

Entry-Level Field Camera Shootout

Looking south from Ecola State Park, Oregon. Here front tilts brought the whole scene into sharp focus. The base tilts on the Shen Hao take a bit of getting used to but with practice they are nearly as quick as axis tilts.

—by Joseph A. Dickerson

Serious 4x5s For Under \$1000: Mission Impossible?

I don't recall just how many times I've gone through this, but it's more than a few. After much soul-searching, speculation, and fretting I decide I'm going to give up large format photography *forever*. It always seems like such a good idea at the time. But, as you have probably guessed, I've changed my mind—again. Innocently enough, I picked up a used view camera from a friend who was retiring and once again became infected by the large format bug.

The whole process got me to wondering just how much has changed since I did my last field camera roundup for *Shutterbug* many moons ago. The folks at the magazine agreed that you might be interested as well, so here goes.

Renewed Interest

While large format photography probably can't match the excitement that digital photography generates there is a definite resurgence of interest. This renewed appeal is shared by amateur and professional photographers and seemingly encompasses the entire photographic spectrum, from commercial photography to fine art. Many, like myself, work with a hybrid system, shooting images on film and then scanning the negatives or transparencies and tweaking them in the digital darkroom. Still others prefer a more purist approach and do all their work in the wet lab. Some of the



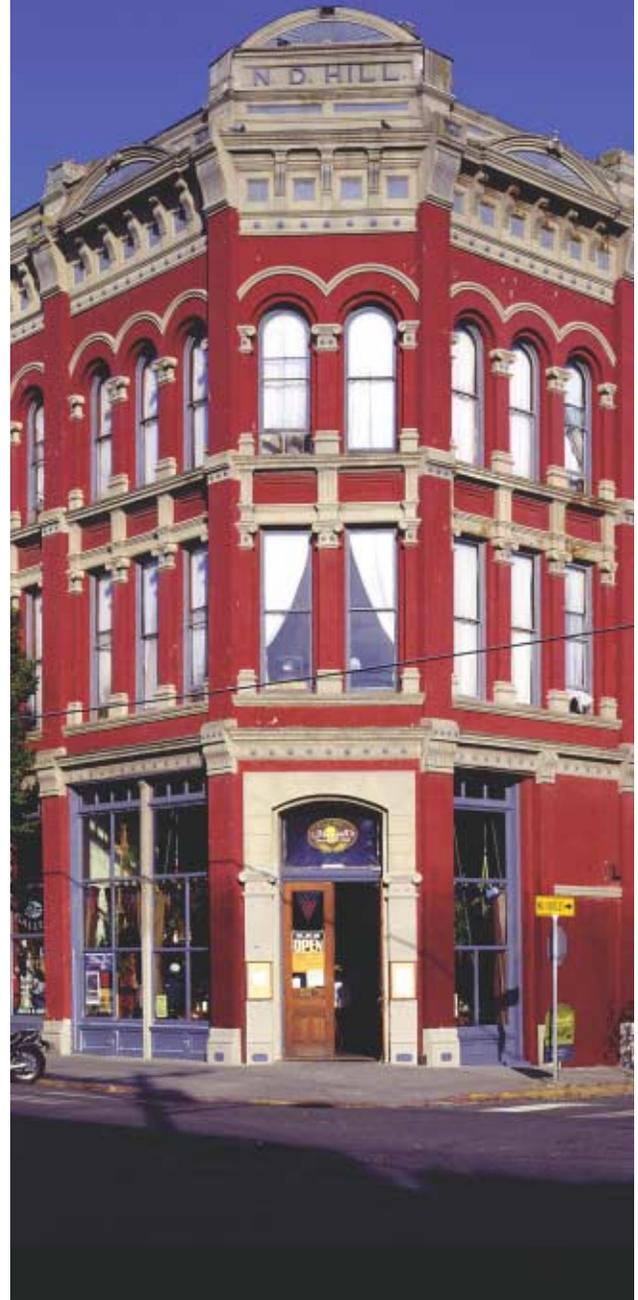
Upper North Falls, Silver Falls State Park, Oregon. The Shen Hao with a 210mm lens. The generous movements of the Shen Hao made shots like this easy to accomplish.



(Above) Point Wilson Lighthouse, Port Townsend, Washington. A cold and windy sunrise and I really appreciated the large knobs on the Shen Hao that were easily gripped even wearing polypro gloves.



(Above left) The Shen Hao HZX45-IIA. A solid little brick of a camera that works as well as it looks. The cluster of knobs on the rear takes a little getting used to, but after a couple of days with the camera I grabbed the right one almost every time. (Above right) The Toyo 45CF. One derisive comment I read on the Internet was that the 45CF is plastic. Well, yeah it's supposed to be, but so is Lance Armstrong's time trial bike. That's what makes 'em both so light.



