A Tribute to the Memory of

Victor & Erna Hasselblad

1906–1978 | 1914–1983

By Göran Bengtsson,
Chair of the Hasselblad Foundation

Royal Swedish Academy of Engineering Sciences (IVA)

Erna and Victor Hasselblad. Photo: Unknown.

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Royal Swedish Academy of Engineering Sciences

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Print advertisement for Hasselblad 1600F, 1950s.

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Foreword

Each year the Royal Swedish Academy of Engineering Sciences (IVA) produces a booklet commemorating a person whose scientific, engineering, economic or industrial achievements were of significant benefit to the society of his or her day.

The person recognised in the booklet must have been born at least 100 years ago. The Commemorative Booklet is published in conjunction with the Academy's Annual Meeting. This year we acknowledge Victor Hasselblad (1906–1978) and Erna Hasselblad (1914–1983) for jointly developing the company Victor Hasselblad AB, where the world-famous Hasselblad camera was developed and produced with dazzling engineering.

We would like to extend our sincere gratitude to Göran Bengtsson, Chair of the Hasselblad Foundation, for the time and effort he has dedicated to this year's Commemorative Booklet.

Tuula Teeri
President of the Academy

Gabriel Urwitz
Chair of the Medal Committee

Victor photographed birds with his brother in Lapland, using a Speed Graflex camera.
Photo: Stig Hasselblad, 1927.

Victor Hasselblad on Råö with three cameras, i.a. 500C. Photo unknown, 1957.

Introduction

The images of humanity's first steps on the moon in 1969 are some of the most iconic in the history of photography. And the moment was immortalised with a "Hasselblad", a Swedish innovation whose name became more or less synonymous with the world's best camera. This memorial tribute seeks to shine a spotlight on the Hasselblad camera, the engineering that made it possible, the path into the global market and the crucial collaboration with NASA – but above all, the key figures behind both the camera company and the Hasselblad Foundation, which through proactive management of their legacy has been able to distribute around half a billion kronor in research funding, grants and stipends: Erna and Victor Hasselblad.

Victor and Erna Hasselblad

Victor Hasselblad (1906–1978) was born and raised in Gothenburg. As the son of one of the city's leading entrepreneurs, after upper secondary school at Latinläroverket he immediately went into the wholesale business that his grandfather, Arvid Viktor, had started. In London, Arvid Viktor had made the acquaintance of one George Eastman – who

Gustav VI Adolf on his Eriksgata in 1951. Victor shows the Hasselblad camera to the photography-interested king. To the right of Victor Hasselblad is the king's hand secretary Erik Sjöqvist. On the table are both Hasselblad cameras and Exacta clockworks.

three years later would change the name of his company to Kodak – and he negotiated the exclusive rights to sell Eastman's dry plates and roll film in Sweden.

Erna Hasselblad (née Nathhorst, 1914–1983) was born in Falun, where her father was an officer in the Dalarna Regiment. Erna and her four siblings were homeschooled by their mother Mary T. Nathhorst, a journalist from Stockholm, where the entire Nathhorst family later settled.

Erna was curious about life and wanted to go out into the world. And so, at the age of 19, she found herself sitting on a train to Gothenburg instead of her ill sister to meet the

cavalry officer her sister had been in touch with for some time. She already knew a little about the man waiting for her, the 27-year-old eldest son of the owner of FW Hasselblad & Co AB. The meeting marked the start of more than a lifelong love. Erna + Victor proved to be a recipe for success with after-effects all the way into our own time.

In April 1937, the couple opened their own photographic shop, Victor Foto. The shop was mainly manned by Victor, and sometimes Erna, who also took care of the newly-started company's accounts and marketing. The window featured a large photograph of Erna with a baby bird in her hand, taken by Victor on a beach in Skagen during the couple's honeymoon three years earlier.

The business quickly took off, driven by a conscious strategy, plus a successful combination of Victor's extensive contacts in Gothenburg society and Erna's talent for networking and building relationships.

The Dream Camera

Victor got to explore the world as a teenager. He worked at photographic companies in Germany, France and the USA and travelled to Denmark, the Netherlands, southern France and Morocco all on his own. The trips were largely dedicated to Victor's two big interests: photography and birdwatching.

Victor was more or less born into the new age of photography and, as he grew up, he witnessed the camera's breakthrough at close quarters, thanks to the family company's growing focus on photographic products. Family friend George Eastman had made the camera more accessible to the general public in 1888, when he launched the first box camera with which one could take 48 photos and then hand in the camera for development at one of the company's stores.

