**CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS**

Explore the artistic and cultural heritage of the Delaware Valley region with the Michener Art Museum

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**LET'S LOOK**

What do you think is the focal point of this work?
What draws your eye to this location?

Where is the viewer standing?
How do you know?

Where and what kinds of patterns do you see?

Have you ever visited an antique store or a flea market before?
Describe the most fascinating thing you recall encountering.

Choose an object shown in this painting.
Who might its original owner have been?
How did it end up in this storefront window?

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**ABOUT THE ARTWORK**

Katharine Steele Renninger, a lifelong resident of Bucks County, was interested in capturing the culture and history of her Pennsylvania community. In her series of paintings from the window of an antique shop in Newtown, PA, Morrell’s *Spinning Wheel and Wool Winder* shows a crowded window display filled with a collection of tools, furniture and other objects from the past. The large circle of a spinning wheel sits next to a diamond-shaped wool winder. The objects are surrounded by an arrangement of other curious items: a small chessboard, a metal grater, a duck decoy, ceramicware, colorful glass bottles, and more. This scene is layered with the reflection of windows from a building across the street that create a colorful grid-like pattern. Interestingly, no passerby or customer – or painter – appears in this reflection.

Renninger draws all of these objects in careful detail, but instead of using realistic colors, she paints them with 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. Renninger preferred to use casein paint, a fast-drying and water-soluble medium that is made from milk protein. Working with casein gave her a large amount of control while she painted. Renninger applied the casein to a linen canvas and then scrubbed some away to create unique colors and textures. The canvas was then mounted on a piece of sturdy masonite, or a type of engineered wood board.

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**Morrell's Spinning Wheel and Wool Winder**
Katharine Steele Renninger
1988
Casein on linen canvas mounted on masonite
17.625 x 23.625 inches
ABOUT THE ARTIST

Katharine Steele Renninger (1925-2004), was from Jenkintown, Pennsylvania, and made a career painting familiar places and objects found throughout Bucks County. The majority of her work focused on inanimate, or non-living, things. She was inspired by patterns created by the repetition of various architectural forms (windows, doors, railings) and common household objects (chairs, jars, quilts). Although her paintings are devoid of people, we might get a sense of the character of those that may have owned these items. “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.”

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 make the compositions feel less real and more abstract. Renninger was influential in her community as an artist, teacher and philanthropist. She founded the Arts and Cultural Council of Bucks County and was one of the first trustees of the James A. Michener Art Museum when it opened in 1988. Renninger also worked with several Bucks County public school districts to promote arts appreciation and courses in local schools.

3D ARTS

ReTooled
Antique stores are often full of interesting objects that once served a specific need, but have since been replaced or made redundant in the modern world. Find a low-cost item at a local thrift or vintage shop. Try to choose something that confuses you! Research the object to find out about its original purpose, then use other art materials to re-imagine the object as something new. Could it be a different kind of tool? Something to snuggle? A helpful new invention? Write an artist statement to display alongside your piece that shares about its history as well as the choices you made while reshaping it. For an extra challenge, make the retooled version connect in some way to its old story.

SCIENCE

Making Casein
Casein was Renninger’s preferred medium. This was used in ancient cave paintings and also more modern paintings such as The Scream by Edvard Munch and several paintings by pop artist Andy Warhol. Create your own version of casein, or milk paint, by using lemon juice and skim milk. You can follow the steps outlined at:
https://www.marthastewart.com/272306/milk-paint-recipe

As you use the homemade casein, make notes about its properties. How is it different from other paints you have used? For older students, stir in 1/2 tsp of Borax once curds form. Observe the chemical reaction that takes place – how do you explain what happened?

SOCIAL STUDIES/HISTORY

Political Spin
The spinning wheel has been used for centuries to spin yarn in many different cultures. In the British American colonies, spinning fibers from wool, flax or cotton into yarn or thread was traditionally women’s work. By the mid-1700s, however, most women did not need to spin their own yarn, because fabric could readily be purchased at local stores. Find out how “spinning bees” became political events in the years before the American Revolution. Why was wearing homespun clothing an acceptable form of protest for women? Can you think of other ways that textiles and/or fashion choices have been used to make political statements? Do you think these are effective ways to make a statement? Why or why not?