

# BRONICA SQAM



## TEST REPORT

by Gavin Hodge

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# Motoring for professionals!

Gavin Hodge analyses the Bronica SQ-Am medium format SLR camera



*The Bronica SQAM is a versatile medium format SLR with a built-in motor providing automated film advance.*

**B**ronica cameras have for years been the backbone of many a professional's working system, and none have been more popular than the 6 x 6cm models. In some quarters they have earned the nickname of 'the poor man's Hasselblad' – and that should definitely be regarded as a compliment rather than a slur!

In fact, in some respects the Bronica SQ-Am could be considered as more than a match for a basic Hasselblad 500 C/M in the specification stakes since it comes complete with a built in motor for automatic film advance, a roll film back, 80mm f2.8 Zenzanon-S standard lens and waist-level viewfinder for around £995 which substantially undercuts a similarly-equipped Hasselblad and represents good value for money.

We'll lay one myth to rest immediately by pointing out that despite the rather German-sounding name – Zenza Bronica, these medium format cameras are in fact made in Japan like the vast majority of their 35mm counterparts.

no fewer than four different image formats, interchangeable viewfinders including the AE Prism Finder on test which endows the camera with fast

handling Aperture Priority Auto exposure characteristics, plus an excellent range of interchangeable lenses ranging from the Zenzanon-S 40mm f4 Super



*It accepts a metering prism viewfinder as a very useful option over the standard waist level finder.*

## Versatile SLR

For the record, the Bronica SQ-Am is a motorised, multi-format SLR camera with interchangeable film backs offering



Wideangle right up to the 500mm f8 telephoto. There's also a 2X Converter which will double up the 500mm to 1000mm for a lot more reach!

### Modular concept

Although the SQ-Am has been around for some years now, it is still an extremely popular camera, both with professionals who have a crust to earn, and discerning hobby photographers pursuing image quality with relentless enthusiasm.

The SQ-Am is a truly modular camera which you can build up to suit your needs and tastes, and you can even pick your film format: film backs are fully interchangeable and in addition to the standard 6 x 6cm 120 and 220 roll film options you can pick a 135 back for shooting conventional 35mm format, measuring 24 x 36mm, or a panoramic 24 x 54mm, plus also a 6 x 4.5cm back giving classic picture proportions, and last but by no means least – a 6 x 6cm Polaroid back, the professional's friend.

The prices of these film backs vary considerably and while a 6 x 6cm version will cost a reasonable £149.50, you'll have to shell out £261 for the 135 format back, only £169 for a 6 x 4.5cm back or £190 for a Polaroid. This all needs to be taken into consideration when you weigh the camera up against its rivals.

### Darkslide principle

Each back comes with a darkslide which makes the minor miracle of being able to change films, or even formats, in mid-roll a delightfully easy task. You



*Interchangeable film backs let you choose your film and film format – you can even shoot 35mm, but the camera is designed to shoot large 6 x 6cm negatives or transparencies.*

just slide the darkslide (a small sheet of aluminium) into its slot in front of the film inside a back which is in use on the camera and then remove the back to be swapped for one with different film inside.

As you might expect, the Bronica is equipped with a Darkslide Safety Mechanism which ensures that you cannot remove a film back from the camera until a darkslide has been inserted, thus preventing at a stroke the total loss of a possible prize-winning picture that you have just taken! There are a number of other safety features on the SQ-Am designed to prevent accidental multiple exposures, and to make sure that film backs

don't open accidentally fogging the film inside.

