




Chapter one

Equipment and darkroom

Let's start by stating the obvious; making ambrotypes requires us to use a large format camera. We should, however, remember that not all large format cameras are equally suitable for the purpose; it is a bit of a paradox, that quite frequently it will turn out that the better the camera, the less suitable for wetplate work it will be.



In the 19th and early 20th century, the key material on which pictures were taken was a glass plate; first a collodion plate then, a silver gelatin one. This means that film holders for cameras made at the time were made in such a way as to accommodate the relatively thick (measuring up to a couple millimetres thickness) glass plate negatives. Equally importantly, most holders were made from wood; a material comparatively resilient to the action of solvents and chemically neutral to the collodion. And it is such holders (and consequently cameras) that are best suited for wetplate work.

With the passage of time and the development of photographic technology, the glass plate negative started to be replaced by sheet film, much thinner than glass. For a long time the two materials were used alongside and the camera manufacturers responded by providing the film holders with special inserts that made it possible to place a thin piece of sheet film in a much thicker holder. As both types of material were in use, the construction of the holders themselves didn't change which means that also the cameras from that period will be perfectly suited to our purposes. All we need to do is take the insert out of the holder and replace it with our wetplate.

As years passed, the sheet film dominated the market, replacing glass plate negatives entirely and thus causing a change in the construction of cameras or, to be more precise, the film holders. The international back type of holders dominated the market; they are much more convenient with modern materials, but rather useless with the wetplate. They can only be used for our purposes if the inside of the holder is removed; still the materials they are made with will make them less durable than the traditional, wooden ones.

Summing up, the most useful for wetplate will be the older type cameras, with film holders made for working with glass, preferably wooden (metal holders may react with the silver nitrate or collodion and destroy the pictures). From the cameras available in Eastern European market the most useful will be the Globica and Mentor cameras. The former especially has a very user friendly holder design (the holders open making the loading much easier than the other types). Russian FKD and FKP cameras will also work quite well, though we need to be prepared to modify the holders a little as they

are usually just a touch too small for the standard plates and may require a little filing to make the room for the plate a bit bigger.

Needless to say, pre-war cameras like the Agfa, Ansco, Korona and the old German Reiscameras will also work well, just as will modern cameras with holders designed for wetplate work.

Another thing we may want to take notice of is the size of the plate our camera is designed for. Generally speaking, there are two systems of sizes in existence; one measured in centimeters where we have the plate sizes such as 9x12, 13x18, 18x24 and so on, and one expressed in inches with plates such as 4x5, 7x8, 8x10 inches and so forth. The sizes of plates in both systems are very similar, after all one inch is just a little more than 2,5 cm and the tiny differences in existence have little if any bearing on the appearance of the photographs. They do, however, influence the final cost of our photography; if we use a plate size that is standard in our region of the world, we can buy factory made glass plates and this means they will be reasonably cheap. If, on the other hand, our camera uses the system that is not standard, we will need to cut our own glass or have the plates cut to size and this will bring up the cost drastically. Just to illustrate the point; plates sized in centimeters can easily be bought, for example in Alternative Photographic Supplies at a cost of 25-50 eurocents. If I wanted to have similar plates cut to order I would end up paying 4-5 euros a piece.

Mentor Studio and Mentor Panorama, coming from the same country as the Globica I have mentioned earlier, are among my favourite wetplate cameras.





The film holder for Globica, which can be conveniently opened, is an ideal solution for a person doing wetplate as it practically eliminates the danger of damaging the delicate surface of the collodion while inserting the plate into the holder or at the point of removing the exposed plate from it. Mentor holders don't offer that comfort.

Soviet made FKD cameras are an interesting alternative to the East German Globicas and Mentors. They are light and easy to transport, though not perfect either. First of all their holders are usually a little too small and may need gentle filing to make enough room for a plate inside. Secondly, the cameras themselves are rather delicate and can be easily damaged, not to mention their limited stiffness.



The otherwise excellent cameras such as the Sinar shown to the left are less practical for wetplate work because of the way their film holders are constructed, specifically for work with sheet film. We can, of course, adapt such a holder for use with a wetplate by removing its interior but this amounts to de facto destroying it.

1. Field and studio cameras

Most view cameras are, by their nature, rather large, especially if their designer has made sure that we have all the movements at our disposal as well as a large enough bellows extension. As such cameras were heavy and unwieldy, two types evolved; the field camera and the studio one. A field camera is designed so as it can be folded for storage and transport and is relatively light which is achieved by sacrificing some of its photographic potential. The studio camera is built so as to offer the greatest photographic potential without bothering about their size or weight, frequently coming with its own stand giving the camera the necessary stability.

If you have an appropriate studio and intend to do your wetplate work there, getting a studio camera such as the Globica I mentioned will mostly likely be the best solution. Coming with its own wheeled stand the camera will offer great stability and the long bellows extension and great range of movements will guarantee very comfortable work. The film holders that can be opened will also add to the comfort and ease with which we will be able to take our photographs, not to mention the fact that they will last longer than most other holders.

If we are more interested in landscape or outdoors photography, especially using a mobile darkroom, the only logical choice is a folding field camera such as a Mentor Studio or FKD. These cameras are reasonably compact and light (especially the wooden ones such as the FKD), easy to carry and can be placed on any modern tripod of sufficiently sturdy construction. Unfortunately this is paid for with smaller photographic possibilities resulting, for example from the fact that the back standard has no or little movement. If our priority is to have a camera that offers a wide range of tools for controlling the resulting images, we can resort to a rail camera such as Cambo or Mentor Panorama, though personally I can't imagine moving about with a camera like this without a car and thus feel it to be a bit of a rotten compromise.

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studio cameras are constructed so as to give the photographer a maximum of control over the image by offering a full range of movements of both standards with all the necessary tilts and swings. They offer, for example, great freedom of manipulating the plane of focus and the perspective. They usually also offer large bellows extension and come with a dedicated stand that offers extra stability. Or, as is the case with the Globica, the stand may be an integral part of the camera.