

REPRINT: 1949

---

# Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow

by Russell Lynes

When Editor Russell Lynes published his light-hearted analysis in the February 1949 *Harper's*, Harry S. Truman had just been elected President in his own right, Gerald Ford was a freshman in Congress, and the median U.S. family income was \$3,107. At the top of the best-seller list were Lloyd Douglas's religious novel, *The Big Fisherman*, and Dwight D. Eisenhower's *Crusade in Europe*. Television was still a novelty.

Tongue in cheek, Lynes sought to gauge the social significance of "taste" in the postwar era. He gave Americans a shorthand way of classifying themselves according to cultural consumption, and "Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow" remains part of the language. "Apparently, I touched a nerve," Lynes wrote later, "and that is precisely what I meant to do." *Life*, the 1949 king of the visual media, quickly rebroadcast Lynes's assessment, adding a pictorial chart. We present in 1976 a slightly condensed version of the *Harper's* article and the April 11, 1949 *Life* socio-diagram. Lynes adds a postscript; he suggests that competitive American taste, however changed in many outward aspects, has left the rules of the game much as they were in 1949.

---

The old structure of the upper class, the middle class, and the lower class is on the wane. It isn't wealth or family that makes prestige these days. It's high thinking.

Our heroes now are not the Carnegies or the Morgans but the intellectuals—the atomic scientists, the cultural historians, the

commentators, the thinkers of global thoughts who, we assume for lack of another faith, know better than anyone else how we should cope with what we call with new resonance "our national destiny." What we want are oracles, and the best substitutes we can find are the intellectuals. Einstein makes headlines as

*Reprinted by permission of Russell Lynes, © 1949 by Russell Lynes.*

Millikan never did. Toynbee's popularity is to be reckoned with as Spengler's never was. Even Calvert whiskey has selected as Man of Distinction [for its ads] more artists, architects, writers, and commentators than it has industrialists or financiers. What we are headed for is a sort of social structure in which the highbrows are the elite, the middlebrows are the bourgeoisie, and the lowbrows are *hoi polloi*.

For the time being this is perhaps largely an urban phenomenon, and the true middlebrow may readily be mistaken in the small community for a genuine highbrow. But the pattern is emerging with increasing clarity, and the new distinctions do not seem to be based either on money or on breeding. It is true that most highbrows are in the ill-paid professions, notably the academic, and that most middlebrows are at least reasonably well off. Only the lowbrows can be found in about equal percentages at all financial levels.

There may be a time, of course, when the highbrows will be paid in accordance with their own estimate of their worth, but that is not likely to happen in any form of society in which creature comforts are in greater demand than intellectual uplift. Like poets they will have to be content mostly with prestige.

While this social shift is still in its early stages, let us assume a rather lofty position, examine the principal categories with their subdivisions and splinter groups, and see where we ourselves are likely to fetch up in the new order.

### The Highbrows

The highbrows come first. Edgar Wallace, who was certainly not a highbrow himself, was asked by a newspaper reporter in Hollywood some years ago to define one. "What

is a highbrow?" he said. "A highbrow is a man who has found something more interesting than women."

Presumably at some time in every man's life there are things he finds more interesting than women; alcohol, for example, or the World Series. Mr. Wallace has only partially defined the highbrow. Brander Matthews came closer when he said that "a highbrow is a person educated beyond his intelligence," and A. P. Herbert came closest of all when he wrote that "a highbrow is the kind of person who looks at a sausage and thinks of Picasso."

It is this association of culture with every aspect of daily life, from the design of his razor to the shape of the bottle that holds his sleeping pills, that distinguishes the highbrow from the middlebrow or the lowbrow. Spiritually and intellectually, the highbrow inhabits a precinct well up the slopes of Parnassus, and his view of the cultural scene is from above. His vision pinpoints certain lakes and quarries upon which his special affections are concentrated—a perturbed lake called Rilke or a deserted quarry called Kierkegaard—but he believes that he sees them, as he sees the functional design of his razor, always in relation to the broader cultural scene. There is a certain air of omniscience about the highbrow, though that air is in many cases the thin variety encountered on the tops of high mountains from which the view is extensive but the details are lost.

