

So, Just What is the Future of Large Format?

In order to answer this question I asked four dealers of used equipment to respond to a series of questions about their current sales of large format equipment. These, of course, are not the only dealers of view cameras, but I thought their answers might provide a good overview of what is happening in the market place. L&R is Lens and Repro in New York, VCS is the View Camera Store in Phoenix, QC is Quality Camera in Atlanta and MW is Midwest Photo Exchange in Ohio.

Following this Q&A section are statements by Bill Andrews, former Vice President of Sales for Sinar Bron USA, and Richard Newman, Fine Art Specialist for Calumet.

What changes in the view camera market have you noticed in the last two years?

L&R - Cameras are being used more for personal expression and fine art work than for commercial applications.

VCS - Decrease in sales in cameras above 8x10 and an increase in cameras sales 8x10 and smaller. Many films have been discontinued, such as 5x7 Delta and 5x7 TMax 400. Also, Ilford has discontinued film sizes above 8x10, and it is difficult to get orders large enough for Kodak in special order film sizes. Decrease in darkroom sales.

QC - From a retail standpoint, there has been some industry consolidation. From the consumer standpoint, the market is probably larger and more diverse than ever before. The explosive growth of the Internet as a means of communication has created a way in which members of the large format community are easily able to connect worldwide. This facilitates the sharing of information and experiences, which, in turn, has done a great deal to help

create a sense of community among large format users. I believe that this feeling of community and sharing of information will be key to the continued viability of the large format market.

MW - Exciting changes have been happening in the last several years! With technology and new traditional products coming to market, the consumer has never had so many options!

It can be confusing to many just where and how to start! Larger format sizes from 8x10 and up have seen a big jump in demand. Also, in the digital realm, scanning of large format negatives and printing on Epson wide-format printers have become very popular!

Who is buying your cameras and for what purposes?

L&R - We have a large student base buying first large format outfits for university work. We have always had a large group of customers who are field-oriented, and extra-large format is growing as well.

VCS - Most of our camera sales are to fine art and serious amateur photographers. They are realizing the quality gain by using large format cameras.

QC - Over the past 6 to 8 years, our large format sales have shifted dramatically. As recently as 6 years ago, our sales were about 80% to professional photographers and 20% to serious amateur / fine art photographers. Currently, our sales are about 70% to serious amateurs, 20% to fine art photographers (individuals who earn their living selling or teaching fine art photography), and about 10% to commercial photographers.

MW - Professionals who shoot architecture, hotels, interiors, landscape artwork for sale etc. Trading "up" has been popular. Ending up with the Ebony's, Toyo's, and other higher priced cameras has been common. Many enter the ranks of large format photography every day. Some have mastered digital and are intrigued by LF, while others who left years ago are now returning. Purpose is wide! Personal pleasure, relaxation, nature, or creating art for many is reason enough in this busy world.

The USA is by far our biggest market, but customers continue to come from all over the world! Australia and northern Europe have become common destinations for our large format products.

What format sizes seem to be the most popular?

L&R - 4x5.

VCS - The most popular format sizes have been 4x5,

followed by 8x10. 5x7 is often sold with a 4x5 back, mainly Canham metal and wood cameras. This could be due to the Canham 6x17 roll film holder that fits those cameras.

QC - I believe that there is a greater interest today in 5X7 format than at any time in the past 30 years. However, in terms of numbers of units sold, in the past 12 to 18 months, the largest volume in an individual size would continue to be 4X5, followed closely by 8X10.

MW - 4x5 remains the most popular sales wise with big volume. But WOW -- how about Ultra large format! While 8x10 has been growing fast, even bigger cameras continue to be in great demand! While some bargains can be found with used cameras and lenses, most high priced manufacturers have never been busier! 5x7 and panoramic formats like 4x10 and 7x17 always seem to have a steady share of the market.

Have you noticed an increase in interest in cameras larger than 8x10?

L&R - As far as our store is concerned, we have seen much more interest in the lenses for the extra large format cameras.

VCS - We used to sell Ilford 12x20 Hp5+ for our customers with 12x20 cameras, and we did a special order for our customers of 12x20 Kodak Tri-X. I think a lot of the cameras in use today have come from the used market. We used to sell cameras larger than 8x10, but that was more than 2 years ago.

QC - Absolutely. In the first 9 months of this year, we have sold cameras and/or cut film holders in 10 different sizes larger than 8X10.

MW - Huge interest has been generated in ULF-Ultra large format cameras (bigger than 8x10) and lenses! So much so, they have been hard to keep in stock. 8x10 cameras have been hard to keep in stock, both new and used! But ULF demand continues to overpower supply.

Are you selling lenses with cameras?

L&R - We are most known for our extensive selection of used and exotic lenses. We have always offered "alternate vision" lenses like portrait lenses, convertible sets, "speed" lenses, extra wide coverage lenses, and early aplanats.

