THE FACES OF ‘WRATH’

Photos of migrants who inspired novel on display at BMoA

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When Henri Bristol was assigned to do a book report on “The Grapes of Wrath” in high school, he had an expert on the subject living under his own roof but didn’t know it.

“I asked my dad, ‘Have you ever heard of this novel,’ and he realized at that point, not only had he not shared that with us, but this huge part of his life he left behind him.”

Bristol’s father was Horace Bristol, the photojournalist who persuaded John Steinbeck to travel with him to the great Central Valley of California to collaborate on a book of photographs chronicling what was happening: a vast migration of dispossessed people leaving their homes in Oklahoma and the surrounding region to escape drought, poverty and despair. What the men saw — families living in tents by the side of the road, children playing in the dirt, desperate men signing up for relief — stayed with them forever.

As for the book of photos, it never materialized.

What did come out of that trip was “The Grapes of Wrath” — and a Pulitzer Prize for Steinbeck.

“I don’t think he ever felt betrayed,” Bristol said of his father, who died at age 86 in 1997. “There was this incredible novel, and he was part of it. But it must have been difficult to have all this attention drawn to this novel after they worked on it.

“When Steinbeck wrote his memoirs, there was no mention of the events that transpired. Not until many years later, until very recently, did everyone acknowledge everyone’s place in the story.”

Bristol’s place in the story is on display at the Bakersfield Museum of Art beginning today. Part of the winter exhibitions, “Horace Bristol’s ‘Grapes of Wrath’ portfolio. The photo graced the cover of several editions of the classic novel, Bristol’s son said.

“Tom Joad,” perhaps the most iconic image from photojournalist Horace Bristol’s “Grapes of Wrath” portfolio. The photo captures a boy tenderly cradling a rabbit; and “Rose of Sharon,” whose subject is a young mother — an unreadable look in her staring eyes — nursing an infant.

The Bristol exhibition is one of several communitywide observances of the 75th anniversary of the novel’s publication. BMoA curator Vikki Cruz sits on the arts and humanities advisory board at Cal State Bakersfield, organizer of most of the events.

“Although the work of Horace Bristol may not be as widely known as some of his contemporaries such as Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans, he definitely left an indelible place in American history by covering such subjects as World War II, Asia, famous personalities, and the architecture of American industry,” said Cruz in an emailed statement. “He was highly influenced by Dorothea Lange and first traveled with her to the Central Valley in 1937.”

Bristol, like Lange, was interested in his chosen medium’s power, not as a high-art form, but as a vehicle for delivering the truth of people and events to viewers.

“He always thought of himself, and was told by (acclaimed photographer) Edward Weston, that he was more an artisan than a true artist,” said Bristol’s son.

“My dad always said, ‘That’s right. I’m an artisan building a cathedral.’

“Dorothea Lange, who was a huge inspiration to my dad, felt photography was about story and communicating something greater. That really put my dad on a new trajectory.”

Bristol went on to document the war, which led him to Japan and, in his son’s estimation, the period of his greatest work. It was there that he founded a successful agency that supplied photos shot throughout Asia to western publications.

“The trouble is, few people have seen the Asian photos, said Bristol, the “de facto architect” of his father’s body of work. Part of the reason rests with Bristol himself, who descended into despair in 1956 with the suicide of his first wife. He retreated from his work, destroying many of his negatives, and distanced himself from the all-consuming career he felt was right for him.”

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Winter/spring 2014 exhibitions

When: Opening reception 6 p.m. today
Where: Bakersfield Museum of Art, 1930 R St.
Admission: $10; free to museum members
**WRATH**

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partially responsible for his wife’s anguish.

Even when Bristol met and married his second wife, he said little about his career to the two children they had together.

“My father was 60 when he had me,” said Bristol, 45, the youngest of the photographer’s four children from both of his marriages.

“We knew he was a photographer. We always got war stories at bedtime and that sort of thing. It was when I had that book report that I saw his work. It obviously was kind of a mind-blowing experience. I’m sure I got an A on the assignment.”

