

H A S S E L B L A D®



SQUARE  
COMPOSITION

## Square composition with the Hasselblad

The glut of photographic images presented to our eyes each day tends to obscure the merits of even the best photographs.

We are constantly being bombarded by images in magazines, news-papers, TV, catalogs, ads and calendars, images for routine consumption by jaded viewers.

The camera has also become a commonplace feature in our lives. As common as the TV set, washing machine and other capital goods in an industrialized society.

Expensive cameras may be status symbols to some people. But the creative side of photography is paramount to others. To them, technical innovation, gadgetry and high-precision design are simply aids in support of creativity.

Composition in a photograph is often the product of a photographer's visual sensitivity and talent. And composition is just as important in a photograph as in a classical oil painting. Good composition is the product of inherent talent, judiciously exercised, and of untiring efforts to achieve satisfactory results. How do you arouse a slumbering talent? There are probably as many ways as there are types of talent. Sometimes it only takes a single event to heighten the visual sensitivity of a photographer.

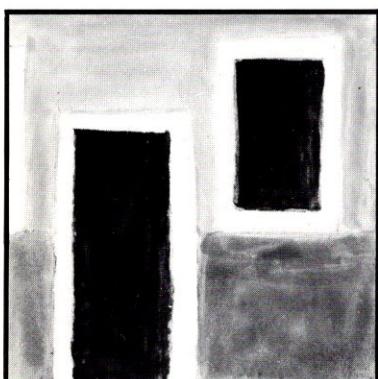
At the start of my career, I worked exclusively with a 35 mm camera and with the rectangular format's horizontal or vertical field. But I remember the first time I used a  $2\frac{1}{4} \times 2\frac{1}{4}$  camera. The experience was like

being thunderstruck, and I really savored the image revealed in the viewfinder. That format enabled me to "see" a subject for the first time.

The square format of the focusing screen riveted my attention and forced me to concentrate fully on the subject. (The camera was faster and easier to work with too.) After that experience, I was no longer able to pick up a camera and just fire away. My awareness of the visual potential of subjects was enhanced. My curiosity was also aroused, and I began trying to add new dimension to commonplace subjects with the aid of my camera. I literally began seeing things in a new light (in a new frame, to be more accurate).

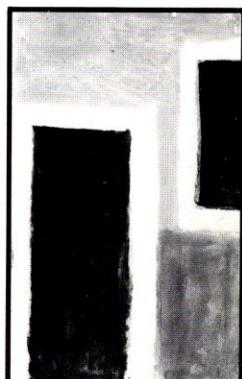
I came to regard the square sides of the focusing screen as an important feature in image composition. Something else also happened to change my way of seeing things. That experience was my first view of the sea. I remember walking down to the beach, the boom of the surf in my ears while the waves were still hidden by towering sand dunes. A belvedere with a large, wide-open square door provided a scenic view. A flight of stairs led down to the water. From this vantage point, I was able to take in the vast expanse of the sky conjoined by the horizon to an endless sea.

When I stepped back just inside the door, the door frame neatly cropped the mighty scene before my very eyes. I've never forgotten this splendid occasion, and thirty years



*The square format lends interest to the door, window and the right angles of the masonry.*

