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Nicholas photographing pochote with a Gitzo G1348 MK2 Mountaineer Inter-Pro Studex tripod + Arca-Swiss tripod head + Canon EOS-1D Mark III. El Salvador 2011.

Don't overlook the importance of a tripod (and a tripod head)

Students and enthusiasts always buy a camera first, and tend to forget about a tripod. Then, when they realize the importance of a tripod, they go low-bid.

In distinction, a professional photographer will use a tripod more often than not, and their tripods will be a professional brand (Gitzo, Manfrotto, Linhof, etc).

On low price tripods for weekend photography the tripod and tripod head are all one unit. Most professional tripods have two different and separate parts: the tripod (with no head) and the tripod head (separately). In other words, many pros buy a tripod of one brand and a tripod head of another brand. Or, if they buy all one brand, they buy the tripod and head separately: first the tripod and then a specific head.



Price, cost, pros and cons of tripod heads

Price is an understandable consideration, but if you buy a cheap product, it may not last as long as a really well-engineered and quality control manufactured tripod head. If a product has a 5-year warranty, that is a good sign. If it has only a 1-year warranty, I would be careful.

Cost also hinges on the brand name. Some brands are inherently more expensive. But some brands are worth their cost. If you are a pro, people who visit your studio expect to see an international name brand on each item of equipment.



Nicholas photographing pochote with a Gitzo G1348 MK2 Mountaineer Inter-Pro Studex tripod + Arca-Swiss tripod head + Canon EOS-1D Mark III. El Salvador 2011.

The pros and cons of a tripod head are primarily determined for what use you intend the head for: video or still photography, studio or out in a remote field trip. Some tripod heads weight as much as an entire carbon fiber tripod.



Introduction to the many different kinds of tripod heads: comparisons

- Ball heads (in an endless set of varieties and versions)
- Pistol-Grip heads, Action-Grip (rare, best known from Manfrotto)
- Geared heads (best one is the Manfrotto model 400).
- Tilt and pan tripod heads (pan-tilt)
- Three-way head (pan, tilt, and rotate)
- Gimbel heads (which is the next kind I wish to obtain)
- Floor level tripods
- Leveling heads (so far primarily Arca-Swiss and Linhof)
- Unique innovative heads (if you want to spend \$10K)

You could also classify the panoramic heads as a separate kind of head class; most are L-shaped (for 35mm or smaller cameras). Be aware that most L-shaped pano heads wobble even for 35mm cameras. For a medium format camera, I long ago gave up even trying to use an L-shaped head. For my Hasselblad with Phase One P25+ I use a horizontal pano head from NOVOFLEX and get great results.



Nicholas holding his Hasselblad camera + Phase One P25+ with a horizontal Novoflex pano head. Mangrove swamp near Monterrico, Guatemala, 100 meters from the Pacific Ocean coast.



Let's now look at the seven most common different kinds of tripod heads and learn more about them, based on a few decades of experience as a photographer.

Ball heads

Ball heads have been my favorite for decade after decade. But I can understand why other photographers will prefer other types of heads. Each person will have their own preference, though ball heads are very popular with pros and prosumers.

In **bold font** I list the tripod heads that the FLAAR Reports photography evaluation institute would consider to evaluate.

- AcraTech, Ultimate, ballhead
- Arca-Swiss, their first Mono Ball head, which I still use daily and love
- Arca-Swiss, B1, their second head; most flawed ball head ever made
- Arca-Swiss Monoball Z1 DP Double Pan.
- Arca-Swiss Cube (beautiful engineering if you like over-engineering)
- Burzynski Protec, or Ball Head II
- Gitzo Systematic ball head
- Gitzo Series 1
- Gitzo Series 2
- Gitzo Series 3
- Kirk BH1 or BH3
- Linhof Profi III is the current series in 2011 going into 2012
- Manfrotto 057 series ball heads (at PhotoPlus 2011)
- Markins M10 or M20
- **NOVOFLEX ClassicBall** (six models that look good (but we do not have any yet))
- NOVOFLEX MagicBall (for small point-and-shoot cameras)
- NOVOFLEX (many more models but mostly for home photography)

Since even Arca-Swiss tripod heads have rare defects or eventually wear out (after 30 years!), we do not yet list any ballheads designed in China. Of course the problem is that a cheap tripod will break no matter where it is made. We bought a Sony VCT-R640 and it was a piece of cheap junk (even when it worked). It broke after a few months.

