



ALEXANDRE HOGUE

Dust Bowl, 1933

ALEXANDRE HOGUE (1898–1994)

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oil on canvas, 24 × 32 5/8 in.
Smithsonian American Art Museum,
Gift of International Business Machines Corporation

Background Information for Teachers

Dust Bowl vividly depicts the extreme drought, soil erosion, and looming dust storms that bore down on the plains of the Midwest in the early 1930s. The storms moved millions of tons of topsoil across America's heartland, wiping out farms and ranches for generations. Alexandre Hogue witnessed firsthand the mass exodus of families, who packed what property was not seized by creditors and set out for California, hoping to find a better future.

Angular fence posts and spikes of barbed wire echo the malevolent wedge of bloodred earth obscuring the sky. Below the break in the fence, tire tracks lead away from the desolate farm, as if the family had just driven away and the dust moved to erase all traces of them. In the distance we see the dwarfed silhouette of farm buildings. The whirring dust blurs the edges of a windmill, once used to pump water out of a well, which is likely now dry. There are no people, animals, crops, or sign of water. The only vestiges of plant life are the dried brush in the lower left foreground.

Dust Bowl and two other paintings from Hogue's *Erosion* series created a furor in Texas when they were reproduced in *Life* magazine in June 1937. Many readers claimed the paintings exaggerated the seriousness of

the situation and were consequently damaging the local economy. Hogue defended his artwork, writing he may "have chosen an unpleasant... subject, but after all the drought is most unpleasant. To record its beautiful moments without its tragedy would be false indeed.... If the paintings have the power to vivify the condition and incite action, I am truly flattered." Unlike many painters of the time, Hogue did not work for the government-funded Federal Art Project of the WPA. He refused to ennoble the human misery seen in many other artists' Depression-era images, blaming the impact of the Dust Bowl on humans, their lack of respect for nature, and mistreatment of the land.

Guided Looking Questions for Students

- Where do you see evidence of people in this painting? Describe the elements the artist has shown. Taken together, what story do these elements tell?
- Consider two of the artist's choices: the placement of the fence in the foreground of the painting and the color of the sky. What do these choices tell us about this landscape?

Primary Source Connection

Pair this artwork with the following excerpt from "The 'Okies' Search for a Lost Frontier" from the *New York Times Magazine* of August 1939. Author Charles L. Todd exposes the lives of families at migrant camps across California. Films and photographs, as well as paintings by artists like Hogue, publicized the dire conditions faced by those in the Dust Bowl region.

"They told me this was the land o' milk an' honey, but Ah guess the cow's gone dry, and the tumblebugs has got in the beehive." That in his own language, is the way the average Dust Bowl migrant feels toward California today. And how does California react to the migrant? As one West Coast grower puts it, "This isn't a migration—it's an invasion! They're worse than a plague of locusts!" The situation might not be so tragic if there were an end in sight somewhere. But the "covered wagons" are still running across the border—there were 20,000 new arrivals during the first five months of 1939, making a total of nearly 300,000 migrants now living in California. "What shall we do with them? How can we feed them? What about housing, medical care, relief?" These are the questions California is asking today, and no one, not even the Federal Government, seems to know the ultimate answers.

Suggested Questions

- Whose perspectives are represented in Todd's article? How does each group's vision of the "frontier" differ?
- What purposes might Hogue and Todd have had in the creation of the painting and the magazine article, respectively?

Literary Connection

Pair this artwork with the opening lines, excerpted below, from chapter 14 of John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). The West holds an iconic place

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in the American imagination. Having put down roots on the East Coast, European Americans moved west in search of opportunity in the form of farmland. They saw the land as their right and something that would help them improve their lives. In the 1930s, Alexandre Hogue saw firsthand the mass exodus of families from their farms in the Midwest, heading farther west and hoping again to find a better future. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck interspersed narrative chapters with interchapters that expand upon the story of the Joad family, making the themes of hardship and displacement more universal.

The Western land, nervous under the beginning change. The Western States, nervous as horses before a thunder storm. The great owners, nervous, sensing a change, knowing nothing of the nature of the change. The great owners, striking at the immediate thing, the widening government, the growing labor unity; striking at new taxes, at plans; not knowing these things are results, not causes. Results, not causes; results, not causes. The causes lie deep and simple—the causes are a hunger in a stomach, multiplied a million times; a hunger in a single soul, hunger for joy and some security, multiplied a million times; muscles and mind aching to grow, to work, to create, multiplied a million times. The last clear definite function of man—muscles aching to work, minds aching to create beyond the single need—this is man.

Suggested Questions

- What changes does the common man face in this chapter? What has caused those changes?
- Apply this reading to Hogue's *Dust Bowl*. Which passages are most important to understanding the events that might have preceded the scene Hogue painted?

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