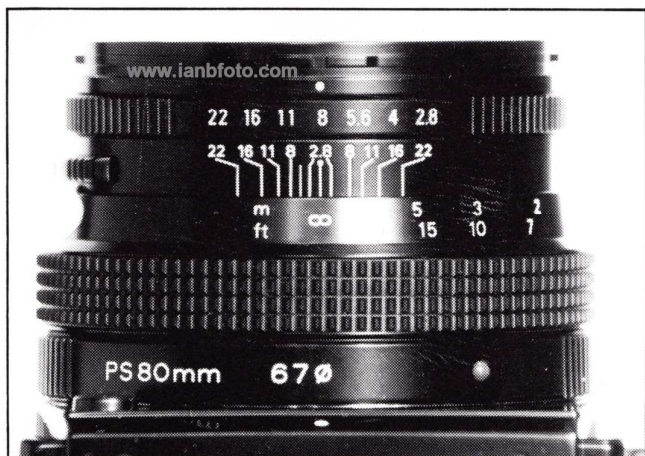
The advantages of interchangeable film backs are self evident, but you may overlook how much the availability of a couple of ready-loaded spare film backs can speed up a photographic session, bearing in mind that if you are shooting 6 x 6cm on 120 roll film you'll get just 12 pictures per roll. This doubles up to 24 pictures on a 220 roll but at present there is a fairly limited choice of 220 film available. You'll get 15 pictures if you use the 6 x 4.5cm back and 36 from a 35mm cassette.

load with film once you get the knack. An empty back opens to reveal the take-up spool which may have to be moved to the take-up position if an exposed film has been removed. This is because 120 roll film comes rolled onto the spool which will become the take-up spool for the next film – a different principle to 35mm film cassettes with which you are probably familiar, from which the film is rolled out during exposure then rolled back for processing.

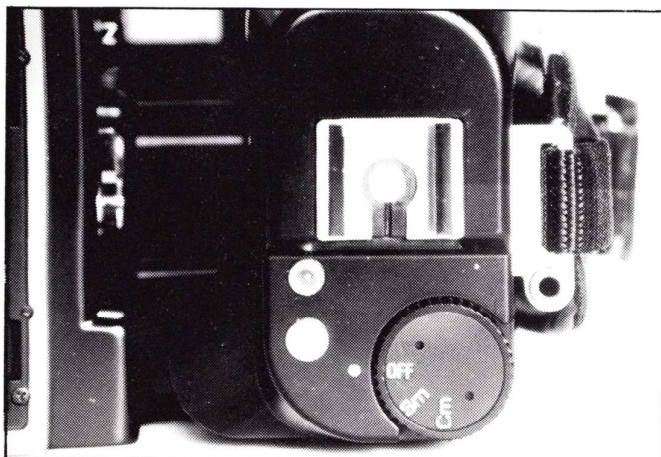
The standard Polaroid back used on the Bronica gives you a choice of no fewer than 8 different Polaroid films, in colour or black and white. The black and white Polaroid films are rated at

### Film loading

Roll film backs are easy to



*Each lens contains a leaf shutter which means that flash can be synchronised at all shutter speeds.*



*A control on top of the built-in grip lets you set single or continuous film advance.*



ISO 3000 which has to be born in mind when checking exposures, while the colour options are rated at either ISO 75 or 80. You get eight images per pack.