Combining his two interests to photograph birds was a natural step for Victor, but he also sowed the seed for what would become his life's work. Because even though cameras were made more accessible, they were still cumbersome. Being able to sneak up on a bird without scaring it and then capture the subject – ideally in motion – was a demanding challenge for the equipment. The question rolled around in Victor's head: What would the ideal camera for bird photography actually look like?

Breakthrough

Global politics changed in 1939 with the arrival of German troops in Poland. Trade was adversely affected by the war, while photography bans were being issued with increasing frequency to protect national security. This development could have led to the end of a relatively new company whose entire business model was based on the desire

Flight captain Torvald Andersson and flight photographer Åke Wintzell with the Ross HK 7 surveillance camera. Photo unknown, 1940s.

of wealthy people to document their leisure time on camera. Instead, new opportunities arose.

In April 1940, Victor Hasselblad stepped into the office of the Royal Swedish Air Force Materiel Administration in Stockholm. He examined the camera that civil engineer Olof Hagsten had placed on the table: a Xenon found in the wreck of a German plane shot down under top secret circumstances somewhere over Sweden. Victor nodded and lifted up the camera he had brought with him: his own patent-pending image reproduction device.

Hagsten had been tasked with investigating the potential to develop a Swedish aerial camera for surveillance purposes. Bringing the archive camera to the meeting was part of Hasselblad's strategy; he wanted to show that his company was capable of designing a camera from scratch. Now the war seemed to be opening up opportunities to develop yet another product. Hagsten pointed at the German surveillance camera: "Do you think it's possible to build something like this?" Victor looked first at the camera, then at the engineer and responded: "No, not one like this. A better one."

Then everything evolved very quickly. Hagsten immediately asked for a quotation for two prototype cameras, which Victor provided, and within a week and a half, Hagsten had submitted the Administration's order for the two cameras at a cost of SEK 11,090.

By autumn 1940, the first prototype of the HK7 camera was ready, and the Materiel Administration soon came back with a new order: 106 aerial cameras. Delivery date: as fast as possible. And so began a truly hectic period at Hasselblad's workshop in Gothenburg. Resources were scarce: there was a metal lathe, a bench lathe and a drill, and that was it.

Erna with a baby bird in her hand. Photo taken by Victor with a Leica camera on a beach in Skagen, during the couple's honeymoon in 1934.

Victor Hasselblad on his way to photograph birds throughout Europe. The photo is probably taken by his friend Per Olof Swanberg, 1929.

Requests for drawings to work from received the rather vague response that “there was a German camera to follow, but they didn’t really have access to it.” The materials came mainly from the Air Force, with trips to the nearest scrapyard for whatever was lacking. The work took place more or less around the clock, often under Erna’s supervision, while Victor ran around town in search of more skilled workers and larger premises.

The team ultimately consisted of 15 cheerful enthusiasts borrowed from, among others, the Swedish Ball Bearing Factory (SKF). Most of them had little knowledge of photography or cameras, but what they did have in spades was incredible ingenuity, an interest in mechanical engineering and a generally positive attitude towards the project.

In addition to the camera models initially ordered, several new models were invented in the workshop, as reconnaissance cameras and field surveillance cameras were also needed. A total of 342 cameras were produced for the Air Force during the war years of 1942–45. The deal was a huge breakthrough for Hasselblad.

The Civilian Camera

While the work of developing military cameras took up most of his time, Victor’s thoughts were partially occupied by something else close to his heart: making cameras for the civilian market.

In his summer cottage on Råö, he started sketching just such a design: a single-lens reflex camera with an interchangeable lens, a film magazine, and a camera body with curtain shutters. The camera had to be small and easy to handle, but at the same time advanced enough for more challenging photographic adventures. Victor was convinced that, after the war, colour film would sweep the globe and interest in photography would explode among the middle class. In an interview with Vecko-Journalen at the end of 1941, he declared: The civilian camera is coming!

As soon as the war came to an end, Victor and Erna travelled to Kodak's headquarters in Rochester, USA, where Victor had been an intern in his youth and now had his conviction about the bright future of photography confirmed. At this site, Kodak converted all its camera production from a war footing to civilian products and planned a laboratory for the development of colour photos.

