And, yes I know, there are those that carry a tarp, but that is way too much trouble for me. I want to find my subject, plop down my tripod and then get to work without having to look for a convenient and safe place to put down the pack. This thinking led to a modification to both the tripod and the pack. Susan added a webbing loop to the top of the pack

and I added a hook on the bottom of the tripod crown. This allows us to hang the pack from the tripod, keeping it out of the dirt and making it very accessible.

We both have worked out a system that allows us to carry everything we need and work efficiently in most any situation. The packs we use have a large compartment in the bottom for the camera and a separate top compartment for lenses and accessories. The custom packs also have room for several film holders.

This is how we do it and it has proven to be very efficient. However you choose to work in the field, the most important thing is to have everything you need with you, well protected, and easily within reach.



JB

THE B&W VIEWING FILTER

This entry was posted on November 9, 2010.



Susan and I have used a Zone VI B&W viewing filter for years. This nifty little round device not only shows you the relative tonal relationship between different areas of a scene, it also acts as a framing device.

So, what is a B&W viewing filter? In reality it is a Wratten #90 monochromatic filter. The gel version of these filters are available from the usual photographic suppliers. They are a gelatin filter and fragile. Several companies manufacture monochromatic viewing filters. Tiffen has a version for B&W, but we prefer the Zone VI filter. It is rugged, mine is over 15 years old and still going

strong. The fragile filter is mounted between glass and encapsulated in a round molded plastic enclosure. The filter comes with a cord so it can hang around your neck ready for use at any time.

So, what does the B&W filter really do? What it does not do is turn a scene to B&W. The filter shows you the approximate tonal relationship between different areas of a scene as recorded by B&W film. It will show you if there are any mergers of tone within a scene. or example, the filter will show you if a building will tonally merge with the sky, thus indicating the use of a filter to darken the sky for separation. It will also give you a good idea of how different colors will look in B&W. I have found that nice little green moss on a tree trunk will merge with the bark and disappear. The viewing filter will show you this with just a glance. Once you get used to using this handy, yet simple little device, you will not want to be without it.

The Zone VI version also serves as a framing device. The 4×5 version has the same proportions as a 4×5 or 8×10 negative. By learning to hold the filter at the correct distance from your eye, you will soon be able to approximate what focal length lens is required on your camera for a specific framing.

One other thing, the filter forces you to close one eye to use. Remember, the camera has only one lens, one view, one perspective. You may be surprised, but try closing one eye while you are looking at a possible photograph. You just may quickly learn that once you remove the 3-D effect of using both eyes, the photo just may not work. Try it!

This is just another tool. It may work for you, maybe not. The only way to really know is to try it. The Zone VI B&W Viewing Filter is no longer manufactured, but you see them used all the time. Check the Internet. This just could become a regular part of your equipment complement.

JB

IS THAT AN OLD CAMERA?

This entry was posted on March 26, 2009.



How many times have I been asked, “is that an old camera?” I usually have to explain that no, it is actually a modern version of an old camera. Seldom am I asked why I would use something like an old bellows-type camera. But I get the feeling that there are those that would like to ask why.

Am I the only one that believes that simplicity has its place? For me, it really has its place when it comes to my art form. When I get out in the field, I want the equipment to become transparent in its function. And, the best way I have found to achieve this transparency is through simplicity.

I have started a list of things that I like about using a view camera. It goes something like this:

- No batteries
- No multi-function buttons
- No multi-layered menus
- No planned obsolescence
- No little tiny buttons to locate
- Nothing new to learn
- Nothing to upgrade

I am sure with a little more time I could think of more, but I am sure you get the idea. I love the feel of a view camera. I love the feel of a view camera on a very large, heavy, wooden tripod. I love to climb under the dark cloth and just look at the ground glass. I love the fact that the image is upside down. Nothing will do more to improve your compositions than a flipped image. I like the slow pace of the view camera. I love spending an afternoon just exposing two sheets of film of one subject. Waiting for the light. Waiting for things to come together just right. I like the idea of having only one chance to make the image. I love to just stand next to the camera all set up and ready to click the shutter and just wait. I hate to be rushed. I hate to be pressured. And if things don't work out, I can just put the camera up and head home. Nothing gained, nothing lost. There are times when just being out there with the camera is the best part of the entire experience. It is great when I bring home a really nice image, but not always necessary.

So. . . does anyone reading this believe I am a view camera advocate? Yep, that pretty much describes me. I would never even consider making a serious photograph with anything but a view camera loaded with B&W film. Just me, but I love what I do, and now you know why.

JB

COVER YOUR BACK?

This entry was posted on June 3, 2010.



Do you cover the back of your view camera with the darkcloth before you pull the darkslide? I certainly do!

Have you ever experienced these pesky little light leaks along the edge of the film that seem to come from nowhere? Gremlins?

Not really. They are caused by any number of things that can go wrong in LF. A holder that has a small leak only when the slide is out, one that does not fit tight in the camera back, a light trap that is worn, or maybe you stress the holder as you remove or replace the darkslide. Thing is, it always seems to show up on that one piece of film

you really want to print. Light leaks were seldom a problem as long as we were shooting 4×5, but when we moved to larger film sizes it became more evident. I will say, without reservation, as the film size goes up, the problems multiply exponentially!

The good news. . . the solution is simple, and for us, solved 99% of the light leak problems. Leave the darkcloth on the back of the camera while exposing the film. This way, even if there is a problem with the holder seating or the light seal being broken when removing or replacing the slide, you greatly reduce the probability of a leak.



