Depression, Postwar Photos Displayed in New FJJMA Exhibit

NORMAN, OKLA. – Depression-era Oklahoma migrants, World War II combat and postwar Japan are subjects of a new photography exhibition at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art. The museum at the University of Oklahoma opens On Assignment: the Photojournalism of Horace Bristol to the public Saturday, Nov. 16.

A public lecture at 6 p.m. on Friday, Nov. 15, will precede a private exhibition opening reception for Museum Association members and their guests at 7 p.m. Food for the private reception will be catered by O Asian Fusion, and live music will be provided by local singer/songwriter Robert Bartlett, who specializes in Woody Guthrie songs as well as original music inspired by the famous songwriter.

Through his photo essays for LIFE, Fortune and Time magazines, Bristol exposed American audiences to the dismal conditions facing Oklahoma migrants during the Great Depression, the triumphs and horrors of combat during World War II, and the realities of Japanese life following the war. On Assignment examines a seminal decade in Bristol’s career, beginning with his 1938 visit to California’s Central Valley to document conditions among migrant camps and concluding in 1948 with his essays on postwar Japan and Korea.

“The photographs of Horace Bristol have an indelible place in the American imagination, even if the photographer himself is not popularly known,” said Mark White, the Eugene B. Adkins and Chief Curator and interim director at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art. “His photographs of the Great Depression, World War II and postwar Japan provide fascinating insights into the significant events at mid-century that helped to shape the world for decades to come.”
Born in Whittier, Calif., Bristol moved to San Francisco in 1933 to pursue a career in commercial photography. He met photographer Ansel Adams during that time and, through him, Edward Weston, Imogen Cunningham and a number of other modernist photographers. Bristol, in turn, was drawn increasingly to subjects of the natural world photographed with a sharp focus and high tonal contrast.

“Like his contemporaries, he sought out the abstract in the everyday world, using lighting effects and unexpected angles to create images distinctively modern,” White said. “Bristol used that aesthetic for much of his career but considered photography more of a tool for social change than a high art form.”

In the 1930s, Bristol worked freelance at *Time* and *Sunset* magazines, but did not find a regular assignment until *LIFE* changed editorial direction in 1936. He became one of the publication’s first staff photographers and actively sought out projects of social relevance for the magazine.

He approached his picture editor at *LIFE*, Wilson Hicks, with a proposed photo essay on the numerous migrants fleeing the Dust Bowl for a better life in California, only to find few jobs at low wages. Bristol wanted author John Steinbeck to produce the accompanying text that would illustrate the hardships of these migrants. Hicks declined, so Bristol turned to *Fortune* for support. At first, Steinbeck was hesitant to work with a capitalist publication, but he eventually agreed to accompany Bristol to the Central Valley during the winter of 1937-38. There, Bristol photographed the migrant workers as Steinbeck interviewed them.

Steinbeck ultimately backed out of the project to begin a novel based on the experience. His interviews inspired the 1939 *The Grapes of Wrath* — a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel that described the struggles of migrant farmers during the Great Depression. When Bristol read Steinbeck’s book, he considered it to be one of the best works in American literature and subsequently altered the names of his subjects to correspond to specific characters in *The Grapes of Wrath*. *LIFE* eventually ran many of Bristol’s photographs following the publication of the novel in the article “Grapes of Wrath: John Steinbeck Writes a Major Novel About Western Migrants,” which appeared in the June 5, 1939, issue.

*LIFE* magazine proved an effective forum for Bristol’s work, but the photographer often was frustrated by the editorial process, especially the lack of positive feedback regarding his ideas and work.

With the surprise Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, and the subsequent American entry into World War II, Bristol left *LIFE* in hopes of
contributing to the war effort. He became one of five photographers chosen by the famed Edward Steichen to participate in the Naval Aviation Photographic Unit, which documented the activities of the naval war and promoted the recruitment of naval aviators.

After the Japanese surrender, Bristol relocated to Japan in 1946 to document the effects of the war and the process of reconstruction. During his stay, he started the East-West Photo Agency and sold his photographs of Southeast Asia to many major magazines, including *Fortune, National Geographic, Newsweek* and *Collier’s*.

“Bristol attempted to counter the stereotypes that the American media had created during the war that often portrayed the Japanese as cold-blooded, uncivilized people,” White said. “Through Bristol’s photographs, the American public was able to see the full range of Japanese life, both positive and negative.”

His subjects ranged from the destruction caused by the war, to celebrities such as Gen. Hideki Tojo’s personal fortune teller, to prostitution and organized crime. He eventually published a book of his photographs through the East-West Photo Agency in 1949. A second edition was produced in two forms, one of which was intended as educational material for American military personnel on a tour of duty.

It was also in 1949 that Bristol released his first version of the book, *Korea*. The photographer had visited the Korean peninsula shortly after his arrival in Japan and had produced countless photos of the country after its liberation from Japanese occupation. Many of his photographs concern the return of traditional fashion and culture, much of which was suppressed under the Japanese.

Bristol continued his work in Southeast Asia until the 1960s, when he left Japan. Although he continued to work actively for the remainder of his life, his work from the late 1930s and 1940s captured important changes both nationally and globally.

Additional educational programs related to the exhibition are scheduled this fall at the museum, including Art “à la Carte” on Friday, Nov. 8, in conjunction with the Norman Arts Council’s 2nd Friday Circuit of Art. The event will feature live music by Tracy Reed and Matt Johnson, food provided by LOCAL restaurant, short films by deadCENTER Film Festival and an exclusive gallery talk and sneak peak of *On Assignment* with White. The event is scheduled for 5 to 7 p.m., with the gallery talk at 6:30 p.m.

An additional gallery talk by Todd Stewart, photography associate professor and associate director of the OU School of Art and Art History, is scheduled at 12:30 p.m. on Tuesday, Dec. 3.

The Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art is located in the OU Arts District on the corner of Elm Avenue and Boyd Street, at 555 Elm Ave., on the OU Norman campus. Admission to the museum is complimentary to all visitors, thanks to the generosity of the OU Office of the President and the OU Athletics Department. The museum is closed on Mondays. Information and accommodations on the basis of disability are available by calling (405) 325-4938 or visiting www.ou.edu/fjjma.

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**IMAGE CREDIT**

A new exhibition of photography by Horace Bristol debuts Saturday, Nov. 16, at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art. On Assignment: the Photojournalism of Horace Bristol includes a decade of photography that spans the Great Depression and World War II combat and postwar Asia, including this 1938 photo, Tom Joad, from The Grapes of Wrath series, named after a character from John Steinbeck’s seminal novel.

Horace Bristol (1908-1997)

*Tom Joad, from The Grapes of Wrath Series*, 1938

Black and white silver gelatin print, 11 ¼ x 9 9/16 in.

The Horace and Masako Bristol Trust