Burzynski never exhibits at PMA or PHotoPlus (or if they did in past years I can't remember them). And even at Photokina, Burzynski has not left much imprint on my brain. So if they were there, they were well hidden.

Same with **Markins**; this brand name (sorry) is not imprinted in my memory and my memory has Photokina 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010 but I will check at Photokina 2012. Markins was definitely not at PhotoPlus 2011 and I don't remember them from PMA (I skipped the last two years of PMA because they kept shrinking in size).



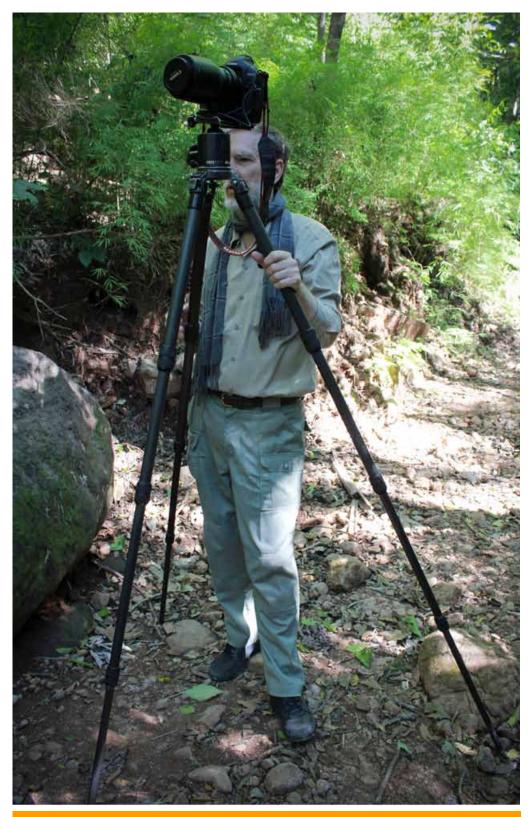


Berlebach tripod ball head with quick release magnesite 140. Photokina 2010.



Berlebach Levelling screw with 3/8" thread. Photokina 2010.





Nicholas photographing pochote with a Gitzo G1348 MK2 Mountaineer Inter-Pro Studex tripod + Arca-Swiss tripod head + Canon EOS-1D Mark III. El Salvador 2011.



AcraTech used to exhibit at PMA, but first Epson pulled out; then when Canon pulled out there was not enough left to attract enough other exhibitors. Hence visitor interest died, and they cancelled 2011 if I remember correctly. For 2012 PMA will be sort of co-located with a popular consumer electronics expo in Las Vegas.



Nicholas photographing reptiles with a Gitzo G1348 MK2 Mountaineer Inter-Pro Studex tripod + Arca-Swiss tripod head + Canon EOS-1D Mark III. Zoo La Aurora, Guatemala 2011.

The brand **NPC** I have never noticed; this does not mean they are always absent from photo trade shows, but since most of the year I am out photographing in remote parts of Guatemala I can't exactly drop in to B+H when I am in NY. And when I am in NY I rarely have time to go camera shopping. So if a company has no presence, or if their presence is not noticeable at a busy expo, I tend to focus on the companies that have a focus, such as **Gitzo, Manfrotto,** and **NOVOFLEX.**

I have visited the Linhof factory and have many Linhof cameras, but I would be content with other ball heads.









