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# Arts participation as cultural capital in the United States, 1982–2002: Signs of decline?

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## Abstract

We analyzed Surveys of Public Participation in the Arts for 1982, 1992, and 2002 to see if trends in U.S. arts attendance are consistent with the perception of many sociologists of culture that the role of the arts as cultural capital is in decline. From a Bourdieuan perspective, a dramatic deflation in the value of the arts as cultural capital (the “meltdown scenario”) would manifest itself in (1) large declines in high-culture arts participation rates (2) especially among the youngest cohorts that (3) are not evident in participation in middlebrow activities and (4) are concentrated among groups for whom cultural capital is most important, i.e. (4a) highly educated people and (4b) women.) Results are mixed. Trend data are *not* consistent with the meltdown scenario, but *do* suggest change in the position of different arts genres *within* cultural capital and ongoing attrition in the audience for many of the arts. Consistent with the decline perspective, younger cohorts’ attendance rates have fallen for most high-culture performing-arts attendance activities. (Because college attendance increased in the 1960s, the decline is not visible in the middle cohorts until one disaggregates by education level.) In contrast to the decline perspective, however, declines are as bad or worse for several middle-brow cultural activities; attendance rates for art museums and jazz concerts have increased; and rates have declined more slowly for women and college graduates than for others. Two changes are evident: first, greater elite and general interest in the visual arts and jazz and less in classical music, ballet, and theatre (trends consistent with Peterson’s “omnivore theory,” aspects of postmodern theory, and the notion that the content of cultural capital evolves over time); and, second, gradual decline among almost all age/gender/education groups in rates of attendance at live cultural events broadly defined, probably reflecting greater competition from at-home entertainment options and changes in population composition and family structure.

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In *The Inheritors* (1979) and *Reproduction* (1977), Pierre Bourdieu made the influential argument that in the modern economy, where the publicly held corporation had succeeded the industrial magnate's empire, a new mode of class reproduction based on formal education had replaced the old mechanism of direct inheritance. According to Bourdieu, members of the "dominant class" invested in their children's "cultural capital"—an easy familiarity with prestigious forms of culture—as a means of ensuring their success. Bourdieu argued that teachers and other gatekeepers interpreted "cultural capital" as a sign of grace, indicating that a child was gifted and worthy of attention and cultivation. Students with the proper cultural socialization, then, would excel in primary school, be admitted to the most selective institutions of higher education (which increasingly controlled access to the best opportunities), and ultimately succeed in reproducing their parents' elite status. In his empirical work, Bourdieu mustered much evidence of high levels of class reproduction in France, as well as strong associations among family socioeconomic status, educational achievement and attainment, and cultural practices and tastes (1984; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, 1979).

Bourdieu was careful to distinguish between his general theory of capital as an analytic scheme and the institutional details of his accounts of French society, including the centrality of aesthetic taste to cultural capital. By the 1980s, however, researchers in many other countries had merged Bourdieuan reproduction theory with the methods and perspectives of the status-attainment tradition to analyze the impact of family background on cultural capital, and the impact of cultural capital on success and persistence in schooling, as well as a range of other outcome variables. Despite the complaints of critics who suggested that the potency of aesthetic culture as a sign of distinction was peculiar to France, or at least to Europe, most of these researchers used indicators of cultural capital similar to (albeit less detailed than) those Bourdieu had employed: attendance at high culture arts events and taste for high culture art forms.<sup>1</sup> For the past 20 years, scholars have been documenting strong associations between socioeconomic status and "cultural capital" thus defined (DiMaggio and Mohr, 1985; Van Eijck, 1997; Mohr and DiMaggio, 1995; DeGraaf et al., 2000), as well as statistically significant, albeit weaker, effects of cultural capital on educational and other outcomes (reviewed in DiMaggio, 2001).

Artistic practices and tastes have served as useful measures of cultural capital because of their generality. It is only sensible to speak of cultural *capital* if one is referring to media of broad legitimacy. Because the arts have been deeply institutionalized by states and institutions of higher learning, they constitute the most broadly recognized forms of prestigious culture throughout Europe and the Americas (DiMaggio, 1982). To be sure, in any specific status group—whether it is a local

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<sup>1</sup> Lamont (1992) reports that U.S. middle-class men, especially men from outside the northeast, are less likely than French men to report judging people on the basis of their aesthetic judgment. In a study of a sample of students at an elite U.S. university, Kane (2003) reports that (controlling for age, academic program, gender, and family background) Europeans are significantly more likely than U.S. students to attend classical-music concerts and visit art museums (but not ballet performances); but they are *not* significantly more likely than their U.S. counterparts to report that it is important to them that their friends are cultured.

friendship circle or a nationally organized profession like medicine or computer science—there will be parochial forms of knowledge that are highly prestigious, possession of which marks a person as an insider worthy of respect. But such forms of knowledge are negotiable only within relatively narrow circles: in effect, they constitute local cultural barter systems rather than currencies for a national cultural economy. By contrast, the arts, especially the high-culture arts, have been the most *general* form of prestigious culture in the West, and thus a privileged indicator of cultural capital. Consistent with this, research has demonstrated that familiarity with the high-culture arts (including attendance at arts events) appears to be the best cultural predictor of school success, exceeding the usually insignificant influence of academic knowledge about the arts or artistic practice (DiMaggio 1982, 2001).

Despite the persistence of research support for the importance of the dynamics Bourdieu identified, and for the efficacy of high-culture arts attendance and appreciation as indicators of cultural capital, most observers believe that the position of the high culture arts as cultural capital is declining, especially in the United States (DiMaggio, 1991; Lamont, 1992; Holt, 1991). Several reasons have been posited for this.

First, commercial popular culture has become so pervasive and so finely segmented (as nichecasting has replaced broadcasting in fields as diverse as fiction publishing, cable television, the music industry, and film) as to overwhelm the ability of universities and nonprofit cultural institutions to maintain their cultural centrality (Warde et al., 1999). Notwithstanding the expansion of the nonprofit cultural field in the 1970s and 1980s, orchestras, theatres, and opera companies suffer persistent budgetary problems and in many cases perceive that their audiences are declining in the face of competition from other cultural fare and leisure activities (The Wolf Organization, 1991; McCarthy et al., 2001). The problem of competition only became worse with the rise of the Internet, which offers many kinds of convenient at-home entertainment through a single telephone or cable connection.

Second, many U.S. social critics believe that high culture is crumbling from within, participating in its own de-institutionalization (DiMaggio, 1987, 1991). In particular, high culture appears to be far less insulated from other cultural forms than in the past, and cultural hierarchy has been under attack not only by supporters of multiculturalism but by artists themselves. Postmodern artists in many fields have effaced boundaries between “serious” and “popular” culture; and types of art once dismissed as merely commercial are now the subject of university courses and museum exhibitions. The U.S. public stoutly rejects the proposition that high culture is inherently more valuable than folk or popular culture, and the most educated Americans (who should have the greatest stake in cultural hierarchy) are the most united in rejecting it (DiMaggio and Bryson, 1995).

Third, many sociologists who study patterns of artistic taste and participation contend that prestige now accrues to the person who is familiar with many cultural forms from many parts of (what once was) the cultural hierarchy. According to Richard Peterson, the new cultural capitalists are the “omnivores,” men and women who are comfortable speaking about and participating in high and popular culture and everything in between (Peterson, 1997; Peterson and Kern, 1996; Van Rees et

al., 1999). This trend, it is argued, is supported by high levels of geographic mobility and job histories that require co-workers to work effectively with many types of people for relatively short periods. Research indicates that people with complex and heterogeneous social networks—precisely what one would expect as a result of these trends—have more heterogeneous (and “omnivorous”) tastes (Erickson 1996; Relish 1997; Kane, *this volume*).

These are complex arguments and detailed review of evidence bearing on the propositions they comprise is beyond the scope of this paper. What is important for our purposes is that there are many plausible reasons to believe that the grip of high culture on the process of cultural and social reproduction in the United States (and perhaps elsewhere) may have loosened over the past several decades.

