

Federico Castellon, American (b. Almeria, Spain), 1914-1971

“And the Red Death Held Illimitable Dominion Over-All,” 1969, color lithograph

Federico Castellon was essentially a self-taught artist who distinguished himself as a painter and graphic artist, receiving numerous awards and grants during his lifetime. His works are in the collections of such museums as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Art Institute of Chicago and Brooklyn Museum of Art.

In 1921, his family left Spain and settled in Brooklyn, New York, which remained his home for the rest of his life. He began sketching in grammar school, and by his mid-teens he was already influenced by Realism and Surrealism, and would go on to work in such areas as Cubism and Futurism. During this time, Castellon also began to exhibit his works. Without formal training beyond high school, he developed superb skills as a draftsman, printmaker, illustrator and painter. In 1938, Castellon did his first lithographs. In 1943, he became a U.S. citizen, and by 1946 began a teaching career that lasted over 25 years. Between 1950 and 1957, Castellon was almost exclusively involved in illustration, for magazines and the like.

While he continued to work in a variety of mediums during the rest of his life, Castellon's later works dealt mainly with etchings and lithographs. His work transcended the Surrealism he had developed, becoming mysterious, meticulous and quixotic in nature. His figures and symbols, expressed in highly individualistic ways, many times hovered between dreams and nightmares. His most mature work, of the 1960s, shows an artist who became a master of the visual question.

At a certain point, he chose to combine his talents and insight to Edgar Allen Poe's superb writing. “And the Red Death Held Illimitable Dominion Over-All” (1969) comes from his *The Mask of the Red Death* series of color lithographs. This series is based on Poe's short story *Masque of the Red Death* in which a king and his court shut themselves up in a castle to escape a plague that has devastated the rest of the kingdom. At a masked ball which the king arranges to celebrate their escape from danger, a mysterious stranger appears. At midnight, when everyone un.masks, they discover the stranger is a skeleton, representing the Red Death, the plague they thought they could escape. The title to this lithograph derives from the last line of the story.

In summary, art critic/curator Albert Reese had this to say about Castellon's lithographs: “Looking at the prints of the gifted Spanish American artist Federico Castellon, one feels as if a window were suddenly opened into the depths of our unconscious, and indeed the artist's lithographs have all the astounding clarity, the sharp definition, we associate with dreams. Castellon has an extraordinary facility for denoting space and tactile values, and the subtle tones of the medium are registered with sensitivity and grace.”

The KIA's Permanent Collection includes 18 lithographs by Federico Castellon, 16 of which are *The Mask of the Red Death* series. Also in the collection is a screenprint entitled “The Conversation.”