

The "V" Stands for "Versatile"

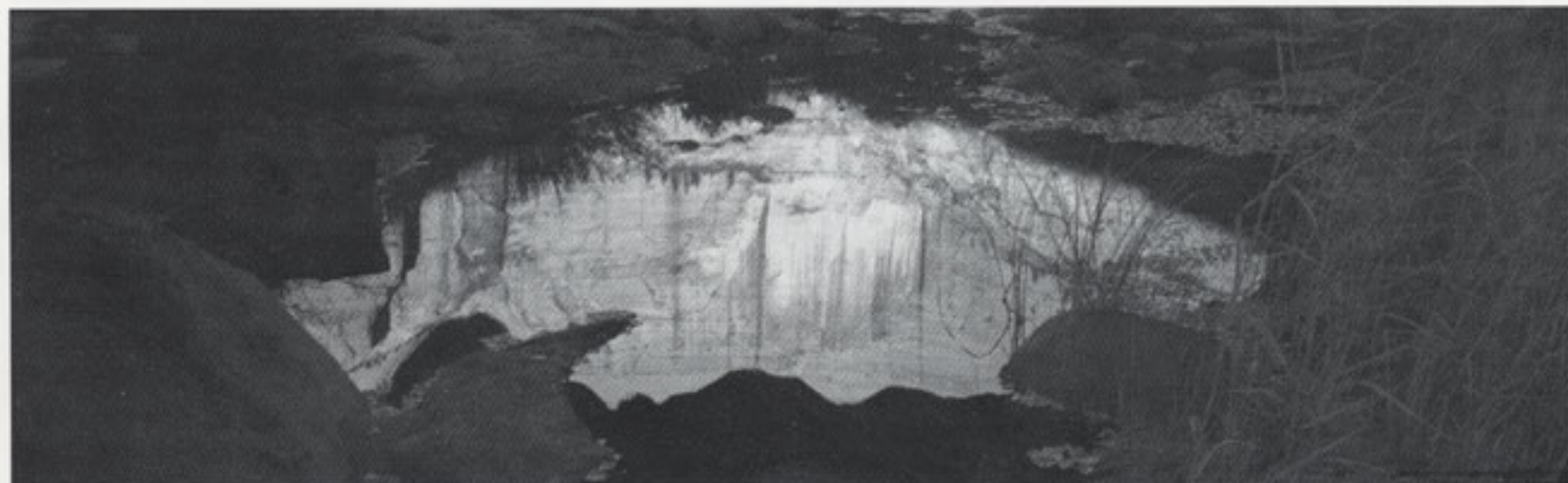
The V-PAN 617 Panoramic Camera

By Dave Howard

A common shortcoming of most panoramic cameras is their lack of interchangeable lenses. The large, rotating Cirkut cameras from the early years of this century had them, but nearly every one since has not. There are a couple of reasons for this: the first is the added expense of interchangeable lens mounts on an already expensive, limited-production camera; the second is the

assumption that "panoramic" is synonymous with "as wide as you can possibly get," so just bolt the widest-angle lens that will cover the particular format on the camera and be done with it. accepts two lenses, has been around for several years; but two lenses isn't range enough, and 6x12cm often isn't wide enough. The Technorama 617, Art Panorama and Fuji G617 offer the satisfyingly wide 6x17cm format, but have fixed lenses. Fuji's newest GX617 offers a selection of three lenses; much better, to be sure, and great for aerials and on-the-fly handheld use, but still a bit limiting

It would be a great economy if I could adapt lenses I already own. The control of a ground glass focusing screen (one of the new "bright" screens, of course) is much preferable to the rough approximations offered by panoramic optical viewfinders. While I'm at it, I might as well wish for rise, fall, swing, tilt and shift for total image control. And, the whole thing would have to be easily backpack-



assumption that "panoramic" is synonymous with "as wide as you can possibly get," so just bolt the widest-angle lens that will cover the particular format on the camera and be done with it.