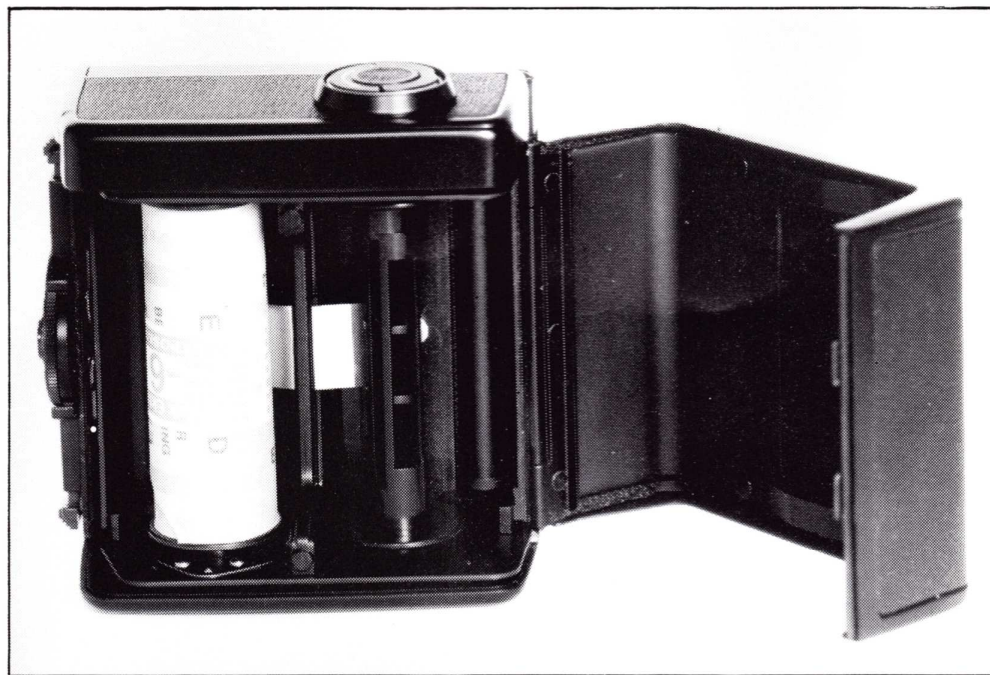
## Viewfinders

Although the camera may be sold complete with a waist-level viewfinder it doesn't mean that you are duty bound to buy it with one. Since the Bronica SQ-Am is a totally modular professional tool you can buy just the bits you want, and this is likely to include an AE Prism Finder S if you are used to 35mm eye-level photography.

The AE Prism does cost an extra £429.50 but it makes the camera a breeze to use compared to the basic model with waist-level finder. For a start, the image you see through the viewfinder will be the right way round, and the right way up whereas the waist-level finder shows it laterally reversed. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the AE prism is fitted with a light meter which measures the exposure through the lens in use, including any filters you may have attached. This spells spot on exposures for transparencies.

Thirdly, it converts the camera to Aperture Priority automatic exposure control which makes it much quicker to use than the basic, manual, meter-less version which calls for you to use a handheld light meter. With the AE prism fitted you can select the lens aperture you want to use and the camera will automatically provide the right shutter speed for correct exposure.

The Bronica takes its cue on



*Roll film may be loaded into a film back whether or not it is attached to the camera.*

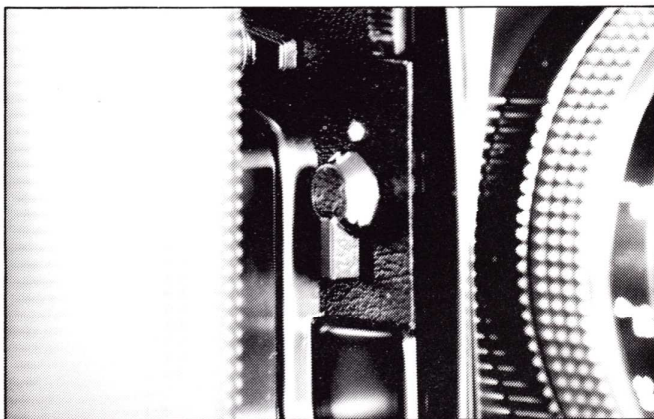
film speed from the film back attached at the time – there are electronic contacts linking back to camera, and viewfinder to camera with a free flow of information between them. Likewise, the Bronica has a fully electronic bayonet lens mount for information to pass between camera body and lens.

If the price of the AE Prism is a little rich for your blood, do not despair, there are other options including the ME prism which provides TTL manual exposure for an outlay of £356.50, or the MF Finder-S which is the one for you if you prefer a waist-level viewfinder but would like a built-in meter – this finder costs £295 and includes an adjustable magnifier with

–3 to +2 dioptre range.