Here are the results of the photography at the Guatemala City "Aurora Zoo" of the venomous Rio Motagua lizard. It helps to have a good tripod to achieve this level of results. Keep in mind, this venmous lizard is not in his cage, it is on an open table directly in front of us. .Zoo La Aurora, Guatemala 2011.



Pistol-grip heads

I tried a vertical and a horizontal action-grip head from Manfrotto. I preferred the horizontal one; another photographer preferred the vertical one.

These Manfrotto heads were the first generation action grip heads from Italy. They lasted several years and I was very happy with this innovative concept of head for general photography. This means for photographing at trade shows or on excursions. These heads are not intended for use in a studio (for our studios I had the Manfrotto geared tripod head, a really sturdy long-lasting achievement).

But after a few years the action grips would no longer clamp tight. I hope this aspect has been redesigned, since if you are on airplanes over a 414,000 kilometers as I was last year, I am so seldom home I have no way to send anything for repair (one tripod whose leg was broken in a crocodile infested swamp is still at its repair place three years later because I never had time to retrieve it).

Now Manfrotto indicates that the action-grip heads are redesigned, so you might want to try them. One new alternative is the Manfrotto 324RC2 Joystick Head (which replaced the model 222).

It is also helpful that Manfrotto carefully labeled the names of these as Light Duty Grip Ball Head. We really liked the two action grips that we had, but even though we are very careful in using them, we take thousands of photographs.

Geared heads



I have an original edition Manfrotto geared heads (a model 3263). Actually I have two of them. I have used them for so long I think the current models have a different model designation for the last decade! The current model designation is Manfrotto 400 Deluxe Geared Head.

For any 4x5" camera, or even any medium format camera, the geared Manfrotto head is my favorite. But what I still need is a center attachment that can hold a Canon or Nikon camera, since these geared heads are understandably made for medium format (3/8") and for large format (also 3/8" European thread).

Tilt and Pan heads

I cringe when I see someone offering me a pan/tilt tripod head. These are okay if you are stuck somewhere, the airline has lost your baggage, and the only tripod you can borrow in the destination city has a tilt and pan head.



Otherwise I would never ever buy or ask for rarely use a pan and tilt head. Yet thousands of photographers still buy these, thinking these are what pros use. And I am sure that many pro studio photographers do. But ever since I got the original Arca-Swiss head over 30 years ago, I have favored ball heads, though obviously for bird photography with a heavy lens I need to upgrade to a gimbal head.

But I will admit that I did use pan/tilt heads for years. And I am sure that for some applications this style of head has advantages. This is why a pro photographer will tend to have many different tripod heads.

Also, I noticed that Gitzo now offers a special tripod head for bird photography: the G2380 fluid head, for birdwatchers. Since we at FLAAR do bird photography in mangrove swamps and rivers, this head sounds like a great concept to evaluate.



This is the original Manfrotto geared tripod head, model #3263. It is now the Manfrotto model 400 geared tripod head. The stains and calcification show how many DECADES this head has been used out in the humid jungles of Central America. It still works just fine. In fact we liked it so much we obtained a second one.

The benefit of this Manfrotto #3263 (now Manfroto #400) geared head is that the handles open and close. Here the handles are shown closed. If you have a tripod head with handles that are permanently open, they will break off sooner or later! This tripod head is years and years and years of heavy use (as you can see) and none of the handles are broken off.





This geared head has handles which open out. This photograph shows the handles closed. The ability to close the handles is what makes this head so durable over a decade: the handles never get broken off because they can be closed into a protective area.



We use this head for medium-format and for large-format cameras. It is best in the studio but as you can tell by the naturally weathered condition, we have been using this head out on field trips to remote areas for years. We liked it so much we obtained a second one.



Three-way head (pan, tilt, and rotate)

Sorry, too many controls for when I am in a crocodile infested swamp, or inside the crocodile pen at the zoo.

When I have pit vipers on the table in front of me (yes, carefully taken completely out of their cage by the helpful herpatologist), I need to keep my eye on the snake's head (and look at their muscle movement and breathing pattern). So I don't have time to twiddle with three controls on a stupid tripod (sorry to be so blunt).