Bristol is thrilled his father’s work is getting exposure but regrets that he can’t attend the opening today. He and his partner are at home in Santa Barbara looking after their newborn twins. Still, he hopes to visit BMoA during the life of the exhibition and bring the babies, though he conceded it will be many years until they can appreciate their grandfather’s work and approach to his craft.

“He saw heroism in things everyday people did.”

**Also at BMoA**

Bakersfield folk singer Joel Jacob will perform selections from the Woody Guthrie songbook and other material related to the Dust Bowl era, plus originals, during the opening reception.

In addition to the Bristol photos, four other exhibitions are part of the winter/spring exhibitions. Descriptions were provided by the BMoA:

**“The World on a String: Puppets from the Alan Cook Collection”**

Though the collection includes more than 2,000 puppets, about 100 will be on view at BMoA. There are five types of puppets, including marionettes and rod puppets, representing regions from around the world. Standouts include a metal Sicilian marionette that stands over 3 feet high, a dragon shadow puppet from China and the lively Carmen Miranda marionette created by Frank Paris, who created the original Howdy Doody.

**“Paintings by Keith Wicks”**

A leading painter with the soul of an old master, Keith Wicks is able to capture the essence of the moment with clarity and intensity. Through the use of oil paint, he has developed the unique ability to harness the purity and energy of light, even when it is dancing in the shadows. This exhibition features 25 paintings and eight illustrations that embrace Yang’s Asian heritage.

**“SiddhARTH Parasnis and Suhas Bhubali”**

This exhibition explores two emerging California painters who were born in India. Their current body of work explores identity relating to places. The two incorporate people and architecture native to their homeland paired with the similarities found in their new California environment.

**SALAD**

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and it’s not loaded down with filler. Even the tuna is like that — not all full of junk that doesn’t belong in tuna. Just nice, flaky albacore. Like everything at Luigi’s, it tastes really fresh.

I like this salad if I’m going to be exercising after I eat it. It seems to be just the right amount of fuel for a couple hours of tennis or a nice bike ride. Have one for lunch and you’ll be good until dinner.

Oh, and I really appreciate the many letters and emails about everyone’s favorite salad destinations. I have to say that I’m surprised at how many people had this idea before I did, but I suppose it’s just common sense. Keep the suggestions coming, and I’ll keep this quest going for as long as it takes.

It should be noted that I donated blood recently, and all my vitals were outstanding, so these salads are clearly making me healthier. And I’m finding that I don’t miss standard entrees much at all. I’ve also found that if I have three salads a week for lunch, I can eat chicken and waffles guilt-free. And that’s a big deal.

**FIRST LOOK**

Join Assistant Lifestyles Editor Stefani Dias this morning as she chats with Scott Cox on “First Look.” They’ll go over the best entertainment options of the next couple of weeks and talk about a shared obsession: salad.

They’ll also give away “Bedlam: A Baby Blues Collection” by Rick Kirkman and Jerry Scott. Listen for your cue to call.

Watch the show on Bakersfield.com or tune in to 1180-AM, KERN.

**Eye Street**

Wibisana, a shadow puppet from Java, is part of “The World on a String: Puppets from the Alan Cook Collection” show at the Bakersfield Museum of Art.

“A Story of Immigration: Illustrations by Belle Yang”

Belle Yang is an author, graphic novelist, and children’s book illustrator who translates her experiences as a Chinese-American immigrant into bold, powerful works of art. This exhibition features 25 paintings and eight illustrations that embrace Yang’s Asian heritage.

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**“Paintings by Keith Wicks”**

A leading painter with the soul of an old master, Keith Wicks is able to capture the essence of the moment with clarity and intensity. Through the use of oil paint, he has developed the unique ability to harness the purity and energy of light, even when it is dancing in the shadows. This exhibition features a selection of recent paintings depicting bustling cityscapes, sunbathed landscapes, and intimate interiors.