This paper is a preliminary effort to see to what extent this appears to be true. There are two ways one might go about this task. We have chosen to take a descriptive, demographic approach that permits us to examine change in rates of participation by different population groups directly. At this stage, we are more interested in illuminating trends than in testing hypotheses formally. The latter is best accomplished using more conventional regression-based methods, which enable one to inspect change in the effects of particular variables over time, and to estimate the contribution of particular mediating factors to those changes. We shall undertake such analyses in the future, but for now will focus on the preliminary step of documenting the trends.

## **1. Data and implications**

Until now, researchers who have wished to analyze trends in arts participation have been frustrated by the absence of comparable data collected at different points of time. With the release of the 2002 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA), relatively long-term trend analysis has finally become possible. Surveys of Public Participation in the Arts were also undertaken in 1982 and 1992. Core items in the 1982 survey were repeated in 1992 and 2002. In each year, the survey was sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts, Research Division and fielded by the U.S. Bureau of the Census.<sup>2</sup>

The SPPAs are household surveys. In 1982 and 1992, they were administered (to 17,254 and 12,736 persons, respectively, most of whom were interviewed by telephone,

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<sup>2</sup> The 1982 and 1992 surveys differed from the 2002 study in two ways. First, they were undertaken as add-on modules to the National Crime Survey, whereas the 2002 study was a module of the Current Population Survey. Second, they were year-round surveys, whereas the 2002 survey was administered in August. According to John Robinson and Tom Bradshaw (personal communication), extensive analyses have disconfirmed the hypothesis that either of these differences influenced the results in a systematic manner. (The arts-participation items we use in this paper refer to participation during the previous 12 months, so should not be affected by the month in which the survey is administered.) Surveys administered in 1985 and 1997 are less useful for our purposes, the former because it was aborted midway for budgetary reasons and the latter because it was administered by a different survey organization and generated results that were systematically discrepant from the Census-administered studies.

but some of whom were interviewed in person) as supplements to the National Crime Survey. Statistical weights rendered the results comparable to the full population of non-institutionalized U.S. residents 18 years of age or older.<sup>3</sup> In 2002, the SPPA was administered as part of the Current Population Survey and 17,135 persons responded.

We build on earlier studies of the 1982 and 1992 SPPAs by Peterson and Sherkat (1996) and by Balfe and Meyersohn (1996). Although these studies did not attempt to address the theoretical questions we pose in this paper, they did indicate that arts participation began to decline with the early baby boom generation—persons born between 1946 and 1955—and continued thereafter. With data from 2002, we are able to see if these trends persisted as the baby boomers and subsequent generations aged, and if they are present in the cohort born between 1976 and 1985, who first appear in the SPPA data in 2002.

Our strategy is to compare results from the 1982, 1992 and 2002 studies, and to ask if trends in arts participation are consistent with the view that the importance of the arts to social reproduction is declining. For the purpose of addressing this issue, we would prefer to have comparable data on trends in the impact of cultural capital on such outcomes as years of schooling, college quality, and early occupational attainment; but we do not. Absent such data, we focus on trends in arts consumption, an approach that makes sense in so far as one accepts the premises that actors are, first, knowledgeable and, second, reasonably rational. With respect to the first, we believe that most people are aware, consciously or unconsciously, of the extent to which involvement in the arts is part of the complex of prestigious cultural dispositions and practices that help people get ahead (i.e., cultural capital). With respect to the second, we assume that if the status payoff of participation in the arts declines, people will have reduced incentive to participate and will participate less.<sup>4</sup> Because participation in the arts becomes intrinsically gratifying to most people once they begin to do it, we would anticipate that declines in incentives would have stronger effects on initial investments in exposure to the arts than on continuity of participation, and that they would therefore show up more sharply in differences among cohorts, than in change within cohorts over time. Even without status payoffs, the arts will continue to attract many people for other reasons. We only posit that declining incentives will produce some *net decline* in consumption.

Armed with these assumptions, what would we expect to find if the arts were declining as a form, source, and indicator of cultural capital?

1. Declining participation in the arts. If the value of the arts for social reproduction declined between 1982 and 2002, then the incentive of persons to attend arts

<sup>3</sup> We chose age groups to follow the usage of Peterson and Sherkat (1992). According to Sherkat (personal communication), the original data set with which they worked included a few 17-year-old respondents, whose records were ultimately eliminated as the result of further cleaning of the data.

<sup>4</sup> It is not necessary to believe that people consciously evaluate the status payoff of arts attendance on their pocket calculators in order to decide whether or not to attend arts events. We follow Bourdieu in viewing strategic rationality as to a great extent institutionalized, with rational action reflecting the alignment of disposition and opportunity that Bourdieu (1974) calls *la causalité du probable*.

events would have declined, causing a net decline in participation. There are many other good reasons to attend arts events than enhancing one's social status, of course. But unless there were some reason to believe that such motives were more compelling in 2002 than they were in 1982, *we would anticipate a net decline in participation* if status incentives have diminished.

1.a. (Bourdieu, 1973; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979) posited that the successful inculcation of cultural capital occurred early in life, at the time of the formation of the *habitus*. Other scholars have rejected this emphasis on early socialization. Nonetheless, if there is *any* tendency for early experience to influence adult participation patterns, *any decline should be more visible among younger than among older cohorts of the population*. (Most observers have suggested that the hegemony of high culture began to give way in the 1960s, suggesting that trends would begin to be visible only among cohorts that came of age in that decade or later.)

1.b. If the value of the high-culture arts as cultural capital has declined, then we would expect to find more marked declines in attendance at high-culture arts events (for example, symphony concerts, ballet performances, or operas) than at events with more mass appeal (for example, craft fairs or historical sites). Pastimes that never were very prestigious have no prestige to lose, so should not be affected by a de-institutionalization of high culture. And if Peterson (Peterson and Kern, 1996) is right about omnivorousness, such activities might actually gain in prestige as high culture activities lose some of theirs. Therefore, *declines should be less visible in more popular arts activities than in high-culture events*.

2. The best sociodemographic predictor of attendance at arts events in study after study has been years of schooling. The U.S. population has become more educated between 1982 and 2002, and rising educational levels should reduce the visibility of the incentive-reduction effect. Therefore, *we anticipate that the decline in attendance will be most visible within groups defined by years of education*, rather than in the population as a whole.

Moreover if arts attendance has become less associated with elite status, then *the gap between participation by the most highly educated and participation by people with less education should decline*. Some theories of postmodernity have emphasized the increasing plasticity of identity and the importance of taste and consumption as instruments of self-definition (Harvey, 1989; Featherstone, 1991; Pescosolido and Rubin, 2000). In so far as this is the case, the enhanced value of arts participation as a source of identity could counteract its reduced value as a source of social status. If so, we might not see participation decline. But because the significance of arts participation for identity formation should be less skewed by social origin than is its role as cultural capital, we would anticipate that the extent to which arts participation was associated with educational attainment would decline, even if net attendance levels did not. (If new identity incentives have not emerged to offset the effects of declining status incentives, we would expect intergroup differences to decline a fortiori.) As ever, one would expect such trends to be particularly notable among younger cohorts.

3. In the U.S. at least, measures of cultural capital have always been strongly influenced by gender, with women attending more high-culture arts events than men,

reading more literature, taking more classes, and evincing more highbrow tastes (Dumais, 2002). One may interpret these differences as reflecting a household division of cultural labor [descending from the “doctrine of separate spheres” (Welter, 1966; Smith-Rosenberg, 1985)] in which women, as mothers and as guardians of the domestic sphere, were vested with disproportionate responsibility for the inculcation of cultural capital (Collins, 1992; Tepper, 2000; Upright this volume). If aesthetic cultural capital has become less important to social reproduction, then we would expect the participation of women to decline especially rapidly, relative to (the already lower) rates of participation of men. In other words, *we would expect that (within education groups) the ratio of women’s to men’s participation would decline over time.* (As usual, the expectation is strongest for younger cohorts.)