I use a ball head when I photograph dangerous or venomous reptiles.

But, when we did not have enough tripod heads for all our photographers (there are now about seven photographers on our team), we provided one of our photographers the **1570M** head. She said it took a few days to get used to, but after she had experience, she said it did have some advantages.

Gimbal heads

Wimberley is the best known for gimbel heads but now you can get lower cost gimbel heads from Manfrotto (Manfrotto 393 Heavy Telephoto Lens Support)

Jobu Design was not at the PhotoPlus 2011 so tough to comment on their BWG-Pro options.

Custom Brackets was at PhotoPlus 2011. Their Gimbal heads are L-shaped (as Manfrotto). Traditional gimbal heads have tended to be semi-circular.

Manfrotto 393 gimbel head looks more robust because it has a frame on both sides. This is one I would like to try.

Floor level tripods

These are really a tripod not a tripod head; actually if you use them outside on the ground you don't need a head (especially if you put them on a bean bag).

I have two Leica table top tripods and both are inadequate to hold the weight of a good camera; plus they are crotchety in how they behave when in use. This is the only Leica equipment I had that was unacceptable. Today Manfrotto and other manufacturers have similar products. I need something even lower.

The KIRK enterprise Low Pod is something I definitely would like to test and evaluate.

The Manfrotto Pocket DSLR Support is completely different but I would really like to try it (black Part #





Gimbal heads from Manfrotto at Canon booth. Photokina 2010.

MP3-D01 or Grey, Part # MP#-D02)

Caption: Here you can see where I need a "low rise" tripod, out in the jungle, trying to get my camera parallel to leaf-cutting ants. We especially like to photograph them when the ants are carrying flower petels.

Leveling tripod heads

The Linhof 3D Micro understandably reminds me of the Arca-Swiss Cube. I estimate the Cube came first but would need to check. These are for use in a camera studio, but as a non-profit research institute I get National Geographic quality shots with my Manfrotto geared head (now the model 400).

And yes, my photos with tripod heads other than a leveling gizmo have indeed been published by



National Geographic (about 11 of my photographs of 7th-9th century AD Maya vases and bowls).

I do not see any particular need for a leveling head for any of my work, not even in a museum. But I am sure that some highly specialized photography, that a leveling head would be nice.

Otherwise, these heads are obviously an exercise by capable engineers to entertain themselves in designing something remarkable (albeit not really very often needed, or even very practical).

Unique innovative heads

The Gitzo Ser.5 3 Way Electronic Head was clearly the most remarkable tripod head exhibited at PhotoPlus 2011 in New York. If I win the Lotto I would definitely consider this (the head costs a cool \$10,000, not including tax).

Panoramic heads

My favorite pano is definitely the NOVOFLEX. I am writing this page in Milano, Italy, and don't have my NOVOFLEX pano system in front of me to note the model #, but it is the top of their line. FLAAR covers pano heads on other web pages and in PDFs. Link to the other pages and show the mini-titles as hot links.



Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III atop a Novoflex focusing rack castel XL rail which is on an aging Arca-Swiss Monoball head, atop a Gitzo tripod.



Features to look for

A standardized base plate is helpful if you have lots of cameras and lots of tripod heads. For serious photographers, Arca-Swiss is the standard worldwide for base plate width and height and bevel. Ironically the best base plates that fit are from companies in the US such as KIRK and others.

Ratings, reviews, evaluations

Since FLAAR is not a commercial company, we don't give ratings like the sham reviews, pseudo-reviews, or reviews that get a commission on click-throughs. Instead of a rating, we either use a tripod head, or not. We only use the tripod heads that really work. So if you see a tripod and head in our reports, you know this is because our 40+ years of experience suggests this equipment is effective.