You cannot tell a man that he is a lowbrow any more than you can tell a woman that her clothes are in bad taste. But a highbrow does not mind being called a highbrow. He has worked hard, read widely, traveled far, and listened attentively in order to satisfy his curiosity and establish his squatter's rights in this little

---

*Joseph Russell Lynes, Jr. was born in Great Barrington, Mass. in 1910, graduated from Yale ('32), and, after a book publishing stint, became principal of the Shipley School in Bryn Mawr, Pa. He helped run Army Service Forces training for civilians in World War II, and then went to Harper's, where he became managing editor (1947-67). His books include Snobs (1950), Tastemakers (1954), A Surfeit of Honey (1957), The Art-Makers of Nineteenth Century America (1970), Good Old Modern (1973).*

---

corner of intellectualism. And he does not care who knows it. This is true of both kinds of highbrows—the militant, or crusader, type and the passive, or dilettante, type. These types in general live happily together; the militant highbrow carries the torch of culture, the passive highbrow reads by its light.

**"Intellectual Marines"**

The carrier of the torch makes a profession of being a highbrow and lives by his calling. He is most frequently found in university and college towns, a member of the liberal-arts faculty, teaching languages (ancient or modern), the fine arts, or literature. His spare time is often devoted to editing a magazine which is read mainly by other highbrows, ambitious undergraduates, and the editors of middlebrow publications in search of talent. When he writes for the magazine himself (or for another "little" magazine) it is usually criticism of criticism of criticism.

He leaves the writing of fiction and poetry to others more bent on creation than on what has been created. For the highbrow is primarily a critic and not an artist—a taster, not a cook. He is often more interested in where the arts have been and where they are going than in the objects themselves. He is devoted to the proposition that the arts must be pigeonholed and that their trends should be plotted, or as W. H. Auden puts it—

Our intellectual marines,  
Landing in Little Magazines,  
Capture a trend.

This gravitation of the highbrows to the universities is fairly recent. In the Twenties, when the little magazines were devoted to publishing experimental writing rather than criticism of exhumed experimental writing, the highbrows flocked to Paris, New York, and Chicago. The *transatlantic review*, *transition*, and the *Little Review*, of the lower-case era of literature, were all published in Paris; *BROOM* was published in New York; *Poetry* was (and still is) published in Chicago. The principal little magazines now, with the exception of *Partisan Review*, a New York product but written mostly by academics, are published in the colleges—the *Kenyon Review*, the *Sewanee Review*, the *Virginia Quarterly*, and so on—and their flavor reflects this.

But this does not mean that highbrows do not prefer the centers in which cultural activities are the most varied and active, and these are still London, Paris, New York, and, more recently, Rome. Especially in the fine arts, the highbrow has a chance to make a living in the metropolis where museums are centered and where art is bought and sold as well as created. This is also true of commercial publishing, in which many highbrows find suitable, if not congenial, refuge.

But no matter where they may make their homes, all highbrows live in a world which they believe is inhabited almost entirely by philistines—those who through viciousness or smugness or the worship of materialism gnaw away at the foundations of culture. And the highbrow sees as his real enemy the middlebrow, whom he regards as a pretentious and frivolous man or woman who uses culture to satisfy social or business ambitions; who, to quote Clement Greenberg in *Partisan Review*, is busy “devaluating the precious, infecting the healthy, corrupting the honest and stultifying the wise.”

It takes a man who feels strongly to use such harsh words, but the militant highbrow has no patience with his enemies. He is a serious man who will not tolerate frivolity where the arts are concerned. It is part of his function as a highbrow to protect the arts from the culture-mongers, and he spits venom at those he suspects of selling the Muses short.

The fact that nowadays everyone has access to culture through schools and colleges, through the press, radio, and museums disturbs him deeply; for it tends to blur the distinctions between those who are serious and those who are frivolous. “Culturally what we have,” writes William Phillips in *Horizon*, “is a democratic free-for-all in which every individual, being as good as every other one, has the right to question any form of intellectual authority.” To this Mr. Greenberg adds, “It becomes increasingly difficult to tell who is serious and who not.”

#### Needed: An Elite?

The highbrow does not like to be confused, nor does he like to have his authority questioned, except by other highbrows of whose serious-

ness he is certain. The result is precisely what you would expect: the highbrows believe in, and would establish, an intellectual elite, “a fluid body of intellectuals . . . whose accepted role in society is to perpetuate traditional ideas and values and to create new ones.” Such an elite would like to see the middlebrow eliminated, for it regards him as the undesirable element in our, and anybody else’s, culture.

“It must be obvious to anyone that the volume and social weight of middlebrow culture,” Mr. Greenberg writes, “borne along as it has been by the great recent increase in the American middle class, have multiplied at least tenfold in the past three decades. This culture presents a more serious threat to the genuine article than the old-time pulp dime novel . . . ever has or will. Unlike the latter, which has its social limits clearly marked out for it, middlebrow culture attacks distinctions as such and insinuates itself everywhere. . . .”