## 2. Results

In this paper, we focus on what are called the SPPA’s “core” items: questions about attendance at classical music concerts, jazz performances, opera, musical theatre, nonmusical theatre, ballet, visual art exhibits at museums or galleries, arts and craft fairs, historic sites, and, in 1992 and 2002 only, modern dance. For the most part, these represent “high culture” art forms, by which we mean artistic genres that are treated by critics as “serious,” characterized by a tendency for evaluation to place greater priority on responses of critics and artists than on responses of the general public, represented in college and university curricula, likely to receive subvention from private patrons, foundations, or government agencies based on the perceived aesthetic value of their product, and often produced and distributed by nonprofit organizations (Becker, 1982; Bourdieu, 1983). Systems of artistic classification (DiMaggio, 1987) have changed continuously, with a trend in the U.S. toward an expansion of high-culture institutional arenas (university curricula, serious criticism, government grant-making) during the twentieth century (DiMaggio, 1992). One can distinguish among the SPPA core activities a gradation by prestige, associated with the percentage of revenue derived from commercial productions and with the recency of the art form’s inclusion in university curricula, with classical music, museum art, opera, and ballet at the top, followed by theatre and modern dance, then jazz and musical theatre, and finally art and craft fairs (with historical sites institutionally orthogonal but aimed at a broad audience).

The SPPA data are in some respects ill equipped to help us fathom the intricacies of change in the structure, composition, and distribution of cultural capital, for two reasons. First, as Bourdieu argued, cultural capital inheres less in specific behaviors than in a particular relationship to elite culture, particular modes of appropriation and appropriate discursive forms. The mere act of attending an arts event tells us relatively little in itself about the extent to which people use the arts as a form of cultural capital to define their identities and manage boundaries within and between status groups. Second, the SPPA data provide more reliable information about *whether* someone attends a certain type of event than about how frequently they attend it. If attendance rates at orchestra concerts decline, for example, but people

who do attend are attending many more concerts, then the two trends may balance one another out, at least as far as orchestra managements are concerned.

We acknowledge these limitations but believe that looking at attendance rates is valuable nonetheless. Participation data have provided the best available proxies for cultural capital, operating effectively to disclose relationships not subject to plausible alternative explanations. We have no other individual-level data relevant to tracking change over time. Moreover, we have no particular reason to believe that the frequency with which attenders have attended arts events has changed over the past twenty years. Moreover, from a theoretical standpoint, a shift from broad participation by many high-status persons to very intensive participation by a few high-status persons would make the arts a less general form of cultural capital—which is to say, it would make the arts more like many other high-status forms of knowledge or activity that operate as currency within relatively limited networks and less like a broadly recognized form of cultural capital at all.

After presenting attendance rates in the full population for each art form for each year, we plot attendance rates for the full sample by cohort for each decade (1982, 1992, and 2002) to investigate trends with aging controlled. We then disaggregate the data, first by years of education (less than high school, high school graduate, some college, at least four complete years of college) and then by gender. To explore change in gaps between men and women and between more or less educated respondents, we use odds ratios, because these are relatively robust with respect to differences in absolute participation rates (Martin, 2003). Odds ratios,  $r$ , are calculated as:  $r_{jk} = (p_j/[1-p_j]) / (p_k/[1-p_k])$ , where  $p_j$  is the probability of attendance by the first of two groups and  $p_k$  is the attendance probability of the second.

### 2.1. *Has arts participation declined?*

If the arts have become less central as a form of cultural capital then we would anticipate that attendance at arts events would have declined between 1982 and 2002. Furthermore, we would expect the declines to be most visible within educational groups (i.e., controlling for change over time in educational attainment), for the most prestigious arts forms (attendance at which was more firmly indicative of cultural capital), and among the youngest cohorts of the sample (those who came to age in the postmodern era).

Table 1 shows participation rates for the entire weighted sample in each of nine core activities for each survey year, 1982, 1992, and 2002. The last column indicates the percentage change in the odds of attendance (the attendance rate divided by the rate of nonattendance) between 1982 and 2002. The results provide little support for the notion that the arts are in decline as a form of cultural capital. In some areas attendance went up slightly, in others it declined. The greatest declines were in the most popular activities: attendance at art and craft fairs and historic sites, odds of attending each of which declined approximately 22 percent. The greatest increase was in attendance at art museums and galleries, odds of which climbed more than 25 percent. Other changes were quite modest: classical music attendance declined slightly, jazz attendance rose a bit, and rates of attendance at the least popular

Table 1

Participation rates for each core activity for each year, full sample

Event type	1982	1992	2002	Percentage $\Delta$ odds
Classical music	0.130	0.125	0.116	–12.2
Jazz	0.096	0.106	0.108	14.0
Opera	0.030	0.033	0.032	6.8
Musical theatre	0.186	0.174	0.171	–9.7
Play (not musical)	0.119	0.135	0.123	3.8
Ballet	0.042	0.046	0.039	–7.4
Other dance	N/A	0.071	0.063	N/A
Art museum	0.221	0.266	0.265	27.1
Art or craft fair	0.393	0.406	0.334	–22.5
Historic site	0.372	0.344	0.316	–22.0

Source: Surveys of Public Participation in the Arts. Rates are weighted to reflect population composition.

activities, ballet and opera, changed marginally from already miniscule levels. Moreover, for only three activities were declines monotonic: historic sites, classical music, and musical theatre (which declined very modestly).

Because participation in many kinds of leisure activities is structured by age, it is useful to look at changes within particular age groups. Fig. 1 depicts attendance rates by age groups for each of nine core participation activities. The darkest line (diamonds) depicts the figures for 1982; the line of medium hue (squares) represents 1992; and the light line (triangles) reports data from 2002.

Again, results vary considerably from art form to art form. Let us begin by looking at the historically most prestigious art forms: classical music, opera, ballet, and the visual arts. Attendance rates at classical music concerts have declined markedly among younger cohorts since 1982 (with the worst of the decline occurring between 1982 and 1992). By contrast, attendance among older cohorts (those 47 years of age or older) increased notably between 1982 and 1992, declining only slightly in the previous decade. Similar but less consistent trends are visible for ballet and opera. Indeed, the same is true of attendance at stage plays and musical theatre productions. Attendance at all of these performing-arts activities has remained stable or has grown among most cohorts of older Americans, while falling among younger audiences. This pattern is consistent with the notion that the status of these activities as cultural capital has declined.

The pattern for art museum attendance has been somewhat different. Among persons 18 to 46, attendance rose from 1982 to 1992, then fell back to 1982 levels by 2002, remaining stable throughout the period. Among older Americans, attendance continued to rise during each decade. Like the performing arts, then, art museums have fared best (relatively speaking) among persons middle-aged and older; but unlike the performing arts activities, they have held their own even among the young.

