

## Katharine Steele Renninger (1925-2004)

### *Morrell's Spinning Wheel and Wool Winder, 1988*

H. 17.625 x W. 23.625 inches, casein on linen canvas mounted on masonite, James A. Michener Art Museum.  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph L. Wesley, Sr., on the occasion of a tribute to George Ermentrout.

## Looking Questions

- Describe what you see in this painting. Create a list of all the details you can find.
- Identify the **focal point** of the work. What draws your eye to this location?
- What objects are part of the window display and what objects are from the reflection?
- Where is the viewer standing? How do you know?
- Where do you see **patterns**?
- Find all the **geometric** and **organic shapes** in the painting.
- How would you explain Renninger's use of color?
- Describe Renninger's use of the paint on the canvas. How would you describe its **texture**?
- Would you consider this painting **realistic** or **abstract**? Explain.
- If you were going to give this painting a different title, what would you call it? Why?

## About the Artwork

Katharine Steele Renninger, a lifelong resident of Bucks County, was interested in capturing the culture and history of her community. In her series of paintings from the window of Morrell's **Antique** Shop in Newtown, Pennsylvania, *Morrell's Spinning Wheel and Wool Winder* shows a crowded window display filled with **antiques**. The **antiques** are layered with the **reflection** of windows from a building across the street that create a grid-like **pattern** of colors. The **focal point** of the busy **composition** is the large circle of a spinning wheel and the diamond shape of the wool winder. The objects are drawn in careful detail, but instead of **realistic** colors, Renninger shifts the color palette to **tints** and **shades** of the **secondary colors** orange, purple and green. She further distorts the image by flattening the space between objects and **cropping** out the window frame to make us question what is real and what is a reflection. **Casein** was applied to the linen canvas and then scrubbed away to create an interesting **texture**. The canvas was then mounted on a piece of sturdy **masonite**.

## About the Artist



Katharine Steele Renninger painting, n.d., James A. Michener Art Museum Archives, Gift of Mary Renninger Rumsey, Sarah Renninger Henriques, Patrick John Renninger, and Katharine Ann Renninger.

Katharine Steele Renninger (1925-2004), born in Jenkintown, Pennsylvania, made a career painting familiar places and objects found throughout Bucks County. She attended Moore College of Art and Design in Philadelphia and eventually joined its faculty. Renninger was influential in her community not only because of her art, but also because of her philanthropic efforts. She founded the Arts and Cultural Council of Bucks County and was a founding trustee of the James A. Michener Art Museum in Doylestown, PA. She also worked with Bucks County public school districts to promote art in schools.

The majority of Renninger's more than 800 paintings focused on **inanimate objects** such as places and objects. Although the paintings are devoid of people, we feel a sense of the character of the people that may have owned these items. She was inspired by **geometric patterns** made by the **repetition** of various **architectural** forms (windows, doors, railings) and common household objects (chairs, jars, quilts) that reflect her cultural heritage.

Renninger drew inspiration from different artistic styles, but she described herself as an "**abstract realist**." The objects in her paintings are recognizable, but the use of colorful **patterns**, **cropping** and shallow **depth**, border on **abstraction**. She painted these objects as she found them instead of arranging them in the manner of **still life** artists. She worked mainly in a medium called **casein**, a fast-drying, milk-based paint that was used in ancient cave paintings. The water-soluble paint allowed her to rework and remove paint to reveal the **texture** of the canvas.

## In the Words of the Artist

"I like to paint things through things."

"I paint things that have a sense of integrity, that were made one at a time by someone who really cared. I guess it's a rebellion against the sameness of everything around us today."

"I have no desire to be a historical archivist or to create picture-postcard pretties."

"An empty building gives the viewer more possibilities for imagination."

"The trick to painting glass, is not to paint it."

James A. Michener Art Museum, 2016

“[I paint] just ‘things.’ They are exciting and interesting to me. When they are to other people too it is extremely gratifying.”

