



Visual arts appreciation patterns: Crossing horizontal and vertical boundaries within the cultural hierarchy

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Abstract

The appreciation of nine distinct visual art styles was assessed by presenting color plates to some 3000 Flemish respondents. We set out to study the relation between vertical cultural boundary crossing, or omnivorousness, and horizontal boundary crossing, i.e., a preference for both classical and modern works within the domain of legitimate visual arts. We find that, Bourdieu's scholarship notwithstanding, a substantial proportion of our sample enjoyed both classical and modern works. This latter segment also ventured somewhat into popular culture, but markedly less than the taste group limiting its visual arts preferences to modern works. Those with a visual arts taste restricted to classical works were much less culturally active, as were those with low preference levels for most modern and classical visual art styles. The analyses demonstrate that horizontal and vertical cultural boundary crossing have different meanings and probably represent distinct strategies for distinction as well. Omnivorousness can thus occur in different ways, which calls for a reconceptualization of the concept. Breadth of taste should be seen as only one dimension of taste patterns, which need to be qualified further by the specific combination of cultural genres on which they focus.

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1. Introduction

Within cultural sociology there is an ongoing debate concerning the degree to which taste patterns are determined by class and other sociodemographic characteristics. Some argue that, in our postmodern society, people are free to make their own cultural choices, without being constrained by traditions or limited access to information (Baumann, 1998; Pakulski and Waters, 1996; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). However, empirical research demonstrates that cultural behavior is still strongly related to a set of relevant background characteristics (Featherstone,

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1991; Lieberson, 2000; Warde, 1997). The obstinacy of the social determination of taste need not be at odds with rapid cultural changes nor with shifting cultural boundaries. In this article, we will focus on the boundaries between cultural taste patterns and assess to what extent they are related to socioeconomic and cultural background.

When it comes to taste patterns, two major boundaries can be discerned. The first boundary is between cultural artefacts that are considered highbrow or legitimate on the one hand, and artefacts that are considered lowbrow, popular, or folk, on the other (Peterson, 1997). This boundary is no longer respected by large groups of cultural participants, the so-called omnivores, who combine highbrow and popular culture (Peterson, 2005; Peterson and Simkus, 1992). A second relevant cultural boundary, although it has been far less subject to empirical analyses, is that between the bourgeois preference for classical art and the more avant-garde taste for modern or abstract art. This boundary distinguishes between tastes within the legitimate arts. According to Bourdieu (1984), these legitimate tastes variants demonstrate a crucial distinction between two class fractions, the economic elite and the cultural elite, that are ideologically very far apart although they are both fractions of the dominant class. We wonder to what extent this horizontal cultural boundary is still relevant today. If people increasingly combine highbrow and popular culture, can we then expect the combining of classical and modern art to become more prevalent as well? And if so, will the people who cross the vertical boundary between highbrow and lowbrow be the same people as those crossing the horizontal boundary between classical and modern art? Is it even possible to have such a broad interest in all sorts of culture? And if it is, who are these people?

The relevant boundaries for our study are those used by Bellavance (2008) to present a theoretical space of cultural items with two axes: high–low and old–new. Together, these axes render a two-by-two table where the cells represent the following categories of items: classic (high and old), contemporary (high and new), folk (low and old), and pop (low and new). Against the background of this theoretical space, the cultural omnivore can be defined as combining high and low elements, such as classical and folk, or contemporary and pop. Combining classical and contemporary highbrow art (or folk and pop within the ‘lower’ half of his space), would indicate the crossing of Bellavance’s horizontal axis distinguishing ‘old’ from ‘new’.

By differentiating not only between highbrow and lowbrow, but within each of these domains between old and new, Bellavance also makes clear that it is possible to discern between subtypes of omnivores, which is also demonstrated by other studies (e.g., Ollivier, 2008; Vander Stichele, 2008; Van Eijck and Lievens, 2008). Recently, Peterson and Rossman (2008) argued that cultural omnivores can be differentiated according to an emphasis in their cultural repertoire on either highbrow or lowbrow elements. They even consider breadth of taste (broad is omnivore, narrow is univore, regardless of brow-level) and taste level (highbrow/legitimate versus lowbrow/popular, regardless of breadth) separately, speaking of lowbrow omnivores and highbrow omnivores as well as highbrow and lowbrow univores. Note that, according to this conceptualization,¹ omnivorosity does not automatically imply that the highbrow–lowbrow line is being crossed; especially lowbrow omnivores may limit themselves to popular genres.

¹ Breadth of taste was assessed by Peterson and Rossman (2008) by counting the number of musical genres liked. Brow-level was determined by looking at people’s favourite genre. If this was classical music or opera (and if a second favourite was mentioned, this had to be classical music, opera, or jazz), respondents were designated as highbrow. All others were labeled lowbrow. Highbrows who liked five or less genres were labeled highbrow univores, those liking six or more were highbrow omnivores. Similarly, lowbrows liking at most three genres were lowbrow univores, lowbrows liking four or more genres were lowbrow omnivores.

Similarly, both highbrow and lowbrow univores might cross the boundary between highbrow and lowbrow even if their musical taste is narrow.

For the clarity of our presentation, however, we will use the term omnivorous for taste patterns combining cultural items that hold different positions along the highbrow–lowbrow axis. We will refer to omnivorousness as vertical boundary crossing. The crossing of the other axis in Bellavance’s model, the one separating old from new, will be addressed as horizontal boundary crossing. In addition, horizontal boundary crossing will only be addressed explicitly within the domain of legitimate art.