The outlier for the performing arts is attendance at jazz concerts. Here the shape of the age/attendance distribution changed markedly between 1982 and 1992, and

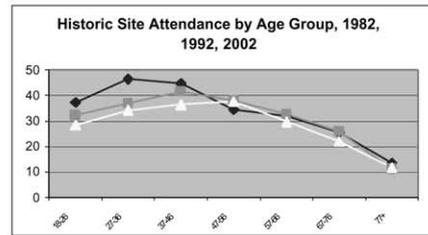
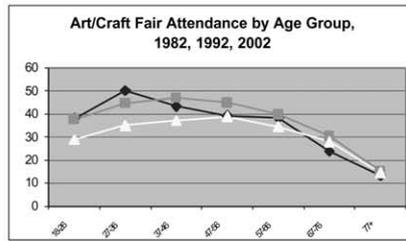
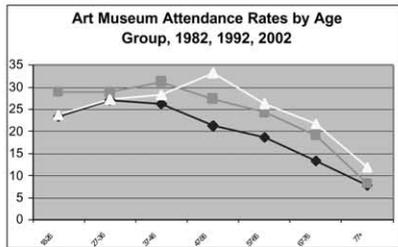
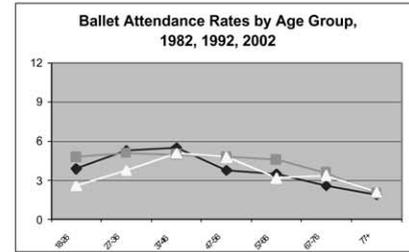
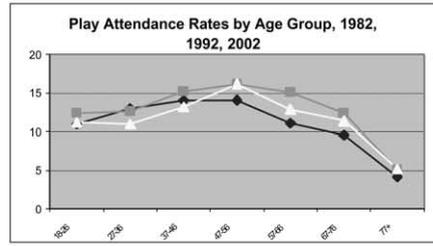
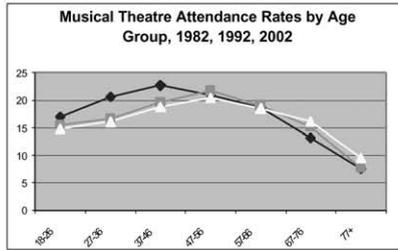
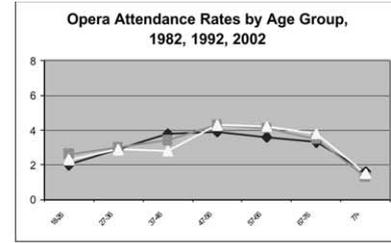
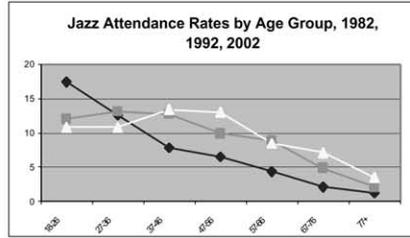
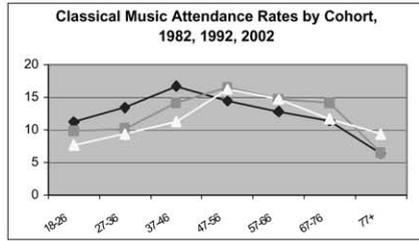


Fig. 1. Attendance rates by age groups for full sample: 1982 (black), 1992 (gray), 2002 (white).

remained stable in the decade that followed. In 1982, jazz was a young person's music: attendance was highest among the 18–26-year-old age group; declined sharply through age 46, and continued to decline, at a slower rate, thereafter. In 1992, attendance peaked between the ages of 18 and 26; in 2002, it peaked between the ages of 37 and 46. In part, this reflects the fact that the cohort that was 18–26 retained its enthusiasm as it aged. But this is not all that was going on. In addition, declining attendance by age in 1992 and 2002 not only started later but was more modest in slope than in 1982, so that the cohort that was 27–36 years old in 1982 attended at roughly the same rate twenty years later, making the age/attendance curve for jazz rather similar to that for art museums.

Attendance at two activities—arts-and-craft fairs and historic sites—arguably falls outside the category of high-culture consumption as this is ordinarily understood. As we have seen, these two types of activities experienced the most marked declines between 1982 and 2002. Attendance at arts and crafts fairs held fairly constant among Americans 67 or older; peaked among respondents 37–66 in 1992 before declining in 2002; and declined monotonically among persons under 37. (Moreover, participation by members of the cohorts that were youngest in 1982 and 1992 continued to decline relative to their own earlier rates [Figures available on request].) By contrast, most of the decline in attendance at historic sites occurred between 1982 and 1992, and was concentrated among persons aged 18 through 36.

Taken as a whole, the pattern is consistent with the notion that the traditional high-culture performing arts became less central to cultural capital during the last two decades of the Twentieth century. Not only did attendance decline slightly but, more important, the decline was concentrated among the youngest cohorts in the population, suggesting a failure of these art forms to renew their audiences. On the other hand, this trend was not peculiar to the more prestigious performing arts. Musical theatre, a relatively middlebrow form, displayed the same pattern; and the most popular activities, attending art-and-craft fairs and visiting historic sites, declined even more rapidly.

The two outlying activities are attendance at art museums and jazz concerts, rates of which have increased markedly among older Americans and, except for jazz attendance in the very youngest cohort, remained stable among the young. As a U.S.-bred art form with African-American roots, jazz lies firmly outside the terrain of Euro-American high culture. At the same time, as it has been annexed by university music departments, highbrow critics, private foundations, government grantmakers, and nonprofit music presenters, it has arguably undergone an institutional transformation into a form of high culture—a transformation which we may see reflected in its evolving age distribution (DiMaggio and Ostrower, 1990; Peterson, 1972; Lopes, 2002). Art museums deviate in another way, as they are more engaged both with contemporary art and with nonwestern cultures than are symphony orchestras, ballet or opera companies, and most theatre companies. (Zolberg, 1988 argues that art museums, with their bricolage of objects from many times and places, are quintessentially “postmodern.”) Consistent with the notion that museums' openness to novelty and cultural diversity is part of their appeal, DiMaggio (1996) found that U.S. art-museum visitors were significantly more cosmopolitan and tolerant than

nonvisitors, even after controlling for sociodemographic factors. The exceptionalism of jazz and art-museum attendance, then, is consistent with the postmodern account of cultural change; with the “omnivore” story; and also with the notion that the body of prestigious arts capable of serving as cultural capital may evolve over time.

## 2.2. *Has arts attendance declined most among the highly educated?*

Bourdieu argues that prestigious cultural forms are effective as cultural capital only for those equipped to use them. From this perspective, although anyone may participate in the arts for intrinsic gratifications, the status value of participation will accrue primarily to the highly educated. If the value of the arts as cultural capital declines, then, we would expect this to have its greatest effect on people with college educations or more, for whom this decline would reduce an important (if ordinarily unconscious) incentive for participation.

Focusing on college graduates is also useful because it controls for much of the change in levels of educational attainment over the lifetimes of persons represented in the survey. In particular, rates of college attendance rose rapidly during the 1960s. Between 1982 and 2002, people who left the survey population through death were replaced by young persons with substantially higher levels of education. (Other things equal, this would have ensured increasing rates of arts attendance between 1982 and 2002. Of course, we have already seen that other things were not equal.) Although looking at change within age groups controls for some of the effect of increasing educational levels, it does not control for all of it, especially in comparisons over time among cohorts of the middle-aged.

Table 2 reports attendance rates in nine activities for 1982, 1992, and 2002, as well as the change in odds of attendance from 1982 to 2002, for respondents who had completed at least four years of higher education. Note that in every year, participation rates in all activities are substantially higher for college graduates than for the population as a whole. Note also that declines in odds of participation are more

Table 2

Participation rates for core activities for each year, respondents with four or more years of higher education only

Event type	1982	1992	2002	Percentage Δ odds
Classical	0.334	0.284	0.259	–30.3
Jazz	0.190	0.221	0.209	12.6
Opera	0.082	0.083	0.079	–4.0
Musical theatre	0.411	0.328	0.326	–30.7
Play (not musical)	0.307	0.286	0.255	–22.7
Ballet	0.107	0.102	0.090	–17.5
Art museum	0.492	0.517	0.505	5.3
Art or craft fair	0.632	0.575	0.501	–41.5
Historic site	0.674	0.568	0.530	–45.5

Source: Surveys of Public Participation in the Arts. Rates are weighted to reflect population composition.

substantial for the highly educated than for the population as a whole. Indeed, the odds of a college graduate attending a classical music concert were 30 percent lower in 2002 than in 1982; for plays, the odds were 23 percent lower (even though for the population as a whole they had risen slightly). Losses remained greatest among the most popular activities, with odds of attending arts and craft fairs or historic sites declining by more than 40 percent. Art-museum attendance increased among college graduates, but almost imperceptibly. The only activities for which attendance trends were relatively similar for college graduates and for the population as a whole were jazz attendance (which rose almost as much for college graduates as for everyone else) and opera attendance (which changed very little). Unlike the whole population, rates declined monotonically for college graduates in six of nine activities (all but jazz, art museums, and opera, where they rose between 1982 and 1992 and declined between 1992 and 2002).

