



December 2011



Dust Bowl

1933

Alexandre Hogue

Born: Memphis, Missouri, 1898

Died: Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1994

Oil on canvas

24 x 32 5/8 in. (61 x 82.8 cm)

Smithsonian American Art
Museum, Gift of International
Business Machines Corporation,
1969.123

[Collections Webpage and High Resolution Image](#)

*Researcher Ann was at first unable to see this painting in person, until it returned from being on loan to [an exhibition about Hogue](#). She began under the assumption that *Dust Bowl* was an exaggerated but straightforward documentation of the terrible drought and soil erosion of the 1930s Dust Bowl. She quickly realized that Hogue's series of paintings called *Erosion*, including *Dust Bowl*, aroused considerable controversy in their day; an artwork's context certainly includes its impact as well as its sources. Therefore she asked:*

- **Why did Alexandre Hogue make this painting and the others in the *Erosion* Series?**
- **How did Texans react to this painting in the 1930s?**

It was not difficult to find out how Hogue saw the Dust Bowl and why he painted it; the artist made many statements on the subject. Many of these are in [Hogue's papers in the Archives of American Art](#). Hogue's 1938 (unsuccessful) application to the Guggenheim Foundation for a fellowship to continue his *Erosion* series asserts his direct knowledge of what he painted. He stated that he had spent years "both before and after the dust menace, working and painting on a Panhandle ranch near Dalhart. This ranch, owned by my brother-in-law, Wiley Bishop, has been, like many others, literally 'plowed in' on all sides by the 'suit-case' farmers whose uncontrolled

loose dirt, pushed before the wind, has gnawed away every spring of grass that dares show above ground. How well I remember the repeated warning of the ranchmen uttered twenty years ago, ‘If you plow this country up it will blow away.’” Hogue continued “Some may feel that in these paintings . . . I may have chosen an unpleasant subject, but after all the drouth is most unpleasant. To record its beautiful moments without its tragedy would be false indeed. At one and the same time the drouth is beautiful in its effects and terrifying in its results. The former shows peace on the surface but the latter reveals tragedy underneath. Tragedy as I have used it is simply visual psychology, which is beautiful in a terrifying way.” (Hogue Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.)

To understand the relationship between what Hogue painted in *Dust Bowl* and the reality of conditions in Texas and the other Dust Bowl states of Oklahoma, Kansas, Colorado, and New Mexico during the 1930s, I read books (Reid, 1994; Egan, 2006; Hurt, 1981); listened to [interviews](#) on the website of the Wessel Living History Farm in York, Nebraska; watched documentary films both recent ([Surviving the Dust Bowl: The American Experience, PBS](#)) and from the 1930s ([1936, The Plow That Broke the Plains](#)), and looked at [documentary photographs of the Dust Bowl](#). This enabled me to appreciate the very selective but well supported truth of Hogue’s portrayals. Dust bowl conditions shifted year by year and were not always as serious in all places as what Hogue portrayed. In the worst places, [the powerful winds eroded top soil and buried everything in smothering drifts](#). Terrible dust storms blotted out the sun, making [chickens start roosting because they thought night was coming](#). The wind drove dust into houses through every crack until the piles of dirt [had to be dug out with shovels](#). [Photographs taken after such dust storms](#) show ripples in the dust like those in Hogue’s painting. The pale sun in Hogue’s painting shines through dense clouds of red dust as [a dust storm begins](#). Many families, unable to make a living as crops failed year after year, left their farms for California or other places where they hoped to find opportunities. Hogue represented the so-called “exodusters” in the footprints and tire tracks leading away from the farm in the background of *Dust Bowl*. More people stayed on their land than left, however, hoping each year that the next year would be better (Hurt, 1981; Worster, 1979; Egan, 2006).