(Above) N.D. Hill building, Port Townsend, Washington. The Toyo proved up to the task for shooting historic architecture. Although the specs may seem a bit limited the camera was capable of everything I tried to shoot with it.

more dedicated are even utilizing "alternative" processes such as platinum or palladium printing. Whatever the process employed, the view camera, with its nearly transcendental approach, is the main tool utilized to capture the images.

I was also curious to see what was new in equipment and if things had improved since the Dark Ages when I started out. While the studio/advertising/commercial photographer has always had a good selection of cameras, lenses, and accessories to choose from, the nature/scenic photographer's choices have been more limited. Unless of course, you don't mind a camera that weighs only slightly less than a mid-sized SUV, and costs nearly as much.

I wanted to see what was available for those who, like me, shoot mostly scenics, travel, and historic architecture and prefer not to take out a second mortgage to buy yet another camera. I, somewhat arbitrarily, chose a monetary ceiling of \$1000 for the camera body,

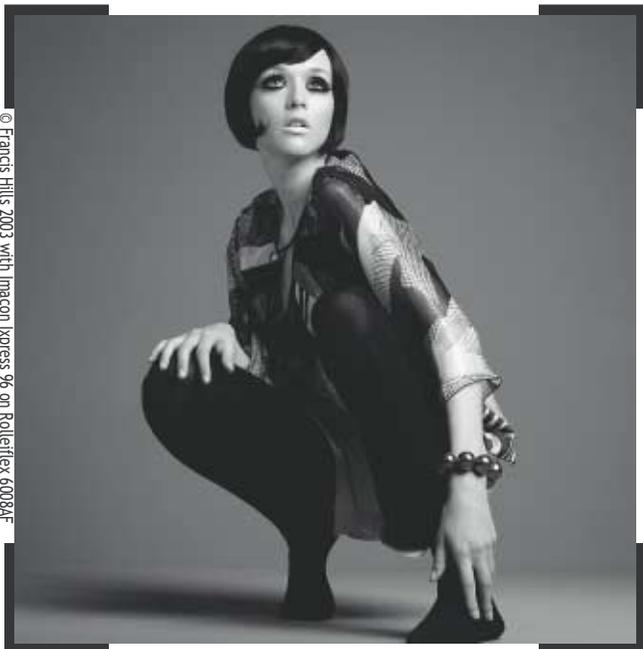
which seems like a nice round number. You could add a lens, light meter, film holders, etc. and keep the investment under \$2000. A little investigation quickly proved that the under-\$1000 category was easily met. Lots of cameras offered the desired features, but buying one of the cheap was a bit more difficult. Difficult, but happily, not impossible.

Some Large Format Options

The first camera I (re)discovered was one that I had plenty of experience with, the Tachihara/Osaka 4x5 field camera. I had one of these years ago and was delighted that it was still available. It's a wonderful camera, offers huge value for the asking price (well under our \$1000 budget) and is very lightweight. (See the chart for complete specs.) As I continued my quest, I discovered two cameras that I had no prior experience with but that seemed to fit our criteria, the Shen Hao HZX45-IIA and the Toyo 45CF. I had already

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planned a photo trip to the Pacific Northwest to shoot waterfalls and lighthouses so I arranged loaner cameras through the generosity of Badger Graphic Sales, Inc. (Shen Hao) and Mamiya America Corporation (Toyo), loaded up the van and headed north.

Fit And Finish

The two cameras are a bit different in concept, design, and materials but my first impression of each was very positive. The Shen Hao is beautifully finished teak with black-painted hardware resulting in a very rich looking, albeit somewhat heavy, camera. The Toyo, on the other hand, is carbon fiber (hence the CF designation) and polycarbonate with metal parts where required. The carbon fiber/plastic construction isn't as aesthetically exciting as the teak but the result is a camera that weighs less than 4 lbs.

Both feel quite solid and I'm convinced that either camera, given reasonable care, is capable of a very long service life. The control layout of both is intuitive and easy to work with.

Unfolding/opening the Toyo was a bit tricky until I remembered to rack the focusing rail back into the camera before trying to pull the front standard forward. From then on there was no drama whatsoever. I used both extensively throughout the trip and thoroughly enjoyed the experience. In fact, I had zero problems and would recommend either camera without reservation. That's not to say they're absolutely perfect, but everything worked exactly as it was designed to do.

Before I left home I figured that one of the cameras would assert itself as my favorite and the other would become an also-ran. Well, I found so much to like about both (and so little to dislike) that I still can't say for certain which I prefer. I do have to confess that I really like the look and warm feel of the teak on the Shen Hao. On my trip I visited with two family members who are accomplished woodworkers and they were both in awe of the fit and finish of the joinery work.