#### Muses or Masses

By no means are all highbrows so intolerant, or so ambitious for authority. Many of them, the passive ones, are merely consumers totally indifferent to the middlebrows or supercilious about them. Others endeavor to widen the circle of those who can enjoy the arts in their purest forms. Many museums, colleges, and publishing houses are at least partly staffed by highbrows who exert a more than half-hearted effort to make the arts exciting and important to the public. But in his heart of hearts, nearly every highbrow believes with Ortega y Gasset that “the average citizen [is] a creature incapable of receiving the sacrament of art, blind and deaf to pure beauty.” When, for example, the Metropolitan Museum planned to

expand its facilities a few years ago, an art dealer who can clearly be classified as a highbrow remarked: "All this means is less art for more people."

### **Highbrow Habitat**

The real highbrow's way of life is as intellectualized as his way of thinking, and as carefully plotted. He is likely to be either extremely self-conscious about his physical surroundings and creature comforts or else sublimely, and rather ostentatiously, indifferent to them.

If he affects the former attitude, he will within the limits of his income surround himself with works of art. If he cannot afford paintings, he buys drawings. Color reproductions, except as casual reminders tucked in the frame of a mirror, are beneath him. The facsimile is no substitute in his mind for the genuine, and he would rather have a slight sketch by a master, Braque or Picasso or even Jackson Pollock, than a fully realized canvas by an artist he considers not quite first-rate. Drawings by his friends he hangs in the bathroom.

His furniture, if it is modern, consists of identifiable pieces by Aalto or Breuer or Mies van der Rohe or Eames; it does not come from department stores. If he finds modern unsympathetic, he will tend to use Biedermeier or the more "entertaining" varieties of Victorian, which he collects piece by piece with an eye to the slightly eccentric. If he has antiques, you may be sure they are not maple; the cult of "early American" is offensive to him.

The food that he serves will be planned with the greatest care, either very simple (a perfect French omelette made with sweet butter) or elaborate recipes from *Wine and Food* magazine published in London and edited by André Simon. If he

cannot afford a pound of butter with every guinea fowl, he will in all probability resort to the casserole and peasant cookery with the sparer parts of animals and birds seasoned meticulously with herbs that he gets from a little importer in the wholesale district. His wine is more likely to be a "perfectly adequate little red wine" for eighty-nine cents a half-gallon than an imported French vintage. (Anybody with good advice can buy French wines, but the discovery of a good domestic bottle shows perception and educated taste.) He wouldn't dream of washing his salad bowl. His collection of phonograph records is likely to bulk large at the ends and sag in the middle—a predominance of Bach-and-before at one end and Stravinsky, Schönberg, Bartók, and New Orleans jazz at the other. His radio, if he has one, is turned on rarely; he wouldn't have a television set in the house.

### **Sublime Indifference**

The highbrow who disregards his creature comforts does it with a will. He lives with whatever furniture happens to come his way in a disorganized conglomeration of Victorian department store and Mexican bits and pieces. He takes care of his books in that he knows where each one is no matter in what disorder they may appear. Every other detail of domestic life he leaves to his wife, of whose taste he is largely unaware, and he eats what she gives him without comment. If he is a bachelor, he eats in a cafeteria or drugstore and sometimes spills soup on the open pages of his book. He is oblivious to the man who sits down opposite him, and, if Edgar Wallace is right, to the woman who shares his table. He is not a man without passions, but they have their place. Dress is a matter of indifference to him.

The highbrows about whom I have been writing are mainly consumers and not creators—editors, critics, and dilettantes. The creative artists who are generally considered highbrows—such men as T. S. Eliot, E. M. Forster, Picasso, and Stravinsky—seem to me to fall in another category, that of the professional man who, while he may be concerned with communicating with a limited and perhaps largely highbrow audience, is primarily a doer and not a done-by. When Eliot or Forster or Picasso or Stravinsky sits down at his worktable, I do not know whether he says to himself, “I am going to create Art,” but I very much doubt if that is what is in his mind. He is concerned rather with the communication of ideas within the frame of a poem, novel, a painting, or a ballet suite, and if it turns out to be art (which many think it frequently does) that is to him a by-product of creation, an extra dividend of craftsmanship, intelligence, and sensibility. But when this happens he is taken up by the highbrow consumer—and his reputation will be every bit as carefully guarded by the highbrows as a hundred shares of Standard Oil of New Jersey by the middlebrows. He will be sold—at a par decided upon by the highbrows—to the middlebrows, who are natural gamblers in the commodities of culture.