In the years immediately after the war, Victor and Erna crossed the Atlantic time and again to prepare for the launch of Hasselblad's civilian camera, which was just a few years away. At least that is what they thought and said, but not everyone was convinced. The fact was that the camera didn't exist yet. In the small factory on Odinsgatan in Gothenburg, intensive efforts were under way to create a device that worked. The engineers were often frustrated, progress was slow and a lot went wrong. The employees suspected that the only reason Victor was always smiling and encouraging during his visits to the factory, was because he didn't understand the complexity of the project. It seemed that the strength of Victor's dream meant the problems were always overshadowed by his vision.

On 6 October 1948, Victor Hasselblad held this dream in his hands, on public display and ready for the judgement of the USA's top photographic journalists, who gathered at the New York Athletic Club to see the new camera they had been hearing about for so long.

The camera, marketed in the distributed press leaflet with the words "Sweden presents a new camera – Hasselblad Reflex", was the world's first single-lens reflex camera in 6 x 6 format, with interchangeable lenses and cassettes for 120 roll film and plates, and a completely unique product. Its success was assured.

The Hasselblad Brand

The success of the Hasselblad Reflex was just the beginning. Victor was constantly striving for improvement, and the feedback he received on his cameras was used as a source of reflection and development. 1957 saw the launch of the Hasselblad II, a camera with a central shutter and flash synchronisation on all shutter speeds. When the shutter speed was extended to 1/500 seconds, the camera was soon renamed the 500C. The camera was the first of its kind, combining the advantages of a small format with those of a medium format, and a success even before it was seriously tested.

The camera itself very much lived up to the hype, and the timing was ideal with an American market hungry for new innovations. But the real success factor was more than

that. The Hasselblads had understood something most advertisers would only realise much later; success depends on far more than just the product itself – it also takes a strong brand.

Together, they had been very purposeful in building up the Hasselblad brand over a long period of time, and they were as much a part of that brand as their product. Through countless trips and meetings, they made sure they were in the right place, with the right people, at the right time, to achieve their vision. They built a worldwide network of personal and professional contacts, nurturing the valuable and influential contacts they gained early on – like Kodak – and constantly cultivating new ones. Always together, and always willing to put themselves forward as the faces of the product and the company.

Erna's social skills and proven understanding of marketing, not least what would now be called relationship marketing, were undoubtedly crucial to their success.

Out in space

In the early 1960s, Victor and Erna received reports of exciting events across the Atlantic. In May 1961, President John F. Kennedy promised that the USA would land a man on the moon before the end of the decade. When NASA began sketching a suitable space camera to take on the moon mission, astronaut Walter Schirra pointed out that the drafts

Alan Bean, Apollo 12. Photo: David A. Scott, 1969.

resembled his own Hasselblad, which prompted NASA's engineers to immediately purchase a 500C that they modified by stripping away any superfluous weight. On 3 October 1962, when Wally Schirra went six times around the world in his space capsule, he was accompanied by this Hasselblad camera. Schirra's images impressed NASA's ground crew, and over the next few years, no astronaut left Earth without a Hasselblad camera, making it part of the big talking point of the time: the space race between the Soviet Union and USA.

Being involved in NASA's project was incredibly important to Hasselblad, partly because the space travel gave the camera the best possible advertising, and partly because of the unique opportunities for product development. It was hard to imagine a better quality test of a camera than getting it to operate out in space. The fact that the Hasselblad camera had already been able to deliver razor-sharp images in brilliant colours in this extreme setting confirmed what Victor had been pursuing for so many years: his cameras were better than anything the world had ever seen.

Nevertheless, NASA began exploring other options, so Victor and Erna dedicated the spring of 1966 to convincing NASA to continue using their Hasselblad cameras. Their efforts paid off and on the Gemini 8 and 9 flights that same spring the Hasselblad Super Wide C took a trip into space for the first time. And when, on the Gemini 10 mission of 18 July, astronaut Michael Collins lost his equipment on his spacewalk, he couldn't help exclaiming: "Also, I lost my EVA Hasselblad inadvertently. I'm sorry to say". His words were wired to the media around the world, cementing the name Hasselblad as the space

camera of choice. When Victor Hasselblad later met Michael Collins and he apologised for his clumsiness with the camera, the Swede replied: “We couldn’t buy that kind of publicity”. In March 1969, Victor and Erna found themselves at Cape Kennedy in Florida, there to witness the launch of Apollo IX, which was about to orbit the moon in search of a suitable landing site. On board, the crew had a Hasselblad SWC, two Hasselblad 500Cs and four Hasselblad 500ELs.

The Moon Landing and the Secret Cargo

The Apollo 11 mission that was supposed to take people to the moon had to be rescheduled for 16 July 1969. Victor and Erna Hasselblad were among the guests of honour who received an early invitation. Back in the US and Florida once more, Victor couldn’t pass up the opportunity to also go out photographing birds in Everglades National Park.

