Cameras We Use - The Stereo Realist

by Ray Moxom

If total sales is the measure of popularity, then the Stereo Realist is the most popular stereo camera ever made.

The Stereo Realist ushered in the post World War Two (WW2) revival of stereo photography.

The camera was designed by the American stereo photographer Seton Rochwite and was announced in November 1945 just three months after WW2. Seton Rochwite remained very active in the stereo scene until recently. He and his wife Isabelle continued to enter slides in International Exhibition until the early 1990s.

The Realist was manufactured in the United States by a precision instrument manufacturer, the David White Company of Milwaukee. The camera is a true precision camera built to a high quality standard.

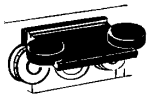
The camera was launched onto the American market in 1947. There was a full page advertisement on page 3 of the November 1946 edition of "American Photography". This advertisement advised "watch for it - wait for it" indicating that the camera had not then been released. Interestingly, the advertisement had photographs of a Realist camera with f3.5 Ilex-Paragon lenses and with 1sec to $^1/_{200}$ sec shutter speeds. To the best of my knowledge only the $^1/_{150}$ sec maximum shutter speed reached the market until the f2.8 lens model was released a few years later. The camera remained on the market, with little change, for over 20 years and an estimated ¼ million were sold. The Realist caught the imagination of the American public and many famous people were seen with a Realist hanging around their neck. Among these were General Dwight Eisenhower and the actor Harold Lloyd.

The Realist's success was due, in no small part, to the high quality of the recently available (in the US) 35mm Kodachrome color slide film. Color film was not so readily available in other parts of the world in the post war 1940s. This coupled with a lack of the new stereo cameras outside of America explains why the late 1940s stereo boom in the USA was not a world wide phenomena. When color film (mainly Kodachrome) did become readily available in Europe and Australia it was to a large extent the enthusiast that embraced stereo photography.

The Realist 22 mm x 23 mm format became the standard format in America, and later the world, for color stereo slides. Other cameras using the Realist format soon came on the market, some for less than half the price of the Realist.

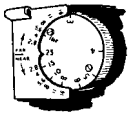
Mechanically the Realist is better made and more reliable than most of the other US and German made cameras that followed the Realist onto the market.

The viewfinder is a periscope with the viewing eyepiece on the bottom of the camera and the viewfinder lens located centrally between the taking lenses. See line drawing above.



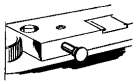
The hinged lens cover (left) protects the lenses and covers the viewfinder, thus preventing picture taking with the lenses covered. The cover also provides a degree of lens shading.

The f3.5 Cook type triplet or the f2.8 Tessar type lenses are rigidly fixed to the camera body. Focusing is at the focal plane and is aided by an accurate wide based rangefinder. Early models has a depth of field table under the hinged lens cover while, as seen at the right, later models had a depth of field scale at the focusing knob. This feature was available as a modification for earlier cameras.



So how good is the Stereo Realist camera? The answer to that question will depend very much on who you ask.

The main criticisms that I hear about the Realist are: the slow ($^1/_{150}$ sec) maximum shutter speed on the f3.5 lens model, slight vignetting at small apertures on some of the early f3.5 lens models, and the three step procedure for winding on the film and cocking the shutter. This procedure is: first press the film wind release button on the back of the camera, then wind the film on for the next exposure, and finally manually cock the shutter with the leaver at the front of the camera. Personally I have not found any of these criticisms to be a problem. As far as shutter speeds are concerned, the need for depth of field tends to push us to using $^1/_{100}$ sec most of the time. While the very early f3.5 lens models lacked double exposure prevention - this could be added as a factory modification. When fitted the double exposure prevention also had an override button as shown at right.



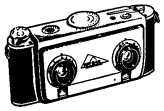
The main models of the Stereo Realist are:

- Model ST41 with f3.5 David White lenses (Ilex Paragon on early models) and a maximum shutter speed of $^1/_{150}$ sec
- Model ST42 with f2.8 David White lenses (Kodak Ektar on early models) and a maximum shutter speed of $^1/_{200}$ sec
- Model 1050 Custom with f2.8 Realist "rare earth" lenses made by Steinheil (Germany) and a maximum shutter speed of $^1/_{200}$ sec

Models ST41 & ST42 later became known as Models 1041 & 1042.

The models with f2.8 lenses are much sought after and now tend to sell for twice the price of the models with f3.5 lenses. I do not think that they are worth that much extra, but I must say that all of the f2.8 lenses are of exceptionally high quality.

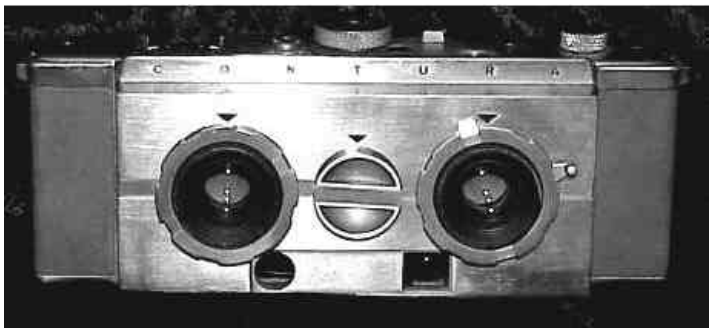
Other Stereo Realist cameras were the specialised Realist Macro and the Realist 45. The latter was a re-badged German made Iloca Rapid priced to compete with lower cost American and German stereo cameras that were on the market in the mid 1950s. Seton Rochwite also designed the Kin Dar (shown at right) and Contura stereo cameras. The very rare Contura is said to be the best Realist format stereo camera ever made. They now sell for about $3,000, if you can find one.