#### Essential Purists

In a sense it is this determination of par that is the particular contribution of the highbrow. Others may quarrel with his evaluations, but the fact remains that unless there were a relatively small group of self-appointed intellectuals who took it upon themselves to ransack the studios of artists, devour the manuscripts of promising writers, and listen at the keyholes of young com-

posers, many talented men and women might pass unnoticed and our culture be the poorer.

The highbrows are saddened by the writers and painters who have set out to be serious men, as Hemingway did, and then become popular by being taken up by the middlebrows. They even go so far as to say that a story published in *Partisan Review* is a better story than if it were published in the *New Yorker* or *Harper's Bazaar*.

This attitude, which is the attitude of the purist, is valuable. The ground in which the arts grow stays fertile only when it is fought over by both artists and consumers, and the phalanx of highbrows in the field can be counted on to keep the fray alive.

#### The Lowbrow

The highbrow's friend is the lowbrow.

The highbrow enjoys and respects the lowbrow's art—jazz, for instance—which he is likely to call a spontaneous expression of folk culture. The lowbrow is not interested, as the middlebrow is, in preempting any of the highbrow's function. In fact, he is almost completely oblivious of the highbrow unless he happens to be taken up by him—as many jazz musicians, primitive painters, and ballad writers have been—and then he is likely to be flattered, a little suspicious, and somewhat amused. A creative lowbrow like the jazz musician is a prominent citizen in his own world, and being taken up by the highbrows has very little effect on his social standing therein. He is tolerant of the highbrow, whom he regards as somewhat odd and out-of-place in a world in which people do things and enjoy them without analyzing why or worrying about their cultural implications.

The lowbrow doesn't give a hang about art *qua* art. He knows what he

likes, and he doesn't care why he likes it—which implies that all children are lowbrows. The word "beautiful," which has long since ceased to mean anything to the highbrow, is a perfectly good word to the lowbrow. Beautiful blues, beautiful sunsets, beautiful women, all things that do something to a man inside without passing through the mind, association without allusions, illusions without implications. The arts created by the lowbrow are made in the expression of immediate pleasure or grief, like most forms of jazz; or of usefulness, like the manufacturing of a tool or a piece of machinery or even a bridge across the Hudson.

#### Live and Let Live

The form, to use a highbrow phrase, follows the function. When the lowbrow arts follow this formula (which they don't always do), then the highbrow finds much in them to admire, and he calls it the vernacular. When, however, the lowbrow arts get mixed up with middlebrow ideas of culture, then the highbrow turns away in disgust. Look, for example, at what happened to the circus, a traditional form of lowbrow art. They got in [Designer] Norman Bel Geddes to fancy it up, and now its special flavor of authenticity is gone—all wrapped up in pink middlebrow sequins. This is not to say that the lowbrow doesn't like it just as much as he ever did. It is the highbrow who is pained.

Part of the highbrow's admiration for the lowbrow stems from the lowbrow's indifference to art. This makes it possible for the highbrow to blame whatever he doesn't like about lowbrow taste on the middlebrow. If the lowbrow reads the comics, the highbrow understands; he is frequently a connoisseur of the comics himself. But if he likes grade-B double features, the highbrow

blames that on the corrupting influence of the middlebrow moneybags of Hollywood. The lowbrow consumer, whether he is an engineer of bridges or a bus driver, wants to be comfortable and to enjoy himself without having to worry about whether he has good taste or not. It doesn't make any difference to him that a chair is a bad Grand Rapids copy or an eighteenth century *fau-teuil* so long as he's happy when he sits down. He doesn't care whether the movies are art, or the radio improving, so long as he has fun while he's giving them his attention.

It wouldn't occur to him to tell a novelist what kind of book he should write, or a movie director what kind of movie to make. If he doesn't like a book he ignores it; if he doesn't like a movie he says so, whether it is a "Blondie" show or *Henry V*. If he likes jive or square-dancing, he doesn't worry about whether they are fashionable or not. If other people like the ballet, that's all right with him, so long as he doesn't have to go himself. In general the lowbrow attitude toward the arts is live and let live. Lowbrows are not philistines. One has to know enough about the arts to argue about them with highbrows to be a philistine.

#### The Middlebrows

The popular press, and also much of the unpopular press, is run by the middlebrows, and it is against them that the highbrow inveighs.

They divide themselves into two groups: the upper-middlebrows and the lower-middlebrows. It is the upper-middlebrows who are the principal purveyors of highbrow ideas and the lower-middlebrows who are the principal consumers of what the upper-middlebrows pass along to them.