Fig. 2 reports the attendance of college graduates at the nine core activities by age group for 1982, 1992, and 2002. For the performing arts, it suggests that the apparent increases in attendance among persons aged 47–66 for the population as a whole reflected the fact that those groups had considerably higher levels of education in 2002 than in 1982. For college graduates only, attendance at classical music concerts declined among all age groups but the oldest. Moreover, those cohorts entering the sample in the youngest age groups in 1982 and 1992 did not catch up with their elders: Instead, their attendance rates fell further as they aged. Between 1982 and 2002, opera attendance held up better among the youngest age groups, but experienced sizable declines among college graduates 37–46 and 57–66 years of age. Ballet attendance, by contrast, declined in the three youngest age groups, with more uneven patterns for older college graduates. In 2002, college graduates under the age of 66 were attending fewer plays and musicals than their counterparts had in 1982, with the decline among persons younger than 47 especially notable for musical theatre between 1982 and 1992.

The other more popular activities suffered substantial declines among college graduates as well, with art and craft fair attendance losing ground among every age group except persons aged 57 through 76, and historical site attendance declining across the board (mostly between 1982 and 1992). College graduates' art-museum attendance rates were stable: except for a sharp rise among persons 47–56, there was little change within any age group between any of the surveys. Jazz attendance by the youngest college graduates (aged 18–26) declined between 1982 and 1992, then rebounded slightly, and rates for persons 27–36 were relatively stable. But among each age group between the ages of 37–76, rates of jazz concert attendance increased markedly between 1982 and 1992, and remained steady in the decade that followed. The resulting age/attendance curve, as compared to the distribution in 1982, reflects jazz's journey from a music of the young to one of the high-culture arts.

As with evidence from the full sample, the decline in college graduates' attendance at many kinds of performing-arts events (and the fact that the decline tends to have been greatest among younger cohorts), is consistent with the view that the performing arts are becoming less central parts of the status culture of highly educated Americans, whereas the visual arts are holding their own and jazz may have entered

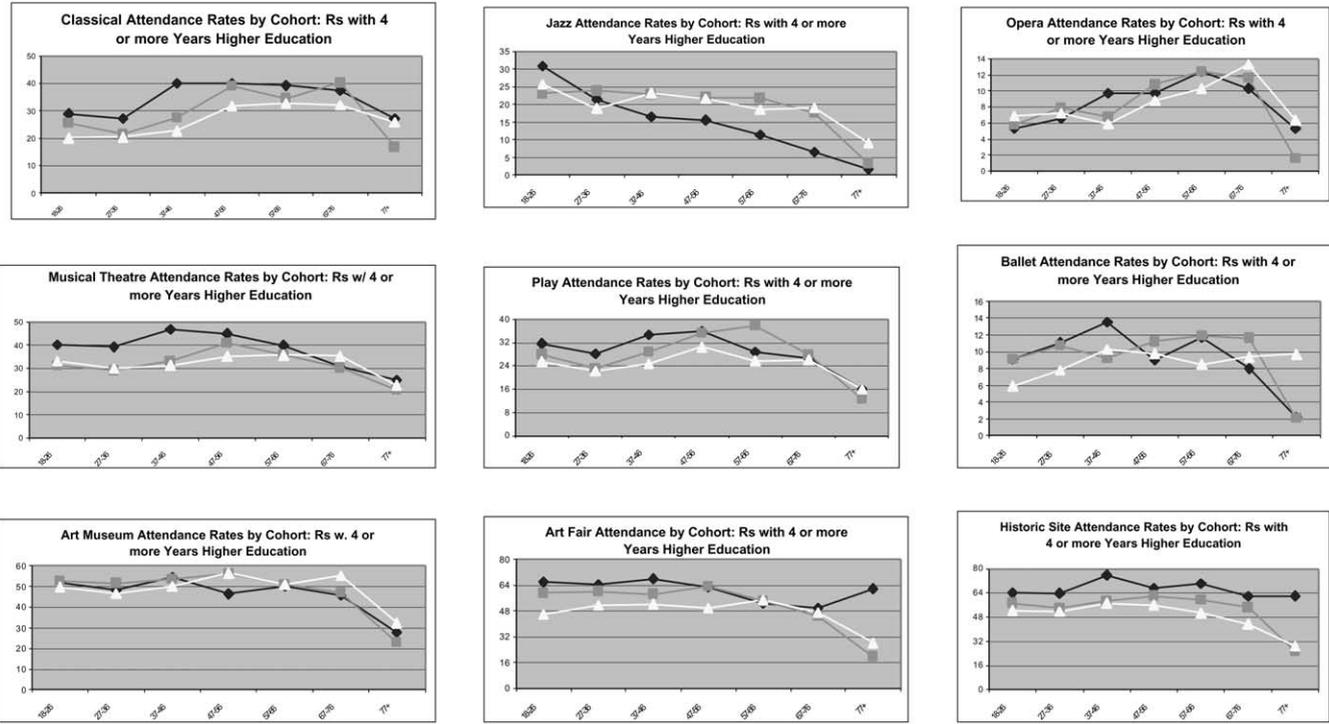


Fig. 2. Attendance rates by age groups for respondents who had completed 4 or more years of higher education: 1982 (black), 1992 (gray), 2002 (white).

the realm of high culture. At the same time, declines in attendance at historic sites, art-and-craft fairs, and musical theatre productions demonstrate that whatever trends are reducing participation in prestigious cultural forms are affecting middlebrow culture consumption as well.

Earlier we argued that if the status of the arts as cultural capital was endangered, we might expect a more rapid decline in participation among highly educated than among other people, leading to a decline in the ratio of college graduates' to others' odds of attendance. Fig. 3 depicts these ratios in each year for each core activity, comparing college graduates to high school graduates who had not completed additional years of education.<sup>5</sup> Here we see that there is no support for the expectation that the distribution of participation has become more equal over time. Indeed, the odds of high-school graduates participating in arts events have declined even more quickly than the odds for college graduates. For example, between 1982 and 2002, when the classical-music concert attendance rate for college graduates declined a substantial 22.5 percent (from 33.4 to 25.9 percent), the rate for high school graduates fell by more than 40 percent (from 7.6 to 4.5 percent). Declines in opera and ballet were even more disproportionate. Jazz and art-museum attendance, which increased modestly among college graduates actually declined among their high-school educated counterparts. Thus, in participation in high-culture arts events, as in many other areas of U.S. life, inequality appears to have increased during the last two decades of the twentieth century.

**Ratio College Graduate to High School Attendance Odds**

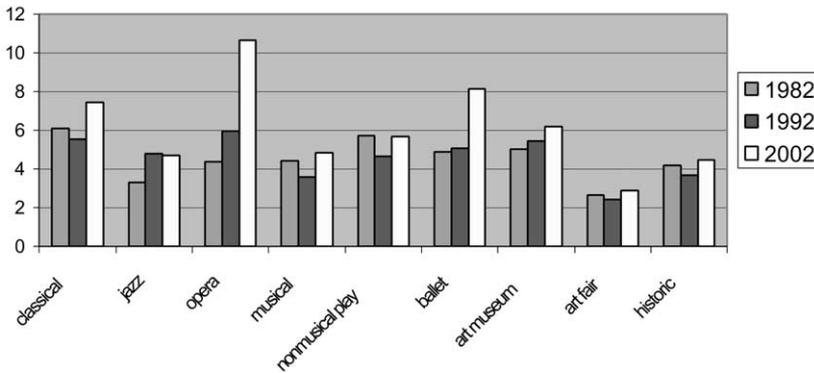


Fig. 3. Ratio of odds of respondent with at least 4 years of higher education attending event to odds for high school graduate without college.