The Shen Hao also has the advantages of a slightly longer bellows and the option of changing to a bag bellows for really short lenses. I did try my 65mm lens with the bag bellows and the camera body interfered with the front rise somewhat, but I think a recessed lensboard would probably solve the problem.

The Toyo lacks a wide angle bellows option altogether, although I used a 90mm lens with some movements. Again, a recessed lensboard would have increased the useable movements with this lens considerably. Both cameras could easily handle a 300mm lens and had no problem supporting the weight of this lens. In fact, I



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Middle North Falls, Silver Falls State Park, Oregon. Both cameras came with Graftok backs greatly enhancing their versatility. I shot a lot with a Horseman 6x12cm rollfilm back and I really like the 2:1 aspect ratio of this panorama format. (Toyo with 135mm lens.)

even tried a 400mm telephoto lens and neither camera felt as though stability was sacrificed. To me, this is pretty impressive for cameras designed to be field cameras.

One feature of the Toyo that I really appreciated was its ability to fold with a compact lens in place. I tried this with two different lenses, a Fujinon 135mm and a Caltar 150mm IIe compact, both of which are mounted in number 0 shutters. This translated to a minute or two saved every time I set the camera up, more if you factor in the time it always seems to take me to find the darn lens caps. Incidentally, the same lenses would fold into the Shen Hao if I first reversed the lensboard.

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If I Had To Choose

As previously stated, I would be very hard put to choose one of these cameras

over the other. For the scenics, lighthouses, and waterfalls I shot this summer both offered adequate movements, ease of handling, and enough bellows draw to make the shots happen. For photographers who rely heavily on shorter lenses with lots of movements the nod would probably go to

the Shen Hao. The Shen Hao wide angle (bag) bellows is very inexpensive and switching over takes only a minute or so. However, if you backpack substantial distances or overnight and need to carry food and shelter as well as photo gear, the Toyo might make you a happier camper.

Both cameras come with a Graflok or international back as standard issue. I shot with a Polaroid 545 film holder, a Calumet 6x7cm rollfilm back, a Horseman 6x12cm holder, and Fuji Quickload sheet film without a hitch. Both focusing panels include markings for 6x7cm and 6x9cm roll film on the standard 4x5 ground glass. I was delighted to find that the Shen Hao also has corner markings for the 6x12cm format as well.

Front movements for the Toyo (no rear movements are possible) are adequate, easy to use, and lock solidly. However, the front standard positioning as well as the front shift and swings are all locked by a common lever. This can make setting the movements a little fussier. The Shen Hao uses separate levers for the front standard positioning and the swings and tilts. Shen Hao indicates that you can increase the bellows extension by disengaging the base tilts and leaning the camera front forward. To be completely honest, I didn't feel that the front axis tilts alone would support the weight of most of the lenses I had with me, but I suppose it's workable in a pinch.

Some of the accessories Badger Graphic Sales, Inc. lists for the Shen Hao are lensboards (standard and recessed), a folding hood, bag bellows, monocular viewfinder, and a very interesting multi-format rollfilm back all offered at very reasonable prices. The Toyo will accept a vast array of accessories offered for other Toyo field and monorail cameras.

Flower field, Lompoc, California. Front tilts on the Toyo are axis tilts. This requires less refocusing as the lensboard is tilted.

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Camera	Materials /Type	Lensboard	Front Tilt	Front Swings	Front Shift	Front Rise/Fall	Bellows Extension (maximum)	Rear Tilt	Rear Swings	Rear Rise	Rear Shift	Wide Angle Bellows	Weight	Folded Dimensions	Street Price
Horseman Woodman	Cherry wood and chrome	Technica type	+20° -30°	±10°	±10mm	35mm rise 25mm fall	315mm (12.4 in) 45mm (1.7 in)	±25°	±10°	None	None	None	3.2 lbs (1.45kg)	7.9x8x3.3"	\$898.98
Osaka/Tachihara Field	Wood/brass flat bed	Technica type	±30°	±17°	None	70mm	304mm (12.0 in) 65mm (2.5 in)	±40°	±24°	None	None	None	3.8 lbs (1.7kg)	8x8x3"	\$625.00
Toyo 45CF	Carbon fiber/polycarbonate	Toyo 110mm sq.	±15°	±20°	±28.5mm	28.5mm rise 20mm fall bed drops 15"	356.7mm (14.04 in) 80.3mm (3.16 in)	None	None	None	None	None	3.42 lbs (1.5kg)	7.9x6.9x4"	\$659.00
Shen Hao HZX 45-11A	Teak/stainless steel	Technica type	+90° -45°	±17°	None	37mm rise 32mm fall	360mm (14.1 in) 55mm (2.1 in)	90° forward 40° backward	±20°	45mm	±45mm	Yes	4.8 lbs (2.2kg)	8.75x7.25x 3.75"	\$625.00