*Cover photo: Michael Gnage*



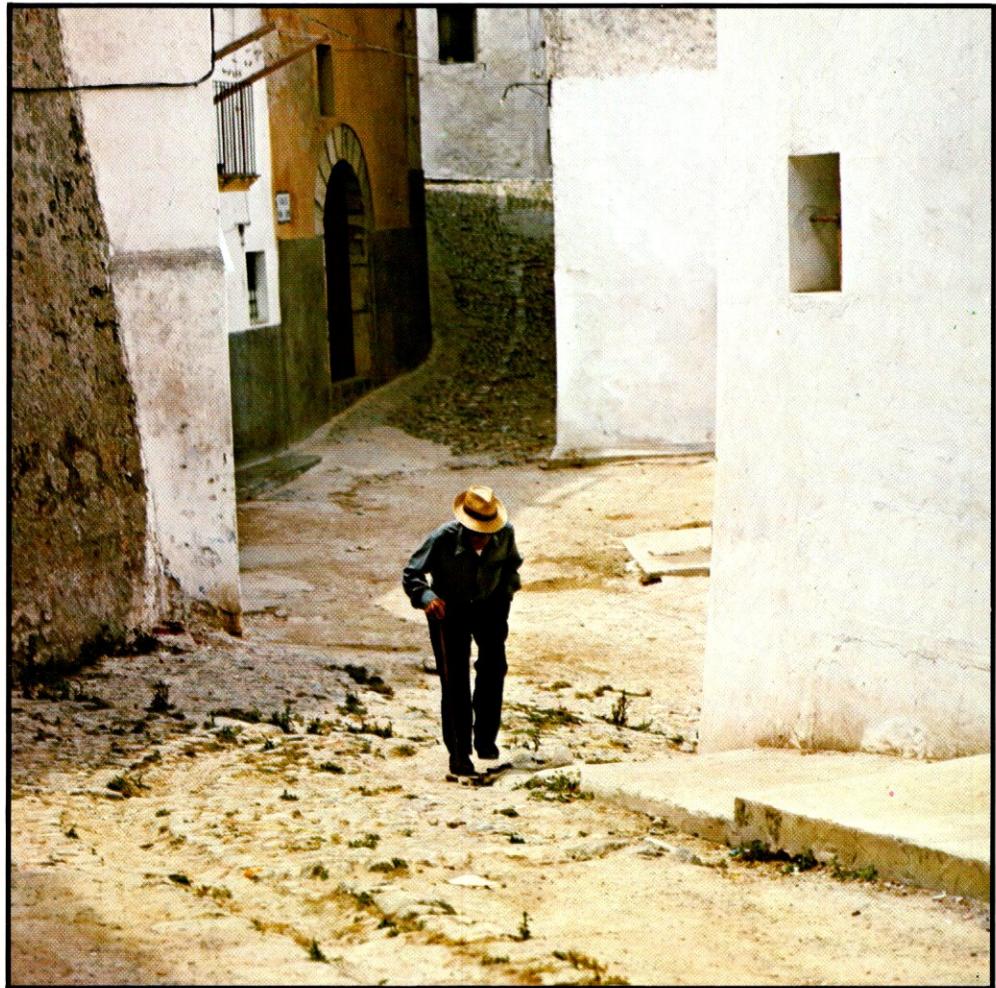
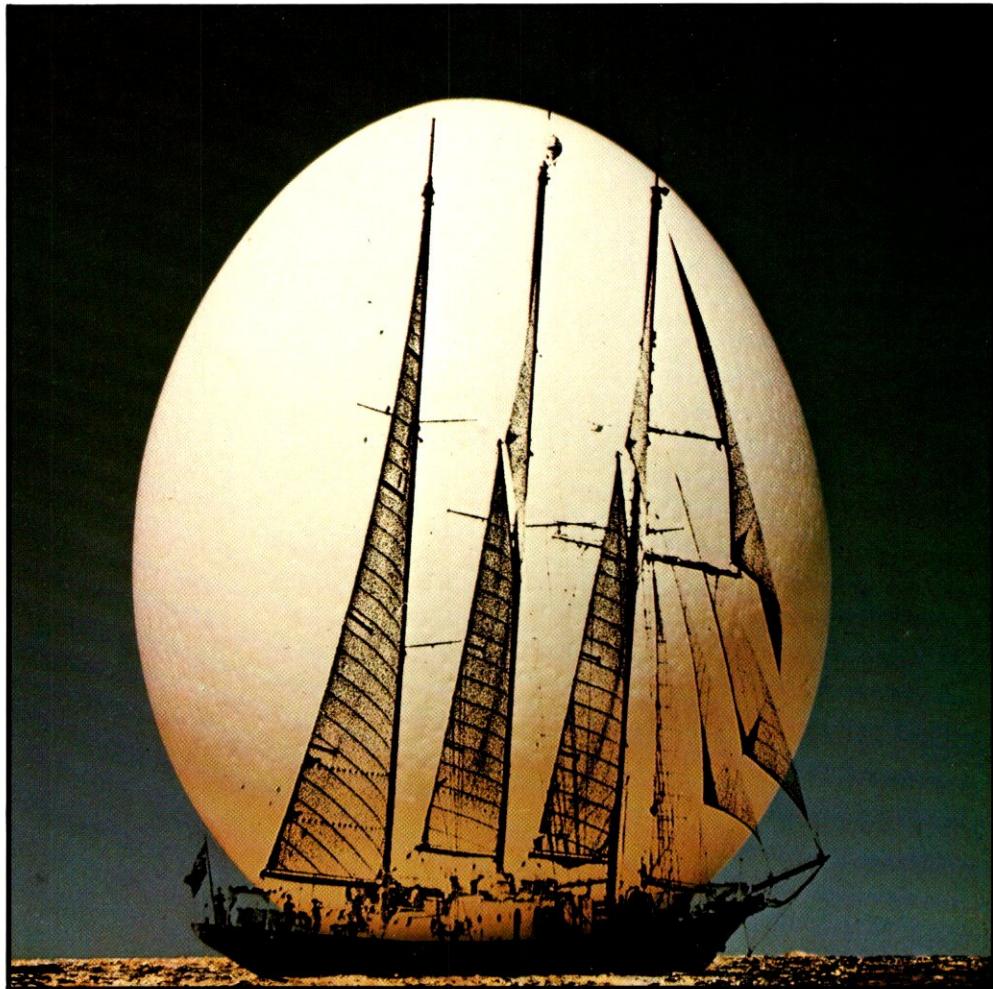


Photo: Michael Gnade

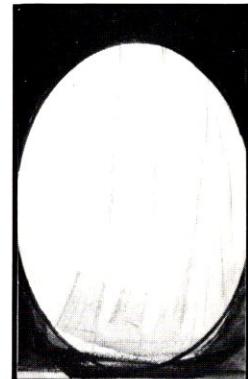
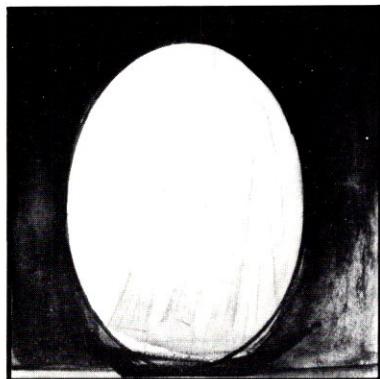
*The light surroundings provide the small, dark figure with contrasting color and proportions.*





