Barrett’s Principles for Interpreting Art

The following principles can help viewers engage in meaningful interpretation of works of art and visual culture. They are intended to be “expanded or contracted” (Barrett, 2003, p. 197) by those constructing interpretation and can be especially useful in helping museum visitors find meaning in works of art as well as helping them think about interpretation in new ways. Barrett cautions that although all of the principles could be applied to any work of art, to do so would be “exhausting except in cases of very serious purpose” (p. 198).

- Artworks are always about something.
- Subject matter + Medium + Form + Context = Meaning
- To interpret a work of art is to understand it in language.
- Feelings are guides to interpretation.
- The critical activities of describing, analyzing, interpreting, judging, and theorizing about works of art are interrelated and interdependent.
- Artworks attract multiple interpretations and it is not the goal of interpretation to arrive at single, grand, unified, composite interpretations.
- There is a range of interpretations any artwork will allow.
- Meanings of artworks are not limited to what their artists intended them to mean.
- Interpretations are not so much right, but more or less reasonable, convincing, informative, and enlightening.
- Interpretations imply a worldview.
- Good interpretations tell more about the artwork than they tell about the interpreter.
- The objects of interpretations are artworks, not artists.
- All art is about the world in which it emerged.
- All art is in part about other art.
- Good interpretations have coherence, correspondence, and inclusiveness.

• Interpreting art is an endeavor that is both individual and communal.
• Some interpretations are better than others.
• The admissibility of an interpretation is ultimately determined by a community of interpreters and the community is self-correcting.
• Good interpretations invite us to see for ourselves and continue on our own.

Reference