It has become a habit to clip the darkcloth to the camera back once it is setup, and it remains there till the exposure is finished and the darkslide is back in the holder. We both use small, inexpensive, plastic spring clamps available at the local hardware store, to clip the darkcloth to the camera back. Simple, quick, easy. . . and. . . it works!

JB

A PLACE TO STAND

This entry was posted on January 16, 2012.



Ever found that once you have your camera in just the right position that you can't quite see the very top of the ground glass. It is important to get up there so you can see if your foreground is in focus. Never fails, you need just a little more to get a good view. Well, we found a neat accessory that just may save the day for you.

We discovered a nifty little folding step stool at Wal-Mart. We hauled a couple of these with us on our last trip and though I never used mine, Susan found it very helpful with several of her photographic efforts. It was especially useful for her and the pano format cameras she uses. She made use of the step several times when she needed a little height working with difficult setups.



Here is more information from the Wal-Mart web site;

Keep everything within reach with the Mainstays 12" Folding Step Stool. This skid-resistant step stool gives you an extra boost to reach high shelves or cabinets. It folds down to two inches thick for easy storage.

Mainstays 12" Folding Step Stool:

Easy to carry

Skid-resistant top and feet

Stands 12" high

Folds to 2" thick

Weight capacity: 300 lbs

Folded Size: 13.5" x 12.5" x 2" Weight: 2.5 lbs

Wal-Mart No.: 007126355



This 12” step folds up and is easily tucked away till you need a little boost. This is another accessory that is a life saver when you need it. We ended up purchasing several of these for use around the house also. You never know what you are going to find when you are out poking around in the stores.

JB

MY FIRST CAMERA

This entry was posted on November 10, 2012.



Been some discussion lately about getting started in photography. We seem to have a lot of people interested in film photography. Everyone started somewhere and everyone has a story. I had written earlier in another [BLOG](#) post about the book that got me started doing my own darkroom work, but I never mentioned my first camera. I used my Mother's Kodak No. 2A Hawk-Eye folder for my very first photographs. My Mother always had to break out the camera and make a quick snapshot when anything interesting was happening, mostly family gatherings, maybe a trip or school event. She always said, "now let me get back a little farther so I don't cut your head off." I have many snapshots of the great scene with these little tiny people in there somewhere. I never could break her of that habit.

But when I was somewhere around eight or nine years old I received my first camera as a Christmas gift. My very own Kodak Brownie Starflash that came in a presentation box, with a roll of B&W film, flash bulbs (remember those?) and batteries. I was only allowed to use B&W film, since it was so much cheaper than shooting color. I never did get the hang of color for anything but

casual snapshots anyway.

There was a major train derailment just outside of the town where I grew up and I have two rolls of that. When I was in the fourth grade we got to bring our cameras to school. It was the annual school Easter Egg Hunt and I have photos of that and even some in the classroom. I made the usual snapshots you would expect from a very young beginner.

So, that is where I started camera wise. I have to credit my Mother for getting me hooked on photography. I have had numerous cameras since my first. Don't know what happened to my original camera. I suspect it was sold in one of my Mother's garage sales. But, I was able to find an identical Brownie Starflash at a local camera show, and it hangs on the wall in our darkroom as a reminder of where I started.

JB

WHAT CAN GO WRONG?

This entry was posted on March 17, 2009.



Seems as you shoot larger and larger formats, you find more and more mistakes to make. Anyone that has spent much time with a view camera knows all of those common mistakes you can make. No matter how experienced you are, and what you do to create a routine, something happens every now and then.

Just to name a few things that will come up to ruin your film; you pull the dark slide without closing the lens; you forget to set the aperture; you forget to pull the dark slide; you forget to cock the shutter, and the noise of the running water is so loud you cannot hear if the shutter fired; you fail to get the film holder properly seated in the camera back; there is dust on the film, always right in a nice even area of sky; strange light leaks; lens flare; camera flare; you kick the tripod after taking forever to get the image framed just right; and don't forget double exposure. This can go on and on. Any number of other things, can and will happen, that are just right to ruin that great photograph.

These things never happened to you? Bet it has, even if you are not willing to admit it. All of the above, and many more, have certainly happened to me. The only way to lessen mistakes is to establish a routine. Do everything in the same order and double check as you go. But, even then, every now and again, something will get you. Just learn to live with it. Mistakes are one thing we all share in common. It is just part of being human. I still reserve the right to express a few choice words when I screw up a good image.

JB

A GREAT STORY

Published July 11, 2012

“A photographer went to a socialite party in New York. As he entered the front door, the host said 'I love your pictures - they're wonderful; you must have a fantastic camera.' He said nothing until dinner was finished, then: 'That was a wonderful dinner; you must have a terrific stove.’”

-Sam Haskins-

Each volume of TRADITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY is derived from years of past writing on the jbhphoto.com BLOG. These are short articles about advanced wet darkroom, film and view camera techniques. Each volume contains selected writings about a specific topic.

Is all of the information contained in this installment of TRADITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY too technical or advanced for you?

Are you new to the wet darkroom?

Do you need a refresher or a starting point?

The four e-book series on Traditional B&W Film & Wet Darkroom series is specially created for the beginner or the experienced traditional photographic artist working in the wet darkroom.

This e-book series has been created for those interested in the traditional large format film photography practiced in the wet darkroom.



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