Summary: Brands of tripod heads

Sorry, we do not yet evaluate Chinese tripod heads (until we have documentation from using them that documents they hold up adequately). However, be realistic, for even name brands are actually made in China and rebranded (but at least they are designed in USA or Western Europe). Below we list the important brands that you should consider. Most are still made in North America or Western Europe

- Acratech
- Arca-Swiss, primarily extremely complex engineering concepts
- Gitzo (Bogen in past years), almost every kind of head you can imagine
- Manfrotto (Bogen in past years), every size, every shape, every application
- Wimberley, primarily specialized such as Wimberly WH-200

I did not see Acratech at Photo Plus 2011; don't confuse Acratech with Argraph. It is Acratech which makes the impressive heads.

All professional photographers know the brand names Linhof, Arca-Swiss, and Gitzo. But there are other tripod manufacturers that also have innovative tripod heads. I would definitely mention

- Berlebach
- Ries
- NOVOFLEX

Berlebach also makes tripod heads

Berlebach is best known for their wooden tripods. But it is their tripod heads that I like: especially I like their



- Leveling Adapter, #111971
- and their 3-way-head Pegasus, #11128.

However, we lack these, so I can't write a review until we actually have them to use in our photography of plants, animals, landscapes, and in museums and botanical gardens and zoos. We also photograph archaeological artifacts, Maya sculpture, and architectural history (especially Mayan palaces, temple-pyramids and ball courts (for their ballgame where the head of the defeated capitan was wrapped in native rubber and used as the ball in the next game)).

Comparison reviews

We have tested two **Arca-Swiss** tripod heads. The first one, the original "Monoball" has lasted over 27 years and still works (though it could use some tightening after all these thousands of days of use). This is probably one of the best ball heads every made.

The second-generation Arca-Swiss ball heads, B1, was one of the worst and most problematic tripod heads ever conceived. I used it less than 5 days before it locked tight. There was endless nonsense issued by the manufacturer on how easy it was to unlock, and claims that the locking was the fault of the end-user. Nonsense: it was inadequately engineered; was severely flawed. They should have simply politely apologized and replaced it with one that worked.

Evidently they finally realized how much bad PR this first-generation tripod head was, and finally evidently corrected the flaw, but too many years too late. And they still blamed it on everything but the original design concept. I guess we are all human and understandably it is easier to blame something or someone besides our own family.

Acratech heads I have never used because none have been made available for testing. No one answered our e-mails. No problemo, since we have plenty of other tripod heads, but we would have enjoyed testing them.

Gitzo off-center ball head hold up several years but is now in need of tightening. We cover Gitzo tripods extensively on all the FLAAR Reports web sites.

Manfrotto three-movement geared tripod heads: the largest head they make, a geared head, the original 3263, was fabulous. I still have two of them. They have supported by 4x5 and 8x10 cameras for decades and still hold my cameras today. This Manfrotto head holds up to constant travel and constant use. Today the current model designation is 400.

The two nice Manfrotto action grip tripods were very popular with my staff photographers. But the "grip" wore out after several years. But they lasted much longer than Chinese tripods. The newer models of Manfrotto action grip heads I saw at PhotoPlus 2011 hopefully are more longer lasting. Plus, they have helpful label now, Light Duty.

It is impressive to see how many new models Manfrotto now offers (based on what I saw at Photo-Plus 2011 in New York recently).



NOVOFLEX tripod heads

NOVOFLEX makes equipment for hobby photographers (Magicball and Ball 19), prosumers (Classicball 3, Ball NQ, Ball 30, Ball 40), and also professional studio photography (Classicball 5). I rate the NOVOFLEX macro focusing rail and horizontal rotating pano head is at the full professional level. I use my Hasselblad with Phase One P25+ on NOVOFLEX pano system and get stunning results.

Botanists, zoologists, geologists, archaeologists, and architectural historians can also use ball heads from NOVOFLEX out on location.



Gitzo G1348 MK2 Mountaineer Inter-Pro Studex tripod + Novoflex Panorama = Q Pro Plate with a Novoflex QPL-Panorama Plate. Mangrove swamp near Monterrico, Guatemala, 100 meters from the Pacific Ocean coast.