Regarding the crossing of cultural boundaries, we formulate two research questions. Firstly: can we indeed observe an omnivorous taste, in the sense of encompassing many styles, among persons with a (largely) highbrow taste pattern? Bourdieu would argue that the mixing of what he discerned to be a bourgeois taste and an avant-garde taste would be unlikely. He argues that most of the ‘horizontal cultural struggle’ takes place within the upper classes, i.e., between the economic and the cultural class fractions. We therefore wonder if, or among whom, we will empirically encounter a broad taste pattern that combines the preferences of the economic elite (bourgeois taste) and the cultural elite (avant-garde). Also, if such a pattern is found, will it enhance the likelihood of preferring popular culture? In other words: is the cultural omnivore likely to also cross boundaries within the domain of legitimate culture?

A second question, raised by the work of Peterson (1992) and Peterson and Rossman (2008) is whether we should conceive of those combining a preference for classic and contemporary high art as displaying what Peterson (1992) called a ‘passing knowledge’ of the culture they are familiar with. Is such a superficial commitment to culture even possible with legitimate art? Although the omnivore, conceived as a person combining highbrow with lowbrow, is often thought to display tolerance and openness as key characteristics, we can wonder whether these attitudes suffice to develop a highbrow omnivore taste because the latter may require a lot more effort than simply allowing your previously snobbish self to be entertained by pop music or sitcoms every once in a while. Especially within the legitimate domain, breadth may come at the cost of investment in each separate item or style, either in the sense of appreciating highbrow works less intensely, or in the sense of appreciating only those highbrow products that are, for some reason, easier to grasp.

2. Cultural boundaries: theories and hypotheses

2.1. *Horizontal differentiation within the upper-middle classes*

In *Distinction* Pierre Bourdieu (1984) sketches the hierarchy of French society, using different social markers. He identifies people as bearers of economic, cultural, and social capital. The volume and composition of these resources define a person’s place on the social ladder. Near the higher end of the social hierarchy, Bourdieu discerns two class fractions – the economic elite (bourgeoisie) and the cultural elite – that differ most notably in the composition of their capital rather than in its total volume. Relative to the bourgeoisie, the cultural elite has less economic capital but more cultural capital. The habitus of these two groups translates their resources into dispositions, resulting in opposing taste patterns even though they both have a high overall capital volume. The bourgeoisie allegedly spend their money ostentatiously on fancy clothing, expensive cars, blustering mansions, etc. As they lack extensive cultural training, they stick to conservative choices in legitimate cultural consumption like the masterpieces of classical music

and the opera. The members of the cultural elite, on the other hand, have received an extensive socialization in legitimate culture and attained mastery of the symbolic language of the arts, having an aesthetic disposition. They have a progressive and experimental taste in culture, preferring, for example, jazz, conceptual art, or unconventional theatre. However, their relatively modest financial means compel them to forgo luxury, making scarcity into virtue. Bourdieu characterizes their lifestyle as aesthetic ascetism.

Of course, this schema renders a far too simplistic picture of society. Bourdieu himself discerns an intermediate group within the elite class whose capital structure is more or less on par. He mentions doctors and professional managers as examples. However, he does not elaborate much on the specifics of this group and focuses almost exclusively on the sharp opposition between cultural and economic elites. Kraaykamp (2002), however, is explicitly concerned with the important category that is overlooked by focusing solely on the two distinct elite fractions. A position with comparable amounts of cultural and economic capital leads to the interesting situation where these two forms of capital can ‘feed’ on one another. A well-informed, aesthetic taste can be cultivated best when the economic means to do so are available. Conversely, distinctive consumption can only be aimed properly if a person has the knowledge to distinguish between goods. Therefore, a capital structure in equilibrium is likely to posit a person not between, but *above* imbalanced capitalists. Van Eijck and Van Oosterhout (2005) also argue that the consumption patterns of the economic and the cultural elite may be less contrasting than is often thought. They discern a rise in material consumption among the group of avid cultural consumers and explain this by referring to a postmodern scenario where an ascetic lifestyle clears room for a more hedonistic, individualistically oriented consumption pattern. The cultural elites are ‘allowed’ to purchase fancy commodities as well and they certainly seem to enjoy doing so.

These recent findings indicate that the strong divide sketched out in Bourdieu’s theoretical framework is up for reconsideration. The strict taste boundaries between the cultural and economic elite appear more open to transgression than he suggests when he states that ‘the opposition between the teachers and the employers [. . .] is comparable to the gap between two “cultures” in the anthropological sense’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 283). The big question is: what evidence of Bourdieu’s taste gap between the upper class fractions will be found and, if the gap is bridged by some, who are these people?

2.2. *Vertical differentiation, or omnivorousness*

The cultural elite, as detailed above, distinguished themselves from the economic elite by specializing in the more avant-garde forms of highbrow art. Yet, their specific taste did not only distinguish them from those whose capital *composition* differed from their own, it also communicated how different they were from the people with a lower overall capital *volume*. The latter might be called vertical cultural differentiation. This is where the interests of the cultural and the economic elite come together. Both elites are eager to demonstrate their possession of either economic or cultural capital by engaging in conspicuous consumption or conspicuous leisure, as Veblen noted long ago. What is more, they had to be consistent in their taste in order to avoid confusion or the suspicion that they might be trying to misrepresent their status (Goffman, 1951). These traditional elites are, however, being replaced by new kinds of (cultural) consumers that abide less to the old conventions of good taste. Instead, they appreciate – and participate in – a wide variety of cultural forms, thereby (partly) dispensing with the formerly valid distinction between high- and lowbrow, or elite and popular culture. Although Bourdieu already alluded to this lifestyle in his treatment of the new middle class and the tendency of the avant-garde to ogle

popular culture, Peterson and Simkus (1992) empirically identified this pattern of preference and coined the term ‘cultural omnivore’.