VCS - We sell cameras with lenses about half the time. Many are changing cameras and keeping their lenses.

QC - This is an area where things have not changed a great deal for us. Other than the fact that we do not sell

film or other soft goods, we sell a comprehensive line of large format-related accessories. These include lens boards, cut film holders, filters, cases and bags, lens shades, focusing cloths, changing tents, tripods, light meters, etc.

MW - Yes, lenses usually sell with cameras. And, as you would think, many like to have more than one lens. Sometimes a camera will sell with several lenses. But most will buy a camera with one lens to start. Then they will purchase more in the future. Lens sales also can be impulsive!

Are there new people entering the large format market? If so, what is their motivation for doing so?

L&R - Universities spawn new students twice a year. Most schools offer large format courses. Additionally, as more things become digital, there is also a reaching-back to making images that look as non-digital as possible.

VCS - Yes, we find new people entering the large format market. Most of them are getting more serious about photography, and have always wanted to get a 4x5 camera or larger.

QC - Absolutely! In the past several months, we have noticed an increased number of first time buyers. These first time buyers represent very diverse demographics; however, we have noticed a significant increase in two groups. The two groups are young people (15-25 years old) and females (35-55 years old). As far as their motivation is concerned, truthfully, we don't ask; we are just thankful for the business.

MW - Yes, everyday people enter the LF market! Motivation can be many things: past large format experience, intrigue upon seeing others' work, technology allowing one to not enter a traditional darkroom if one does not want to, the combining of traditional and digital, like digital negatives, etc. Marketing of large format continues in many magazines, and having View Camera has certainly helped also! Also, the Internet and large format forums have been a great safe source for many to get info without pushy sales people. In our busy world, many find a great meditation when shooting large format. Our job is to identify their needs and budget, and then get the right products identified for their consideration.

What accessories do you usually sell with your cameras?

L&R - The normal accessories include lenses, lens boards, cable release, film holders, Polaroid back, lens shade,

and case.

VCS - The accessories we sell the most are lens boards, focusing cloths, ground glass protectors, film holders, film changing tents, tripods and heads, loupes, cable release, and lens wrenches.

QC - This is an area where things have not changed a great deal for us. Other than the fact that we do not sell film or other soft goods, we sell a comprehensive line of large format-related accessories. These include lens boards, cut film holders, filters, cases and bags, lens shades, focusing cloths, changing tents, tripods, light meters, etc.

MW - Usual accessories include: lens, lens board, film holders, cable release, focusing cloth, change tents, film, tripod, loupes, backpacks, camera bags, and filters. Customers coming back for "round two" usually buy a second or third lens, scanner, or Epson printer; then monitor calibrator, as well as traditional darkroom products, of course.

Do you sense there is a revival in the large format market? If not, is the interest holding steady?

L&R - Too hard to generalize. Some sections get more activity, some stay the same, and some slow down. Different seasons produce different interests.

VCS - Yes, we have seen a number of photographers getting into large format, but a number have gone digital. I think it is holding steady.

QC - While I do not have access to specific statistical data about current market trends (either nationally or worldwide), my sense is that the interest level today is equal to or greater than what it has been at anytime in the past 30 years.

MW - YES, the revival is on! Especially in 8x10 and bigger camera and lenses! While 4x5 sales continue to climb and own the lion's share of the market, bigger cameras now are in big demand! Remember how popular medium format was before digital! Yet, only 6-7 manufacturers fulfilled the demand that existed when most professional wedding and portrait photography was done on film! Well, while we have seen the demise of medium format cameras, look at the large format manufacturers! Some 15 or more worldwide? New models from many makers and the lowest entry level prices ever! And all seem to be very busy!

What are your predictions for the next two years?

L&R - 8x10 monorail view cameras will continue their slow death. Additionally, the more perfect the digital image becomes, the more photographers will revisit vintage lenses for a different look.

VCS - For the future, large format photographers will still be using sheet film, but a good percentage will be printing on ink jet printers with good results. Also, there will be an increase in the number of photographers using scanning back, such as the BetterLight, for their view cameras, rather than film.

QC - I predict that film and printing paper will continue to be readily available in a great variety of sizes and emulsions to those who want it. I predict that cameras, lenses, and cut film holders will be available in a greater variety than they are today. And finally, I predict that the community of large format photographers will be even more organized and better connected to one another than they are today.

MW - Our predictions for the next several years are exciting! With so many products now on the market and many more coming in, both traditional and digital, the consumer will have the best of everything! Competitive pricing and new items coming to market! Soon you'll see a new \$400 4x5 camera! How about an 8x10 camera under \$1000? Scanners, printers, software, new techniques..... What more could consumers want? And, again, our job remains to identify what the potential photographer wants to achieve, and guide him the correct products with the best price.

