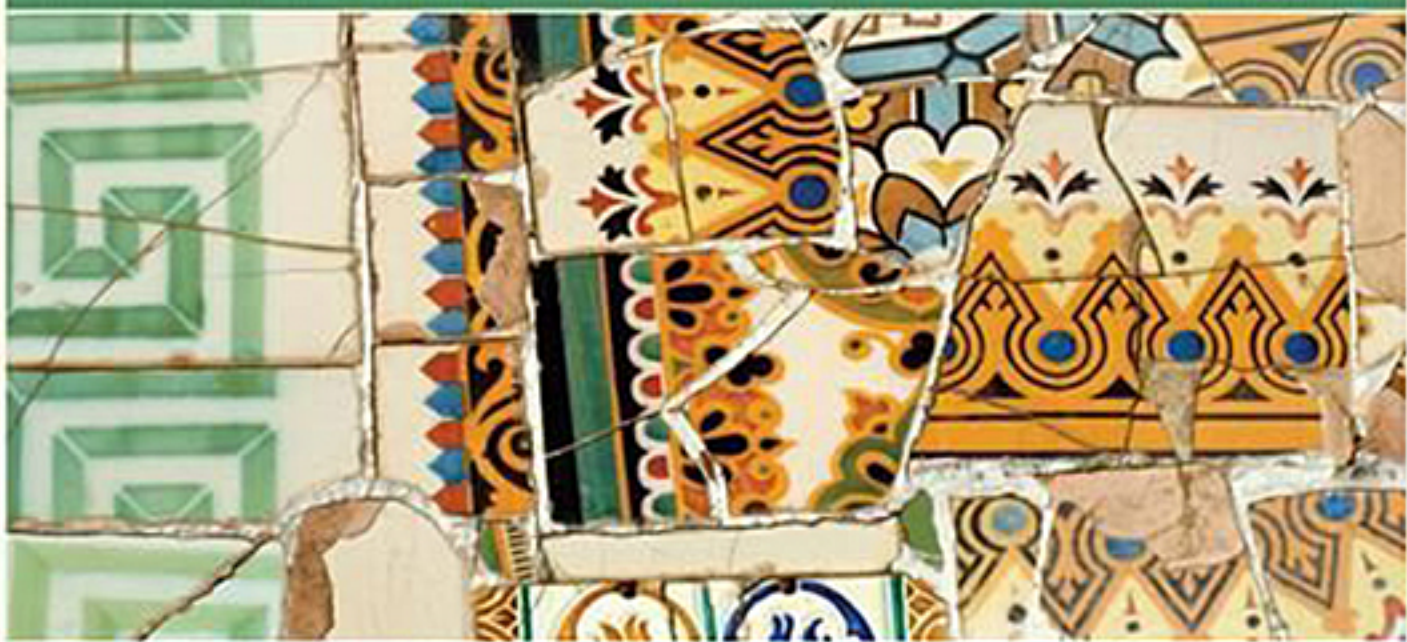


MULTICULTURALISM  
IN ART MUSEUMS  
TODAY



*Edited by*  
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& LAURA EVANS

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## Chapter Fifteen

# Taking It Personally

*Coming to Know Oneself and Others  
Through Interpretations of Art*

Terry Barrett

This is a personal narrative about my many years of teaching people to respond to works of art. During a long and enjoyable career, I have been facilitating learning about and through art by discussing it with people of different ages, races, ethnicities, classes, creeds, and abilities gathered together in art museums, community centers, and classrooms. I have been most interested in encouraging people not so much to judge whether and how an artwork is good or not, but rather to seek interpretations of what an artwork might be expressing to viewers in a diverse society. Eventually I learned that interpretations of art based on personal experiences articulated by people with differences could contribute vivid knowledge about our complex world and the people who live in it. I have found that sharing personal responses and understandings of art can help to create communities of people who empathically understand one another and thus contribute to a more peaceful world.



Brick and Ivy, 2003

42 x 62 inches, 107 x 157 cm

pigment print

Stephen Althouse ©

Lastly, an elderly woman of 94, who lived in an assisted-living retirement home, serenely and joyfully contemplated her late years while looking at a photograph of an ancient stone covered with moss and a strand of ivy, a piece created by Stephen Althouse entitled *Brick and Ivy* (2003). She wrote:

This makes me realize the fragility of our life spans—also impresses me about the durability of the stone contrasted with the ivy and changing life cycles. The human spirit's ability to withstand and overcome some of life's trials as well as the blessings, as expressed by the light as well as the dark: sunshine, shadow, hope and despair, optimism versus pessimism. The overall feeling is one of antiquity and eternal life.<sup>3</sup> (personal communication, 2008)

These last interpretive responses to works of art demonstrate that some people courageously live their lives consciously aware of death, deaths of their loved ones as well as their own impending deaths. Their thoughts on death and dying open spaces for such conversations about under-discussed topics and under-served people, namely those with infirmities and advanced age and those who offer care to them. These shared thoughts on death and dying inspired by works of art can enable all of us to live with sharpened senses of the preciousness of the present and courage concerning the future.