## Themes

*Morrell's Spinning Wheel and Wool Winder* addresses a variety of themes for discussion and lesson planning. These include:

- Abstraction
- Realism
- Pattern and repetition
- Reflections
- Color theory
- Painting
- Still life
- Geometric/organic shapes
- Textile arts
- Community
- Light/shadow
- Tints/shades
- Secondary colors
- Bucks County
- Folk art
- Architecture

## Interdisciplinary Connections

Interdisciplinary connections can be made between *Morrell's Spinning Wheel and Wool Winder* and a variety of subjects. The lesson ideas, listed below for elementary through high school students, are provided as a way to enrich curricula and make meaningful connections with the work by Katharine Steele Renninger.

## Visual Arts

- Renninger painted the **antiques** as she saw them through a window. Find a subject that you have to look through something else to see and draw or paint it. Present your artwork to the class for a peer critique.
- In your sketchbook, try drawing or painting a picture of reflective and/or clear objects like a mirror or glass.
- **Still life** objects can tell about the person who owned them. Create a **still life** with objects that describe you and your personality. What items would you choose? Why? Write an artist statement to accompany your **still life**. For younger students, read *Still Life Stew* by Helena Clare Pittman.

## Art History

- Renninger was inspired by the American **Realists**. Look at examples of work by Charles Sheeler, Charles Demuth and Edward Hopper. Which artist's style is most similar to Renninger's? Write a paragraph explaining your opinion.
- **Casein** was Renninger's preferred medium. This medium was used for ancient cave paintings and more

modern paintings such as *The Scream* by Expressionist painter Edvard Munch and several paintings by pop artist Andy Warhol. Research the history of **casein**. Experiment by painting with both **casein** and watercolor. Discuss the qualities of each.

- After graduating, Renninger traveled abroad, where she was influenced by many European artists, including Paul Cézanne. Learn about Cézanne and choose one of his many **still life** paintings. Describe the similarities and differences to Renninger's painting. Explain which painting you prefer and why. Support your claim with at least three reasons.
- Renninger's Pennsylvania Dutch ancestors piqued her interest in handcrafted furniture and objects. Learn about Pennsylvania German **Folk art** and **Fraktur**. Create a PowerPoint or [Prezi](#) presentation sharing what you learned.

## Language Arts

- Renninger's father was an engineer who taught her the importance of careful observation and accuracy. She made very detailed drawings and notes in her sketchbook: descriptions about design, color, light, functional information, and other precise observations. In your sketchbook, chose one or more objects to create thumbnail sketches and record descriptive notes.
- Many of Renninger's paintings depict places and objects important to the history and culture of her hometown. Write a paragraph about a place or object that represents your community. Explain why you chose this object. What does it tell us about the place where you live? Share your paragraph with the class.
- Create a list poem on your own or with your class describing Renninger's painting. Give your poem a creative title.
- Write a fictional narrative about the person who might have owned one of these **antiques**. Who were they? Why was this object important to them? How did it ended up in the **antique** shop? Use evidence from the painting to support your reasons.

## Social Studies/History

- The spinning wheel has been used for centuries to spin yarn in many different cultures. Read about the history of the spinning wheel and about **textile** arts. What is Leonardo da Vinci's connection to the spinning wheel?
- Research your town's local history to learn more about the important events that shaped where you lived. Create an interactive timeline to share with your classmates on [Timeline](#) at: [www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/interactives/timeline\\_2/](http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/interactives/timeline_2/)
- Renninger was inspired by The Philadelphia Ten, a group of women artists from Philadelphia who exhibited together from 1917-1945. This progressive group of women sought camaraderie and support in a mostly male-dominated art world and included such noted Bucks County artists as Fern I. Coppedge and M. Elizabeth Price. Learn about important women in history and select one woman to research. Create a [Popplet](#) mind-map about this famous woman to share with the class.
- Throughout her career, Renninger saw her hometown of Newtown, PA transform from farm to suburbs. Learn more about the historical background of this town. How old is it? Continue to research the differences between rural, urban and suburban communities. What kind of community do you live in? How is it similar or different from 50 years ago? Explain your answer.

## Mathematics and Science

- Renninger was inspired by the **patterns** and **geometric shapes** found in **architecture** and objects. Find examples of **pattern** throughout the painting. What **geometric shapes** do you see? The spinning wheel

is divided into several even pieces as well as the windows and checkerboard game. Use these objects to practice fractions. Find the diameter of the spinning wheel.

