
Section 3: The classics

Unit 1 explains that ‘the civilizations of ancient Greece and Rome formed both a common background and a major source of inspiration to Enlightenment thinkers and artists ... The dominant culture of the Enlightenment was rooted in the classics, and its art was consciously imitative and neoclassical’ (p.26).

The video illustrates the familiarity of the wealthy in eighteenth-century Europe with classical culture through viewing antique statuary at the ancient sites in Italy while on the Grand Tour (see Figure V1.3) or through the acquisition of original sculptures or eighteenth-century imitations (such as the statues of Apollo and Venus by the French sculptor F.G. Adam in Frederick the Great’s palace at Sans-Souci – see Unit 1, Figure 1.5).

One of the greatest British collections of classical antique statuary was accumulated across nearly 40 years by the wealthy antiquarian Charles Towneley. Towneley exhibited these works at his London house in Park Street, Westminster, and made them accessible to artists and art students. Towneley was a trustee of the British Museum, which acquired the collection on his death in 1805.

The German art historian and critic Johann Joachim Winckelmann, the foremost eighteenth-century interpreter of classical art, described its characteristics as ‘calm grandeur and noble simplicity in gesture and expression’. Winckelmann held that ‘the only way for us to become great ... is through imitation of the ancients’ (*Thoughts on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture*, 1755). For the same spirit of veneration for the works of antiquity, look at Figure 1.4 in Unit 1, *The Artist Moved by the Grandeur of Antique Fragments*, by Henry Fuseli. The attitude of Fuseli’s artist to these colossal fragments suggests the distinction between the merely ‘beautiful’ and the ‘sublime’ analysed by Burke in his important work, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, discussed in Unit 1, p.17, and later p.35, and in detail in Units 16–17.

Eighteenth-century taste in art and architecture was dominated by the classical. Kedleston Hall in Derbyshire, designed for Lord Curzon by one of the most successful classical architects of the age, Robert Adam, was based on well-known Roman models. The arched centrepiece of the



Figure V1.3 Canaletto, Ruins of the Forum, Looking towards the Capitol, 1740, drawing, 191 x 106 cm, The Royal Collection © 2002, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. Photo: reproduced by gracious permission of Her Majesty the Queen.

Edward Gibbon, author of The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (1776–88), traced the inspiration for his work to a moment during his Grand Tour of Italy: ‘It was at Rome, on the fifteenth of October 1764, as I sat musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol while the barefooted friars were singing vespers in the Temple of Jupiter, that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the city first started to my mind’ (Gibbon, 1998, p.viii). Figure V1.3 shows the ruins of the Forum. Partly visible on the Capitoline Hill in the background is the church of Santa Maria in Aracoeli. Note Gibbon’s contrast between ‘the ruins of the Capitol’ and ‘the barefooted friars’. Gibbon recorded near the end of his History: ‘I have described the triumph of barbarism and religion’ (Gibbon, 1998, p.1074).

Section 4: Humanity and the noble savage

The video argues that for the *philosophes* across Enlightenment Europe an interest in non-European peoples, like the passion for the classics, not only added to knowledge generally but also provided standards of comparison against which to measure existing values and practices. The ancient civilizations of China and India were much admired.

One of the most lasting Enlightenment concepts of human nature was 'the good savage' or 'noble savage'. The phrase embodied a utopian myth, with roots both biblical and classical, of a Garden of Eden or Golden Age. Mythology seemed to become reality with the discovery of the Pacific (South Sea) Islands and their attractive inhabitants (see Figure V1.4).