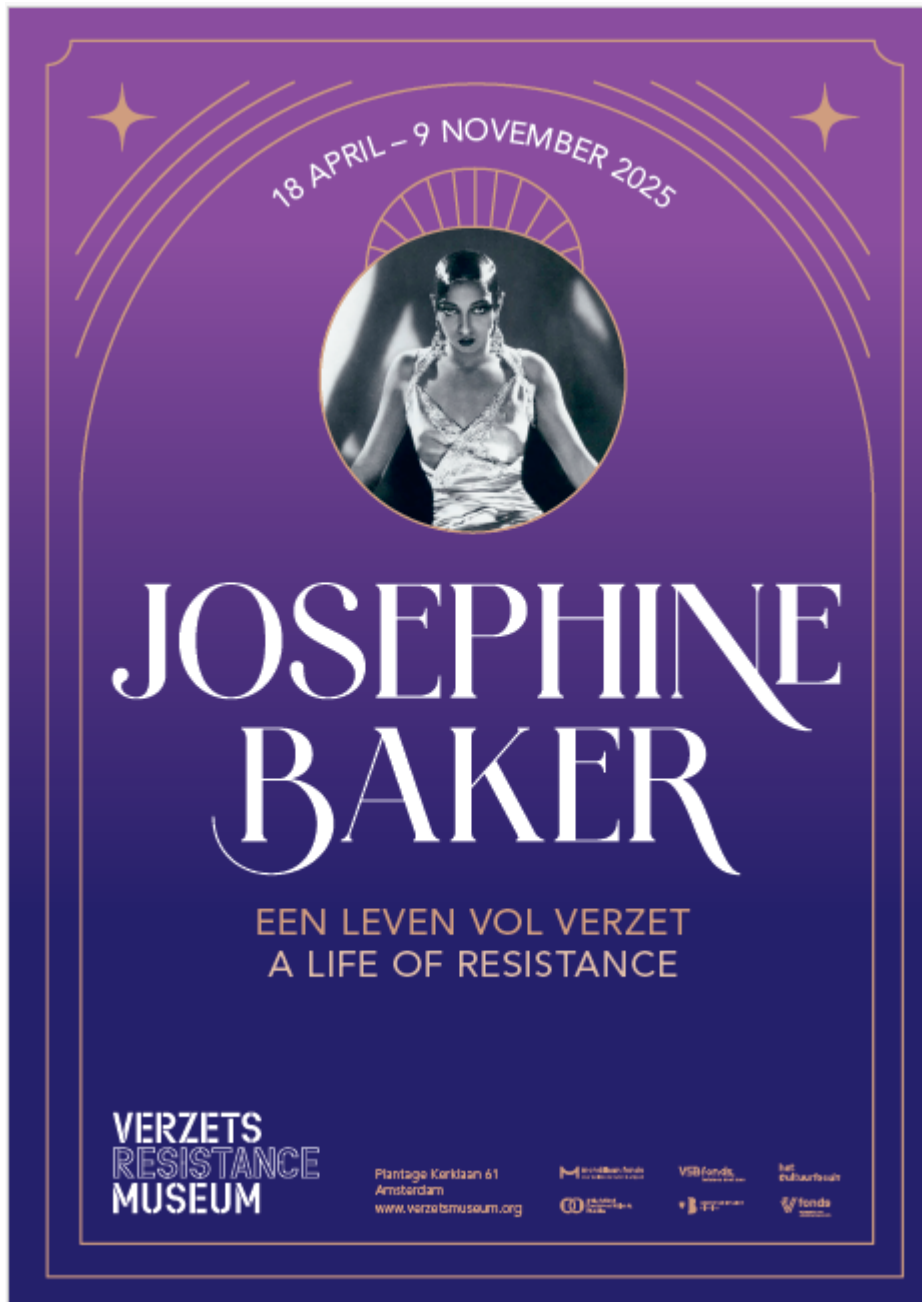


Josephine Baker: a life of resistance



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Josephine Baker: a life of resistance

