



IMAGE Sean Conboy arrived at York Minster pre-dawn before the tourists, which meant that he could shoot uncluttered pictures for a few hours with his then-new Hasselblad H5D-60.

SHOOTING OLD SCHOOL

Photographing architecture is a specialised area and Sean Conboy is a master of his craft and living proof that it's possible to combine time-honoured photographic techniques with a digital approach

WORDS TERRY HOPE PICTURES SEAN CONBOY



For some the tidal wave of digital technology that's swept through photography over the past couple of decades has been bittersweet, because although it's brought huge advantages in terms of efficiency and cost savings it's also encouraged a lowering of the skill set that's required to produce challenging work.

Whereas once a photographer would need to have experience and a vast fund of technical knowledge in order to calculate such things as light placement, filtration and tricky time exposures, now it's possible to check everything on site, and to reshoot on the spot where necessary.

While that's good for the nerves, and no one would ever suggest that photography has become easy overnight, there are some quarters where the ability to have what is essentially a safety net in place has led to less stringent quality control, and the attitude that most things can be fixed in post. Even disregarding this rather sloppy outlook, there's no doubting that the need for a high level of technical skill is certainly less than it once was, and that makes the post silver halide landscape a very different place to the one a previous generation once inhabited.

All of which makes it a positive joy and a pleasure to come across a photographer such as Sean Conboy, who is, in the nicest possible way, a real throwback to another age, a time

IMAGES For the shot looking up into the roof the camera was placed on the floor and the viewpoint was finely tuned via Live View and a tethered laptop. Minute adjustments were made using side-shift movement on the camera to ensure that everything was completely square: a classic case of Sean getting everything right in-camera. Lighting was provided by broncolor Move units plus bron Para 88 reflectors, which proved capable of pumping light into a vast area.

when technical knowledge was king and the name of the game was getting everything right in-camera. Not that Sean is in any way a retrograde who has spurned the modern tools of his trade: he's expertly looked to combine the best of the new and the old, and the formula he's come up with has enabled him to become one of the best architectural photographers on the planet, while using a camera whose functions would have been familiar to those working 100 years ago.

"I worked with 5x4in large format for many years," says Sean, "and took my gear with me all around the world. My camera was a Sinar P2 and was quite a big piece of kit that needed to fit in a flight case and go in the hold. Then one day I went on a job and the camera got lost, and I was in an absolute state of panic! As it happened the client wasn't quite ready in any case and the shoot was put back a day and in that time the camera turned up. However, it was a close call and I decided that I needed →



NICK TEED



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to be working with a large-format camera that was portable enough to take with me as carry-on luggage.

"I moved over to an Ebony 5x4in but then switched to the medium format Linhof Techno when it was introduced in 2009. This is a classic looking, beautifully engineered camera, designed to be folded right down and taken virtually anywhere. Like the Sinar, however, it comes with a full set of movements that allow me to do all kinds of things, from altering the viewpoint I'm getting without moving camera position through to being able to minutely control the areas of focus that I'm getting or to introduce amazing depth-of-field that stretches throughout the entire image."

While camera movements offer an enormous amount of control, something that's been appreciated by serious photographers virtually since the medium was invented, they are not widely used these days: they are quite niche and are reserved for fields such as architecture or advertising. Some photographers have opted for tilt-shift lenses, which are simpler to use and can work in tandem with smaller formats, but they don't offer all of the combinations of movements, that you'll get from a field camera. There are also post-production effects that can emulate some of the things that movements can do - straighten the verticals of a building, for example - but the time-honoured solutions are still considered by many to be the best.

"I would say that I use movements to some degree or other in virtually every picture I take," says Sean. "They take a little learning, but once you've become used to what they can offer you they just become second nature and so you instinctively know what you need to work with."

Into the digital age

Sean carried on working in a traditional way, using sheet film, until 2006, when he acquired his first Hasselblad digital back. "Years ago I was told that architectural shooters would be the last to abandon film because we needed what these traditional cameras could give us," says Sean. "However, with so many pro labs shutting down and fewer places processing sheet film, something just had to change.

"In the end I switched to a Hasselblad H3D-50, which was the first camera I used that gave me files that had a true film-like appearance, coupled with an amazing tonal range. This set-up gave me real flexibility, because I could use the back in conjunction with my Linhof but I could also work with the whole Hasselblad outfit as well, and I use it extensively in my work. The advantage for the client is that they receive files that are identical, because they are produced by the same sensor, and this gives them the continuity they're looking for." →

IMAGE This is the Sky View Restaurant on the Sunborn Hotel, so-called because the roof can slide back to create an outdoor-type space. Sean was careful not to overpower the ambient LED light in the room, and the broncolor Move's modelling light was called into action. Rising front was used to allow the open roof to play a prominent role in the picture, and swing and tilt was also utilised to extend the depth-of-field.





IMAGE The style of this bar on the Sunborn hotel needed to be captured, so Sean was determined not to overpower the cool LED lighting. He used LED lighting from the modelling light on his bron Move kit, whose output was warmed up by a filter to match the temperature of the ambient light. The difference was subtle, but added a touch of pink. Rising front and a small amount of tilt-shift was employed for a huge depth-of-field.

