

## What Is Meant By Classical Art, Music And Literature?

(See 1946.002 for an introduction to FB's Balliol essays.)

The interesting thing about words of the more abstract variety is the habit they have of slipping about like quicksilver when you try to pin them down to a meaning. This makes it tempting to follow Humpty Dumpty's example, and let the word mean 'just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less'. The word 'classical' is an excellent example of the quicksilver word. It may be fastened on to anything of a respectable age, and although the public, if challenged, always tend to be a little woolly about what it means, they are always triumphantly certain of one thing it does *not* mean, and that of course is 'romantic'. The public would hesitate to *say* perhaps that a painting or a poem or a symphony that was not romantic was of necessity classical, but they would probably *think* it in a vague way and would be mildly resentful if any horn-rimmed 'expert' tried to disillusion them. This is not to say, of course, that the public is not aware that romanticism began and ended in the nineteenth century. In fact, when it came to think a little about the question the public would probably grow quite confident and assert boldly that art prior to the reign of Victoria was 'classical', during that reign 'romantic', and after it 'modern'. If the expert slyly mentioned the Elizabethans the whole tiresome subject would probably be dropped, and the conversation turned with relief to some really absorbing topic such as cricket.

So it is of little use asking the public for help in solving the intriguing question posed by our title. And only in sheerest desperation would we turn to the 'expert' – he is far too overworked already, without our adding to his burdens.

Rather distractedly, therefore, we ruffle the pages of the dictionary. H'm 'standard, first-class, especially in literature; of ancient Greek or Latin standard authors or art. Opposite to romantic'. Resolutely we fight the temptation to say something witty about first-class railway carriages being renamed 'classical' carriages. (How pleasant, though, to have, instead of prosaic 'firsts' and 'thirds', 'classical' and 'romantic' carriages.) Really the dictionary has no more to say on the subject than the public, which should teach us not to try to analyse the unanalysable. An adjective of such vague and general meaning is valueless except when employed in the broadest sense. We convey far more when we say 'a Mozart sonata' than when we say 'a classical sonata'. A musician may understand the latter expression to mean a sonata of strict form and contrapuntal structure, probably composed in the eighteenth century, but many people regard 'classical' music as just something they won't hear if they attend a performance at the Holborn Empire. Similarly a Greats man would think of a 'classical' author as an ancient Greek or Roman, but to the ordinary reader he is a man whose works have a depressingly solid and respectable appearance and are not to be found (Thank Goodness!) on the shelves of his local circulating library.

'Classical', then, is a word which has got out of hand. It is descended from the Latin *classicus* – 'of the first class', but its family tree has a bewildering number of branches and there is no one at hand to prune it back to sanity. When a word reaches this state it is an encumbrance instead of an aid to language. It should be given an honourable retirement for a time and perhaps, if left alone, it may recover.