Josephine Baker died fifty years ago in 1975. She is one of the twentieth century's most famous black artists: a dancer, singer and one of the first black film stars. Josephine Baker fled the racist United States and achieved world fame in Paris. In her performances, she played with African stereotypes and spoke out fiercely against racism. She was decadent and adopted twelve children. She was a high-profile celebrity and passed secret information on to the resistance during the Second World War. She was a diva as well as an activist. Speaking out against injustice and inequality formed the common thread of her life: "For me, there is only one race, the human race." Josephine Baker had a vision; she believed in a world without discrimination of people based on colour, creed or origin.

Some images and quotations in the exhibition may be experienced as offensive. It also includes historical visual material featuring nudity.

Display case



Josephine Baker wore this outfit for a performance in 1974, one year before her death.

Younger years in America

Quote

“Why did I become a dancer? Because I was born in a cold city. Because I was cold throughout my childhood. Because I always wanted to dance in a theatre.”

Filmscript

Josephine Baker is born Freda Josephine McDonald on 3 June 1906 in a ghetto in St. Louis, Missouri. The black population there is oppressed. She grows up in poverty and has to work as a maid in a white household from the age of eight.

In July 1917, race riots break out in St. Louis. A white mob storms black neighbourhoods and the police do not intervene. Between 100 and 200 black Americans are murdered; at least 6000 people lose their homes when entire neighbourhoods are burned down. Josephine is 11 years old at the time. The event marks her for the rest of her life.

Josephine dreams from an early age of becoming a dancer. She sets up a theatre in the cellar of her mother's house, where she puts on shows – with paid entry – for neighbourhood children.

At the age of thirteen, she runs away from home and gets a job as a dresser for the blues singer Clara Smith with the Dixie Steppers music group. She leaves St. Louis to go on tour with the group.

At 15, Josephine leaves for New York, the heart of African-American culture. She is rejected several times for roles, she is either too small, too thin, or too light or too dark, but ultimately lands a place in the Broadway musical *Shuffle Along*. This is Josephine's big break.

Quote

“To me for years St. Louis represented a city of fear, humiliation, misery and terror.”

Childhood in St. Louis

Josephine was the illegitimate child of an unknown father. She was the eldest of four children. Her mother was a laundress and her stepfather was unemployed. They lived in a dilapidated house, picking through the garbage of rich white people for food.

In St. Louis, racial segregation laws based on skin colour are in force. Black residents suffer from racism, violence and humiliation. In 1917, race riots erupt: the East St. Louis massacre. It leaves a lasting impression:

“My happiest childhood memory? I really don't know, but I can tell you which was the worst. It marked me.”

Josephine barely attended school. She worked as a maid for a white family. She was headstrong, which caused tensions at home. Her mother sometimes beat her.

To escape this misery, Josephine married Willy Wells – a much older steel worker – at the age of thirteen. They divorced when it transpired that that Josephine had lied about being pregnant. A short while later, she began to work as a dresser for the music group Dixie Steppers.



Photographs with text

East St. Louis during and after the race riots, 1917.

quote

“The whistling, the shouting, the bravos, the laughter, the hundreds of staring eyes... It was extremely exciting.”

Dixie Steppers and New York

With the Dixie Steppers, Josephine learned from Clara Smith how to write lyrics and sing the blues, but she rarely got to perform. She worked as a dresser and set builder. When a background dancer became unwell, Josephine got to substitute. *“The whistling, the shouting, the bravos, the laughter, the hundreds of staring eyes... It was extremely exciting”*, she recounted later. She stood out because of her humour. *“I soon learned that when I rolled my eyes and made faces, the crowd would burst out laughing.”*

Josephine married Billy Baker. They soon separated, but she kept his last name.