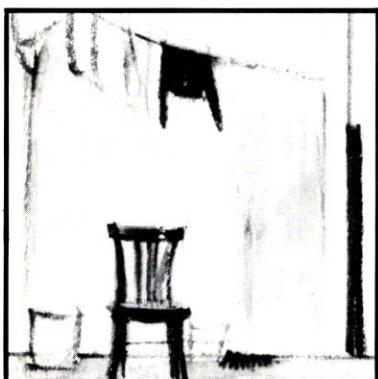
*Photo: Ulf Sjöstedt*

*The contours of the egg would have been less plastic if the background had been lighter. The shape of the egg in the square frame makes the picture exciting.*

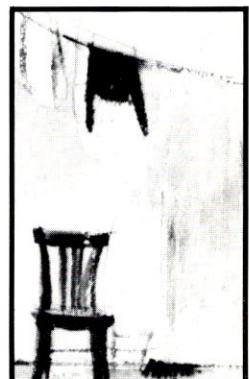




*Photo: Michael Gnade*



*Every item is of equal importance in this square composition, even the pipe to the right. The viewer's eye is guided round in the picture instead of out of it.*





*Photo: Harry Opstrup*

*A deer in the golden section above the horizontal surroundings. Dark foliage adds a sense of depth.*



later the proportions of sky, sea and sand are still square to my eyes.

Abstract conception is the actual basis of the creative process, whether exercised on a painter's canvas, in an architect's sketch book or on the photographer's focusing screen. In our discussion of photographic creativeness, I will henceforth always be referring to the viewfinder image the instant prior to exposure.

When you look through a viewfinder, the world is seen to be compressed, more eloquent, more charged than when viewed with the naked eye. The image reflected onto the focusing screen by the mirror can then be composed to suit esthetic tastes. We array image components in relation to the four sides of the frame by experimenting with the camera site, angular field, illumination and other photographically important aspects. Without even moving the camera we can switch lenses to evoke a new mood, obtain different framing, broader or tighter image angles, increased or reduced depth-of-field, compressed or expanded perspective, etc.

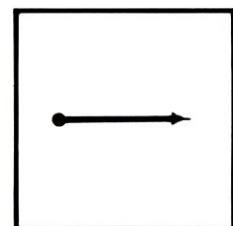
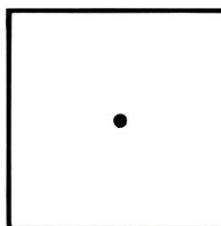
The same practice can obviously be employed with a 35 mm camera. But the tiny viewfinder image doesn't make it easy for you to see if experimentation really is necessary.

The ease with which experimental photography can be carried out is always in direct proportion to the size of the viewfinder image. The bigger the focusing screen, the easier it is to detect faults in image compo-

sition and correct them. The identical principle is practiced at art schools when students are made to paint big in order to develop a feeling for shapes and proportions. And when a painter takes a step back from his canvas to assess the results of his efforts to transfer shapes and forms onto a 2-dimensional, framed surface, the same principles apply as in photography.

Composition is important in most types of photography, even in repro work. So let's consider some of the basic concepts in composition so as to illustrate the importance of format demarcation.

Let's start with the smallest and most abstract element in composition, the point.



The point has a position in space but no significant size or shape. But it can be juxtaposed at the center of a focusing screen and the image composed around it. Even if a point is uninteresting in itself, it can still serve as the center of visual interest. A point can also be the highest or lowest spot in your photographic composition (take the sun in the



*The Hasselblad 500C/M is a single-lens reflex camera for the  $2\frac{1}{4} \times 2\frac{1}{4}$  format and the pillar of the Hasselblad system. The system contains a wide variety of functional accessories.*

photo on p. 18 and the egg on p. 16) or as a composite pattern as on p. 17.

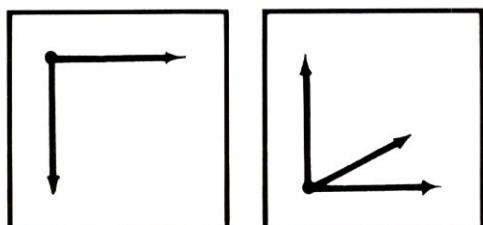
A line traces the path of a moving point. Since a line has no appreciable width, a straight line is one-dimensional. It doesn't matter whether the line in the viewfinder image is vertical, horizontal, tilted, curved or straight. It must always be seen in relation to the format's four demarcating sides. Take the vertical line in the photograph on p. 10, for example. Moving it to one side or another would give you a completely different composition. Or take the delicate power lines in the picture on p. 18. Thicker lines would have changed the very nature of the composition. This would also be the case if the line contour of the pyramid in the photograph on p. 9 were shifted to the left, for example.

occupies space with curved or flat surfaces yielding height, depth and width. The pictures on pp. 3, 4 and 18 produce a sense of depth. But there are many different forms of composition on the two-dimensional plane. If we compose an image so that a simple subject like a tree is arrayed against a flat landscape in three different frames, i.e. a horizontal rectangle, a vertical rectangle and a square, three different compositions are obtained. These compositions can also be varied by raising or lowering the horizon or shifting the tree to one side or another. See the first row of pictures on p. 13.

But even within one and the same format, such as a square, the same subject can produce entirely different impressions when we experiment with subject framing. See the second row of pictures on p. 13.