On 20 July, the Hasselblad couple witnessed the first images of the moon landing, and together with a fifth of the world’s population, heard Neil Armstrong say: That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.

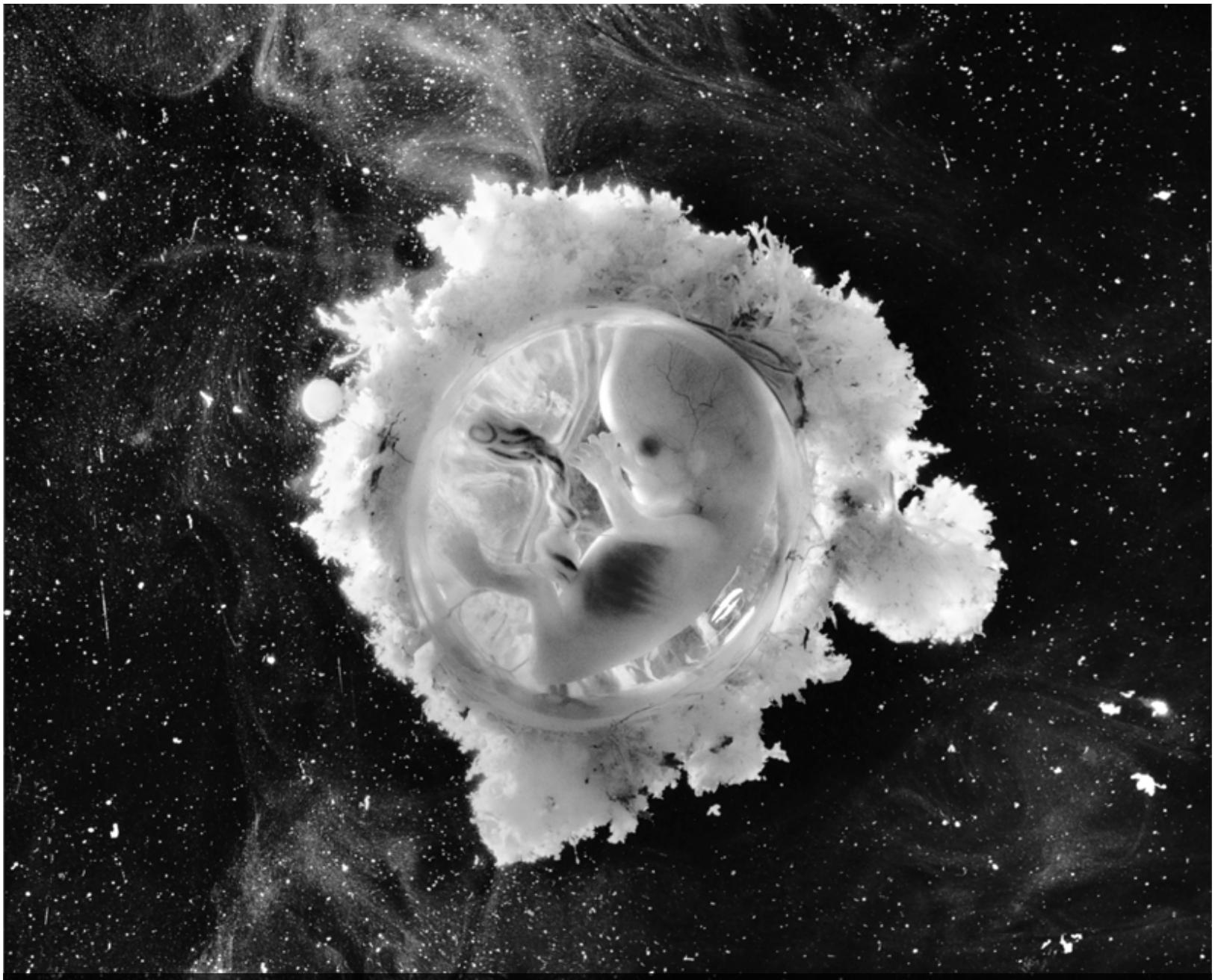
The 12 Hasselblad cameras that documented the moon landing were left by the astronauts, so they could instead bring home samples from the moon, and they remain on the moon to this day.