Moving from film to digital did carry some expensive kit implications, however, and Sean soon discovered that the wider large format lenses in particular that had been designed to work in combination with film weren't performing so well when paired with digital capture, producing results that were soft. With quality considerations being at a premium Sean had no alternative but to invest in some new optics, and he went for Rodenstock 23mm f/5.6 and 32mm f/4 digital lenses and a 43mm f/5.6 Schneider.

"I love it," he says. "This set-up is giving me more in the way of movements than I ever got on my equivalent 5x4in set-up, and the Linhof Techno is so well engineered that I have no alignment problems with the back at all. I can also use some of my old large-format film lenses with this camera, such as a 58mm, 90mm and 110mm, and they still perform well."

The advantages of working with digital capture are obvious, but alongside the reassurance that images have been safely captured on the day, there are other major pluses. For example, when Sean's working in confined spaces, and might want to place his camera right down at ground level, or in a corner where it's not possible to get behind the camera, then he can work tethered, using a laptop to make his adjustments.

There's also a Scene Calibration setting in Hasselblad's Phocus software that has proved invaluable to Sean in terms of ensuring that he can remove colour casts or uneven illumination that have been caused by the use of camera movements.

"I first have to create a calibrated image by taking a picture of a white Perspex sheet that I carry with me," says Sean, "using the same lighting, exposure settings, focus and tilt-shift settings as in the picture I want to correct.

I then select a thumbnail of the calibrated image and click the Create button in the Scene Calibration tool, and name the file. Then I load the image to be adjusted in the Viewer, click again on the Scene Calibration tool and the adjustments are made.

"If I need to I can even apply the changes to multiple images, providing they were all taken under the same conditions. It's a really useful tool and it saves me a lot of time."

Lighting on location

Along with updating his capture equipment, Sean is also continuously reviewing areas such as lighting, and his most recent investment has seen him switch over to broncolor's revolutionary Move 1200L. Launched last year, this mobile unit features studio-like performance, outputting 1200 joules and featuring a nine f/stop power range and up to 1/20,000sec flash durations, while only weighing 6.2kg. Sean has latterly been using these units in combination with bron's trademark 88 Para reflectors, which have proved to be ideal for interior work.

"I'm working with four of the Move packs," says Sean, "and they are just as good as a studio pack, but have the advantage that they are completely portable, and they're also very quick to recycle. They're the perfect partners for the Paras, and I'm working with two of these now. Although they're primarily designed for the fashion and beauty world I've discovered that they are ideal for architectural interiors, particularly vast ones like York Minster, which I visited recently. I was there to carry out a shoot for the York Glaziers Trust who are restoring one of the windows in the Cathedral, and it also gave me a chance to try out my new Hasselblad H5D-60 and to use the new battery adapter that allows the back

to be powered untethered when used with a technical camera. I was able to get access really early in the morning before people had arrived and also into some parts of the cathedral that are normally difficult to get to.

"What I love about the Paras is that they are easy to carry around and quick to set up, and yet they can throw out so much light, which is just what you need in a vast space such as this. They feature a focusing head, and by adjusting this you can light over long distances, but the wonderful thing for me is that although the light they are throwing out is so powerful it's not harsh at all, unlike the light you would get from a conventional reflector. You get amazing control, and I'm really enjoying using them."

Sean also found himself working in quite a different way with the Move packs after receiving a commission to photograph the sumptuous interiors on board the five-star Sunborn floating hotel in Gibraltar. Featuring exquisite lighting displays it was crucial that he didn't overpower the look and here he was able to utilise the Move's less publicised other virtue, namely the inclusion of a daylight-balanced LED modelling light, something that has been welcomed not just by photographers but also filmmakers looking for a portable and powerful continuous source.

"Sometimes you just need a relatively subtle light," says Sean, "and this one is great because you can see what you're getting in real time and it's all contained within the same unit. I work at a default ISO speed of 80 to ensure that I achieve the best possible quality, and for some of the shots on board the Sunborn I was working at exposures of around 32 seconds. However, if you're working with a rock solid tripod - I'm using a Gitzo carbon fibre model with an Arca Swiss Cube head that enables precision movements in all directions - it's not a big deal, and I just take as long as I need to get exactly the shot I'm after."

With a philosophy of investing in the best equipment possible and only offering his clients files full of supreme quality, Sean has set out his stall and is in big demand from those who appreciate his timeless skills.

"I'm not really in the business of trying to cut corners," he says. "From my perspective I'm a little like the photographers of old, in that I'm investing in such things as cameras, lenses and tripods that might see me throughout most of my career. The only thing that will change is that every now and again I'll look to upgrade the digital back I'm using, since these are the elements that are likely to evolve the most. Even so, I just look at buying a back in the same way as I used to look at buying film: it's just something I have to do, and I would spend thousands of pounds a year on film and it would be gone. At least with a digital back there is still something tangible there." **PP**

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• Don't miss Sean Conboy's presentations at the forthcoming ShootLDN event at The Old Truman's Brewery off Brick Lane on 22 and 23 October. Sign up for a free place at www.shoot-ldn.co.uk.