In 1922, Josephine moved to New York. She rented a room in the black neighbourhood of Harlem. She auditions for a show on Broadway, *Shuffle Along*. But

the writers still find her “*too young, too small, too skinny and too dark.*” Josephine became a dresser for the musical *Shuffle Along* and seized her chance when a background dancer fell pregnant. Her performance is a resounding success and she obtains a permanent place in the show.

Audio guide: Shuffle along

Photograph with text

Josephine in *Shuffle Along*, sixth from right.

The Harlem Renaissance and blackface

In 1920s and '30s New York, African American culture was flourishing with blues, jazz and the Charleston. In Harlem, black artists performed for black audiences. In shows for white Americans, people of colour were played by white performers in dark makeup, a practice known as *blackface*. These characters were depictions of racist stereotypes.

The black composer Eubie Blake and black writer Noble Sissle made the first musical with a black cast for a white audience: *Shuffle Along*. Josephine Baker is given a role. The musical was a huge success, while also making use of black stereotypes and blackface. Josephine learned “*that there was discrimination between blacks as well*”, because the dancers were not allowed to be too dark. And in other shows, it was skin that was too light that was no good. “*It made me want to turn and run. Wasn't there any place in the world where colour didn't matter?*”



Photograph with text

Josephine Baker in the musical *Chocolate Dandies* in blackface. This was a way for black performers to gain a footing in the entertainment industry.

Question: What do you think?

American Caseen Gaines has the following to say in his book on *Shuffle Along* and *Chocolate Dandies*: “To be a black actor and perform in blackface was really sort of a form of resistance. It was a way to get paid a proper wage, performing and competing with white actors.” Do you see this as resistance?

To Paris – World Star

Quote

“America was only a country for white people, not black, so I left. Paris accepted me from the first night. The city adored me, made me happy...”

Filmscript

In 1925, an impresario asks Josephine to do a show in Paris. She leaves America without a moment's hesitation. Paris is vibrant and she feels liberated.

She is one of the dancers in *La Revue Nègre* at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. This musical plays on exoticism: the allure and fascination of a primitive, stereotypical image of African culture.

Josephine is the highlight of the show: she dances the Charleston half-naked in wild, sensual and clownish movements. A year later, she wears an iconic 'banana skirt' for the same dance at the theatre of the *Folies Bergère*. It brought Josephine – at 19 years old – instant fame and infamy. She inspires artists.

And that is not all. Josephine also finds success as a singer and becomes one of the first black film stars. She performs across Europe, has her own line of beauty products and sells thousands of 'Josephine dolls'.

In the song *J'ai deux amours (I have two loves)*, she sings of her love for her homeland, but especially for Paris, the city that embraced her. It would become her anthem.

Celebrated and vilified

Josephine was both celebrated and vilified. Racism also existed in Europe and fascism began to rise in the 1920s. Josephine was no longer welcome in Mussolini's fascist Italy. In Vienna, she was considered scandalous, and in 1920 she was banned from performing in Munich for 'endangering public morality'. The German satirical magazine *Simplicissimus* published a cartoon of Josephine in a banana skirt being kicked out of the city by a priest and a soldier. In Hungary, students pelted Josephine with stink bombs. In the view of a Dutch journalist, this was justified on the grounds that this "*native [was] simply immoral*".



Sheet music j'ai deux amour

In 1930, Josephine first sang *J'ai deux amours*, about her love for France as well as her country of birth America. Ten years after her leaving for France and at the height of her European fame, Josephine returned to America. She is not welcomed back with open arms. Her performances receive only moderate applause, and hotels refuse her entry on account of her skin colour. Disillusioned, she goes back to Paris.