As with most assumptions, they don't always hold water. I often want the wide *aspect ratio* (anywhere between 1:2 and 1:3, height-to-width), but not the exaggerated foreground and tiny, rapidly receding backgrounds produced by super-wide-angle lenses. The means to that end is the use of longer, interchangeable lenses. Until recently, this ability has been pretty much the stuff of dreams.

The Linhof Technorama 612, which

**REFLECTION, ZION NATIONAL PARK, UTAH.
1 SEC. AT F/32 ON KODAK LUMIERE, 150MM
SCHNEIDER APO SYMMAR. THE V-PAN'S
BEATTIE INTENSSCREEN MADE VIEWING
AND IMAGE CONTROL EASY IN THE
EARLY MORNING LIGHT.**

for fastidious fine art work. So just what would it take to keep me panoramically happy?

Well, I would want the 6x17cm format, which offers large-format quality with roll film convenience. Interchangeable backs would be nice, for switching between color and black-and-white. Lenses? Oh, how about 75mm to 1200mm?

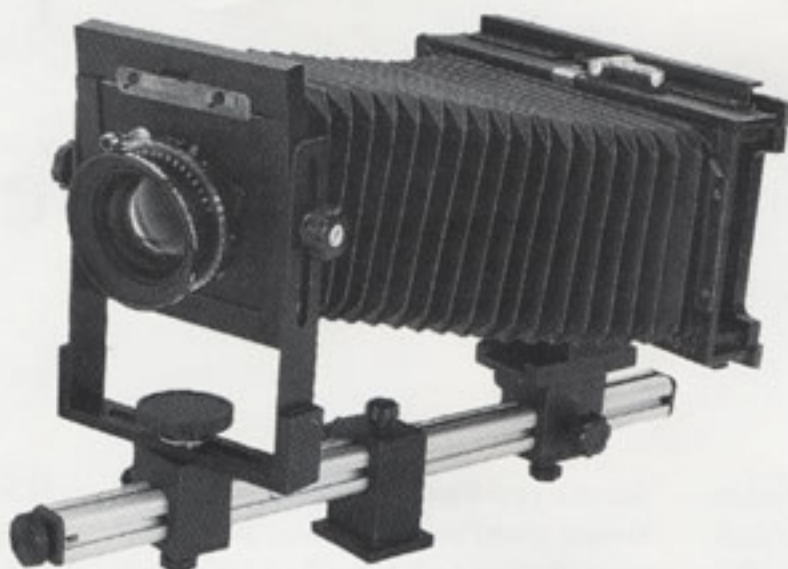
able for trekking to unimaginably spectacular vistas.

Pipe dream? Not at all. The "wishlist special" I've just briefly described is available now, in the form of the V-PAN 617. This panoramic field/view camera is the handiwork of Chet Hanchett of St. Louis, Missouri, and is the result of listening to the requests and suggestions of a lot of photographers specializing in the wide image. As past president of the I.A.P.P. (International Association of Panoramic Photographers), he's had his finger on the pulse of the industry with a first-person awareness of current techniques and hardware. Introduced a couple

of years ago and constantly refined since, the V-PAN 617 offers a unique combination of image controls and transportability.

I've had a chance to live with the latest version of the camera, the Mark III, for a few months now, so let's take a closer look at what it has to offer.

In its standard configuration, the V-PAN comes equipped with a 16" break-down rail, which comes apart in 5" and 11" sections. The significance of this is that the front and rear standards compact together and slide forward onto the 5" section, which is then separated from the rear 11" section, permitting much easier stowage in a backpack. This accommodates lenses from 58mm (with 6x12cm format) to a 500mm telephoto (not long focus) lens. A 21" bellows, for lenses up to a 720mm telephoto, is also available. It comes with 5", 11"



V-PAN 617, WITHOUT FILM MAGAZINE, DEMONSTRATING A FEW MILD CAMERA MOVEMENTS. IT IS THE FIRST ROLL FILM PANORAMIC CAMERA WITH INTERCHANGEABLE LENSES AND BACKS.

tilts are limited only by lens coverage. In my use of the camera so far, I haven't had occasion to wish for any greater range of movements. While a few photographers might lament the lack of rear standard movements for greater control of perspective, inclusion of this feature would have added significantly to the camera's complexity, weight and cost. In practice, I seldom miss it for the landscape work that I use it for.