Ries Tilt Head

I can remember seeing this head many years ago, when Ries still had a booth at photo trade shows. I admired their Ries J250 Double Tilt Head. This is an unusual engineering concept: it is not a normal



pan and tilt head. I would need to have one in front of me to evaluate it (tough now that I don't see them at recent PhotoPlus expos, and PMA has been not adequate even for attendees in past years).

Tripod heads for photographing animals

Wimberley is the company which most comes to mind when you think about a gimbel style tripod head for using with a telephoto lens for bird photography. But now KIRK enterprises has their King Cobra. The KIRK King Cobra would compete with the Wimberley Sidekick. The top of the line Wimberly head would be the WH-200 Wimberley Head Version II.

I have already mentioned the nice Manfrotto 393 gimbel head. It is H shaped (or could be considered U-shaped. I find these inherently more sturdy than L-shaped brackets (sorry, too many L-shaped pano bracket systems wobble).



Wimberly plamp + Gitzo G1348 MK2 Mountaineer Inter-Pro Studex tripod. FLAAR Archive 2011.



When to use a tripod; when not to use a tripod?

I find that most students and weekend photographers either use no tripod at all, or use one that is either inadequate or inappropriate (pan-tilt). The photographers who have tried a tripod may give up and never use one again if they started with either an inadequate one (a tripod that whobbles) or one that is inappropriate (too many handles; too many options; too many controls).



Nicholas photographing with a Gitzo G1348 MK2 Mountaineer Inter-Pro Studex tripod + Arca-Swiss tripod head + Hasselblad with a Phase One P25 Digital Back + Novoflex Panorama = Q Pro Plate with a Novoflex QPL-Panorama Plate. Monterrico Guatemala 2010.

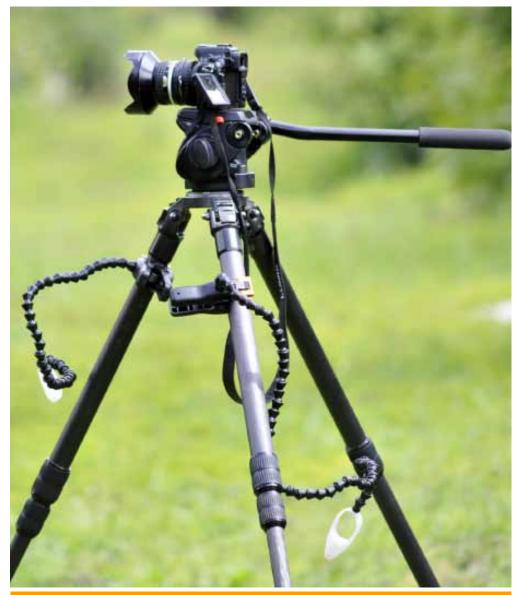
Even with a tripod, use a cable release

When you push your finger down on the camera to take the photo, your finger moves the camera. Then the mirror flips up (causing vibration). So while the camera is trying to take the photo, it has vibrations from two sources.

Plus, I notice that most beginners are too close to their tripod: still figiting with controls or position of



the head or simply standing with their own human legs next to the tripod legs. Result is that the entire tripod and head are being moved while the camera is trying to take a photo with two vibrations from the camera alone.



Gitzo G1348 MK2 Mountaineer Inter-Pro Studex tripod + Manfrotto video tripod head. FLAAR Archive 2011.

When I use my Hasselblad for a shot, 100% of the time I do a mirror release before I take the photo. With a Hasselblad ELX this is very easy to do, since these cameras are made for serious photographers who understand the usefulness of releasing the mirror before you take the photo.

Market electronic releases that we have tried don't work after the first week or so: pure junk. Though surely there must be a brand somewhere that functions a bit longer!

Most name-brand Canon electronic cable releases are not of professional quality either, and they fail long before they should.

