

Press Release
September 29, 2026

Press Contact
Kinshasa Peterson
kinshasa.peterson@villa-albertine.org

Villa Albertine

ATL

BOS

CHI

DC

HOU

LA

MIA

NYC

NOLA

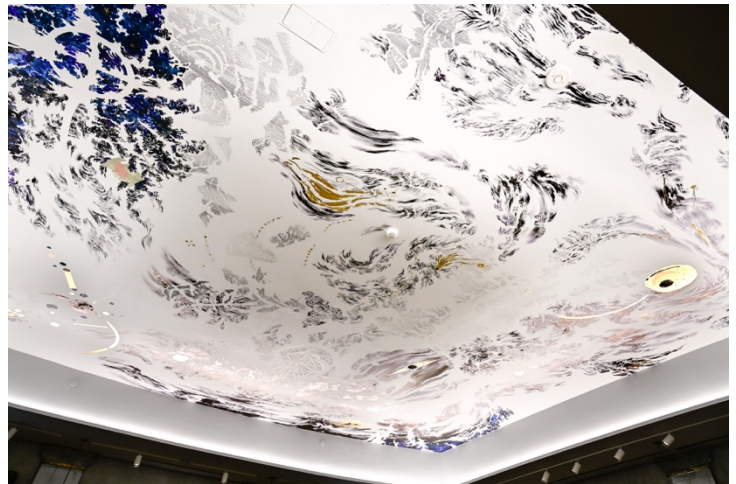
SF




**AMBASSADE
DE FRANCE
AUX ÉTATS-UNIS**
*Liberté
Égalité
Fraternité*

Villa Albertine Unveils Abdelkader Benchamma's *Stella Terrae* in Its Iconic Ballroom Space

The commissioned artwork is a contemporary meditation on our celestial origins and will welcome visitors for years to come.



Left Photo: Beowulf Sheehan
Right Photo: Molly Walsh

New York, September 29, 2026 — Villa Albertine, the French Institute for Culture and Education within the French Embassy of the United States, is thrilled to unveil *Stella Terrae*, a striking, monumental artwork exploring humanity's celestial origins created exclusively for its Fifth Avenue headquarters. Painted on the ceiling of the iconic Ballroom of the Payne Whitney Mansion, itself a renowned example of New York's Gilded Age, the mural was inaugurated in a ceremony held on September 27, 2026 in the presence of the artist.

Stella Terrae is a creation placed literally and figuratively at the center of Villa Albertine. The mural spans the ceiling of its Ballroom, a reception and program space within the institution where diplomatic, cultural and intellectual events are held. Visitors to the space will have the opportunity to engage with the artwork while experiencing exemplary offerings in French culture, ideas, and innovation.

The design of *Stella Terrae* was conceived by French artist Abdelkader Benchamma, who was selected as the laureate of a jury-led competition in June 2026. Exhibiting in Europe as well as internationally, his concept was selected from a field of 225 site-specific entries. Benchamma's body of work is further distinguished by his selection as a member of the 2026 cohort of Villa Albertine Residents, where he will continue his artistic explorations during a two-month sojourn in the United States.

"*Stella Terrae* is dynamic in its very making, created in situ, in dialogue with the scale and tensions of the space, yet seemingly still through the delicacy of its execution: an invitation towards contemplation," explained **Abdelkader Benchamma**. "At its core, the mural tells an essential story: humanity's relationship with the sky, shaped by observation, knowledge, and imaginative narratives. It situates itself within a long continuum of ways of representing the cosmos while offering a contemporary interpretation of that legacy. Its title refers to a mysterious substance sometimes reported after meteorite falls. Known as "star jelly," or *stella terrae* ("star of the earth"), it is surrounded by myths and contradictory interpretations, as though the celestial realm could never be fully defined, explained, or contained."

Stella Terrae features shades of dark blue and purple, combined with iridescent accents, to evoke a celestial body in perpetual motion. For this mural, Benchamma drew inspiration from a rich body of iconography depicting celestial scenes, spanning from antiquity to the present day. Some of these depictions were created using gold leaf applied by Pierre-Yves Morel, an award-winning artisan renowned for his mastery of *trompe-l'œil*, with whom Benchamma had previously collaborated on large-scale projects in France, notably at the Vitry-sur-Seine metro station and the Centre Pompidou.