These simple examples clearly show that the square format, despite its wider range of variation, is more neutral in relation to the subject than the rectangle. The latter tends to force the subject into a given location.

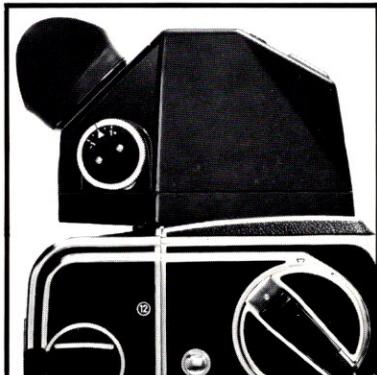
The square format imposes no preconceived visual notions on us. It permits a more generous interpretation of a subject, since man's own field of view is circular and orientated around a central point. The circle and the square are completely symmetrical (see the pictures on p. 14). This symmetry is the embodiment of perfection and represents infinite possibilities. Our conception of space can be illustrated with a globe or a cube, and both fit into a square format.



Two lines at angles to one another and emerging from a common vertex cover two dimensions on the surface of a flat or curved object. The pictures on pp. 1, 5 and 10 make no attempt to create an illusion of depth.

A solid object always has 3 dimensions. It

*The prism viewfinders reduce the entry of extraneous light and yield an unreversed image on the focusing screen, properties of particular value in the composition of your image. The meter prism finder also displays the correct exposure value.*





*Photo: Michael Gnade*



*Pyramids are symmetrical. But the asymmetrical composition here is the work of the photographer. A simple measure like this can enhance the excitement of an image.*



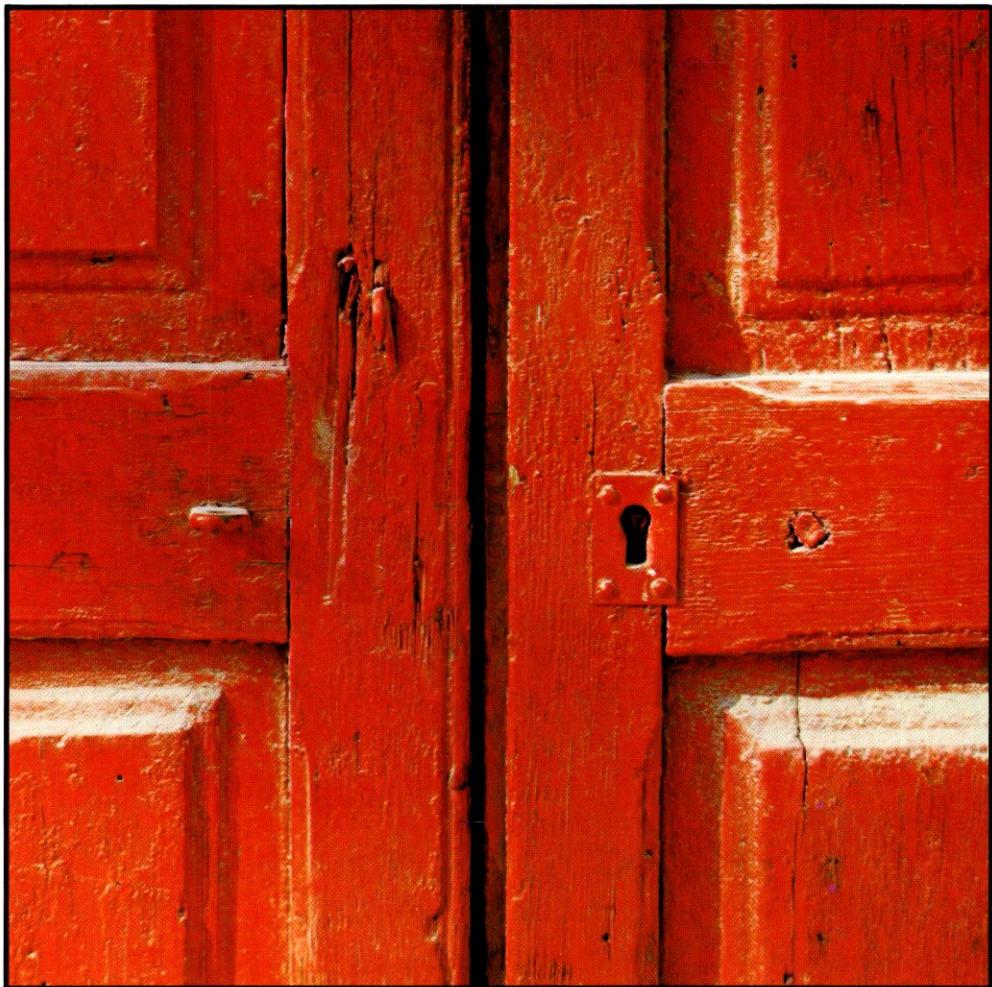
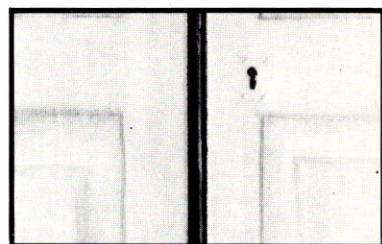
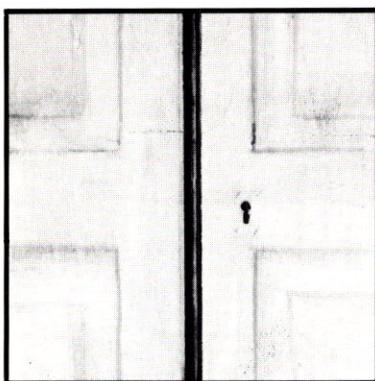