## Lens shutter

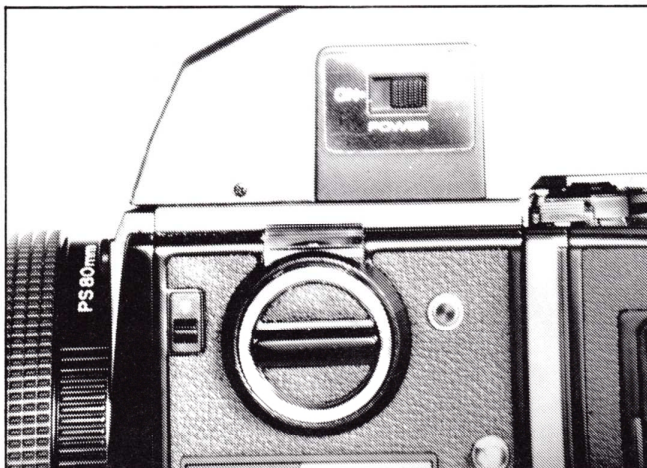
One of the big advantages the Bronica offers over focal plane shutter cameras is flash synch at



*The camera can be set to provide multiple exposures and the mirror can be locked up for vibration free photography.*



*An adjustable strap helps make the camera comfortable to hold, but an angled grip might be preferable.*



*The metering prism has its own ON/OFF switch. The shutter dial is shown on the side of the camera body.*





*With the prism removed you can see the electronic contacts in front of the viewing screen.*

any shutter speed up to 1/500 sec. This is a real boon to wedding, fashion and advertising photographers and is made possible by the electronic leaf shutter built into each lens. Shutter speeds are made extremely precise by this type of shutter, and the full flash synch means that you can use fill-in flash even with large lens apertures, so the background can be thrown out of focus.

Zenanon lenses are optically super – they have to be because professionals' livelihoods depend upon them. But they are slightly more expensive than lenses for a focal plane camera because each time you buy a lens you also buy a shutter. On the plus side this means that you are not wearing out a single shutter built into the camera as is the case with a focal plane model.

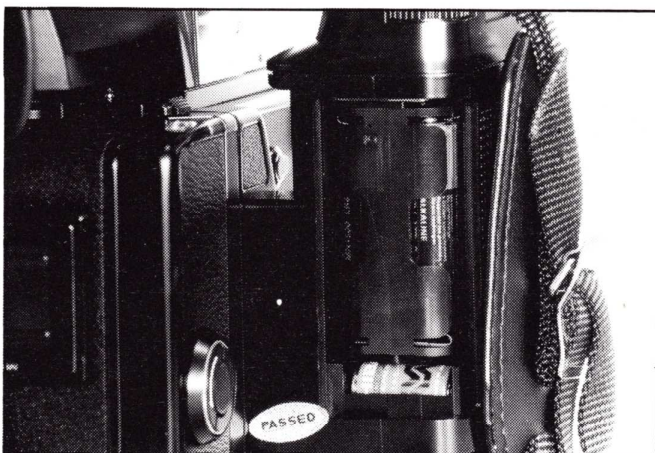
Sample prices for lenses are £595 for the 150mm f3.5 (which is equivalent to a 110mm lens on a 35mm camera), £586.50 for the 200mm f4.5, and £625 for the 50mm f3.5 which is the

most popular wideangle lens option, showing an angle of view just slightly wider than you would see with a 35mm lens on a 35mm camera.

### True SLR

The Bronica is a single lens reflex camera which let you look through the lens fitted to focus and compose the picture. It has a large, bright mirror built into the camera body which shows a good, clear image in the viewfinder of your choice and there are fully seven different focusing screens to choose from to suit all professional applications. These are very easy to swap around since removing a viewfinder gives excellent access.

It's worth noting that before you can attach a lens to the camera body you need to cock both the mirror in the camera body and the shutter in the lens. The mirror can be cocked by pressing the drive button, while the lens can be set simply by manually moving the cocking pin.