What concerns do you have about the large format market, and what do you see as the problems in the next couple of years?

L&R - The film companies need to continue to supply a selection of films for large format users so that the cameras can continue to offer the versatility that large format can give. Art directors need to re-embrace the potential of large format film-driven images.

VCS - The availability of getting films in sizes other than 4x5 and 8x10. Will Kodak stop making sheet film? Photographers will have to support manufacturers of black & white materials.

QC - The greatest concern that I have about the large format market today is the enormous power of the Internet to quickly and widely spread erroneous information, which for many people seems easier to believe than the truth. An example of this would be when an individual

online, in one of the many news groups, posts a statement like, "As nice as the 5X7 format is, it would be a waste of time and money to buy a 5X7 camera because film is no longer available in that size." Simple misinformation like that will cause some who might have an interest in entering the large format market to stay away.

MW - The biggest concern I see is the old vanguard manufacturers like Linhof, Cambo, Horseman, and others not coming out with new products! We also worry about Kodak's commitment to the large format community. We think the new Ilford will survive and prosper, while Fuji continues to develop its film market with new products. Our hope is that the film and traditional darkroom manufacturers will stay as busy as most of the camera makers! While digital technology has become entwined with large format for many, we do see many schools still teaching the traditional darkroom! Our outlook is positive on large format and photography in general! LF is still a respected field that holds intrigue for many looking from the outside in! With new products and lower prices, it's never been easier to enjoy LF. We will continue to help people to make the right decisions for their investment, so they can enjoy what so many have before them!

WHO SAID THAT THE VIEW CAMERA IS DEAD?

by Bill Andrews

For as long as I have been in the photographic industry, I have heard the rumors of the end of the view camera. With the success of digital photography, and the improvements in 35mm chips, the rumors are starting again. But, rumors are all they are, started by those that do not understand the view camera and the reasons for it.

The view camera has always been the tool for the photographic elite. That is not to take anything away from the fixed body photographers, because their creative abilities are quite evident. But the view camera photographer has a more creative tool to work with. He has more control over perspective, selective focus, depth of field, and angle of view. All of this is allowed because of the bellows, rise and fall of the standards, and the shift capabilities. The combinations of these features give the view camera photographer extended creative tools over fixed body cameras. And it is precisely these capabilities that

will keep the view camera alive.

There are many areas of photography, where the view camera and its movements are still sought after. These are architecture, packaging, advertising, furniture, and industrial. It is obvious that the perspective control and rise and fall are most important to the architectural photographer, but these same features are also important to the packaging industry. Advertising, industrial, and furniture not only use the aforementioned features, but also use selective focus and combinations for the others, to give special effects to a photograph and to bring special attention to special areas of the image.

So, who cares about all of this, and what does it mean to the photographer? It means that there are fewer photographers available to deliver the quality product, which large parts of our industry are demanding. Fewer photographers with know-how means fewer photographers with which to compete. Less competition means higher fees. Yes, I know that the fees are not what seem fair, but they are a lot better than what the 35mm photographers are getting, and will get better as the demand for better photography increases. Now, you ask, what will create the demand for all this great photography? Several things will create it, but the most important element is you.

"Me?" you ask. Yes, you! While we all like to think of ourselves as artists, let's face it: you need to be a businessman first, to allow you to do your art. The first thing that you need to do as a businessman is sell your art. To do this, you need to **MARKET** it. This is where **YOU** come in. Good marketing of view camera photography will expand its use. When you show a client that his building doesn't need to look like it is falling backward, or that it doesn't need to look like an arrowhead, the client will see the value of better photography. When a food client realizes that you can look into a bowl of cereal, rather than at a bowl of cereal, your art will have more value. This goes on and on, as the unique features that a view camera provides are explained to a client. Sending comparison photos of a client's product shot with a fixed body camera, side by side with a good view camera image, provides great results. More on how to do this can be discussed later. But, for now, it starts to explain what you can do to improve your business with the view camera.

There are other things that will affect the photography industry as it is today. One is customer competition. Just as photographers compete against each other for clients,

so do the photographer's customers. How the photographic client differentiates himself to his customer will determine his success in the market. And, as the market is flooded with more and more of the same cheap, low quality photography, clip art, and renderings, the more fine quality view camera photography will stand out, and give the client an edge with his consumer. Another issue is file size. You can only fit a 35mm-size chip into a 35mm camera. Larger chips are reserved for the larger cameras, along with the larger file sizes that go along with them. The same concept applies with film. Another thing that affects photography, believe it or not, is perception. A photographer showing up with the same camera as a client (or a client's nephew!) can be perceived as not being any better than the client himself. And, the client may decide to try doing his own photography. I know for a fact that this has happened to many of you. His results were probably as you expected, but you still lost the job. It is safe to say that this situation is highly unlikely with a view camera.