Photo: Fridmar Damm

*The repetition of the small squares, by way of contrast to the square format of the frame as a whole, makes the picture both exciting and well-balanced.*





*Photo: Michael Gnade*

*The vertical line of the girl and the horizontal sidewalk neatly counterbalance the square of the window, creating an especially harmonious composition.*

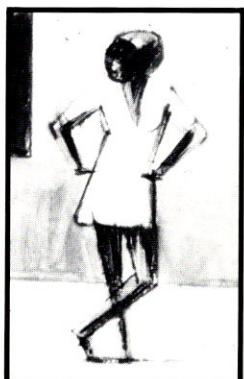
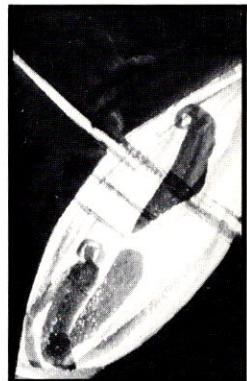
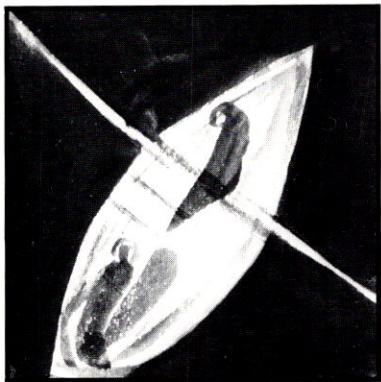
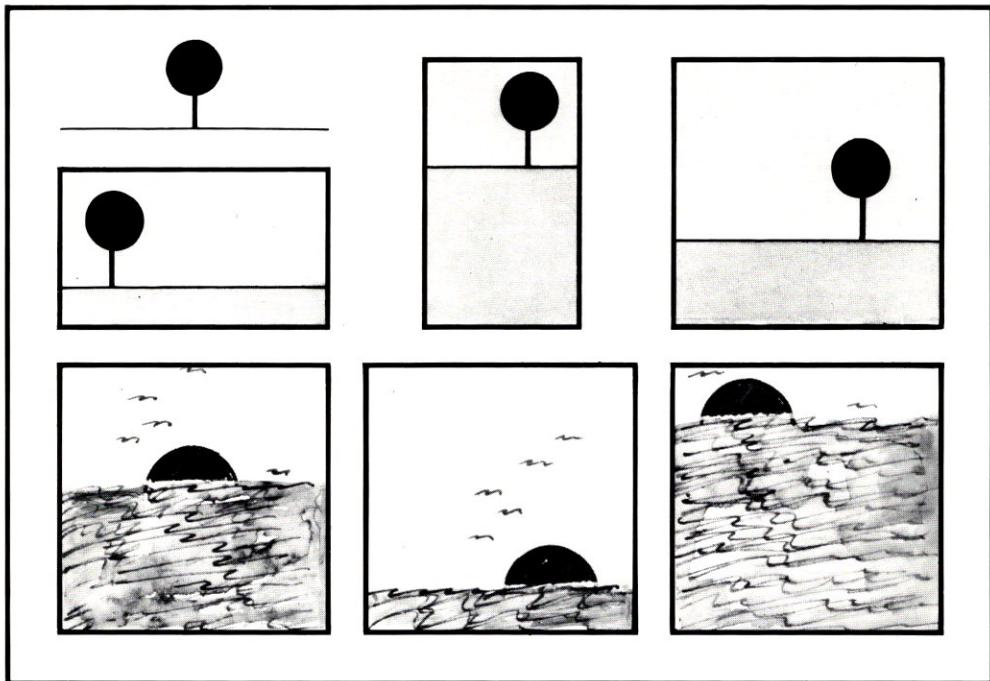




Photo: Håkan Berg

*This square photograph is based upon the two diagonals formed by the boat and its oars, the cross-shaped composition adding liveliness to the image.*