The omnivore’s propensity to take seriously multifarious cultural items is a characteristic of openness that is being addressed in a number of recent studies. According to Warde et al. (2007), only a very limited range of cultural products is categorically dismissed as not worthy of an aesthetic approach beforehand. According to their omnivore respondents, only reality TV, fast food, and electronic dance music are obviously below the threshold. Omnivores are prone to express more tolerance towards diverse cultural forms and to reject snobbism (Ollivier, 2008; Warde et al., 2007). This fits neatly with the cultural relativism that is assumed to be the moral backing of omnivorousness (Peterson and Kern, 1996). Omnivores seem to sense that the cultural climate warrants them to praise diversity and that it is arrogant or snobbish, to dismiss the preferences of others as inferior. Is it to be expected that people with this mind-set will also principally prefer classical and modern or contemporary art equally? We address that question in the next paragraph.

2.3. *Relations between horizontal and vertical boundaries: hypotheses*

If openness is a defining characteristic of omnivores, they will be intellectually curious and more interested in both popular and highbrow culture than people with a more univore inclination. The truly open or humanist omnivore (Ollivier, 2008) does not feel the urge to abide to socially sanctioned cues such as brow-level, the sole criterion applied to cultural products being that they are culturally stimulating. This should not surprise, as even Bourdieu (1984) argued that the summit of the aesthetic habitus is the ability to look at everyday objects from an aesthetic point of view. However, if an open orientation drives the omnivore to give serious consideration to vertically distinct cultural products, it seems highly probable that the canonized, elite forms will be approached with comparable open-handedness. No matter whether they are considered classical, popular, contemporary, avant-garde, or folk, as long as cultural products are able to persuade the omnivore of their value, they will earn a place within his repertoire. Just as hierarchical standards such as ‘elite’ or ‘popular’ lose significance in the eyes of the cultural omnivore, categories of ‘genre’ and ‘style’ may no longer apply, as the search for quality takes place *within* genres as much as *between* them. That is, a broad cultural interest allows an omnivore to cross both vertical and horizontal boundaries, i.e., to seriously engage in a lot of highbrow and a lot of lowbrow activities, as it is the same set of characteristics that makes people cross vertical and horizontal cultural boundaries. This leads us to our first hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1. Omnivorousness increases the range of legitimate arts a person appreciates.

We can ask, however, if an open mind suffices to develop a thorough interest in, and knowledge of, both highbrow and lowbrow culture. Cultural omnivores, as members of the upper-middle classes, are often regarded as expanding the once-snobbish taste of their social position by opening up to popular culture. We may say that the omnivore crosses a vertical boundary between highbrow and lowbrow from top to bottom. Such vertical boundary crossing requires openness and an adjustment of cultural standards rather than a lengthy investment in the cultural capital required to appreciate all these new, popular cultural products. On average, the products of pop culture do not take all that much investment in order to be appreciated, so they easily offer ‘fodder for least-common denominator talk’ (DiMaggio, 1987: 443). According to Peterson (1992), a ‘passing knowledge’ of shared culture suffices to get by and create a common ground for conversation.

However, the openness and tolerance that could turn a snob into an omnivore seem insufficient to allow a person to cross the horizontal boundary between avant-garde and bourgeois tastes as well, or between modern and classical art. Although we do not claim that legitimate culture is always profound and intellectually demanding while popular culture invariably provides shallow fun, the expectation seems warranted that indulgence in legitimate culture often requires more cultural capital than does discovering the joys of popular culture. Basic information on the limited size and elitist composition of arts audience suffices to support this point. Moreover, the notion of ‘passing knowledge’ seems to imply some kind of trade-off. A broad scope is likely to come at the price of a lack of opportunities to invest in highbrow cultural tastes. Mark (1998) backs this claim by pointing out that people’s cultural activities are subject to time constraints. The attempts of omnivores to reconcile many different forms of culture result in preferences that are weaker on average. The many small investments omnivores are expected to make in passing knowledge of a wide array of cultural options across the cultural hierarchy, compel them to display modesty in the field of highbrow culture. We might therefore expect that omnivores are unable to critically or independently elaborate a broad taste within the realm of legitimate art, but will still choose within this particular field on the basis of socially sanctioned cues.

Hypothesis 2. Omnivorousness limits the range of legitimate arts a person appreciates.

If omnivores’ involvement in legitimate art is curtailed by the necessity to uphold a certain level of passing knowledge in other cultural fields, they might choose the least challenging or complex legitimate art forms. Taking the case of the visual arts as an example, in general, modern, abstract and conceptual works of art are considered more difficult to grasp. As they are stripped of direct references, resulting in mere formal characteristics in the case of abstract works or a meaning that is far from straightforward in the case of conceptual art, understanding and appreciating such works would require more effort than an omnivore can invest. If the cultural omnivores take the easy road to the world of highbrow art, we are led to assume that they will be more likely to enjoy more traditional, figurative works of art that require less explanation or background knowledge in order to be perceived correctly, let alone appreciated.

Hypothesis 3a. Omnivores prefer the most traditional art styles.

On the other hand, considering the abstract arts as more demanding *qua* investments might be an intuitive, though far-fetched and thoroughly normative assumption. Halle (1992) finds that abstract art is mainly liked for its decorative qualities, rather than for the intellectual challenges it poses. Taking this into consideration, a taste for abstract art should not be intrinsically more demanding. Furthermore, Halle (1992) notices that, although some claim they prefer abstract art for its propensity to activate the imagination, this imagination often wanders no further than to trivial images of landscapes or portraits. Since this implies that liking abstract art need not be the product of intense training, it is also conceivable that the omnivore, deliberating between styles, will prefer the more modern, abstract or conceptual ones.

This position is further sustained by the progressive, unconventional stance that is attributed to the cultural omnivore. According to Peterson and Kern (1996), the omnivore is trying to avoid being a conservative snob. Rather, openness and an inclination to cross boundaries are thought to be typical of the omnivore. Such characteristics are more strongly associated with modern or contemporary art and artists than with classical works. Research by Feist and Brady (2004) supports this hypothesis. They find that openness and liberal attitudes relate to preference for abstract arts. Bourdieu also offers plausibility to this idea: the aesthetic disposition of the cultural elite allows them to appreciate the popular and take it seriously as art. This supports the

expectation that this most avant-garde class fraction will be most likely to combine highbrow with lowbrow. Approached from the other end, this implies that, *if* omnivores are selective in their appreciation of visual art styles, they are likely to prefer modern art over classical works.