- *Morrell's Spinning Wheel* shows the reflection of the building across the street. Why does glass reflect an image? How does it distort an image? What other objects reflect an image?
- Renninger uses **secondary colors** in her painting. Experiment with color mixing to create purple, orange and green. Make predictions about what color will be made when you mix two different colors together or all three. Try varying the amount of colors you use when you mix the colors, adding more of one over the other. Continue to make variations by mixing white or black. Record your observations in your notebook. For younger students, read *Mix it Up* by Herve Tullet.
- Shadows in the painting are shown as big blocks of color. Experiment with light and shadow. If you shine a light on an object, where does it cast a shadow? What about a clear object like a glass? Why is a shadow dark? Create a composition demonstrating the use of shadows with opaque and transparent objects.
- Mix your own milk paint by using lemon juice and skim milk. For older students, stir in 1/2 tsp of Borax once curds form. How do you explain the chemical reaction? Follow the recipe at: [www.marthastewart.com/272306/milk-paint-recipe](http://www.marthastewart.com/272306/milk-paint-recipe).

## Key Vocabulary

- Abstract
- Antique
- Architecture
- Composition
- Casein
- Crop
- Depth
- Focal point
- Folk art
- Fraktur
- Geometric shapes
- Inanimate object
- Masonite
- Organic shapes
- Pattern
- Realism
- Reflect
- Repetition
- Still life
- Secondary colors
- Shade
- Textile
- Texture
- Tint

## More Michener Connections

Discover these additional works and/or artists at your next visit to the Michener, on the Museum's Bucks County Artists Database, or at the Michener's page on the Google Cultural Institute website to compare and

contrast them with the work of Renninger.

Exon, Randall. *Beach House*, 2002, oil on canvas. ([www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/partner/james-a-michener-art-museum](http://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/partner/james-a-michener-art-museum))

Reisman, Celia, *Angel Awning*, 2000, oil on canvas. ([www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/partner/james-a-michener-art-museum](http://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/partner/james-a-michener-art-museum))

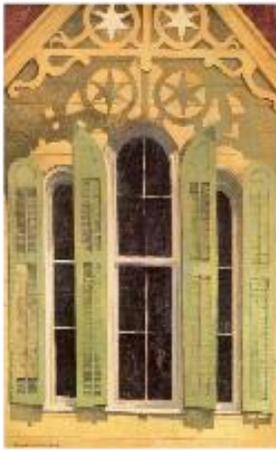
Renninger, Katharine Steele. *Prallsville Mill*, 1993, casein. ([www.michenerartmuseum.org/bucksartists/image/571/](http://www.michenerartmuseum.org/bucksartists/image/571/))

Renninger, Katharine Steele. *Agricultural Fair, West Tilsbury*, 1993, casein. ([www.michenerartmuseum.org/bucksartists/image/573/](http://www.michenerartmuseum.org/bucksartists/image/573/))

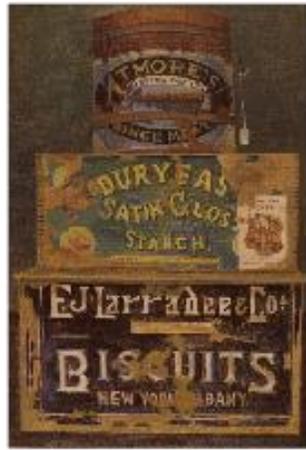
Sapienza, Ellen. *French Doors*, 2013, oil on canvas. ([www.michenerartmuseum.org/bucksartists/image/1941/](http://www.michenerartmuseum.org/bucksartists/image/1941/))

Sheeler, Charles. *Home Sweet Home*, 1931, oil on canvas. ([www.michenerartmuseum.org/bucksartists/image/680/](http://www.michenerartmuseum.org/bucksartists/image/680/))

Trego, William T. *Woman by the Window*, 1895, oil on canvas mounted on masonite, Collection of Raymond and Alice Pushkar. ([www.michenermuseum.org/catalogue/trego/](http://www.michenermuseum.org/catalogue/trego/))