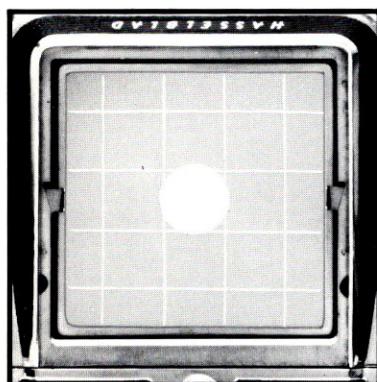




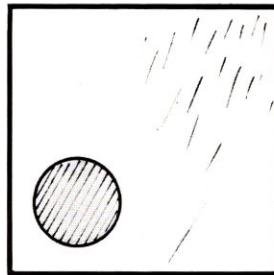
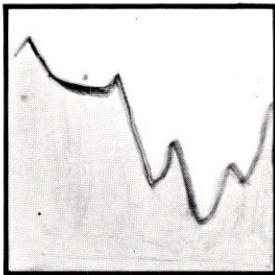
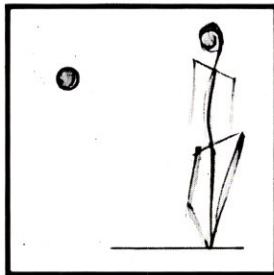
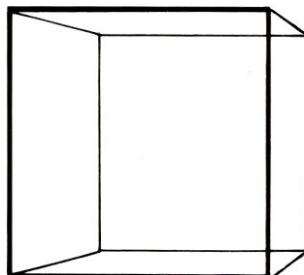
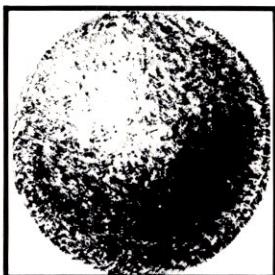
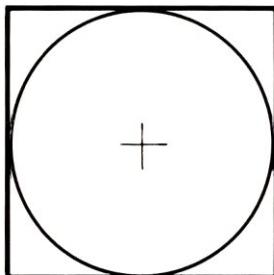
Even asymmetrical compositions are suitable for the square format. And even jumbled composition provides welcome contrast to the subdued symmetry of the square frame (see the 4th frame on p. 14). Also compare the photographs on pp. 6, 9 and 11. Or look at the picture of an asymmetrical curve traced from one side of the frame to

the other in the second row picture on p. 14. Or how about the last picture in the row, an asymmetrical juxtaposition of shapes and proportions. Also see the pictures on pp. 1, 5, 6 and 16.

The sense of harmonic totality, even when represented by a square, opens your eyes to new perspectives. I get the same feeling in my



*Interchangeable focusing screens with different characteristics make it possible for the photographer to pick a screen to suit his taste. The checked focusing screen with central grid facilitates the alignment of horizontal and vertical lines.*



lectures, illustrated with slides projected onto 2 separate, adjacent screens. Horizontal and vertical 35 mm slides are intermixed with square  $2\frac{1}{4}$  transparencies. Apart from the difference in sharpness and image brilliance, it's always a real pleasure to see a square screen completely filled with a single image. (The screen always has to be square, even

with 35 mm slides, to accommodate horizontal and vertical shots.)

The projection of a square, screen-filling transparency causes the viewer's eye to sweep the screen in circles instead of up and down. This enables the viewer to see and experience more. But the contrast between different formats and image sizes can also

*A picture taken with the Hasselblad magazine for Polaroid film produces instant information on exposure accuracy and enables you to obtain exact checks on composition. The Hasselblad system also includes the Magazine A16 for the  $1\frac{5}{8} \times 2\frac{1}{4}$  and the Magazine A16S for the  $1\frac{5}{8} \times 1\frac{5}{8}$  formats.*

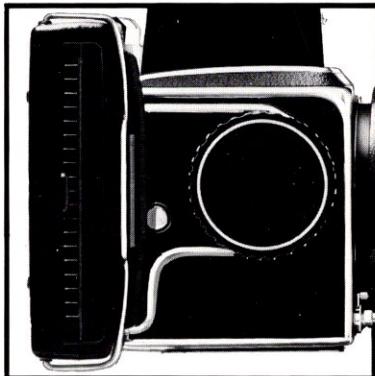
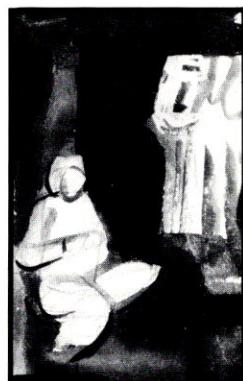




Photo: Michael Gnade

*The mass of the metal objects is a necessary counterweight to the man. Try to crop this picture! You can't without ruining it.*



