

Quentin VerCetty's AstroSankofa Decoded

Carnegie Hall commissioned Quentin VerCetty, one of the world's leading Afrofuturist artists, to create a signature work to represent the spirit of the Afrofuturism festival. A self-described visual griot (a West African term for storyteller), "artpreneur," educator, "artist," and "ever-growing interstellar tree," VerCetty's creative works speculate addressing social issues, and the imaginative futures of representation and preservation of the memories of people of African descent.

His *AstroSankofa* makes myriad references to the galaxy-jumping, time-bending, and mind-expanding world of Afrofuturism, as well as to Carnegie Hall in the Hall's first-ever visual art commissioned for a festival.

Raised arms in homage to vocalist-dancer-artist June Tyson, the only woman in the Sun Ra Arkestra

Fusion of Geordi La Forge's *Star Trek* visor and Kenyan artist Cyrus Kabiru's aesthetic

Facial references to Sissieretta Jones, pioneering opera singer and the first African American woman to headline a concert at Carnegie Hall

Bracelet worn by Malian actress-singer-songwriter Fatoumata Diawara

Necklace worn by Dora Milaje women in Marvel's *Black Panther*

Necklace worn by T'Chaka, Marvel's original Black Panther

Sissieretta Jones's medals

Wings from Earth, Wind & Fire logo inspired by Kemetic (Egyptian) goddess Isis

Reference to outfit worn by Labelle, the 1960s and '70s all-women vocal group that performed at Carnegie Hall

Architecture of Carnegie Hall's Stern Auditorium / Perelman Stage

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Astronaut gloves in honor of Mae C. Jemison, doctor, engineer, NASA astronaut, and the first African American female to travel in space

Orb containing original kente cloth pattern of the Akan Queen Mother, representing knowledge and strength

Headdress worn by Sun Ra—NEA Jazz Master, pioneer of Afrofuturism, visionary musician, and bandleader of the Sun Ra Arkestra, which first performed at Carnegie Hall in 1968

Marvel's Falcon armor

Obsidian stone and gold trophy-like statue

Crystal quartz—the largest deposits found in South Africa—to symbolize healing and natural power as a metaphor for Blackness

Carnegie Hall building exterior



Quentin VerCetty

Photo by Dan Pearce / Torstar

From the Artist

AstroSankofa explores different historical iconographies of legendary Afrofuturists who have shared their sonic frequency at Carnegie Hall. Recognizing Afrofuturism as a feminist praxis—as stated by Ytasha Womack, Alondra Nelson, Camille Turner, and Nalo Hopkinson, among others—I wanted to depict an iconic memorial of Black women that embodies the continuity of resilience and the evolution of Blackness that Afrofuturism facilitates space for in its multidimensional manifestations.

The foundation of the piece is a tribute to the great and under-celebrated African American soprano Madame Matilda Sissieretta Jones (1868–1933), the first person of African descent to headline at Carnegie Hall. She spoke about her struggle and pursuit to build herself up as a singer: “We come through the furnaces of affliction and persecution and become as gold, tried in the fire. As the crushed rose emits the sweetest perfume, so the Negro, bruised and beaten, sings the sweetest songs.”

This sentiment made me think of Sankofa bird symbolism, but also how the Black-African diasporic experience is like that of a rising phoenix. The posture is in homage to the great Queen of Saturn, June Tyson—the songbird, high priestess, and

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voice of Sun Ra’s Arkestra. Along with these two references, the work features an assemblage of elements that are meant to speak to how Black folks globally have used the arts to empower, enlighten, and project towards brighter futures.

Some references are to musical artists who have performed at Carnegie Hall, including the Kemet-inspired headdress of Sun Ra, and the wings of Horus from Earth, Wind & Fire’s logo. There’s an adaptation of Falcon’s armor and Geordi La Forge’s visor, inspired by Kenyan Afrofuturist artist Cyrus Kabiru. The spacesuit and glove are a nod to Mae Jemison, along with a couple of *Black Panther* references. What I would hope for the audience to understand is that Afrofuturism is an exciting, multifaceted experience that’s for everyone to contribute to and participate in.

—Quentin VerCetty
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