Hogue’s *Dust Bowl* and the other paintings in his *Erosion* series were initially well received locally and nationally. As I researched the provenance and reception of *Dust Bowl*, I realized that the early history of *Dust Bowl* was more complex than secondary sources revealed. When I searched Hogue’s name in the online archives of the *Dallas Morning News* I found articles illustrating the image I knew as *Dust Bowl* captioned with other titles including *Wind Erosion*, *Dust*, and *West Texas Sandstorm*. By following these titles in Hogue’s own exhibition and publication lists among his papers in the Archives of American Art, then looking up the articles and catalogues he listed, I traced the painting’s busy history. It appeared at the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts (Bywaters, *Dallas Morning News*, June 9, 1935), the Kansas City Art Institute (Kansas

City Art Institute, 1936), Rockefeller Center in New York (Watson, *New York Times Magazine*, May 24, 1936), and the Art Institute of Chicago (*Dallas Morning News*, November 3, 1936).

In June, 1937, some Texans' response to Hogue's *Erosion* paintings shifted drastically when *Dust Bowl* and two other paintings from the series appeared in the popular national magazine *Life* alongside documentary photographs (*Life*, June 21, 1937). Some Texans saw Hogue's representations of the Dust Bowl as threats to the public perception of Texas. The Archivist of the Panhandle Plains Historical Museum in Canyon, Texas provided me with articles from Texas newspapers where attacks on Hogue's art appeared. The West Texas Chamber of Commerce accused Hogue of portraying "scenes [that] were not typical and made it appear the Panhandle was one vast desert." (*Amarillo Globe*, June 18, 1937) A map in Hurt's *The Dust Bowl* shows that the worst conditions retreated from most of the Texas panhandle between 1935 and 1938, so things had improved in places after Hogue painted *Dust Bowl* in 1933 (Hurt, 1981). The *Dalhart Texan* made a more personal assault, claiming that Hogue had betrayed his state to make money, "As citizens of the Texas Panhandle, as lovers of this country, we deny him the privilege of laying claim to ever having been a citizen of a section that, on the whole, has treated us kindly." (*Dalhart Texan*, June 18, 1937) The controversy attracted crowds to the *Erosion* series painting *Drouth Survivors* at the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts (*Dallas Morning News*, June 18, 1937). One panhandle community sent a man with \$50 to buy *Drouth Survivors*, planning to burn it publicly, but the work's \$2,000 price tag thwarted the plan (Kalil, 2011; Crocker, *Dallas Morning News*, May 15, 1938). Hogue, urging farmers to cooperate with federal soil conservation efforts, replied to these attacks in a letter to the editor of *The Dallas Morning News*: "My paintings are as much a statement of what may happen as what has happened – a warning of impending danger in terms of present conditions." (*Dallas Morning News*, June 21, 1937)

Hogue's art was not the only representation of the Dust Bowl to become a target. The newsreel series *The March of Time* on June 11, 1937, addressed the Dust Bowl (Fielding, 1978). On June 17, 1937, The Texas House of Representatives requested that the episode be withdrawn. Stills from *The March of Time* appeared in *Life* magazine with Hogue's paintings, perhaps increasing anger at the artist (*Life*, June 21, 1937). The Texas House resolution shows the economic basis of Texans' objections to the newsreel and perhaps also to Hogue's art: "such misinformation will undoubtedly cause tourists and others to abandon or postpone visits to the many important and interesting points in the State of Texas." (*Journal of the House of Representatives of the Forty-Fifth Legislature of the State of Texas*, 1937)

Texas artists, by contrast, welcomed Hogue's new fame, which brought notice to their own art (Folsom, *Dallas Morning News*, June 18, 1937.) The local hostility about Hogue's national attention soon died away (Kalil, 2011). After June 1937, Hogue's paintings continued to be widely exhibited and published, receiving acclaim rather than condemnation (as Prior, *American Artist*, May 1945).

The furor roused by images of the Dust Bowl raises the following question:

- **How does the controversy stirred up by Hogue's Dust Bowl paintings in 1937 compare to current debates over press coverage of global climate change and various ecological disasters?**

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