It is important to note that this entire discussion applies to both film and digital photography. Film is still used by a great number of photographers and is still a very reliable medium. If one is doing his own processing, the consistency can still be excellent. Labs, however, are having a harder and harder time, due to the reduction in volume. Some labs are still very reliable, so research is valuable. View cameras are still being produced with film in mind, and all accessories for them are still available. This is not to say that the view camera has not evolved into the digital age. Sinar, for example, has the new P3 view camera. The P3 is smaller and more compact than the traditional view camera, but has electronic contacts throughout the standards, bellows, and lens boards to allow for complete control from the computer. This compact electronic view camera also has all the features that made Sinar famous with conventional view cameras. Linhof has also made a compact view camera that can be used digitally using either the Schneider shutter or the Rollei shutter. While not as slick as the Sinar, it can do the job. So, the view camera has not been lapped by time and technology.

There are people who say you can do with software, what you used to do with the view camera. While this is true with **SOME** limited features, it is not true overall. One thing to keep in mind is that the software does not

add information to the file, but changes and “stretches” the information that is there. This has the potential for being troublesome in some cases and disastrous in others. A lot depends on the operator and the software. “Fixing” an image in Photoshop or other software should be avoided if at all possible. Rarely is a photographer compensated for all the time it takes to make corrections.

Nothing beats doing it right from the start.

So, to those who feel that the days of the view camera are dead, take another look. The view camera is not dying, but is being reborn, in a new era with a new look, with the old reliability and built in creativity. Don't fight it.

Enjoy it!

LARGE FORMAT TODAY- AND HOPEFULLY TOMORROW

by Richard Newman

I thought the title of this article was kind of a funny joke when I thought of it, but in reality, it tells the entire story. With the landslide that was to become digital photography, a lot of people said that large format was a dead issue, never to be heard from again. Now that we're older, more experienced, and have seen where digital is going, maybe it's time to take a look at where we are.

First of all, this is not a "love large format-hate digital" article. I've authored on both subjects, and, truth be told, enjoy my digital camera for some of the things that it can do for me; but it has not replaced my 4x5 or my 8x10. I might shoot a little less film, but I haven't stopped.

In the commercial world, we have seen a mad dash to digital in the commercial and catalog market, and it's a good thing. How important were those images anyway? Mostly, the purpose was to sell a product or fill up some white space on a page. Because of this, color large format transparency film has fallen significantly in sales and usage. The catalog houses were the primary user of this product and now are very much on the digital train. There is still a trend, with large format portrait photographers, to use color negative film, because of the tonalities and contrast range available. While it's arguable

that these issues can be addressed with curves and different software techniques, the one fact that is still true is the cost. Film, while being expensive to process and stock, is still far cheaper than trying to stay current with the price changes of a medium format back.

For the architectural photographer, large format is still the ticket, as the digital sensors are not large enough and do not allow enough usage of wide angle lenses. The exception is the BetterLight scanning back. The drawback here is that nothing can move while the exposure is being made. Before you go crazy yelling at me that PhotoShop CS2 has the perspective correction feature, just use it yourself and show it to the architect you are working for. He'll just love the reshaping of the windows and the bricks on the edge of the frame. Trust me, he'll love you forever and call you back for more work tomorrow.

Veronica Cotter, Regional Sales Manager of Ilford photo confirms resurgence in black and white film and materials. Not only is Ilford still making great black and white films, but also will be adding to their line up of black and white products in the very near future. Everyone is well aware that, in June of this year, Kodak announced that they were no longer making black and white printing papers; the future there remains unclear.

With that kind of introduction, it's time to talk about the fine artists still using large format. Now we enter the realm of magic and myth, and the future depends on us as photographers. As much as we'd like to challenge the manufactures to continue producing the products we've loved for so long, it depends on us, the consumer, to purchase these products. It's unfortunate, but sales numbers speak, and the longer we continue to support these products with our dollars, the longer these products will be produced. What we are going to find is that, as the demand shrinks, we as photographic artists will have fewer and fewer creative choices for materials. Maybe that's good, maybe it's not. For the longest time, I used nothing but blue label Portriga Rapid 111. I could make any kind of negative and it would still look great on that paper. When Agfa changed it over, I must have called them 50 times, telling them what jerks they were to change my life and my working habits. It's still a mystery why it was changed, although there are many speculations. Maybe I'm older now and I adapt better when changes occur.

Right now, we are at the most amazing time in photography, with all the tools that we have at our disposal as photographers. With all the possibilities that have been extended to us, I still prefer that magic of seeing the image upside down with a crazy sheet pulled over my head, and nothing, yes, nothing beats the magic of a print appearing in a tray of liquid in a darkroom.