<sup>5</sup> We chose to compare college graduates to this group rather than to persons who had not completed high school or to persons who had completed between one and three years of college because, for most activities, this is a particularly significant gap.

Taken as a whole these results suggest that the arts face substantial competition from other activities and that many live arts-and-humanities activities may be in relative decline. More popular cultural activities are declining as rapidly as the high-culture arts, and attendance has fallen faster among less educated than among more educated Americans. This indicates that the changes we have identified are *not* being *driven* by a dramatic deflation in the value of cultural capital. Nonetheless, a long-term erosion of participation might eventually *effect* such a devaluation of high-culture arts attendance, even if its causes are independent.

### 2.3. *Are the high-culture arts being defeminized?*

Earlier we called attention to the centrality of gender to the distribution and reproduction of cultural capital in the U.S. At least from the Victorian era onward, a domestic division of labor placed responsibility for business and political activity in the male domain, while allocating to women (who were believed better graced with virtues of sensitivity and refinement) responsibility for the household and for inculcating proper values and sensibilities in the young (Collins, 1992). Research on arts participation has usually found higher rates among women than among men, with differences often wide (DiMaggio, 1982; Bihagen and Katz-Gerro, 2000; Tepper, 2000). Some, but not all, studies have also found stronger effects of family background on arts-related measures of cultural capital for women and stronger effects of cultural capital on women's educational outcomes (Dumais, 2002; but see Aschaffenburg and Maas, 1997).

Persistent gender differences are also evident in the contributions to this special issue. Kaufman and Gabler's (2004) study of extracurricular activities demonstrates that female high-school students are more likely to take dance or music lessons, visit art museums, and engage in other arts activities than are their male counterparts; and although the results vary markedly depending on activity and outcome variable, a few of these activities have more positive payoffs for young women's college attendance than for that of young men. By contrast, Kane finds few gender differences among students at an elite private university in arts participation (with the exception of dance), but reports that network diversity increases several types of arts participation for women but not for men. In analysis of married couples included in the SPPA, Upright finds that women's characteristics play a disproportionate role in driving households' arts participation.

Given the apparent centrality of gender and the household division of labor to the reproduction of the role of the arts as cultural capital, it stands to reason that if the arts are becoming less important as cultural capital, then the advantage of women over men in arts participation should be declining. It is also possible, of course, that women's advantage could decline because the domestic division of cultural labor was changing even if the arts status as cultural capital were *not* declining. Indeed, we might expect the gender gap to decline as a result of factors *other than* changes in the structure and composition of cultural capital. Since the 1960s, the women's movement has challenged the doctrine of separate spheres (and the practices associated with it) with some success. And, most important, middle-class women's labor-force

participation has increased dramatically in the U.S. since the 1950s, a development that has reduced the discretionary time available to precisely those women who once constituted the core of the arts public.

Despite all these good reasons to expect a defeminization of arts attendance, we find no evidence that it has occurred. Table 3 displays attendance rates in each year for nine core activities, as well as the percentage change in odds of attending between 1982 and 2002, separately for men and women. In contrast to our expectations, for all activities but classical music and ballet, women's rates of attendance grew more or declined less than men's over the twenty-year span. (Curiously, whereas male and female rates traveled largely in tandem between 1982 and 1992, between 1992 and 2002 women's attendance rates increased while men's declined for several activities.) For most activities the differences between male and female rates of change were relatively small, but taken as a whole, the results belie the notion that the arts have been defeminized. (To be sure, the two exceptions were the two most high-cultural of the performing arts; but the differences were very small, and for other high-culture art forms, opera and the visual arts, they were reversed.)

We have already seen that aggregate trends may mask differences that emerge when one controls for age and level of educational attainment. Figs. 4 and 5 plot attendance rates among college graduates by age group for each year, separately for men (fig. 4) and women (Fig. 5). We focus our attention upon the three most youthful age groups because trends should be most evident among more recent cohorts. (And we pay little attention to the two oldest cohorts, where cell sizes are often quite small, especially in the early years.) The evidence largely defies generalization. If we compare 1982 rates to those twenty years later, we see comparable

Table 3  
Participation rates for core activities for each year, men and women

		1982	1992	2002	Percentage $\Delta$ odds
Classical Music	Men	0.113	0.115	0.103	-9.9
	Women	0.146	0.133	0.127	-14.9
Jazz	Men	0.103	0.119	0.107	4.3
	Women	0.090	0.094	0.108	22.4
Opera	Men	0.027	0.031	0.028	3.8
	Women	0.033	0.035	0.035	6.3
Musical theatre	Men	0.166	0.150	0.140	-18.2
	Women	0.205	0.196	0.200	-3.0
Play (not musical)	Men	0.108	0.122	0.103	-5.2
	Women	0.129	0.146	0.142	11.7
Ballet	Men	0.027	0.036	0.025	-7.6
	Women	0.056	0.056	0.051	-9.4
Art Museum	Men	0.210	0.264	0.246	22.7
	Women	0.231	0.268	0.282	30.7
Art or Craft Fair	Men	0.331	0.353	0.270	-25.2
	Women	0.448	0.455	0.392	-20.6
Historic Sites	Men	0.377	0.348	0.305	-27.5
	Women	0.368	0.341	0.325	-17.3

Source: Surveys of Public Participation in the Arts. Rates are weighted to reflect population composition.