Hypothesis 3b. Omnivores prefer the least traditional art styles.

3. Data and methods

3.1. *The case of painting*

Our empirical analyses focus on the visual arts.² They offer an interesting case indeed, both substantively and in the way the material was presented to our respondents. Firstly, the visual arts are characterized by distinct styles or periods. They present an immense variety in both subject and form of depiction. This distinction between styles is homologous to the antagonism between the conservative and progressive tastes among the elite class fractions. Secondly, compared to, e.g., modern music, experiments in the visual arts enjoy greater notoriety with a wider public. Put bluntly, a visual artist like Picasso is better known than a composer like Stravinsky, though the two may enjoy a comparable reputation among experts. Finally, visual stimuli such as paintings or installations can evoke quite intuitive responses. If you want to know how people appreciate specific styles or works of art, you can just show them pictures and have them evaluate those on the spot. Corroborating this point is the fact that psychological research has a lengthy history of using paintings in the study of personality (e.g., Burt, 1933; Child, 1965; Eysenck, 1940; Furnham and Avison, 1997; Furnham and Bunyan, 1988; Furnham and Walker, 2001). For all these reasons, we are very pleased to have at our disposal information on people's evaluations of a broad range of specific, canonized visual art works that were shown on color plates. Analyzing respondents' patterns of visual arts appreciation will show (1) whether the horizontal cultural boundaries mentioned by Bourdieu (1984) are still at work; (2) which people do (or do not) respect these boundaries; and (3) how patterns of visual arts appreciation are related to other lifestyle indicators and omnivorousness.

3.2. *Data and analysis*

In order to answer our research questions, we use data from the survey "Cultural Participation in Flanders 2003–2004" (Lievens et al., 2006), a research project of the Cultural Policy Research Centre "Re-Creatief Vlaanderen". Flanders is the northern, Dutch speaking region of Belgium and has about 6 million inhabitants. In a computer-assisted face-to-face interview, 2849 randomly selected respondents aged 14–85 were questioned about their cultural behavior (at home as well as through attending public events) and attitudes in a broad range of domains (arts, everyday culture, leisure activities, sports and recreation). Each of these were measured in detail, providing an extensive picture of cultural participation in Flanders and giving insight into the motives, expectations, or thresholds for participation and broader attitudes towards culture and society. The response rate in the sample was 61.03% of the eligible respondents. The data are weighted by gender, age, and schooling level in order to make them representative of the population of Flanders

² We refer to our set of items as examples of visual arts, even though, in one of nine cases, pictures of installations rather than paintings are used to evoke a response.

aged 14–85. In addition to the face-to-face interviews, data were gathered from the family members using written drop-off questionnaires. We only took information on the financial situation of the household from the latter data set, as this was only gathered from the heads of the households.

For our analysis of taste patterns in the visual arts, we could use information on nine artistic styles that were presented on color plates to the respondents. Each plate contained a number of paintings or, in the case of conceptual art and Dadaism, objects. No further information on these styles was given, nor were the labels used below shown to the respondents. As more than one work of art was depicted on each of the cards, respondents were asked to judge the general style on the card rather than the individual works. For each plate, respondents were asked how much they appreciated the type of art depicted on each plate. The answers were given on a seven point scale ranging from ‘not at all’ to ‘very much’ (intermediate answering categories were numbered, not labeled) (see [Appendix B](#) online for a list of the specific art works shown on each plate, as documented in [Lievens et al., 2006: 119](#)). The styles shown to respondents were:

- Plate 1: (Post)Impressionism.
- Plate 2: Flemish primitives.
- Plate 3: Surrealism.
- Plate 4: Portraits from the Baroque epoche.
- Plate 5: Cobra/Abstract Expressionism.
- Plate 6: 19th Century Landscapes.
- Plate 7: Contemporary Conceptual art/Dadaism.
- Plate 8: Late-renaissance/Baroque.
- Plate 9: Abstract Art.

The respondents’ answers to the nine questions about their appreciation of these styles were used as input for a latent class analysis (see [Vermunt and Magidson, 2000](#)). Latent class analysis (LCA) allows us to identify clusters of people with similar patterns of visual arts preferences. LCA has a number of advantages over cluster analysis, three of which are relevant for our current purpose. Firstly, respondents are assigned to classes with a probability of membership rather than absolutely as in cluster analysis. This allows for an assessment of model fit and the identification of outliers or troublesome respondents. Secondly, LCA can simultaneously carry out segmentation and prediction. We opted for this possibility by including so-called active covariates in our segmentation, which means that classes are constituted simultaneously with the estimation of the effects of a number of independent variables. The advantage of this procedure is that the probabilistic nature of the solution remains intact throughout the analyses. It also implies that the classes are formed taking into account not only the respondents’ scores on the ‘dependent’ variables, but also on the independent variables. In our case, as in many, the inclusion of active covariates did not lead to classes that were substantially different from the classes we would have obtained based solely on the dependent appreciation variables. The difference in mean scores on any of the art styles within latent classes never exceeded 2%. We chose to present the results with the active covariates because it ensures that we are talking about exactly the same classes when presenting the classification itself and the relation of the classes to the independent variables. Finally, LCA is very suitable for dealing with different measurement levels. Most of our independent variables were nominal and we could estimate their effects without resorting to dummy variables. This is convenient because the (significance of the) impact of these variables is presented for the nominal variable as a whole rather than as a series of differences vis-à-vis some reference category.

