

Ireland loses interest in the highbrow arts

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WHEN you build it, they're supposed to come. Instead, despite a record investment in Irish arts over the past decade, people are less likely to attend highbrow events.

A survey published last week by the Arts Council has revealed a significant "dumbing down" in Irish cultural life. Despite having more money, and more artistic events to choose from, Irish people are more inclined to listen to pop and rock music.

"Attendance at any arts event for the middle classes may be at a plateau level, with only a 1% increase between 1994 and 2006," says the report, which found a "steady move towards the popular and commercial and away from traditional art forms".

People are now less likely than they were 12 years ago to attend a range of cultural events, including variety/pantomime (down 15%), art exhibitions (8%), country and western music performances (7%) and plays (7%).

Less classical music is being bought, but 50% of people buy rock or pop, compared with 42% in 1994. While home viewing and listening has also increased for rock and pop, it has fallen for other art forms. The report's authors say this maybe because people have more options in terms of viewing and listening, such as sports television channels, and because there is increased pressure on leisure time due to longer commutes.

They find a "consistent pattern" in the falls in attendance for opera (down from 6% to 4%), classical music (9% to 7%) and traditional Irish or folk music (24% to 19%). Although RTE is broadcasting far more arts programmes than in 1994, only 10% of people watch them compared with 30% back then.

Among the survey's other findings were that fewer people:

- buy poetry books (7% down to 5%)
- buy original works of art (down 2%)
- listen to jazz or blues music (down from 15% to 9%)
- watch art-house films (15% down to 7%)
- watch or listen to opera (12% down to 4%)
- watch ballet (7% down to 3%)
- read for pleasure — 46% of men never do.

The decline in the popularity of theatregoing will come as unwelcome news to the government, given its huge investment programme. It has given millions to rescue The Abbey theatre in Dublin in the past two years and is committed to building a new national theatre in the capital's docklands. The arts department is also paying to renovate several theatres around the country, and since 1994 a series of new venues have opened around Dublin, including the Civic in Tallaght, the Pavilion in Dun Laoghaire and the Mermaid in Bray.

"The apparent fall in attendance in the past decade merits special attention, especially when theatre is such a significant area of spending by the Arts Council," according to the report by Hibernian Consulting.

"Home 'consumption' of drama via radio, television or DVD is also reduced, so it would appear that, whether on stage or broadcast, there is a diminishing public appetite for plays.

"While theatregoing remains a predominantly middle-class activity, that is precisely the social

class demonstrating the greatest fall in attendances — from 58% to 41%.”

Of the smaller number who went to watch a play in 2006, fewer than half (45%) had attended more than once in the previous year. The figure in 1994 was 57%.

Michael Colgan, director of the Gate Theatre in Dublin, said the findings were not borne out by his experience. “There hasn’t been a better year than the one we’ve just had,” he said. “I think this survey finding may be explained by people’s growing confidence. In 1994 they might have felt ‘I am an idiot’ for saying they don’t go to the theatre. Not now.”

There has been a sharp fall in the number of people experiencing difficulty in attending or taking part in arts activities. So the authors of the study speculate that the reason attendances have not increased is that either people have less time or they are “happy with their levels of attendance and do not wish to increase them further”.

The gains are for popular cultural forms only. “Notwithstanding increases in disposable income, the public is not ‘consuming’ more art, at least as traditionally defined,” the report says.

Finbar McDonnell, a consultant with Hibernian, said that another change since 1994 is that people can personalise their choices more easily. “With developments such as podcasting, you can tailor your cultural experiences,” he said. “There is an ‘individuation’ going on and the fact people have more choices may be a factor in the shift from subsidised art to more commercial.”

But several arts administrators insisted the findings were not borne out in their sectors. Suzanne Macdougald, of the Solomon Gallery in Dublin, said: “We have never had it so good and I haven’t noticed any fall-off in art sales or attendances at exhibitions. There is a huge interest in fine arts and lots of artists are doing very well.”

Mary Cloake, director of the Arts Council, said she was not worried about the findings, and it was “positive” that people were looking to popular culture. She believes a lot of Irish people would go to events if they were given more encouragement and support, and the council is launching a three-year audience project that will include measures such as changing the start times of plays so people can go straight from work.

“The survey shows that people’s tastes are broad ranging,” Cloake said. “The Arts Council has to make sure alternatives to the mainstream are available.”