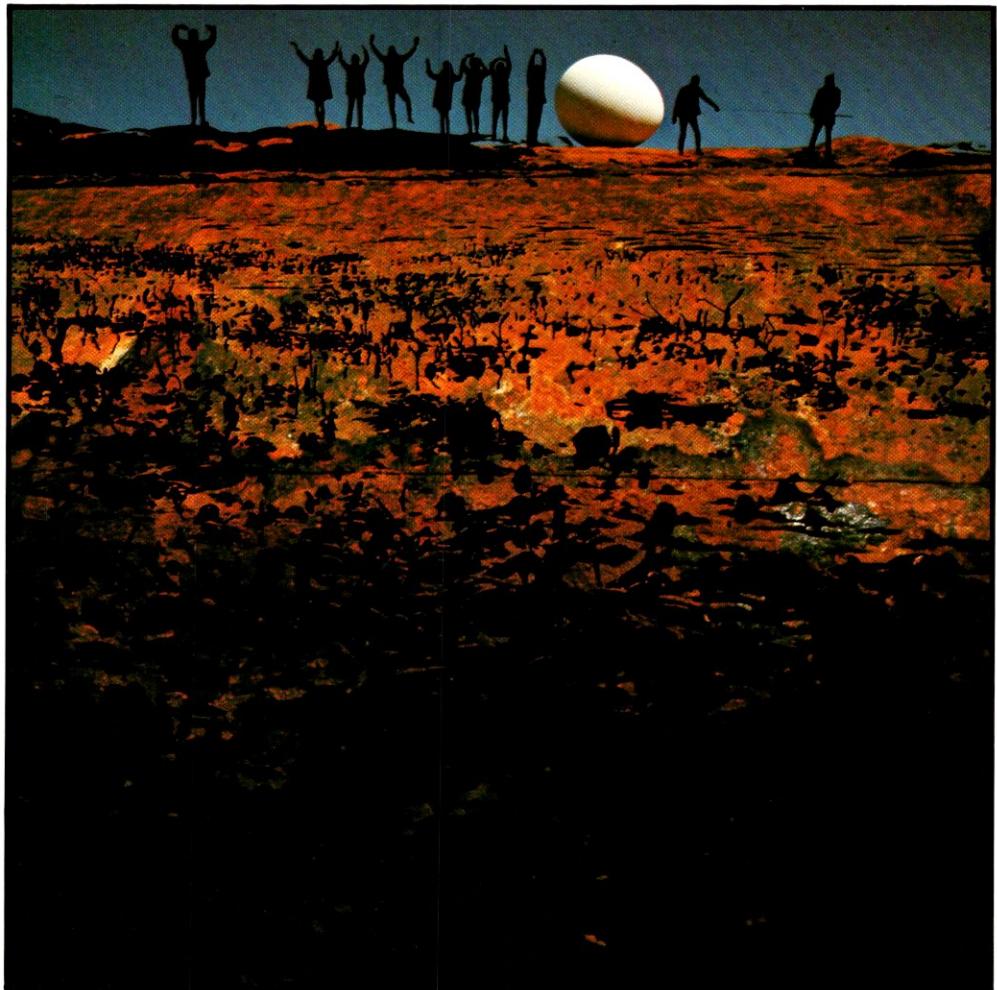
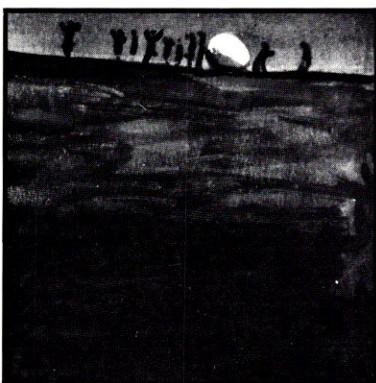


Photo: Ulf Sjöstedt



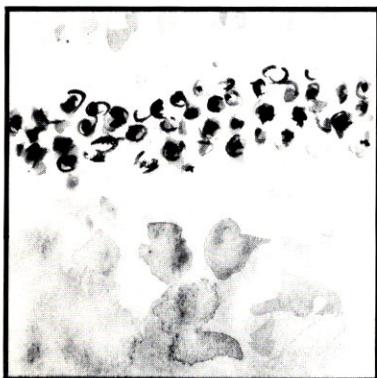
*Even though the event here only takes up a sixth of the image, the large, dark area at the bottom is necessary to provide the figures with a solid ground to stand on. The small, light egg creates a funny counterpoint.*





Photo: Gerhard Krohn

Composition consisting of horizontal rhythms and vertical interplay of sharpness and blurs!  
The small, about same-sized points—sharp and blurred—convey a sense of substance and excitement.



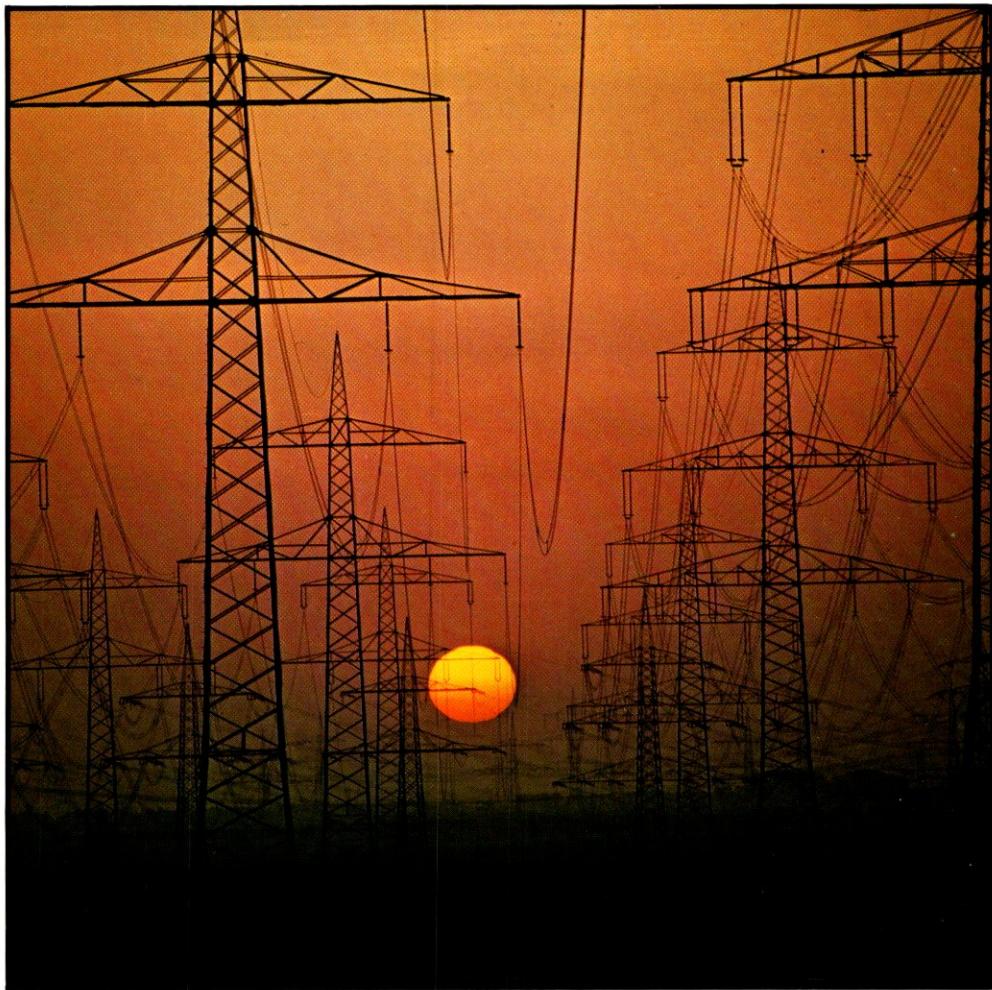
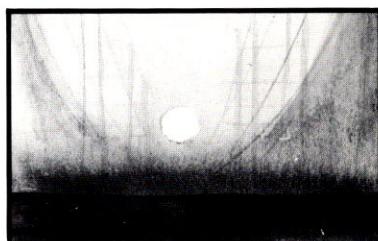
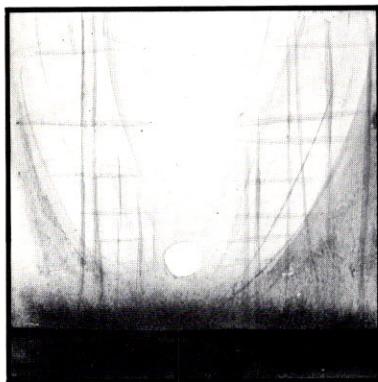