The following independent variables were added. Gender was coded ‘0’ for men and ‘1’ for women. Age was coded into four categories: 18–34, 35–54, 55–64, and 65+. Education was measured using five categories: currently enrolled; no or only primary education; lower secondary education; higher secondary education; and tertiary education. Respondents who scored ‘currently enrolled’ on the educational variable were placed in the ‘student’ category of the set of variables indicating respondents’ main activity, which was coded into: student; paid work; pensioner; and other. Family income was measured subjectively by asking the heads of the households ($n = 1803$) whether they could live comfortably with their current family income. Answers were coded into seven categories ranging from “it is very difficult to make ends meet” to “we can live very comfortably”. Family situation was coded as: living with parents; being single; living with a partner, no children; living with a partner, youngest child living at home aged 10 or less; living with a partner, youngest child living at home aged older than 10. Place of residence was measured in three categories: large city (Brussels, Antwerp, or Ghent); medium city; and small town. Finally, social network was measured based on the number of persons mentioned by name when answering the question with whom respondents typically spend their free time, divided into three categories: 0–4, 5–9, and 10 or more names.

4. Results

4.1. *Typology of visual arts appreciation*

In constructing our typology of visual arts appreciation, it became clear that an optimal solution, judged by both the BIC and CAIC criteria, would require nine latent classes. We opted for a more parsimonious solution because we were mostly interested in the difference between modern and classical styles and how people would relate to these two meta-genres. We therefore decided to work with this four-class solution, which offered us exactly the degree of differentiation necessary to test our hypotheses. The four classes are: people with a predominantly modern³ taste (28.8%; moderns), a predominantly classical taste (28.7%; classics), a preference for both (22.8%; versatiles), and those who do not particularly like any of the presented tastes (19.6%; abstainers).

The patterns of appreciation per latent class are shown in Fig. 1. The upper line reflects the preferences of the versatile visual art lovers. They show the highest level of appreciation on each style except for the 19th century landscapes, which are slightly more preferred by the classics. Also, the versatiles’ appreciation of abstract art (score 3.96) is only slightly higher than that of the moderns (3.93). In general, their appreciation scores are well above those of the other classes. It is quite clear that these people enjoy both classic and modern styles, thus crossing the horizontal cultural boundary separating Bourdieu’s bourgeois class fraction from the cultural elite.

The class with a predominantly modern taste has less outspoken scores than both the versatiles and the classics. Although their appreciation levels for modern works are relatively high (i.e., highest after the versatiles for the clearly modern styles [surrealism, abstract expressionism, contemporary conceptual, and abstract]), their peaks are less conspicuous than those of the classics, who show much higher levels of appreciation for the classical styles they prefer

³ The usage of the term ‘modern’ to describe this cluster does not only refer to a specific style often referred to as modernism. Regarding taste patterns within our sample, ‘moderns’ are people with a preference for any art style that has developed since the late 19th century.

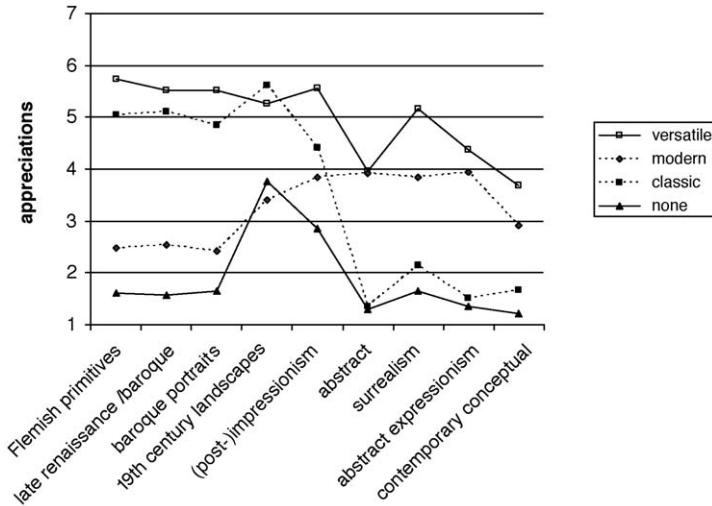


Fig. 1. Latent classes based on appreciation of nine visual art styles.

(Flemish primitives, baroque portraits, 19th century landscapes, and late-renaissance/baroque). Thus, the label ‘moderns’ does not denote that they really, thoroughly love modern art, but rather that they are more enthusiastic about modern art than about classical art and that their modern art preference scores are well above those of the classics and the abstainers. In addition, the patterns of appreciation of the moderns and the classics are more or less opposite to one another. In Fig. 1, their lines cross between impressionism and abstract art, which is exactly between the classical and modern styles.⁴

For eight out of nine presented styles, the abstainers show the lowest level of appreciation, while the versatile are most appreciative. Two styles deviate from this global pattern; impressionism and 19th century landscapes. Arguably, they happen to be the most familiar and perhaps elicit the least aesthetic response because they are so close to what many people enjoy as decorative ‘art’ in their homes (see Halle, 1992). The impressionists are relatively popular among all classes, whereas the landscapes are most popular among the classics and still relatively popular among the abstainers.

4.2. Results: sociodemographics of the visual arts appreciation classes

Looking at the sociodemographic features of the latent classes of visual arts appreciation, it is quite clear that they can be categorized along two axes, the first of which is education. The versatile and modern classes are more highly educated, with over 37% having obtained a degree in post-secondary education. In contrast, the abstainers (7.8%) and classics (10.3%) are obviously less educated. Almost 70% of these groups have obtained lower secondary education or less.

⁴ A factor analysis on the nine appreciation variables yielded two factors, one for modern art (surrealism, abstract expressionism, contemporary conceptual art, abstract) and one for classical art (post-)impressionism, Flemish primitives, baroque portraits, 19th century landscapes, late-renaissance/baroque). Post-impressionism was the only item that also loaded somewhat (0.266) on the opposite factor after varimax rotation, implying that this style can indeed be appreciated from both a classical and a modern perspective.