*Batteries are housed in the grip.*



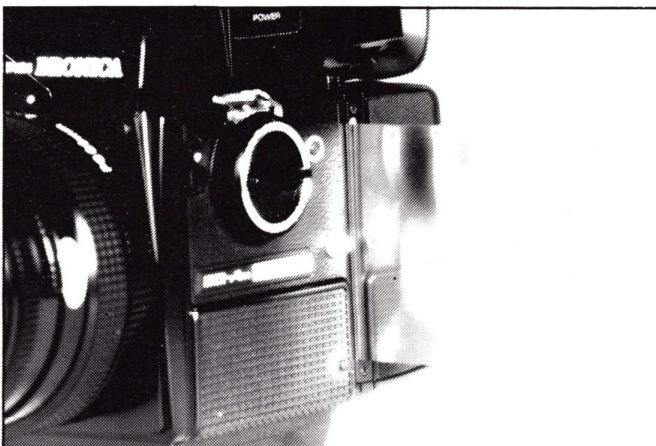
*Despite its multi-format capabilities the SQAM is commendably small and nimble.*

### No fool

The SQ-Am comes with a built-in motor, and a nice chunky grip for your right hand which also acts as a battery housing. A control on top of the grip can be set to single frame advance or continuous advance for shooting a sequence of pictures. There is also an OFF position which effectively turns the whole camera off, metering systems too if you have a metering finder fitted.

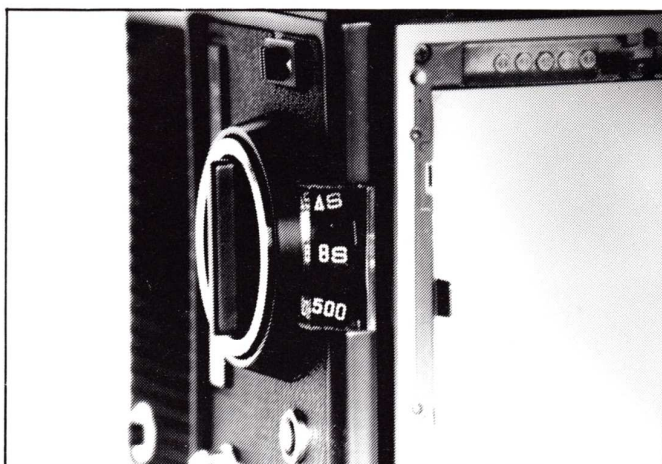
When all systems are go, the Bronica won't let you make a fool of yourself by taking pictures with the darkslide inserted, or a lens not attached properly – you'll get a warning light in the viewfinder.

Shutter speeds are selected with a knob on the left hand side of the camera body and shown through a window on top of the camera. If you are using the AE prism they are shown in the top



*The darkslide must be inserted before you can remove a back with exposed film.*





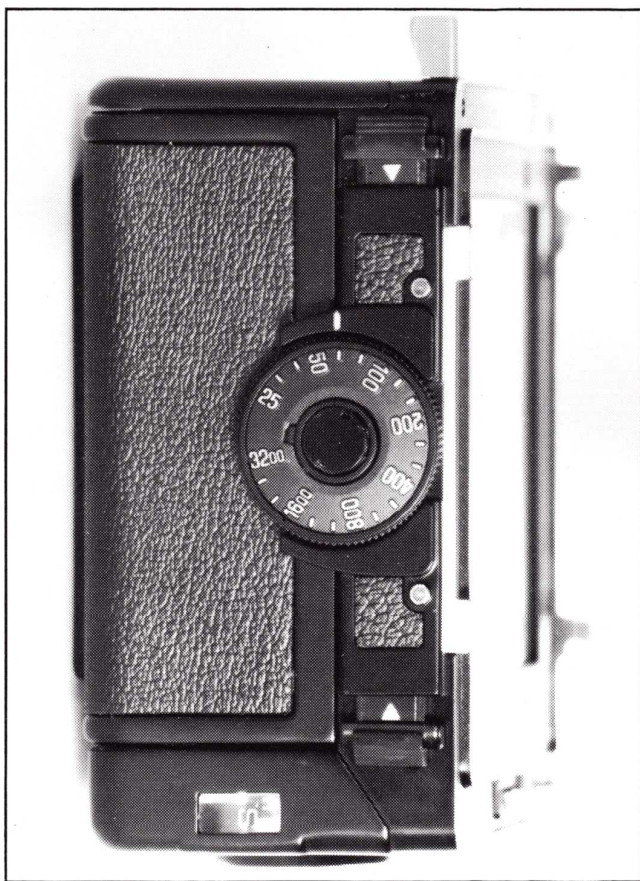
Shutter speeds are shown in a small window above the shutter speed dial.