Photo: Fridmar Damm

*The upper part of the picture emphasizes the low angle of the sun. The play of lines around the disc of the sun leads the eye toward the central point.*



make it easier for viewers to understand a show's message. This is often the case in art exhibitions. Works of differing size are hung beside one another to relieve the monotony otherwise caused by rows of same-sized paintings.

At the moment, the square format is especially significant to me also for another reason. My next photo book will be square. Even at the layout stage I discovered how much more exciting that format will be, since I was able to make use of both square and horizontal prints at will. Square pictures could fill a whole page, and horizontal rectangles could be spread across two pages. The main subject should not be placed in the middle of the latter format but should be located according to the principles of the golden section.

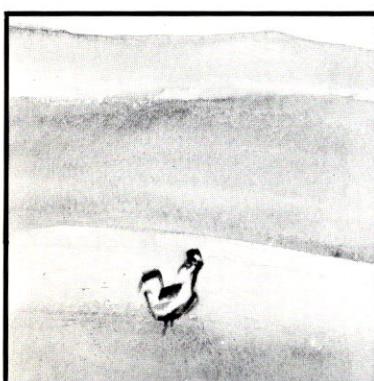
A square book format accentuates the layout if different photograph formats are used, such as a full-page square picture on one page and a vertical picture with caption in under or alongside on the next page. In such cases, subjects of differing contrast and composition should be selected for the respective pictures, e.g. a light subject vs. a dark one, a concentric subject vs. a contrapuntal one etc.

Despite the versatility of the Hasselblad system, I still use a 35 mm camera. Switching formats has a good influence on my pictorial sense. This format switching has made me especially aware of the composition opportunities presented by the square field.

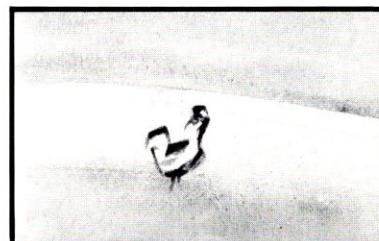
In the same way that a change of scenery can

be refreshing, a change in image format can give rise to enhanced photographic awareness. I can achieve these benefits with a Hasselblad whose focusing screen is marked with lines showing horizontal and vertical rectangular formats. This cropping of the format results in well-balanced horizontal or vertical composition which never appears to be the product of any cropping when transformed into prints or slides. When we utilize all of the height or width of the field, we still make use of about 75 % of the format. This is only possible with the square format. And this format enables you to take your pick of a horizontal or vertical composition when prints are made or when layouts are prepared with transparencies. If you try to make a vertical rectangular print from a horizontal 35 mm format, you can never utilize more than about 67 % of the frame, a frame which is much smaller than the  $2\frac{1}{4} \times 2\frac{1}{4}$  to start with. The result simply has to be impaired image quality compared to the image produced by a well-filled  $2\frac{1}{4} \times 2\frac{1}{4}$  frame.

The object of the drawings accompanying the photographs is to illustrate the fact that the photos here are square format compositions you can't squeeze into a rectangular field. Horizontal and vertical formats are shown by way of comparison so that you can see for yourself that a square field was the only option for these pictures. So the drawings are not intended to illustrate composition in itself. Their purpose is apparent in the unequivocal concept of my pictures.



*The rooster adds scale to the dimensions of the landscape. It would be uninteresting without the landscape—as the landscape would be uninteresting without the rooster.*



# H A S S E L B L A D®



*Photo: Michael Gnade*

Exclusive USA distributor:  
**BRAUN NORTH AMERICA**,  
55 Cambridge Parkway, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02142, USA

**VICTOR HASSELBLAD AKTIEBOLAG, Box 220, S-401 23 Göteborg, Sweden**

Text and drawings: Michael Gnade Layout: Lars Gustafsson Translation: Intertolk

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