The V-PAN accepts standard Linhof Technika lens boards or their generic equivalent (\$40, center-drilled for a Copal #0, 1 or 3 shutter) available from V-PAN. That's one of the great selling points for the V-PAN, compared to most other panoramic options—you can use any large-format lenses you already own as long as they will cover the 6x17 format. Although 6x17cm is basically just a "slice" out of



and 16" rail sections. Custom rails and bellows can be special-ordered to handle lenses to 1200mm.

The above bellows are usable with wide angle lenses, providing you don't need to apply lens movements. When significant rise, fall, shift, tilt and swing are necessary, a special, interchangeable, non-pleated bag bellows is the answer, at a cost of \$250. It is usable with lenses from 58mm to 210mm.

The range of movements available (front standard only) is as follows: Rise, 2"; Fall, 1"; Shift, 1½"; Swing and axial

DON'T RELEGATE PANORAMIC CAMERAS SOLELY TO SCENICS—THEY MAKE GREAT PEOPLE CAMERAS TOO.



5", 11" AND 16" RAILS. THE 5" & 11" IN THE CENTER COMPRISE THE 16" BREAK-DOWN RAIL.

the middle of 5x7", since a lens used for 6x17cm doesn't have to cover the corners of 5x7", you can get away with lenses that have quite a bit shorter focal length than you might otherwise think necessary. For instance, a 75mm Schneider Super Angulon XL, with center filter, will cover with no movements. My 90mm f/5.6

Super Angulon covers easily, with some image circle reserve for movements. It definitely benefits from use of a center filter too, but the new XL version might not need one. The recently released 72mm

the V-PAN in a closet and start attending meetings of Panoramics Anonymous, or take the batteries out of my smaller hardware.

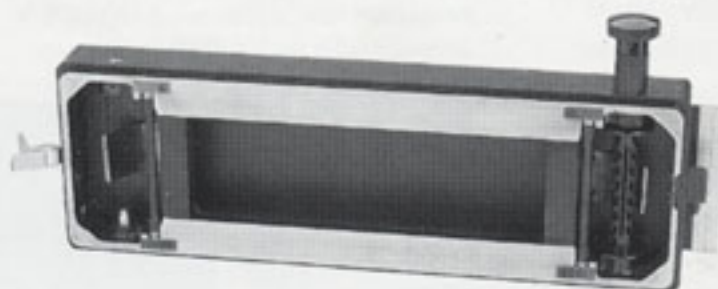
Is there anything I'd like to see added to the camera? Of course; do you own a camera that you feel has 100% of everything you desire in your ideal picture-taking machine? In this case, the first addition would be engraved and filled lines marking the zero positions of the movements, for a visual confirmation of the camera's ball detents. Wish number two is a set of guide pins or rails flanking the left end of the ground glass, to anchor the far end of the ground glass cover/protector. The third item would be a trio of accessory shoes. Huh? Okay, one in the center for a multi-focal optical viewfinder, which is handy for quick lens focal-length selection and when using the camera to photograph large (wide) groups of people. The other two, swivel-mounted to either side of center, would accommodate two shoe-mount flash units. This would allow overlapping and feathering of the two strobes for even, full-width coverage with the widest lenses, as well as present creative lighting possibilities by differentially powering and/or filtering the two flashes. The final item on my wish list would be a folding viewing hood for the ground glass screen. It would serve the function of the ground glass cover/protector, as well as, in most instances, obviate the dark cloth, which is my least favorite item of large-format gear.



REMOVABLE BACK OF FILM MAGAZINE,
SHOWING FULL-LENGTH PRESSURE PLATE.