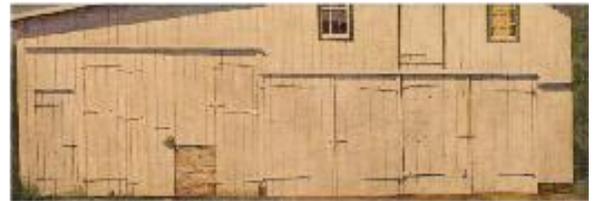
*Two Wheeler*, 1964, casein on canvas mounted to masonite, 24 x 15 in. Private collection.



*Cold Spring Boxes*, 2001, casein on canvas mounted to masonite, 15 x 10 3/8 in. James A. Michener Art Museum, Bequest of the Estate of Laurence G. Taber.



(Top) *Jams and Jellies*, 1997, casein on canvas mounted to masonite, 11 7/8 x 23 7/8 in. Private collection.



(Bottom) *Pop Styer's Carriage House*, 2000, casein on canvas mounted to masonite, 9 7/8 x 28 1/4 in. Private collection.

## Selected Resources

### Web Tools

**Popplet:** [www.popplet.com](http://www.popplet.com)

**Prezi:** [www.prezi.com](http://www.prezi.com)

**Timeline:** [www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/interactives/timeline\\_2/](http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/interactives/timeline_2/)

### Websites

"Katharine Steele Renninger." *Bucks County Artists Database*, 2016, [www.michenerartmuseum.org/bucksartists/artist/203/a](http://www.michenerartmuseum.org/bucksartists/artist/203/a).

Traditional Fine Arts Organization. "Katharine Steele Renninger: Craft, Commitment, Community-March 26 - June 12, 2016." *Resource Library*, 2016, [www.tfaoi.com/aa/10aa/10aa604.htm](http://www.tfaoi.com/aa/10aa/10aa604.htm).

"Katharine Steele Renninger: Craft, Commitment, Community." *Michener Art Museum*, 2016, [www.michenerartmuseum.org/exhibition/katharine-steele-renninger-craft-commitment-community/](http://www.michenerartmuseum.org/exhibition/katharine-steele-renninger-craft-commitment-community/).

"Katharine Steele Renninger." *Senior Artists Initiative*, 2016, [www.seniorartists.org/chronoartists.html](http://www.seniorartists.org/chronoartists.html).

Sergey, Pam, "I like to paint things through things'-Katharine Steele Renninger." *Michener Volunteer Voices*, James A. Michener Art Museum, 2016

Word Press, 29 April 2016, <https://michenvolunteervoices.wordpress.com/2016/04/29/i-like-to-paint-things-through-things-katharine-steele-renninger/>  
Stewart, Martha. "Milk Paint Recipe." Martha Stewart, 2016, [www.marthastewart.com/272306/milk-paint-recipe](http://www.marthastewart.com/272306/milk-paint-recipe).

### **Books for Teachers and Students**

Pittman, Helena Clare. *Still Life Stew*. New York: Hyperion, 1998. Print.

Sheehan, Liz K. *Katharine Steele Renninger: Craft, Commitment, Community*, James A. Michener Art Museum, 2016, Print.

Sydney, Patricia Tanis. *Katharine Steele Renninger: A Retrospective*, James A. Michener Art Museum, 1995, Print.

Tullet, Herve. *Mix it Up*, 2014, Chronicle Books. Print.

**Common Core Standards for ELA:** R.1, R.10, W.1, W.2, W.4, W.5, W.6, W.7, W.8, W.9, SL.1, SL.4, SL.5, L.1, L.2

**PA State Standards:** AH.9.1, AH.9.2, AH.9.3, AH.9.4, G.7.2, G.7.3, H.8.3, CC.2.3, CC.1.1, CC.1.2, CC.1.4, CC.1.5

**Credits:** This teaching poster was produced by the Education Department at the James A. Michener Art Museum. Poster sponsored by a grant from the Ruth and Hans Cahnmann Memorial Fund on behalf of Vivian Francesco. Copyright © 2016 James A. Michener Art Museum