Another relevant source of differentiation is age. The classics constitute the oldest class, with over 60% aged 55 or older. Second oldest are the versatile (45.2%), leaving a great gap with the significantly younger abstainers (22.1%) and moderns (9.4%). More detailed information on the sociodemographic differences between the classes can be found in [Appendix A](#).

Table 1
Classification of latent classes by education and age.

Age	Education	
	Low	High
Low	Abstainer Employed/other Village No art classes	Modern Employed City Art classes
High	Classic Pensioner/other Village No art classes	Versatile Employed/pensioner City Art classes

Considering these age differences, it is not surprising that many pensioners in the sample belong to either the classics (45.4%) or the versatile (31.6%). On the other hand, the majority of moderns is in paid labor (75.3%). The picture is less clear for the abstainers, although it should be noted that quite a large proportion of this class is in the ‘other’ category, typically indicating that they are either homemakers or unemployed. This might have to do with their level of education, as the ‘other’ category is quite large among the classics too.

Place of residence also seems to be in line with education, as the moderns and versatile tend to live in cities significantly more often than the other two classes. Similarly, we see predictably steep differences between the higher and lower educated classes with respect to the likelihood of having attended amateur arts classes.

Gender was the last variable that differed significantly across the classes. Although gender ratios are balanced in the lower educated classes, we see more women (57%) among the moderns and more men (59%) among the versatile. Income, household constellation and social network size do not differ significantly between the four classes.⁵

4.3. Results: lifestyles of the visual arts appreciation classes

To test our hypotheses about the relations between breadth of taste within the legitimate visual arts and omnivorousness, we needed information about some additional cultural lifestyle characteristics of the latent classes. Therefore, we constructed a number of measures concerning the breadth of taste along the cultural hierarchy. These were added separately as active covariates, while controlling for the set of sociodemographic background variables. Their contents are explained in the notes below [Table 2](#).

⁵ See [Appendix C](#) online for more details on the model selection procedure, including why we did not present a solution with more classes.

Table 2
Mean scores on additional lifestyle indicators per visual arts appreciation latent class.

	Modern	Classic	Abstainer	Versatile	Wald	<i>p</i> -value
Breadth of musical taste ^a	5.853	4.679	4.262	6.978	107.722	0.000
# legitimate items ^b	1.572	1.260	0.620	2.537	145.146	0.000
# popular items ^c	3.566	2.213	2.833	3.097	26.054	0.000
Vertical boundary crossing ^d	1.536	1.135	0.600	2.374	140.463	0.000
Omnivorousness P&R ^e	8.216	5.192	5.694	8.123	98.627	0.000

Items were constructed as follows for each survey respondent.

^a Number of following musical genres listened to at least a few times during the last month: (1) classical work, (2) opera, (3) baroque music, (4) operetta, (5) contemporary classical music, (6) pop/rock, (7) dance, (8) world music, (9) jazz/blues/soul/funk, (10) popular Flemish music, (11) brass band, (12) folk music, and (13) chansons.

^b Number of following items engaged in during designated period: attending (1) alternative cinema, (2) ballet performance, (3) contemporary dance performance, (4) play, and listening to (5) baroque music, (6) classical music, (7) contemporary classical music, and (8) opera.

^c Number of following items engaged during designated period: attending (1) a large movie theatre featuring new blockbuster movies, (2) circus, (3) musical, (4) show or revue, and listening to (5) pop and rock music, (6) dance music, (7) popular Flemish music, (8) jazz/blues/soul/funk.

^d Based on legitimate and popular items, counting how many pairs of each are found in a respondent's taste pattern. This measure equals the lower of the scores on the two previous variables.

^e Sum of the number of legitimate items and the number of popular items, similar to the operationalization of the concept by Peterson and Rossman (2008).

As many studies on cultural omnivorousness are supported by data about musical taste, our first measure ('breadth of musical taste') counted the number of musical genres the respondent had listened to during the last month. The versatile are most omnivorous in this respect with a score of about seven genres out of 13. They are followed by the moderns (5.85), then the classics (4.68), and finally the abstainers with 4.26.

The second row displays the number of legitimate cultural activities respondents had engaged in during the last six months. This measure not only took into account listening to music, but also outdoor cultural participation. The versatile obtained the highest average score (2.54), with the moderns running up (1.57) and then the classics (1.26) and the abstainers (0.62). Using a similar scale for popular items (third row), the picture changes somewhat, with the versatile (3.10) coming in second after the moderns (3.57), and the classics closing the ranks (2.21). Remember that, apart from their artistic preferences, the classes that seem most culturally active in Table 2 are also the most highly educated and most likely to be employed and living in a large city.

An even closer look at breadth of cultural repertoires can be taken by calculating how many combinations of legitimate and popular items can be discerned in respondents' score patterns. Hence, we computed a measure for vertical boundary crossing by counting the number of pairs of legitimate – popular items. For example, a person who engages in three highbrow activities and four lowbrow ones, would receive score three, because a maximum of three pairs of highbrow – lowbrow activities could be made. This measure takes into account both amount of activities and diversity. On this measure of boundary crossing, too, the versatile have the highest score, probably because of their high scores on the number of legitimate items. Since the mean number of popular items engaged in is higher than the mean number of legitimate items for each class, a higher number of legitimate items is more likely to enhance the score on boundary crossing than a higher number of popular items, as the latter are less likely to be paired with an equal number of legitimate items.

Finally, if we just add up all activities, irrespective of their brow-level, we get a measure that we call omnivorousness, albeit in the specific sense of [Peterson and Rossman \(2008\)](#). It is just a little bit higher for the moderns than for the versatiles, although the difference is marginal. There is, however, again a substantial difference between the two active classes, on the one hand, and the classics and abstainers on the other.

