

The Art of Healing

Celebrating Indigenous Heritage

Last fall, Anishinaabe multidisciplinary artist Que Rock from Nipissing First Nation in Northern Ontario was

commissioned to create an art piece for Teladoc Health. The colourful masterpiece now proudly hangs in the Toronto office.

Que Rock, whose traditional name is Manidoo Nemeen meaning Spirit Dancing, began his journey in art when he joined a hip-hop community in New York.



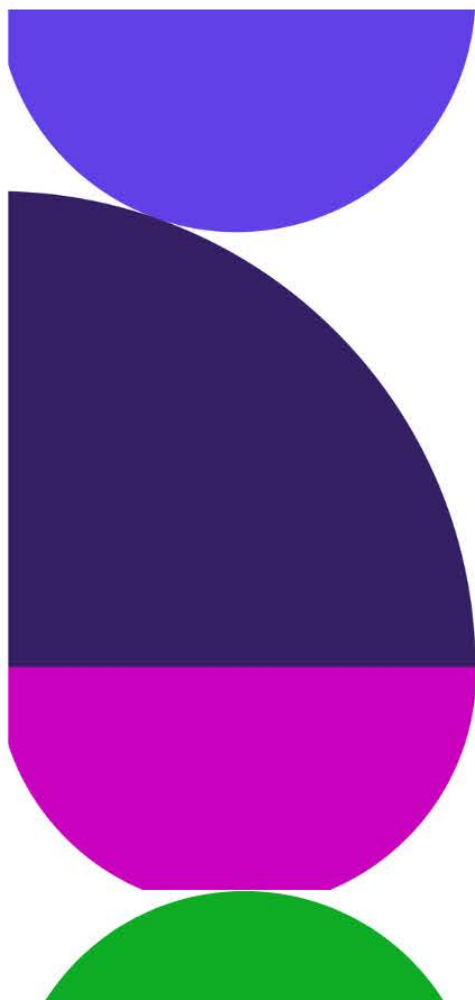
"I was raised traditionally and so moving into the city, I had to learn how to navigate that world, and I had to learn how to communicate. I was just trying to figure things out, but when I discovered hip hop culture at a young age, I felt it was the only platform in Western culture where I could fit in without having to change. I was encouraged to share my culture, so I chose art to communicate with the Western world."

Using his passion for expression, Que transitioned from dance to visual art as a mechanism through which he shares his interpretations and life experiences, but only after gaining a deep understanding of traditional teachings. "Prior to truth and reconciliation acts, no one was interested in learning about native culture, and it's been prophesized that we're supposed to share our culture with them (Western world). I felt like I was actually one of the warriors that was called for that,"

he adds, explaining that in Anishinaabe, the definition of a warrior is "someone who is waiting to help people and share, and defend those who can't defend themselves."

Critically for Que, in Anishinaabe culture, art is visually healing. Unlike Western art, which is interpretive, Que says, "There are teachings within Indigenous art. It's educational and purposeful and there is a sacred geometry within the story the art tells." Healing can happen from several layers. For the artists themselves, they partake in a spiritual ceremony prior to, or during the act of painting. For those who appreciate art, it can connect them with their cultural heritage and serves to heal in that capacity.

The work that Que painted for Teladoc Health is imbued with meaning and tradition from his Anishinaabe identity.



The Anishinaabe Medicine Wheel sits at the centre, and in black are the four sacred medicines: Tobacco in the East, Cedar in the South, Sage in the West, and Sweetgrass in the North. The sacred medicines have deep, intricate healing properties that can't be conceptualized in allopathic (conventional) medicine, and because of this lack of understanding, traditional healing practices are often dismissed despite their profound impact.

Que graciously shared a layer of this complex form of healing. "For smudging purposes, which is our most common practice for prayer, we will burn tobacco. It is offered to an elder to learn something, and it must be given and received with the left hand."

These four sacred medicines are an offering to the creator and can be offered to the four elements: air, earth, water, and fire. Tobacco, the most sacred, is used to open and close the spiritual healing ceremony.

Cedar honours those in the spirit world, it lights up the sky during day-time ceremonies. Cedar branches are used for baths and teas. Cedar is considered a superfood; it can heal you from fevers, improves appetite, and replenishes you after trauma.

Sage removes all negative and harmful energy, including viruses and is tied to the woman's spirit; an important point given Que's Anishinaabe culture is matriarchal. Sweetgrass is the medicine for men and it's the braid of mother earth. Sweetgrass invites all positive energies and serves as the path for ancestors to find you.

In a world where allopathic medicine is predominant, Que suggests, "when approaching Indigenous people, learn our protocols, that would be the first in terms of how we heal."

For Que, art has always been a part of his life, allowing him to preserve his Anishinaabe heritage while serving as the avenue through which he shares the teachings of his culture. He adds, "The main thing for me is that I get to continue to live as an Anishinaabe person without compromising my values and I can communicate to non-Indigenous people, using the platform and mediums of art."

Que hopes his art inspires other Indigenous artists to "pick up a pen, paintbrush or spray can". He hopes his fellow Indigenous people are empowered to share their story of resilience. And he hopes for the non-Indigenous communities to hold a safe space for sharing.