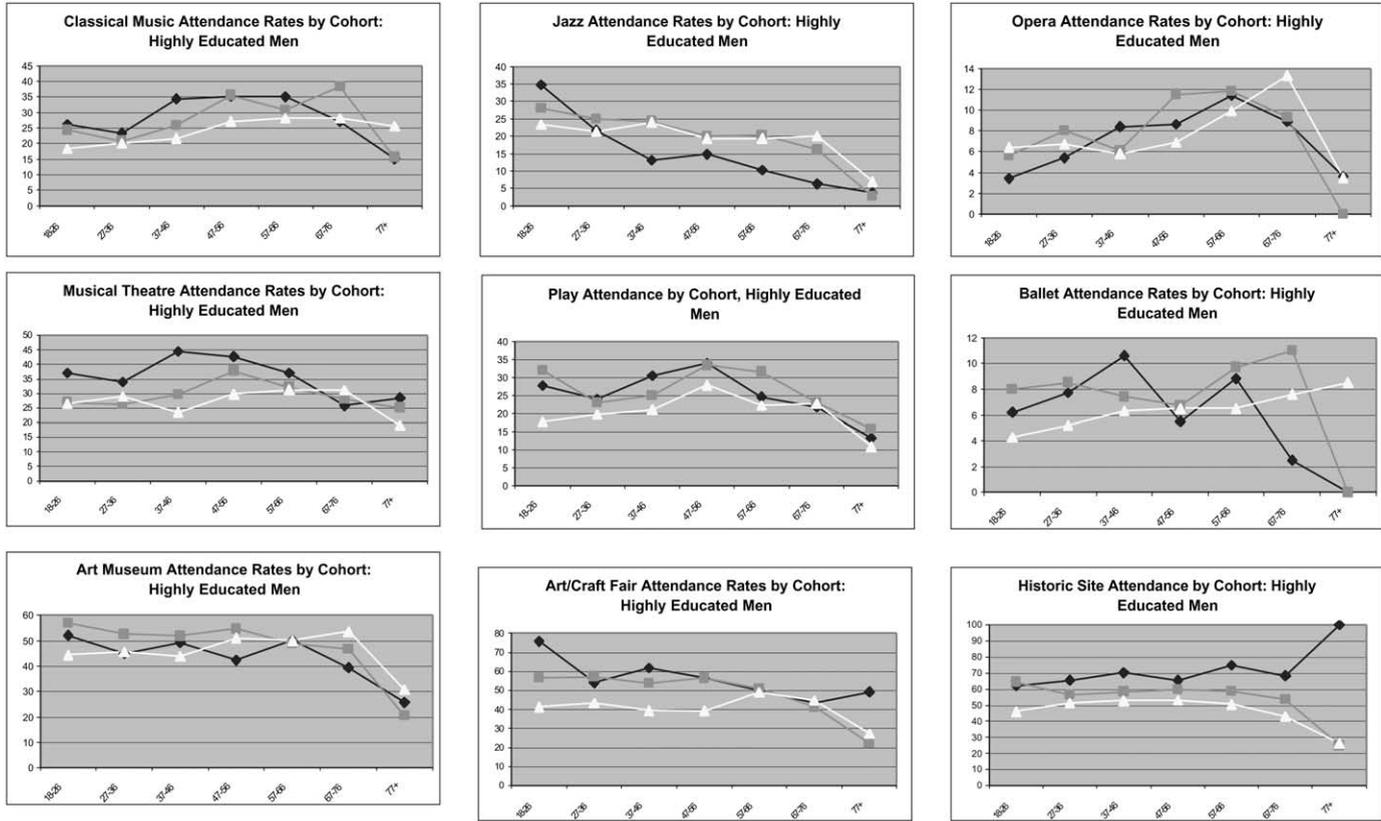


Fig. 4. Attendance rates by age groups for men who had completed 4 or more years of higher education: 1982 (black), 1992 (gray), 2002 (white).

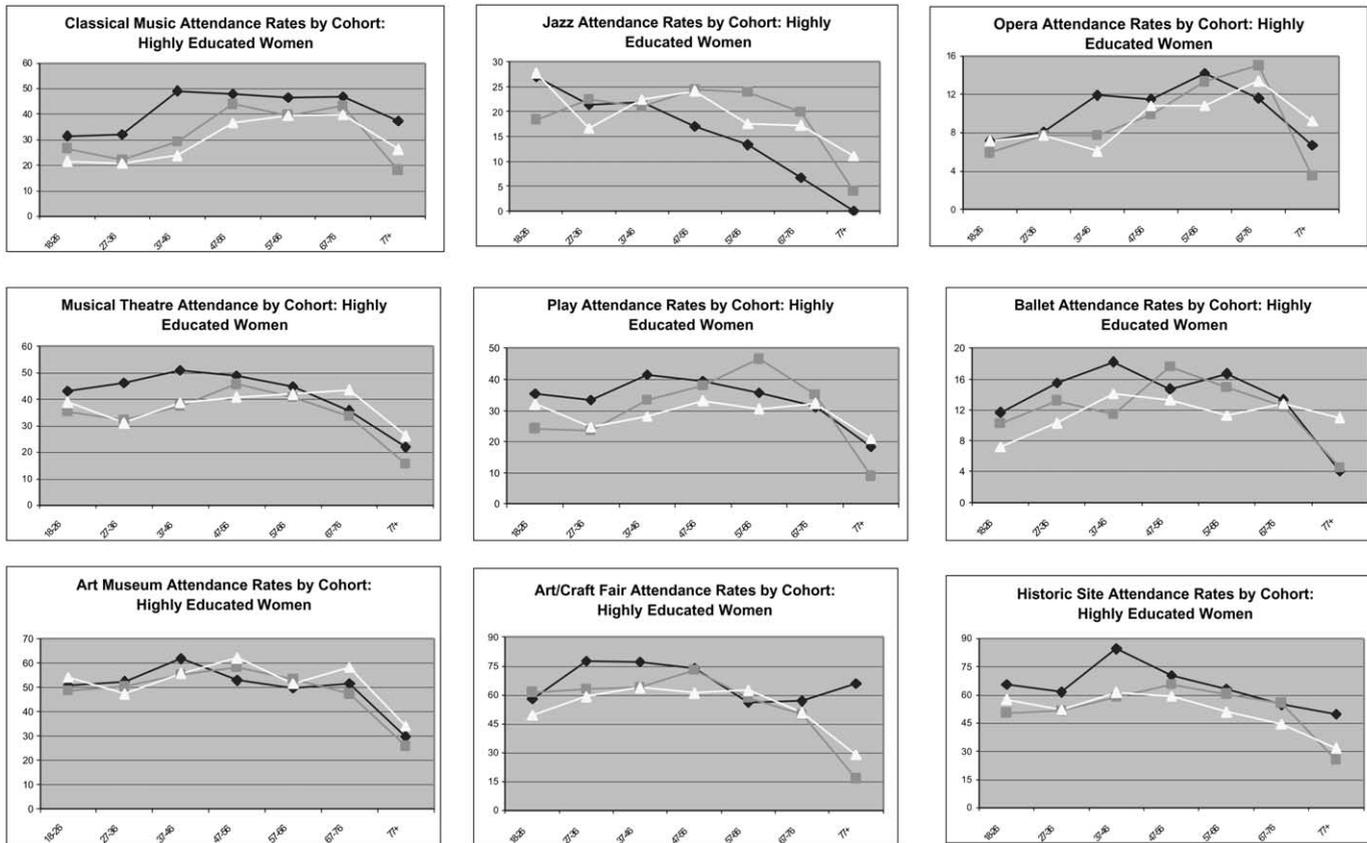


Fig. 5. Attendance rates by age groups for women who had completed 4 or more years of higher educations: 1982 (black), 1992 (gray), 2002 (white).

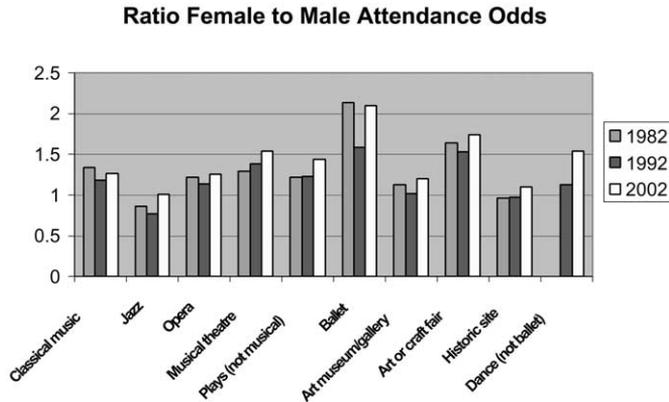


Fig. 6. Female vs. male attendance odds, 1982, 1992, and 2002.

large declines for classical music, ballet, musicals and plays. Notable, if difficult to interpret, gender differences emerge in jazz, where attendance by men in the youngest age group declined markedly between 1982 and 2002, whereas attendance by women in that age group held steady, and where women in the 47–56 age group also made more notable gains than their male peers. Opera attendance declined substantially among women aged 37–46, but was steady for the younger cohorts; by contrast opera attendance rates declined for men aged 37–46, but rebounded in the most youthful cohort. Male and female college graduates also diverged in patterns of art-museum visiting, with attendance rates for persons aged 18–36 declining markedly among men, but not among women.

Focusing on ratios of female to male odds of attendance (Fig. 6), we likewise see little pattern. For most activities (classical music, ballet, opera, jazz, visiting art museums or going to arts-and-crafts fairs) the female advantage declined between 1982 and 1992, then increased between 1992 and 2002. In others (musical theatre, plays, visiting historic sites), women's advantage increased monotonically, but not dramatically. Once again, there is no evidence indicating a de-feminization of the high-culture arts. We also analyzed change in the female-to-male odds ratios for the three youngest cohorts of men and women who had completed at least four years of higher education (tables available upon request). These displayed the same pattern as the aggregate comparisons: a decline in the ratio of women's to men's participation odds between 1982 and 1992, followed by an increase during the following decade.