5. Discussion

Our analyses show that there are at least two ways of being a cultural omnivore or, as [Bellavance \(2008\)](#) puts it, different forms of cultural eclecticism. This must be kept in mind when discussing our findings. For example, our first hypothesis (omnivorousness increases the range of legitimate arts a person appreciates) is corroborated if we take the versatile class as representing the cultural omnivore. They have the highest scores on breadth of musical taste and on boundary crossing (see [Table 2](#)) and they are also the only class clearly appreciating both modern and classical works of art. But there is also something to be said for the moderns as cultural omnivores. Our second hypothesis (omnivorousness limits the range of legitimate arts a person appreciates) holds true if we take the moderns to represent the cultural omnivore. We consider them as another type of cultural omnivore, i.e., the ‘passing knowledge’ type. They combine an appreciation for modern art, albeit not overly enthusiastic, with being the most fanatic lowbrow participants and the most broad if we simply define the latter as doing more different things. Thus, when speaking of cultural omnivores, we are actually speaking about two types. The first, the ‘passing knowledge’ type, the second we could call the ‘multiple experts’. Both have relatively high schooling levels, but the versatiles are older than the moderns. As shown in [Table 1](#), age is a very strong determinant of taste in addition to education, or cultural capital.

It is most tempting to apply Peterson and Rossman’s new labels to our two most omnivorous latent classes. Their lowbrow omnivores seem close to our moderns and our versatiles resemble their highbrow omnivores. The highbrow omnivores transgress horizontal boundaries because they are seriously interested in a wide range of highbrow styles. Obviously, appreciating both modern and classical works of art will not feel like crossing a boundary to them; after all, it is all legitimate art and art is important as such to these people. Thus, they display high levels of appreciation for most of the visual art styles presented to them. Regarding their participation in popular culture, the versatiles rank second in the number of popular items consumed (3.097), which is closer to the abstainers’ score (2.833) than to that of the moderns (3.566). On account of their focus on a broad range of visual art styles, combined with a slightly weaker preference for popular culture (although still the second highest), they might be labeled highbrow omnivores.

Whereas the versatiles stress highbrow culture, the moderns are more committed to popular culture. The moderns only appreciate a specific subset of the plates that were presented to them. For these omnivores, the breadth of their taste might indeed limit the range of legitimate visual art works they appreciate, as stated in [Hypothesis 2](#). We could therefore call them lowbrow omnivores to the extent that their focus is foremost on popular culture. Thus, the relation between horizontal and vertical boundary crossing is negative nor positive; it rather depends on the type of omnivore we are looking at. Both relations are observed, albeit for different people.

[Bourdieu \(1984: 16\)](#) describes the legitimate taste as “[. . .] the taste for legitimate works, here represented by [. . .] in painting, Breughel or Goya, which the most self-assured aesthetes can combine with the most legitimate of the arts that are still in the process of legitimation—cinema, jazz, or even song [. . .]” thus, especially ‘the most self-assured aesthetes’, or those with lots of

cultural capital, can afford to meddle with cultural genres that are not (yet) legitimated. But Bourdieu is talking about upcoming art forms rather than products of popular—or mass culture. That is why our versatiles fit this picture very well; highbrow preferences, with a bit of cinema and the occasional musical. On the same page, Bourdieu mentions Renoir as an example of middlebrow taste, which is in line with the broad popularity of the impressionists in our analysis. In an often very colorful and charming manner, Renoir displays his affection towards (human) nature. That is why, on page 20, Bourdieu places Renoir opposite to the above-mentioned Goya (who is rather more critical and dark), and also opposite to all forms of abstraction. Although this boundary between modern and classical turned out to be highly pertinent in our analyses as well, with classics and moderns keeping to one side of the border, we also observed trespassing. This boundary crossing was found among the most avid art lovers, those with the most eagerly aesthetic and generous gaze (but: there are boundaries for them too). It was the class highest in cultural capital judging by their cultural preference and their schooling level, especially taking into account their age. It is Bourdieu's cultural elite.

If omnivores limit their taste for the visual arts, they clearly appreciate modern art rather than classical works. This refutes [Hypothesis 3a](#) and corroborates [Hypothesis 3b](#). Clearly, the relation between appreciating and understanding art is complicated. The members of our modern class make clear that one need not be an art initiate in order to appreciate works that are considered highly complex and multi-layered by art historians or critics. It seems that the moderns are looking for art that is, in their view, original or different and definitely not old-fashioned or downright boring. This might have to do with their enthusiasm for lowbrow or popular culture, which is less geared towards serious and sound craftsmanship than it is towards spontaneity (corporate) rebellion and outward appearance. Understood as such, Dali is more fun than Caravaggio, Mondrian comes closer to the imagery of contemporary design than Van Eyck, and Duchamp seems to share their love of irony or satire. In order to (say that they) enjoy modern works of art, people do not need to really love it or have a deeper interest in what it is all about.

It thus might make sense for the moderns to enjoy modern art, albeit perhaps in their own way, but why do they dodge classical art? It has *prima facie* intelligibility and most of it is obviously made very skillfully. Still, the moderns do not like it at all. Maybe the reason for this lies exactly in the fact that it is appreciated by the classics. Given the fact that the classics are lower educated and old (fashioned), classical art may be seen as belonging to a class from which the moderns are most eager to distinguish themselves. Similarly, the moderns distinguish themselves from the equally low educated abstainers, simply by appreciating modern art. After all, to a large extent taste is an expression of what, or whom, one does not want to be ([Bryson, 1997](#); [Douglas, 1996](#); [Martin, 2000](#)). Thus, eschewing traditional art might rest on a strategy for distinction rather than indicating a general lack of cultural capital. Displaying a liking for modern art is in a sense a strategic choice because modern art is considered both difficult and progressive. This is where modern art coincides with characteristics of the omnivorous taste and it serves to explain why enjoying popular culture goes together with an appreciation of modern rather than classical art. Horizontal boundary crossing within the visual arts requires an appreciation of classical art forms that does not fit in with the preferences of younger generations of higher educated people. [Schulze \(1992\)](#) has shown that these people, members of what he calls the self-fulfillment milieu, like to combine contemplation or the experience of beauty with spontaneity and originality. In modern art, the younger omnivores find this mixture of stimuli. In classical art, they probably find that seriousness and tradition seem to have the upper hand.