It is hard to imagine a greater way to make a name for yourself. When Victor summed up the entire space adventure in Svenska Dagbladet a month or so later, it was with reverence in his voice: “The circle is closed. Yes, that’s the truth of it. The circle is closed. You see, we started out with aerial cameras and today we’re in space.” What Victor didn’t mention was that some of that space also found its way to Gothenburg. Shortly after their return to Earth, the astronauts on board Apollo 11 sent a secret gift to Erna and Victor – a custom-made charm with the date of the moon landing stamped on the back. The charm was followed by more; Erna Hasselblad’s unique bracelet, which today is in the Hasselblad Foundation’s archive, consists of charms that were on eleven manned Apollo missions from 1968 to 1972. The motif on one of the charms is an astronaut with a Hasselblad camera.

Recognition and Legacy

For Victor Hasselblad, the space adventure and the success meant more to him than simply recognition of his technological innovation. The Hasselblads moved in a world of scientists, academics and even Nobel Prize winners, but Victor himself had no formal higher education. The fact that Chalmers University of Technology conferred on him an Honorary Doctorate in Engineering on 18 May 1968 was therefore a moment of great personal pride.

Erna Hasselblad's iconic Apollo bracelet. Photo: Jens Karlsson.



A child is born. Photo: Lennart Nilsson.

For Victor Hasselblad, the vision of the perfect camera and the opportunity to realise it seems to have been the main driving force, while Erna is said to have had something her husband lacked – the drive to make money. And the Hasselblad camera certainly became a very sound financial proposition.

In late summer 1943, F W Hasselblad & Co had come close to slipping out of the family's hands. Victor had left the family business nine years earlier, but now everything was at stake as a number of senior executives had made a bid for the company. At the time, F W Hasselblad & Co had 510 employees and was a Swedish agency for Kodak. In a quick response, money was arranged and Victor became the owner of F W Hasselblad & Co.

Kodak later wanted to take back the agency and form Kodak AB in Sweden. They were only interested in Hasselblads Fotografiska AB and absolutely did not want to touch the camera manufacturing side of the business. At that time, Victor was under financial pressure and after careful consideration he decided to sell Hasselblads Fotografiska AB to Kodak, which agreed to pay SEK 100 million.

In the mid 1970s Victor's health declined, and he was now convinced that Erna would outlive him, so he knew it was time to sell what remained of the company. Victor wanted to see a Gothenburg-based investment company as the new owner, and on 22 December 1976 Säfveåns AB purchased the camera factory for SEK 28 million. It was a sale guided by the head, not the heart.

On the same day that the sale was locked in, Victor gave Erna a token of his love – a

square silver plate embossed with a camera surrounded by stars, and engraved with the text: “Erna – from start to finish – my shining star”. This marked the end of an era.

Victor Hasselblad died on 5 August 1978, Erna on 8 July 1983, leaving behind a large fortune.

Giving Back

Back in the early 1970s, Victor had begun to talk about starting a foundation, with thoughts of handing out his own kind of “Nobel Prize”. Together, Victor and Erna drafted a will that put most of their wealth into the Erna and Victor Hasselblad Foundation with the mission statement: “The primary purpose of the Foundation is to promote academic teaching and research in the fields of science and photography.”

In 1980, the Foundation presented the first Hasselblad Award to Victor and Erna’s friend, photographer Lennart Nilsson. And so the circles were closed again. The Hasselblad camera had documented space, the biggest thing known to humanity. Lennart Nilsson had turned the camera in the other direction, into the human body, documenting the emergence of life with pictures as colourful and breathtaking as the ones the astronauts brought home from the moon.

Now, 45 years later, through proactive management of the legacy, the Foundation has distributed SEK half a billion in grants and stipends, chosen 42 recipients of the

The Hasselblad Prize was awarded for the first time on Tuesday, November 18, 1980. The prize winner, Lennart Nilsson, received his prize from the foundation's chair, Einar Josefson, during a ceremony at Victor Hasselblad AB. Photo: Unknown.

Hasselblad Award, organised 200 exhibitions and built a substantial library and archive. At the end of the year, the Foundation's assets totalled SEK 1 billion. This article is mainly based on articles, images and books in the ownership of the Hasselblad Foundation. Most of it was published in conjunction with the Hasselblad Foundation's 40th anniversary in 2019.

Now, 45 years later, through proactive management of the legacy, the Erna and Victor Hasselblad Foundation has distributed approximately SEK 0.5 billion in grants and stipends, chosen 42 recipients of the Hasselblad Award, organised around 200 exhibitions and built a substantial library and archive of as many as 16,000 photography books and catalogues. At the end of last year, the Foundation's assets totalled approximately SEK 1 billion.

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