Unit 1.1

You and art

What is art?

The purpose of art

Since the Stone Age art has proven to be mankind's universal language, a language that uses visual images to convey feelings and ideas. Just like our primitive forefathers used mural graffiti to narrate about their family, land and hunting preys, today our museums, books and magazines still abound with images of extraordinary objects such as paintings, statues, palaces, drawings, tapestries, pottery and many others which we define "art".

But, notwithstanding its global recognition, it is not easy to provide a definition of art. This is due to the fact that each historical period has its own concept of art and, of course, this entails ever-changing standards of appreciation.

How do we evaluate art?

On the whole our judgement of works of art is strictly related to such criteria as craftsmanship, design and aesthetic qualities.

We refer to craftsmanship as the above-average skill shown by a person in the handling of materials and tools. We talk about aesthetic qualities when a series of factors makes an object unique. These are sensory qualities, or the elements of art that we apprehend with our senses, that is to say sight and touch, and are identifiable in the use of lines, the mixing and matching of colours, the suggestion of space and the creation of different shapes. Then there are formal factors to consider, or the principles of art that allow artists to arrange the elements of art in order to express their messages. They consist of unity, balance, contrast, rhythm, pattern, movement and emphasis, and help us understand how the components of a work of art are related to each other. We must not forget technical factors which include the media, tools and procedures used to execute an art object. Such techniques as oil painting, marble carving and silkscreen process all require precise skills on the part of the artist.

Finally, we have the expressive qualities of an artwork or the characteristics that elicit our emotional reaction to the object by means of colour, shapes, symbols or design.





(Left) Attributed to the Villa Giulia Painter, *Terracotta kylix*, ca 470 BC.

Maurizio Cattelan, *Squirrel taking his life*, 2004.

Source: Picello Raffaella, 2007: *English Through Art. The Language of the Visual Arts, Architecture, Cinema and Design*, Hoepli, Milano.