Many publishers, for example, are upper-middlebrows—as are most edu-

cators, museum directors, movie producers, art dealers, lecturers, and the editors of most magazines that combine national circulation with an adult vocabulary. Nearly all of them straddle the fence between highbrow and middlebrow and enjoy their equivocal position.

The conscientious publisher, for instance, believes in the importance of literature and the dignity of publishing as a profession. He spends a large part of his time on books that will not yield him a decent return on his investment. He searches out writers of promise; he pores over the "little" magazines (or pays other people to); he leafs through hundreds and hundreds of pages of manuscript. He advises writers, encourages them, coaxes them to do their best work; he even advances them money. But he is not able to be a publisher at all (unless he is willing to put his personal fortune at the disposal of financially naive muses) if he does not publish to make money. In order to publish slender volumes of poetry he must also publish fat volumes of historical romance, and in order to encourage the first novel of a promising young writer he must sell tens of thousands of copies of a book by an old hand who grinds out one best seller a year. He must take the measure of popular taste and cater to it at the same time that he tries to create a taste for new talent. If he is a successful publisher he makes money, lives comfortably, patronizes the other arts, serves on museum boards and committees.

#### **Pandering Publishers?**

The highbrow suspects that the publisher does not pace his book-lined office contriving ways to serve the muses and that these same muses have to wait their turn in line until the balance sheet has been

served. He believes that the publisher is really happy only when he can sell a couple of hundred thousand copies of a novel about a hussy with a horsewhip or a book on how to look forty when forty-five. To the highbrow he is a tool to be cultivated and used, but not to be trusted.

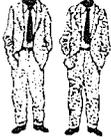
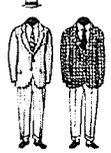
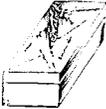
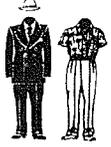
The museum director is in much the same position, caught between the muses and the masses. If he doesn't make a constant effort to swell the door-count, his middlebrow trustees want to know why he isn't serving the community; if he does, the highbrows want to know why he is pandering to popular taste and not minding his main business—the service of scholarship and the support of artists currently certified to be "serious."

#### **The Upper-Middlebrow**

The upper-middlebrow consumer takes his culture seriously, as seriously as his job allows, for he is gainfully employed. In his leisure hours he reads Toynbee or Sartre or Osbert Sitwell's serialized memoirs. He goes to museum openings and to the theater and he keeps up on the foreign films. He buys pictures, sometimes old masters if he can afford them, sometimes contemporary works. He has a few etchings and lithographs, and he is not above an occasional color reproduction of a van Gogh or a Cézanne. If, however, his own son were to express an interest in being an artist, he would be dismayed.

His house is tastefully decorated, sometimes in the very latest mode, a model of the modern architect's dream of functionalism, in which case he can discourse on the theory of the open plan and the derivations of the international style with the zest and uncertain vocabulary of a convert. If his house is "traditional" in character, he will not put up with

## EVERYDAY TASTES FROM HIGH-BROW TO

	CLOTHES	FURNITURE	USEFUL OBJECTS	ENTERTAINMENT	SALADS
HIGH-BROW	 <p>TOWN Fuzzy Harris tweed suit, no hat COUNTRY Fuzzy Harris tweed suit, no hat</p>	 <p>Eames chair, Kurt Verson lamp</p>	 <p>Decanter and ash tray from chemical supply company</p>	 <p>Ballet</p>	 <p>Greens, olive oil, wine vinegar, ground salt, ground pepper, garlic, unwashed salad bowl</p>
UPPER MIDDLE-BROW	 <p>TOWN Brooks suit, regimental tie, felt hat COUNTRY Quiet tweed jacket, knitted tie</p>	 <p>Empire chair, converted sculpture lamp</p>	 <p>Silver cigaret box with wedding ushers' signatures</p>	 <p>Theater</p>	 <p>Same as high-brow but with tomatoes, avocado, Roquefort cheese added</p>
LOWER MIDDLE-BROW	 <p>TOWN Splashy necktie, double-breasted suit COUNTRY Sport shirt, colored slacks</p>	 <p>Grand Rapids Chippendale chair, bridge lamp</p>	 <p>His and Hers towels</p>	 <p>Musical extravaganza films</p>	 <p>Quartered iceberg lettuce and store dressing</p>
LOW-BROW	 <p>TOWN Loafer jacket, woven shoes COUNTRY Old Army clothes</p>	 <p>Mail order overstuffed chair, fringed lamp</p>	 <p>Balsam-stuffed pillow</p>	 <p>Western movies</p>	 <p>Coleslaw</p>