Nikon electronic cable releases last longer than Canon, but eventually the wires pull out (even when I put electrical tape at the joint when they are new).



Summary: What do the photographers at FLAAR use?

Tripod Heads we already have:

Arca-Swiss Monoball, the original; greatest ball head every made Second generation **Arca-Swiss** ball head: one of the most flawed over-engineered failures ever concocted.

Gitzo G1570 M, pan and tilt head; relatively new

Gitzo G1275 M, off-center ball head; many years old; so gradually a bit loose (according to Gitzo this issue has been re-engineered). This demonstrates that Gitzo does improve when a product needs improvement.

Manfrotto geared head; the large one; two of the original model, # 3263. Current model designation is "Manfrotto 400 Deluxe Geared Head." I consider this a perfect head for studio work: medium-format or large-format cameras.

Novoflex Universal Pro Panorama Plate with Q-Mount Quick Release

About half our camera equipment we have bought ourselves; another half was sent by manufacturers for evaluation. And yes, we do not write suck-up reviews. We received a Silvestri medium format camera that was improperly sized and we have not issued any review on it (we sent the improperly engineered portion back and never received a replacement).

We received a Sinar from Sinar that arrived in inadequate condition and fell totally apart after a week or so of being used. In other words, "Made in Switzerland" is no guarantee of a good review by FLAAR. In our review we stated clearly that this super expensive camera obviously did not hold up well to constant use (it was a demo model).

Cambo then sent us one of their cameras to replace the Sinar. Cambo was intelligent enough not to send a 3rd hand old used loaner camera; Cambo sent a brand new model. We still have the Cambo today; we still issue reports on it; and it works fine. We now have a second different Cambo (wide model) and as soon as we have a lens for this we will initiate reviews.

- We do not get payment for click-throughs.
- · We do not accept banner ads.
- We do not ask camera manufacturers for a sales commission.

If you want a review where the reviewer is paid, there are a dozen popular sites with reviews that



reguritate the entire spec list. These web sites print most of the PR releases of the camera manufacturers too.

At FLAAR, fortunately or unfortunately, we do photography for scientific research, not for profit.

So the difference is that the tripod heads which we use, we use them because they are tripod heads that help us get our photography accomplished around the world.

We stopped using Arca-Swiss heads when their second generation head locked and their only response was that this was the fault of the photographer. It would have helped if they admitted they over-engineered it, or if they apologized. Only now, TWELVE or more YEARS LATER, did someone at Arca-Swiss admit that one of the components was defective (note they blamed it on the material (from another company of course), not on the engineer (in-house)).

We are intending to evaluate replacement heads, and will report back later in 2011 or early this coming year when we have new ball and gimbal heads from other manufacturers.

In the meantime, for using a heavy camera in the studio, my favorite head is the top-of-the-line Gitzo geared head. Be sure to get the big one (model 400, with the handles). The mid-size and small size lack cranks on their handles; skip them and go for the best one: the model 400 which replaces the Manfrotto 3263 deluxe geared tripod heads (we have two of the original ones).

Several web sites recommend the Markins TB-20 base plate, but frankly when I have enough Gitzo tripods out on a field trip with a team of several photographers and assistants I get used to the Gitzo style. I have never noticed Markins exhibited at any photo trade show (so if they are indeed present,

it was not a presence I noticed). And I don't remember them from many past Photokina expos, but if I have access to their heads, I will look at them.

Which tripod heads are we interested in publishing evaluations on?

Gitzo Systematic Ball, GH5380SQR

- with 1/4" to 3/8" screw adapter
- "Arca style" plate adapter GS5160CDT
- Panoramic disk GS3750DQ

Gitzo, Off Center Ball Head GH3750

Our intent is to update our review of the older model, G1275M. The Gitzo catalog itself states they have re-engineered the system to remove "the small amount of play present in the previous versions have been completely removed." Gitzo is correct; that



Novoflex classic ball 5.













Click here to watch the video



Click here to watch the video



First posted December 1, 2011.