For further reading on the early history of the Realist and, in particularly, on the origin of the "Realist Format" read Seton Rothwite's article in the March 1991 edition of Stereoscopy.

This article was first published in the March 1996 issue of '3D Window', the Sydney Stereo Camera Club Bulletin

Right: Realist with Wide Angle Attachment



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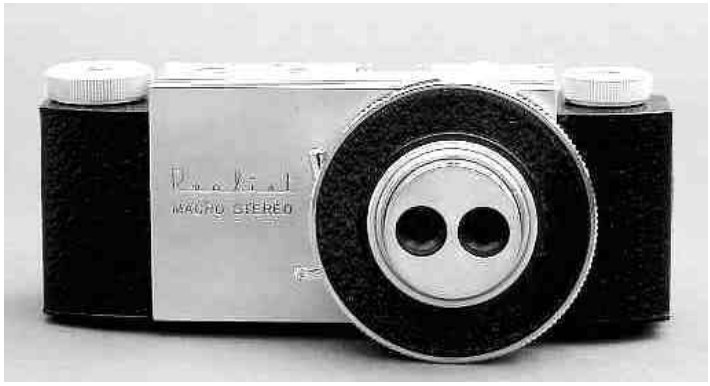
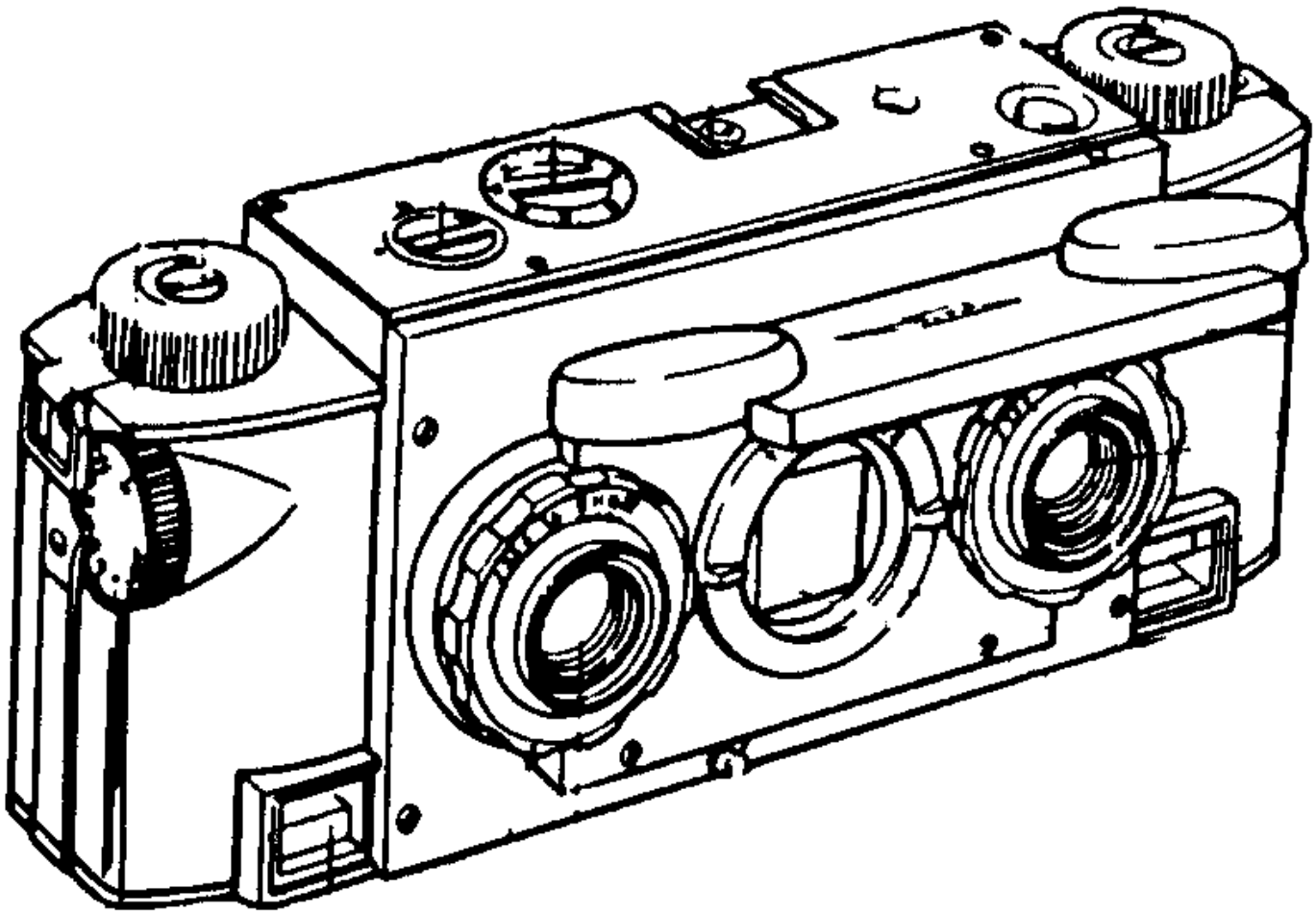


Macro Realist



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