“With the creation of *Stella Terrae*, Abdelkader Benchamma has brought a bold, beautiful, and modern vision to Villa Albertine that is resonant with our Ballroom,” stated **Mohamed Bouabdallah**, Cultural Counselor of France within the United States and Director of Villa Albertine. “His investigations of the cosmos will enthrall visitors when they enter the most emblematic space in our headquarters for years to come. We eagerly look forward to the research he will produce during his residency in the United States.”

Stella Terrae has been made possible through the exceptional support of the Sisley-d’Ornano Foundation, with additional support from French Heritage Society’s New York Chapter and Ann and Bill Van Ness.

The project was developed in close collaboration with the Centre national des arts plastiques (CNAP), with the support of Maison Sennelier, which provided the inks used in the creation of the work.

About Villa Albertine, the French Institute for Culture and Education

Villa Albertine is an institution of the French Embassy in the United States, supported by the French government and Albertine Foundation. Villa Albertine's mission is to strengthen ties between the United States, France and the French-speaking world through culture and education.

In the arts and culture sphere, we encourage collaboration among French and US-based organizations and provide creators, thought leaders, and professionals with customized residencies, immersive networking experiences, grants, and connections to audiences so they can explore and share new insights into society's pressing issues.

In the field of education, we craft projects and programs aimed at making French language and culture accessible to young US-based audiences, expand opportunities for students to study and complete internships in France, and support partnerships between French and American higher education and research institutions.

Villa Albertine is present in 10 major US cities -- Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, Miami, New York, New Orleans, San Francisco, and Washington, DC -- and publishes an annual magazine, *States*. It is headquartered in New York's historic Payne Whitney mansion, home to the bookstore Albertine.

Follow Villa Albertine on [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#), [X](#), and [LinkedIn](#).

villa-albertine.org



About Albertine Foundation

Albertine Foundation is an American nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting French American relations through innovative cultural and educational programs.

In close partnership with Villa Albertine, Albertine Foundation administers grant programs across diverse creative disciplines including visual and performing arts; cinema; and literature, while also supporting exploratory residencies for creative professionals and thinkers across the United States. Albertine Foundation also contributes to promoting French language learning in the United States and funds new opportunities for students, professors, and researchers in the spheres of secondary and higher education.

Albertine Foundation is a non-profit 501(c)(3) corporation by Internal Revenue Service determination. Contributions from corporate, foundation, and individuals are tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law.



About the Centre National des arts Plastiques

The Centre National des Arts Plastiques (National Center for Visual Arts, CNAP) is one of the main operators of the French Ministry of Culture. Its mission is to support and promote contemporary creation in all its diversity, both in terms of disciplines—painting, sculpture, design, photography, video, graphic design, etc.—and career paths.

On behalf of the State of France, CNAP acquires works to enrich its collection, one of the most important public collections in France, which it preserves and makes available to cultural institutions, museums, and government agencies, both in France and abroad. Comprising over 108,000 works acquired from living artists over more than two centuries, this online collection is representative of the diversity of artistic movements that have succeeded one another and of contemporary art in all its plurality.

CNAP supports the French art scene and implements a range of support and mentoring programs, co-productions for exhibitions and outreach activities, commissions, and partnerships designed to support contemporary artists and art professionals in their projects. As a resource center, it produces and disseminates the information necessary for their professional practice.



About the Sisley-d'Ornano Foundation

Created in 2007 by Hubert and Isabelle d'Ornano, the founders of Sisley, the Sisley-d'Ornano Foundation funds initiatives across a wide range of public interest fields, including culture, education, integration, solidarity, the a single objective: to support projects that can make a real difference. Through its actions, the Foundation aims not only to highlight and promote impactful and innovative projects, but also to make a long-term impact and drive collective action among stakeholders. Since its creation, more than 450 projects have been supported both in France and abroad, 15% of which were spearheaded by Sisley employees.



FRENCH
HERITAGE
SOCIETY

About French Heritage Society

French Heritage Society is dedicated to preserving the rich architectural and cultural heritage of France and fostering transatlantic cultural exchange. Over the past 44 years, FHS has awarded more than 700 restoration and cultural grants in France and the United States and supported nearly 600 university student internships at esteemed institutions on both sides of the Atlantic. FHS has 12 chapters—11 in the United States and one in Paris—and membership includes access to all.