On April 11, 1949, Life popularized Lynes's analysis, adding a chart (reproduced above, with minor changes) and an essay by Winthrop

## LOW-BROW ARE CLASSIFIED ON CHART

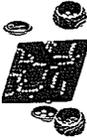
DRINKS	READING	SCULPTURE	RECORDS	GAMES	CAUSES
 A glass of "adequate little" red wine	 "Little magazines," criticism of criticism, avant garde literature	 Calder	 Bach and before, Ives and after	 Go	 Art
 A very dry Martini with lemon peel	 Solid nonfiction, the better novels, quality magazines	 Maillol	 Symphonies, concertos, operas	 The Game	 Planned parenthood
 Bourbon and ginger ale	 Book club selections, mass circulation magazines	 Front yard sculpture	 Light opera, popular favorites	 Bridge	 P. T. A.
 Beer	 Pulps, comic books	 Parlor sculpture	 Jukebox	 Craps	 The Lodge

Chart reprinted from Life courtesy Time Inc.

Sargeant defending the "faddish," fussy highbrows who, he argued, saved America from total inundation by "cultural sewage."

Grand Rapids copies of old pieces; he will have authentic ones. He, or his wife, will ransack secondhand shops for entertaining bibelots and lamps or a piece of Brussels carpet for the bedroom. He never refers to curtains as "drapes." He talks about television as potentially a new art form, and he listens to the Saturday afternoon opera broadcasts. His library contains a few of the more respectable current best sellers, which he reads out of "curiosity" rather than interest. (Membership in any sort of book club he considers beneath him.) There are a few shelves of first editions, some of them autographed by friends who have dined at his house, some of them things (like a presentation copy of *Jurgen*) that he "just happened to pick up" and a sampling of American and British poets. There is also a shelf of paper-bound French novels—most of them by nineteenth century writers. The magazines on his table span the areas from *Time* and the *New Yorker* to *Harper's* and the *Atlantic*, with an occasional copy of the *Yale* and *Partisan Reviews*, and the *Art News*.

#### Uncertain Patrons

From this it can be seen that he supports the highbrows—buys some of the books they recommend and an occasional picture they have looked upon with favor—and contributes to organized efforts to promote the arts both by serving on boards and shelling out money. In general, he is modest about expressing his opinion on cultural matters in the presence of highbrows, but takes a slightly lordly tone when he is talking to other middlebrows. If he discovers a "little" painter or poet, the chances are excellent that the man has already been discovered and promoted by a highbrow or by an upper-middlebrow entrepreneur

(art dealer or publisher). Once in a while he will take a flyer on an unknown artist, and hang his picture inconspicuously in the bedroom. He takes his function as a patron of the arts seriously, but he does it for the pleasure it gives him to be part of the cultural scene. If he does it for "money, fame, power, or prestige," as Virginia Woolf says he does, these motives are so obscured by a general sense of well-being and well-meaning that he would be shocked and surprised to be accused of venality.

#### The Lower-Middlebrow

If the upper-middlebrow is unsure of his own tastes, but firm in his belief that taste is extremely important, the lower-middlebrow ardently believes that he knows what he likes. Yet his taste is constantly susceptible to the pressures that put him in knickerbockers one year and rust-colored slacks the next. Actually he is unsure about almost everything, especially about what he likes. This may explain his pronouncements on taste, which he considers an effete and questionable virtue, and his resentment of the arts; but it may also explain his strength.

When America and Americans are characterized by foreigners and highbrows, the middlebrows are likely to emerge as the dominant group in our society—a dreadful mass of insensible backslappers, given to sentimentality as a prime virtue, the willing victims of slogans and the whims of the bosses, both political and economic.

The picture painted by middlebrow exploiters of the middlebrow, such as the advertisers of nationally advertised brands, is strikingly similar to that painted by the highbrow; their attitudes and motives are quite different (the highbrow paints with a snarl, the advertiser with a gleam),

but they both make the middlebrow out to be much the same kind of creature. The villain of the highbrow and the hero of the advertisers is envisaged as "the typical American family"—happy little women, happy little children, all spotless or sticky in the jam pot, framed against dimity curtains in the windows or decalcomania flowers on the cupboard doors. Lower-middlebrowism is a world pictured without tragedy, a world of new two-door sedans and Bendix washers and reproductions of hunting prints over the living-room mantel. It is a world in which the ingenuity and patience of the housewife are equaled only by the fidelity of her husband and his love of home, pipe, and radio. It is a world that smells of soap. But it is a world of ambition as well, the constant striving for a better way of life—better furniture, bigger refrigerators, more books in the bookcase, more evenings at the movies. To the advertisers this is Americanism; to the highbrows this is the dead weight around the neck of progress.