Audio guide J'ai deux amours

display



The illustrator Paul Colin drew the performers during rehearsals for *La Revue Nègre*. Josephine Baker

impressed him and he persuaded the director to give her a bigger role. *“Paul gave me self-confidence. For the first time in my life, I felt beautiful.”*



The famous Dutch painter Piet Mondriaan lived in Paris. He loved jazz and the Charleston. This record with music by Josephine Baker belonged to him. He had her photo on display in his studio. He said the following about the Charleston: *“Josephine Baker had an inborn, beautifully controlled style.”*



A major international exhibition on the (former) French colonies was held in Paris in 1931. Although Josephine Baker did not originally come from the French colonies, a doll was made of her wearing a grass skirt for the exhibition. Josephine was the symbol of everything 'exotic' and of colour.



Josephine's manager and lover, Guisepppe Pepito Abatino, came up with a series of products bearing her name, from perfume and tanning oil to 'Bakerfix' hair straightener. These Bakerfix products were an international success.



Elegant, of bronze and silver, clearly recognisable with her famous hairstyle. Josephine inspired many artists. Austrian art deco sculptor Karel Hagenauer made this statue around 1930 at the height of her fame in Paris.

photo



Josephine Baker in her famous banana skirt (1927).

Eccentric

Josephine Baker led an extravagant life in Paris in the 1920s and '30s. She frequently socialised with artists and writers and was often the inspiration for works of art. She was nicknamed 'the Black Venus'. She went on to open a café in the Montmartre neighbourhood: Chez Josephine.

She surrounded herself with animals, and bought a chimpanzee, a pig, a snake, a goat and several cats and dogs. She took her leopard Chiquita on walks through Paris.

Josephine had affairs with both men and women, although she was not open about her relationships with women. She is said to have had relationships with Mexican artist Frida Kahlo and writer Colette, the latter whom Josephine called the "*most beautiful panther*". In 1937, Josephine married for the third time, to Jean Lion, which gave her French citizenship. This marriage lasted two years.

Question: What do you think?

Josephine Baker wore both sequined dresses and men's suits. She most likely had relationships with men and women. Many people in the queer community see her as a source of inspiration for that reason, although she was not open about her relationships with women. Can you understand this?

Josephine in the Netherlands

Quote

“The Dutch are not as cold as is said; they are a warm people.”

Filmscript

In 1928, Josephine came to the Netherlands for the first time. She visits The Hague, Scheveningen, Rotterdam and Amsterdam. Crowds welcome her enthusiastically wherever she goes. Like here in the Hague.

In Amsterdam, thousands of fans wait for her. Everyone wants to catch a glimpse of Josephine. A headline in a newspaper reads “Amsterdam Josefient” – (Amsterdam goes Josephine crazy).

But there are also disapproving and sometimes racist reactions. Black music and dance are seen as lewd and debasing. 'The black peril,' wrote one newspaper.

The authorities insist that performances must be 'modest'. In Volendam, Josephine danced the Charleston in clogs and traditional dress, with her skirt pulled up. A journalist wrote: “mothers rushed in from all sides and quietly dragged their children to safety away from the black temptress”.

At the same time, however, Josephine's popularity is unprecedented. She befriends illustrator Piet Worm, with whom she later made a children's book. She continues to visit the Netherlands frequently throughout her career.

Performing for Allied troops

As the end of the Second World War was approaching, Josephine followed the Allied troops and performed for them. This is how in autumn 1944, she ended up in the Van Lin family's café in the recently liberated village of Overasselt, near Nijmegen. *“Granny van Lin didn't like this wild and sexy performance, but my mother – who was ten years old at the time – was awestruck. Not only because there was an international star in the house, but also because she had never seen a black person before”,* recounted Jan van Lin. *“Josephine Baker gave her a bar of chocolate; it was the first chocolate she'd ever eaten. The soldiers were very enthusiastic during the performance. Afterwards, Josephine grabbed a broom and helped sweep up until the floor was clean again.”*

display



Photo: Van Lin Family

Event calendar of the Van Lin family café showing the text: *"4 and 5 Dec 44, Josephine Baker."*

Farewell tour of 1956

In 1956, Josephine Baker embarked on an international farewell tour. She wanted to devote herself to her children.