### 3. Conclusions

We examined trends in arts attendance based on data from the Surveys of Public Participation in the Arts in 1982, 1992, and 2002, and asked if trends were consistent with the widespread belief that the high-culture arts have become less central to cultural capital in the United States, as many observers have suggested. Following

Bourdieu, we view “cultural capital” as comprising types of tastes, knowledge, and modes of appreciation that are institutionally supported and very broadly acknowledged to be high-status and worthy of respect (as distinguished both from passing enthusiasms that are not institutionalized and from cultural forms whose prestige is limited to particular groups). If the structure and composition of cultural capital were undergoing radical change in a way that undermined the role of the arts as cultural capital—let us call this *the meltdown scenario*—we would expect to find (a) declining rates of participation (b) concentrated among groups (college graduates, women, and, *a fortiori*, female college graduates) particularly high in cultural capital, with these trends especially visible (c) among younger cohorts and (d) in those art forms that have been institutionalized as “high culture” as opposed to more commercial or middlebrow forms.<sup>6</sup>

Our results demonstrate that rates of attendance at arts events in the United States *did* decline between 1982 and 2002, although the extent of decline was obscured by a large increase in levels of schooling (the best predictor of arts attendance) among cohorts coming of age after 1960. When one disaggregates the samples by educational attainment, declines are more clearly visible, with the odds of attendance among college graduates declining by more than 20 percent for plays, musicals, classical music concerts, arts-and-craft fairs, and historic sites. Moreover, for all performing-arts activities but jazz and opera, declines are concentrated in the three youngest age groups (18–26, 27–36, and 37–46).

The pattern of decline, however, is not entirely what we would expect if it primarily reflected developments in the high-culture arts. The trends depart from the “meltdown scenario” in several ways. First, some arts activities have held their own: The tiny opera audience has been stable, and attendance rates for jazz concerts and art museums *increased* between 1982 and 2002. Second, middlebrow activities (art or craft fairs, historic sites, musical theatre) lost their public even more quickly than the high-culture arts. Third, there was no visible trend toward defeminization. And, fourth, attendance rates for college graduates declined at a slower pace than did rates for persons whose formal education ended with high-school graduation, so that the advantage of the former over the latter actually increased for seven out of nine activities.

What do we make of these inconsistencies? First, let us consider the anomalous positives: the increased popularity of jazz and art museums in the face of declines in most of the performing arts. This development is consistent with Peterson’s “omnivore thesis,” which argues that status now inheres in cosmopolitanism and broadly inclusive tastes (Peterson, 1997). Jazz, as a form with close ties to the African-American community, and art museums, which represent artworks and objects from many cultures and traditions, stand in sharp contrast to the preponderantly Euro-American character of symphony orchestras, ballet companies, opera companies,

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<sup>6</sup> It is possible, of course, that the arts never were part of “cultural capital” in the U.S., or that they lost that status before the coming of age of the cohorts in our sample. We do not take this conclusion seriously, however, as it is inconsistent with too many studies’ findings of positive associations between cultural capital measured as participation in the arts and life chances.

and many theatre groups. The increase in popularity of these activities (though not necessarily the decline in attendance rates of others) is just what Peterson's work would lead us to anticipate.

Put another way, the observed patterns are consistent with the possibility that the arts remain central to cultural capital, but that change is occurring *in the composition of artistic cultural capital* in response to societal trends towards multiculturalism and greater inclusivity. In so far as attendance rates are indicators, the big losers among the high-culture arts are two art forms whose repertoires remain rooted in nineteenth-century Europe: classical music and ballet. The winners are an art form, jazz, with African-American roots; and the visual and plastic arts, which may have even more appeal (following postmodernism theory) in a post-modern world of images in which visual literacy has increased as verbal literacy has declined (Jameson, 1984; Lash, 1990).

Second, we must consider the anomalous negatives, the fact that attendance at relatively middlebrow arts and cultural activities (craft fairs, musical theatre, historic sites) has declined even more quickly than attendance at more highbrow activities. The patterns suggest that all arts activities are experiencing increased competition for the public's attention, and that declines in attendance reflect these broader competitive conditions rather than the endogenous dynamics of cultural capital. Additional research is needed to identify the most important sources of competition: for example, the relative role of participatory activities (sports, art-making, outdoor activities) vs. new or enhanced forms of home entertainment (cable, the Internet, computer games, DVDs or MP3s). Indeed, given the proliferation of competitors for the consumer's entertainment dollar, it is surprising that public arts events have held up as well as they have.

Research is also needed to understand the specific processes accounting for declines in attendance among younger cohorts. One line of inquiry concerns interactions between attendance at live arts events and other forms of arts consumption. To what extent do declines in attendance at out-of-home arts events reflect across-the-board diminution of the arts public? To what extent might such declines be offset by increases in in-home consumption of related products? (Peterson and Sherkat 1996 present evidence suggesting that at-home consumption may have substituted for live attendance among some age groups in some disciplines between 1982 and 1992.) How has direct participation in the arts (taking arts classes, painting or drawing, taking part in theatrical productions, playing musical instruments, and so on) fared over the past two decades?

A second line of inquiry has to do with how broader kinds of social change may be influencing arts attendance. The arts boom of the 1970s and 1980s was driven both by new infusions of government investment in the arts through the National Endowment for the Arts and the state arts agencies; and by earlier public investments in higher education, which produced unprecedented numbers of new arts consumers among the generations that came of age in the 1960s and 1970s. In the past twenty years, demographic trends may have worked against the arts. Research is needed to assess the impact, if any, of three factors in particular: increased middle-class women's labor-force participation, which may reduce discretionary time for

college-educated women; increases in the divorce rate; and, more recently, increases in birth rates to never-married middle-class women. Parents in general, and single parents in particular, may find it harder to seek entertainment outside the home (Peterson and Sherkat, 1996; Balfe and Meyersohn, 1996). Other research demonstrates (Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell [1999]) that adolescent children living with stepparents or in single-parent households are significantly less likely to visit art, history, or science museums, and that the former are also significantly less likely to take classes in the arts outside of school. It is possible, then, that changes in family structure explain part of the reduced participation rates among the youngest cohorts.

The impression that declines in performing-arts attendance reflect broad competitive forces rather than a specific delegitimation of the arts as cultural capital is consistent, as well, with two other deviations from the “meltdown scenario.” First, women in general, and college-educated women in particular, continue to attend arts events at rates higher than men, even though the influence of feminist critiques of the traditional domestic division of labor and the dramatic rise in labor-force participation by middle-class married women would, other things equal, lead one to expect the female advantage to decline. Second, attendance by college graduates in most activities has declined at a slower rate than attendance by less educated persons. Neither of these results is consistent with the notion that a decline in returns to cultural capital has reduced the incentive for women and college graduates, respectively, to maintain their investment. Rather they are consistent with the interpretation that groups with the strongest investment in high culture offer the greatest resistance, in the face of rising competition, to alternative uses of nonwork time.

So the arts share in the difficulties of a crowded marketplace for cultural and leisure activities. In coping with those difficulties, they have certain advantages. The prestige of high culture is produced by institutional processes that restrain the impact of market forces (DiMaggio, 1982); market forces cannot eliminate that prestige so long as institutions that guarantee and reproduce the valuation of the arts as high culture endure. That said, there is undoubtedly a reciprocal effect of market forces and public opinion on the strength and behavior of institutions. How long high-culture art forms like classical music, theatre, and ballet can continue to lose attendance and still remain a source and indicator of cultural capital remains an open question. We suspect that if attendance continues to decline, at some point such art forms will become irrelevant to the shared culture of families and social groups whose life chances are most dependent upon their command of cultural capital. As that happens, such groups will spend less energy inculcating a love of the arts in their children, may be less willing to support government grants to nonprofit performing-arts institutions, may demand fewer university courses in art history or music history, and may provide less incentive for broadcasters, record companies, and other commercial culture producers to make the arts available in digital form. In this scenario, the “high-culture arts” would not disappear; but they would be left to fend for themselves as niche players in a vast and saturated cultural marketplace.

This is speculation to be sure. Taken together, our results suggest that, although some forms of arts activity are losing patronage in the face of competitive pressure,

the decline of the arts as a form of cultural capital in the U.S. is taking place more slowly than many observers had predicted, if indeed it is taking place at all.

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