of the viewfinder, and LEDs show the shutter speed being provided for the aperture selected on the lens aperture ring.

You can also use the T for Timed exposure setting which is a function of the lens and completely separate from the shutter speed scale on the body. The T setting is locked with a setscrew which must be unscrewed before you can shift the time exposure lever to T for a timed, night exposure or whatever you want to do. It's really a bit of a

fiddle which needs an update, especially since after you have made your timed shot you need to reset the lever to T and tighten the screw again.

Multiple exposure photography is a doddle on the SQ-Am – you simply set the Multiple Exposure lever on the camera body before shooting the first element of your composite picture, but you must remember to reset the lever afterwards or there could be embarrassing repercussions . . .



Film speed is set manually on each film back – from ISO 25-3200.



A film reminder slot is included on the back of each film back, and the prism finder comes complete with a rubber eyecup.

For lengthy exposures its a good idea to use the Mirror Lock which locks the mirror into the up position and banishes any possibility of mirror shock causing trembles which could spoil the sharpness of a crucial picture. Bronica advise you to use manual exposure control when you are using the AE Prism Finder and the mirror is locked up.

Another plus is that the mirror lock can be used for single frame and continuous advance, but you can run into a problem of an unintentional double exposure immediately after using the mirror lock which can be overcome by covering the lens with the lens cap and returning the mirror lock switch to N. On the side of the grip you'll find two small sockets, one of which lets you plug in a remote control activating device, such as a receiver for infra red, while the other socket is the input jack for an external battery pack – could be handy if you shoot lengthy sessions which could exhaust the batteries in the camera.

#### IN SUMMARY

The Bronica SQ-Am has stood the test of time and is still one of the mainstay cameras of the British professional. It's multi-format capabilities give it tremendous versatility since you can change not only the film type but also the film format in mid shoot simply by changing backs.

The interchangeable viewfinder system is also very extensive, with something to suit all tastes ranging from the basic Waist-level Finder, up to the AE

Prism Finder-S which transform the handling into the realms of the automatic. A built-in motor adds to this slickness of handling, and the camera is commendably small for such a flexible unit.

It's various components are competitively priced, and positively reasonable compared to the big H. All in all, the SQ-Am is a good choice for the professional, the semi professional or the hobby photographer for whom only the best results will do.

## Specifications

### Bronica SQ-Am Medium Format SLR at £995 (complete with 80mm lens, W.L.F. and R.F.H.)

Type: Motorised, Multi-Format SLR  
Formats: 6 x 6cm; 24 x 36mm; 24 x 54mm; 6 x 4.5cm; Polaroid 6 x 6cm via interchangeable film backs  
Lens: 80mm f2.8, interchangeable  
Shutter: Electronic leaf type  
Shutter speeds: 8 sec. to 1/500 sec.  
Flash synch: All speeds  
Viewfinder: Interchangeable viewfinders including W.L.F., AE Prism S, ME Prism S, MF Finder S  
Film loading: Manual  
Film advance: Automatic  
Film rewind: Automatic  
Film drive: Single or continuous at up to 3 frames per 2 sec.  
Power source: 6v alkaline manganese for electronic shutter system; 6 AA alkalines or NiCads for motor drive system  
Other features: Multiple exposures, Mirror lock, remote control terminal, external power terminal, hotshoe  
Dimensions: 144.5 x 125 x 179mm  
Weight: 1925g (camera complete with W.L.F. but less batteries)