She spent seven days on stage at the Carré theatre in Amsterdam during this farewell tour. Newspapers were full of praise for her performance, career and persona. *"Farewell to an era"*, read a headline in *De Telegraaf*. Behind the scenes she behaved as a bit of a drama queen, according to newspaper *Het Parool*, stomping off to see the director because another artist's posters were hung next to hers.

The Dutch artist Cees Bantzinger designed the poster for one of Baker's performances and drew her several times. He and his wife Jetty Paerl often spent time with her. *"Josephine behaved like a diva"*, their daughter recounted later. *"For example, she refused to speak to them in English."*

The tour turned out not to be a true farewell. She would perform often in the years that followed.

display

foreign nationals document for her visit to Amsterdam, 1956.

Programme booklet designed by Cees Bantzinger and newspaper clippings about her 1956 farewell tour.

Drawing

Drawing of Josephine Baker by Cees Bantzing, made during her tour in 1956.

WW2 and the Resistance

Quote

“France made me who I am. I am prepared to give my life to France.”

Filmscript

When Nazi Germany invades Poland in September 1939, France declares war on Germany.

Josephine performs for Allied troops, but wants to do more. She is introduced through a mutual acquaintance to Jacques Abtey, head of the secret service. At first, he did not have much confidence in Josephine, but she wins him over. She began to work as a spy

Being an international star proved to be the perfect cover. She gathers information by eavesdropping on politicians during parties at embassies , for example, and passes on information.

In June 1940, Nazi Germany occupies much of France. Her home town of Le Vésinet, a small town west of Paris, is also occupied.

Josephine fled to the Dordogne where she rents a castle, the *Château des Milandes*. It is here that she imagines her future.

Josephine continues her espionage work and also carries out other work for the French Resistance.

She also allows resistance fighters and Jews to hide in the Château des Milandes, where she also hides weapons and radio transmitters.

She then travels to North Africa to perform for the Allied troops. By the end of 1944, she is touring Europe with the liberators, singing for the troops.

Espionage

During World War II, Josephine worked as a spy for the French Resistance. “It is so practical to be Josephine Baker”, she later explains. “As soon as I arrive in a city, I’m invited everywhere... I go through the borders completely relaxed and while the border police do ask for papers, these are only for autographs.” She often travels with Jacques Abtey, who poses as her manager. She smuggled military intelligence to the Free French, the resistance movement led by Charles de Gaulle from London, and later from Casablanca in Morocco, among other places. Using invisible ink on her sheet music, she wrote down secret information and also smuggled microfilms in her underwear.

In the summer of 1941 in Casablanca, Josephine fell gravely ill. She spent over a year in the hospital where she has her uterus removed. She continued with her resistance work from her hospital bed and invited diplomats and officers ‘for fun’ to pass on information about the German army to the French Resistance.

Display

Microfilm with secret information.

Tour for Allied troops

In the spring of 1943 Josephine – still weak from her long stint in bed – performed for American soldiers in Casablanca. Both black and white soldiers were among

the audience. She said: “*We've got to show that blacks and whites are treated equally in the American Army, or else what's the point of waging war on Hitler?*” She continued to tour among the troops in North Africa, raising money for the French Resistance.

In May 1944, Josephine became a second lieutenant in the airforce - she could already fly planes. From then on, she often appeared in uniform. After the Allied invasion of Normandy, Josephine began performing in the liberated areas of Europe with bandleader and conductor Jo Bouillon, who would become her fourth husband.



Display

Josephine Baker's visa request for a tour of Egypt, 1943.

Sheet music *O! Mon Tommy* of 1940, about British troops.

After the war, Josephine was honoured for her resistance work. She received no fewer than five awards, including the *Ordre national de la Légion d'honneur*; the highest French national honour, and the *Croix de Guerre*, as seen here.

Rainbow Tribe

Quote

“These small children will be like brothers, live together as a symbol of democracy.”

