Lennart Nilsson

Lennart Nilsson is a world-renowned photojournalist recognized for his exploratory images of the inside of the human body. Throughout his career, Nilsson has received a great deal of publicity for his images documenting the human reproductive system and the morphology of viruses. His photography was the first to capture early human development and the developmental stages of embryos and fetuses. These images have helped shape the way the public visualizes development.

Nilsson was born in Strängnäs, Sweden, on 24 August 1922. He began his professional career before age twenty, working as a celebrity photographer for Vecko-Revyn magazine. In 1945 Nilsson traveled with midwife Siri Sundström in northern Sweden. He documented his time with Sundström, taking photographs while she worked and ultimately producing the photo-story "A Midwife in Lapland," the first of his articles to sell abroad. During the 1940s and 1950s Nilsson published photo-essays in Sweden on topics,such as polar-bear hunting, the life of ants, and Swedish cultural celebrities.

In 1953 Nilsson had his first assignment from Life magazine. He traveled to New York to photograph Dag Hammarskjöld, who had been elected United Nations Secretary General. While working on this assignment, Nilsson showed his first human fetus images to the editors at Life. Twelve years later, in 1965, Life published the cover story "The Drama of Life" using Nilsson's vastly more sophisticated images of the human fetus. The article portrayed and described the developmental stages of the human embryo and fetus from conception to birth.

Nilsson's photographs serve as representations of the technological advances in photomicroscopy during his career. Much of his work has used macro lenses and wide-angled special optics with an electric flash in order to capture images of aborted fetuses obtained from ectopic pregnancies. In addition, his access to specially designed endoscopes and to ultrasound machinery enabled him to photograph living fetuses from both within and outside of a woman's body. Due to the narrow, flexible structure of an endoscope, Nilsson was able to see far into the body and take photographs, while a wide-angle lens and small fiber optics enabled him to capture high-resolution images. In the 1970s Nilsson incorporated the scanning electron microscope into his photographic tool set. This advanced method of ultrastructural photography allowed him to photograph the AIDS virus in 1985. He photographed the virus in Paris with HIV researcher Luc Montagnier.

Nilsson published a number of widely circulated books, including A Child is Born (1965), Man Behold (1973), Behold Man (1974), and The Body Victorious (1985). All these use his photographs as guides to the exploration of the human body's internal anatomy. Nilsson's photographs have also been included in documentaries and films. In 1985 Swedish television produced "The Miracle of Life," which received an international Emmy award and was the first filmed record of human conception.

Nilsson has received many awards and acknowledgements during the course of his career. He was recognized as a member of the Swedish Society of Medicine in 1969 and was the first photographer to receive the Hasselblad Award in 1980. In 1998 the Lennart Nilsson Award Foundation was established in honor of his photographic achievements. Each year, the foundation recognizes exceptional scientific photographers. Nilsson has received honorary doctorates from many institutions: the Karolinska Institute in 1976, Technische Universität Braunschweig in 2002, and Linköping University in 2003. Today Nilsson's work can be viewed at several museums including the Ontario Science Centre in Canada, Hasselblad Center in Göteborg in Sweden, Tokyo Fuji Art Museum, British Museum in London, and the Modern Museum in Stockholm.

Sources

1. Lennart Nilsson. “Biography.” Lennart Nilsson Photography. http://www.lennartnilsson.com/biography.html (Accessed September 14, 2009).
2. NOVA Online. “Behind The Lens: An Interview with Lennart Nilsson.” NOVA Online/Odyssey of Life. http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/odyssey/nilsson.html (Accessed September 16, 2009).