If our versatiles share many characteristics with either Peterson and Rossman's highbrow omnivores or Bourdieu's cultural elite, our modern class resembles not only the lowbrow omnivores

but also Bourdieu's new middle class (*petite bourgeoisie*). Like the latter, the moderns are more likely to be female than male (Bourdieu, 1984: 361) and relatively young. We already argued above that the moderns shun classical art because it does not fit with their self-identity; it allows them to distinguish themselves from the elderly and the lower educated. In addition, their preference for modern art did not seem to be very committed when judged by their appreciation scores and it was not accompanied by a very high score on active participation. Bourdieu similarly accuses this new *petite bourgeoisie* of 'cultural bluff'. Even though they indicate a love of painters such as Kandinsky, Dali, or Braque, Bourdieu (1984: 362) discerns a serious gap between these stated preferences for highbrow art and the low frequency with which they attend cultural venues, especially museums. Those whom Bourdieu counts as the 'rising fractions of the new occupations' display nothing but 'an empty intention of distinction' with their artistic preferences. Our modern class fits this picture nicely. Even if we hesitate to say that their positive evaluations of painters such as Pollock, Rothko, or Mondrian are only flaunting, or a contemporary form of what Bourdieu called cultural goodwill, Table 2 makes it quite clear that they are more into pop music and blockbuster cinema than into legitimate art. Steiner (1989: 67) puts it as follows: "[...] the ordinary museum visitor [...] participates in a rite of encounter and response which, after the period of secondary and, possibly, of tertiary education in which such encounter may have been assigned its cultural and social functions, belongs less to the sphere of commitment than it does to that of decorum."

Our findings are in line with much that has been stated by Bourdieu and Peterson. The cultural omnivore comes in different guises, as has been recently demonstrated by others as well (Coulangeon, 2003; Ollivier, 2008; Sonnett, 2004). The broad cultural taste manifests itself in two ways in our study. On the one hand, we have the true cultural glutton (*versatiles*) who is deeply involved in legitimate culture, participates a lot, but cares somewhat less for popular culture. On the other hand, we see a cultural flaneur (*moderns*) showing a specifically modern pattern of appreciation that is hardly backed up by actual participation in legitimate culture. These two types probably also differ a lot in what culture means to them, in the roles that status motives, information processing capacities, or social networks play as determinants of their patterns of taste and participation. The *versatiles* are Bourdieu's self-assured aesthetes; highbrow omnivores who are nevertheless willing and able to appreciate popular culture's pick of the bunch too. We might rejoice over their existence if we take it to point at the disappearance of overly strict cultural directives that previously deprived them of all sorts of unthought-of beauty. The moderns, on the other hand, are more of the passing-knowledge type mentioned by Peterson. They seem to exemplify a more pessimistic interpretation of omnivorousness as a sign of the declining interest in legitimate art forms or even decivilisation (Bellavance, 2008), since this class only displays a love of highbrow art in its stated preferences rather than in its behavior. This superficial love is further restricted to styles that are most likely to communicate a fashionable, willful, or sophisticated identity. Thus, our typology is in line with existing literature and makes clear that, rather than deciding that one class or the other represents *the* cultural omnivore, we should study different types of omnivores (and univores) in order to deepen our understanding of cultural tastes, and how they change.

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Appendix A. Sociodemographic background characteristics per visual arts appreciation latent class

Per class, the numbers represent uncontrolled proportions (means) for every category of the background indicators. Wald statistics are based on the logit model that was estimated and thus refer to significance levels of the relation between class membership and each sociodemographic indicator controlling for all other background variables.

	Modern	Classic	Abstainer	Versatile	Wald	df	<i>p</i> -value
% female	56.9	49.9	49.6	41.4	32.844	1	0.000
Age category (%)					104.839	3	0.000
18–34	46.8	9.3	34.6	18.0			
35–54	43.8	29.4	43.3	36.9			
55–64	6.6	22.2	8.7	19.7			
65+	2.8	39.0	13.4	25.5			
Level of education (%)					158.129	4	0.000
No/primary education	6.3	42.3	28.9	16.1			
Lower secondary education	23.1	27.5	42.2	21.9			
Higher secondary education	33.1	19.8	21.1	23.4			
Vocational colleges	27.2	8.4	7.7	22.8			
University	10.3	1.9	0.1	15.8			
Income	4.567	4.286	4.157	4.514	2.844	1	0.420
Socio-economic position (%)					26.954	3	0.001
Employed	75.3	32.8	58.5	51.0			
Student	9.3	1.2	2.3	4.0			
Pensioner	6.0	45.4	14.8	31.6			
Other	9.4	20.6	24.4	13.5			
Place of residence (%)					21.749	2	0.001
Large city	16.5	15.7	10.4	20.7			
Medium city	33.6	32.1	34.6	37.9			
Village	49.9	52.2	55.0	41.3			
Household constellation (%)					16.489	4	0.170
Living with parents	17.4	3.7	11.6	8.6			
Single	7.6	17.4	11.3	16.7			
Children, youngest kid aged <10	32.4	9.5	25.4	16.5			
Children, youngest kid aged >10	21.3	19.0	21.3	23.2			
Partner, no children	21.3	50.4	30.4	35.1			
Social network size (%)					11.719	2	0.069
Large (10+)	34.1	24.5	27.1	24.2			
Medium (5–9)	44.3	36.1	41.6	44.3			
Small (0–4)	21.6	39.5	31.3	31.5			
Amateur arts classes (%)	16.5	4.3	2.7	18.8	41.181	1	0.000

Appendix B. Supplementary data

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at [doi:10.1016/j.poetic.2009.06.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2009.06.003).

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