THE V-PAN MAGAZINE
FOR 120 ROLL FILM



INTERIOR OF FILM MAGAZINE—REAR DOOR
REMOVED, DARK SLIDE IN PLACE.

With the exception of the folding hood, these "wishes" would be minor modifications. Indeed, that's one of the appeals of the V-PAN; it's easy to customize. Do-it-

yourselves could have a ball! If you don't feel up to it yourself, Chet Hanchett is a good listener. That's how the camera has evolved to its present Mark III incarnation. I wish all camera manufacturers were as attentive to their customers' needs. As a result of this interactive process, there are several possible new accessories on the horizon. The only one I'll mention here, because I know the prototype exists, is a set of helically focusable lens cones that would attach to the film magazine and accept the normal lens boards. This would give you a handheld 6x17 for jobs such as aerial photography, or when action is involved.

Now, if I could just con Chet into designing a cold light head for the V-PAN so's I wouldn't have to shuck out for a 5x7 enlarger....

Address

VARI PAN INC., 2725 Sutton Ave., St.
Louis, MO 63143; (314) 781-3600

To Seth
all the best
Thanks
Chet Hanchett

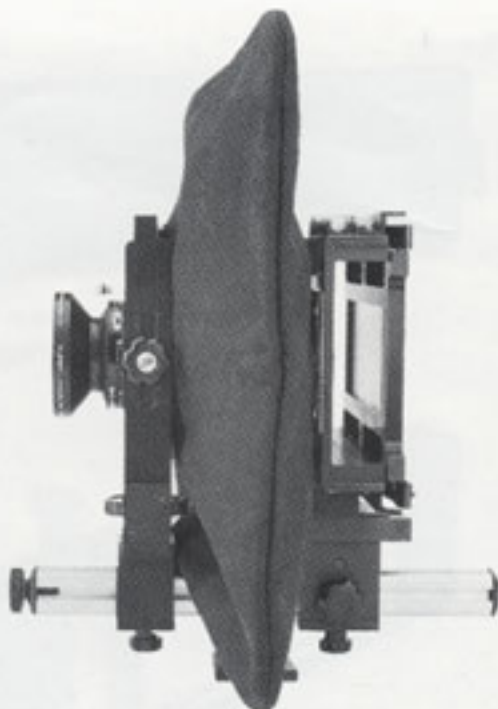
Grandagon from Rodenstock may possibly just cover also, though I haven't tried it yet.

The camera's monorails are geared, providing smooth, positive focusing movement. Drag is adjustable. The tripod mounting block has both $\frac{1}{4}$ -20 and $\frac{3}{8}$ " threads. Actual focusing is on a Beattie Intenscreen Plus, which greatly aids evenness of illumination, especially when utilizing wide angle lenses with "maxed-out" image circles. A hole in the lower right corner of the screen permits viewing the frame numbers on the paper backing of the 120 roll film used in the V-PAN film magazines, similar to standard practice with old box cameras. Obviously, 220 is not usable, due to the fogging that would result from the lack of paper backing. A clear plastic ground glass cover/protector is a \$25 accessory.

The rear standard is set in a dove-tailed slide with a locking lever. This facilitates both quick/rough focus and fitting the front/rear standards onto the 5" rail without removing the tripod block.

The film magazine (included in the price of the camera) is made of cast aluminum alloy. It has a film pressure plate, dark slide and simple (read: robust and reliable) manual film wind mechanism. The rear of the magazine is hinged and removable, providing wide-open access to the straightforward film loading path. After securing the film to the take-up spool and closing/latching the magazine door, the film is wound until the number "2" appears in the film window. The following three exposures (four total) are wound on to frames 6, 10 and 14. In the near future, a mask will be available that will allow use of the magazine for 6x12cm format when desired.