#### Improving the Self

The lower-middlebrows are not like this, of course, and unlike the highbrows and the upper-middlebrows, whose numbers are tiny by comparison, they are hard to pin down. They live everywhere rubbing elbows with lowbrows in apartment houses, in row houses all alike from the outside except for the planting, in large houses at the ends of gravel driveways, in big cities, in medium cities and suburbs, and in small towns, from Boston to San Francisco, from Seattle to Jacksonville. They are the members of the book clubs who read difficult books along with racy and innocuous ones. They are the course-takers who swell the enrollments of adult education

classes in everything from "The Technique of the Short Story" to "Child Care." They are the people who go to hear the lectures that swarm out from New York lecture bureaus with tales of travel on the Dark Continent and panaceas for saving the world from a fate worse than capitalism. They eat in tea shoppes and hold barbecues in their backyards. They are hell-bent on improving their minds as well as their fortunes. They decorate their homes under the careful guidance of *Good Housekeeping* and the *Ladies' Home Journal*, or, if they are well off, of *House and Garden*, and are subject to fads in furniture so long as these don't depart too radically from the traditional and the safe, from the copy of Colonial and the reproduction of Sheraton.

#### Women in Charge

In matters of taste, the lower-middlebrow world is largely dominated by women. They select the furniture, buy the fabrics, pick out the wallpapers, the pictures, the books, the china. Except in the selection of his personal apparel and the car, it is almost *infra dig* for a man to have taste; it is not considered quite manly for the male to express opinions about things which come under the category of "artistic."

Nonetheless, as a member of the school board or the hospital board he decides which design shall be accepted when a new building goes up. The lower-middlebrows are the organizers of the community fund, the members of the legislature, the park commissioners. They pay their taxes and they demand services in return. There are millions of them, conscientious stabilizers of society, slow to change, slow to panic. But they are not as predictable as either the highbrows or the bosses, political or economic, think they are. They

can be led, they can be seduced, but they cannot be pushed around.

Highbrow, lowbrow, upper-middlebrow, and lower-middlebrow—the lines between them are sometimes indistinct, as the lines between upper class, lower class, and middle class have always been in our traditionally fluid society. But gradually they are finding their own levels and confining themselves more and more to the company of their own kind.

#### **If Highbrows Ruled**

The highbrows would like, of course, to eliminate the middlebrows and devise a society that would approximate an intellectual feudal system in which the lowbrows do the work and create folk arts, and the highbrows do the thinking and create fine arts. All middlebrows, presumably, would have their radios taken away, be suspended from society until they had agreed to give up their subscriptions to the Book-of-the-Month, turned their color reproductions over to a Commission for the Dissolution of Middlebrow Taste, and renounced their affiliation with all educational and other cultural institutions whatsoever. They would be taxed for the support of all writers, artists, musicians, critics,

and critics-of-criticism whose production could be certified “serious”—said writers, artists, musicians, and critics to be selected by representatives of qualified magazines with circulations of not more than five thousand copies.

But the highbrows haven't a chance; things have gone too far. Everybody but the genuine lowbrow (who is more wooed than wedded by the highbrow) is jockeying for position in the new cultural class order. *Life* magazine, sensing the trend, has been catching us up on the past of Western Civilization in sixteen-page, four-color capsules. *Mademoiselle* walks off with the first prizes in the annual short-story contests. The Pepsi-Cola Company stages the most elaborate and highest-paying art competition in the country. Even *Partisan Review* runs full-page ads in the *New York Times Book Review*. The Book-of-the-Month Club ships out copies of Toynbee's *A Study of History* as “dividends.”

If life for grandmother was simple in its social distinctions, life is becoming equally simple for us. The rungs of the ladder may be different, it may even be a different ladder, but it's onward and upward just the same....

---

### POSTSCRIPT

## A 1976 COMMENTARY

*by Russell Lynes*

In the nearly 30 years since “Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow” was published, the highbrow has changed his costume and his whiskers several times, the middlebrows have hared off after a succession of “ops” and “pops” and “Decos” and “Mary Hartman” (twice), and the lowbrows have found Archie Bunker and CB radios and game shows with which to amuse and identify themselves. The lines of my arbitrary categories have become even.

---

more indistinct than they were in 1949. But, I believe, the basic pattern still has some validity, or, if not the pattern, at least the underlying bed of nails which is taste. The adaption and exercise of taste will, I expect, always be a serious social game as long as taste is regarded as a guide to status and people are convinced that there are durable standards of "good taste" and that "bad taste" is what their inferiors have.

The highbrows in the 1950s, you will recall, had a rather rough time of it. It was the decade of the McCarthy investigations, of Adlai Stevenson's two defeats as a candidate for President, and, perhaps, worst of all, the arrival of television—a symbol of mass middlebrowism. It was, moreover, the era of Sputnik I and the shocked clamor for more scientific training. While that incident ultimately gave a good many intellectuals an improved bargaining position, it was not the humanists, the preceptors of taste, who benefited. The Eisenhower years did not supply the highbrows with the opportunities that the election of Kennedy seemed to offer, if only briefly. And, despite Lady Bird Johnson's efforts to continue to hold high the torch of culture, her husband was barely tolerant of what highbrows considered her well-intentioned flirtation with the arts.

During the 1960s it was fashionable to take note of "the cultural explosion." Vastly expensive cultural centers burgeoned in cities across the land, and it was generally agreed that culture was good for the community and hence good for business. Culture, you might say, was regarded as civic Geritol. Community theaters popped up like toadstools, many with the beneficence of the Ford Foundation. Established art museums were crowded as never before; new ones appeared by the dozens, and commercial art galleries multiplied at a rate almost as breathtaking as the prices of the wares in which they dealt. High in the Berkshires (the home of Tanglewood, Music Mountain, Jacob's Pillow), where I was born and which used to be dairy country, there were suddenly more violinists than there were cows, or so it seemed.

The highbrows found all this confusing. Obviously they could not oppose public enthusiasm for the arts, at least not to the point of wishing to turn off the faucet that dripped gold into their pockets. They did not want to put a crimp in anything that supported the *avant garde*, though they persisted in passionate disputes about the problems of mass culture vs. high culture. Moreover, they now had to protect their flanks, not just from the middlebrows, but from the activist young, the members of the dissident counter-culture who thought that the highbrows were just as responsible for America's sins as the bankers. Some adult highbrows tried to identify themselves with the young radicals only to discover that they were not wanted and not considered trustworthy. And, since everybody now had beards and refused to dress according to the old rules, how could a poor highbrow tell who were friends and who were enemies, who was serious, who not?

The upper-middlebrows, on the other hand, felt a surge of

aesthetic adrenalin. To serve on the board of the local opera company became every bit as socially desirable as being on the executive committee of the Community Chest. If anything, the caste structure of tastefulness that I adumbrated in my 1949 essay became strengthened. In some respects, the line between highbrows and upper-middlebrows became blurred; but the line between upper- and lower-middlebrows grew sharper and more social. As a result, service on the boards of artistic institutions has made new demands on their members. They are not only expected to be made of money (or know where to find it) but to be culturally "hip" as well. Keeping up with what's "in" is as important as being socially "in" oneself, and, now, when the arts change with a rapidity unknown before, being upper-middlebrow involves considerable psychic strain.

As I look at the chart, which a *Life* editor and I concocted over innumerable cups of coffee 27 years ago, it strikes me, as it must you, that what was highbrow then has become distinctly upper-middlebrow today. Who regards an Eames chair as highbrow now? Or ballet, or an unwashed salad bowl or a Calder "stabile"? They have all become thoroughly upper-middlebrow, and what was upper has become lower. Only the lowbrow line of the chart still makes spiritual if not literal sense. Today television would find itself at all levels of the chart in ways too obvious to define. The "pill" has taken glamor out of Planned Parenthood as an upper-middlebrow cause, and Art is now their cause instead, and so on. It is a game anyone can play. Even if the shapes of the pieces have changed, and the board looks quite different, the basic rules seem to me much the same as they always were—and as insolent.



Initial publication of *The Wilson Quarterly* was made possible by the assistance of the Smithsonian Institution and by grants from the following individuals, foundations, and corporations: Peter B. Clark, Robert Sterling Clark Foundation, Inc., Copernicus Society, Henry L. and Grace Doherty Charitable Foundation, Inc., William H. Donner Foundation, Robert Ellsworth, General Service Foundation, Gulf Oil Foundation, Paul and Mary Haas Foundation, Armand Hammer, Frederick C. Julander, Louis B. Mayer Foundation, Richard King Mellon Foundation, Charles E. Merrill Trust, Mobil Foundation, Inc., National Bank of Detroit, Northrop Corporation, Edward J. Piszek, Procter and Gamble Fund, Scherman Foundation, Lord Thomson of Fleet, United States Steel Foundation, Inc.

The Dialogue on Resources and Economic Growth (pp. 35-50) was one of a series made possible by a grant from the Xerox Corporation.