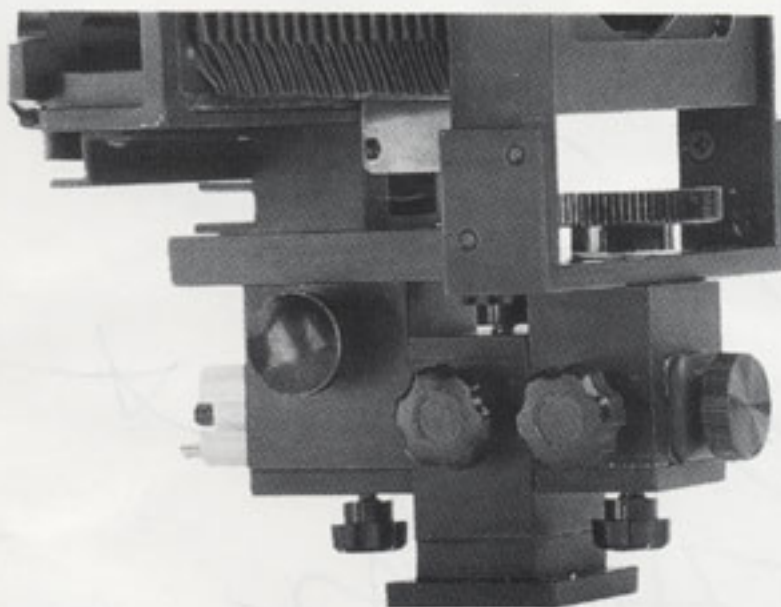
The ground glass frame is spring-loaded, and the film magazine is simply inserted in front of the ground glass, as with a conventional sheet film holder. The only thing you have to learn the "feel" for is the proper seating of the magazine's two light-sealing ridges. This



SIDEVIEW OF THE V-PAN, SANS FILM MAGAZINE, WITH WIDE ANGLE BAG BELLOWS.



REARVIEW OF V-PAN, FILM MAGAZINE INSERTED. NOTE DOVE-TAIL SLIDE, AND HOLE IN BEATTIE INTENSCREEN FOR READING FILM NUMBERS.



DETAIL OF FRONT AND REAR STANDARDS AND TRIPOD BLOCK, COMPACTED ONTO 5" RAIL FOR EASY STOWAGE IN CAMERA BAG.

is learned quickly, as the magazine gives a satisfyingly solid-sounding *thunk* when it seats correctly. A bail handle releases the frame pressure when cocked perpendicular to the ground glass, and reapplies pressure after inserting the magazine by returning it to its normal position parallel to the ground glass. Additional magazines are \$1,500 a copy.

Fit and finish, while not Linhof-svelte, is very good. All corner points that you're likely to run your hand into are rounded. Body parts are black anodized or plated, and the magazine is epoxy-painted. The camera body weighs 5 $\frac{1}{4}$ lbs. Add three pounds for the magazine.

The camera, complete with magazine, in its 16" break-down configuration sells for \$3,095. The 21" version goes for \$3,495. You can contact the company for the name of the nearest rental house that stocks the V-PAN 617 if you'd like to "test-drive" one.

So what are my field impressions of this camera after living with it for a while? Basically, the more I use it, the more I like it. I backpacked it in desert heat and mountain winter cold, and it never let me down. Nothing jammed, broke or fell off. Dim, pre-sunrise light presented no problems with the bright Intenscreen. While the V-PAN isn't exactly a featherweight, neither are the nice, big, "meaty," top-dollar-saleable transparencies that it produces. Thirty-five millimeter panoramics just don't cut it when compared to the "emulsion acreage" of 6x17cm. Being able to use the lenses from my 4x5 Technika on it is a big plus for me, and I like being able to do long telephoto panoramics. This may at first sound like a contradiction, but once you get the hang of "optical extraction" and the graphic renditions obtainable with telecompression, there's no turning back.

My only minor complaint is that it's too easy to get hooked on. My beloved smaller-format cameras that I would normally apply to landscape work have been languishing on the shelf ever since acquiring the V-PAN. I guess I'd better lock