Filmscript

In 1947 Josephine marries conductor Jo Bouillon. They want to have a family but Josephine was unable to have children. She refuses to give up. What if she can prove that children of different races and religions are able to live together in peace and love?

In 1954, she adopts two sons from an orphanage in Japan. This marks the beginning of what she would call her 'Rainbow Tribe'.

They went and lived in Château des Milandes, which she calls *Village du monde* ('*Village of the World*'). Josephine and Jo spend millions of French francs restoring the castle and turning it into a tourist attraction. Thousands of fans travel to the Dordogne to see it. The grounds include hotel rooms, theatres, a restaurant, a playground, a swimming pool and animals. You might even catch a glimpse of the Rainbow Tribe if you're lucky.

Josephine insists that the children maintain their original religion and culture. “*We had to play a role*”, one of them recalled.

Between 1954 and 1959, more than 500,000 tourists visit the castle every summer.

In 1956, Josephine goes on a farewell tour because she wants to focus on her family. But the costs of the castle and her family are too high. She has to keep performing

to make ends meet, sometimes spending months away from home.

Josephine not only teaches her children that everyone was equal but also that they should be generous and show solidarity. The children form a special bond with each other.



Display

In 1957, Josephine wrote the children's book *The Rainbow Children*, together with the Dutch illustrator Piet Worm. It was published in several languages and was about a one-eyed black chicken that doesn't belong anywhere. The chicken goes looking for a home and ends up at the château where the rainbow children live.

Swedish edition of *The Rainbow Children* signed by Josephine Baker.



Photo's

In 1964, the children accompanied Josephine on tour in the Netherlands. By day they took a boat cruise through Amsterdam. In the evening, Josephine performed in the *Concertgebouw* and took the children with her. The little ones fell asleep.

Bankruptcy

Tensions arose with her husband Jo Bouillon, who had wanted to adopt fewer children yet who ended up taking on the responsibility for much of their care because Josephine was often away performing. They split up in 1961.

Josephine spent more money than she brought in, would not listen to advice, and sometimes put her trust in the wrong people. Her debts began to pile up and she was at risk of being evicted from the château. In 1964, the actress and singer Brigitte Bardot, who Josephine did not know personally, made a television appeal to raise money. Others helped too, enabling Josephine to stay at Milandes for a while longer. But it was not enough. In 1969, she was obliged to leave the château. On the photo on the right, she can be seen sitting on some steps, after being forced to leave the château. Her family went to live temporarily with the actress and princess

Grace Kelly in Monaco, with whom Josephine had been friends for many years. She never returned to Milandes.

Activist

Quote

“I could not walk into a hotel in America and get a cup of coffee and that made me mad. And when I get mad, you know that I open my big mouth.”

Filmscript

In the early 1950s, following a successful tour in South America, Josephine was invited to perform in America. She insists on one condition: that black audiences had to be let in too. That was not done in America at the time, where in many places, blacks and whites still lived segregated lives.

During her tour in the United States, Josephine receives standing ovations but also met with racism. Sometimes, she is unable to get served in cafés and restaurants or is turned away from hotels. She spoke up! Josephine uses her fame to draw attention to America's deeply rooted racism.

Josephine got involved with the Civil Rights Movement. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) declares 20 May 1951 to be Josephine Baker Day, in honour of her resistance to racism. She is welcomed in Harlem on that day by a huge crowd of people.

In 1963, she speaks at the March on Washington for the rights of African Americans, during which Martin Luther King makes his famous speech. Josephine also got to speak on that occasion.

Her activism has consequences. Josephine is followed by the US Secret Service and is barred from entering the country.

Question: What do you think?

Josephine had many faces. But she is mostly remembered for the banana skirt. Why not for her resistance and activism, do you think?

Refused service at the Stork Club, New York

On 16 October 1951, Josephine went to eat at the chic Stork Club in New York. She was given a seat but subsequently not served: *“One by one they came and said there was no crabmeat, there was no steak, there was no wine. Then the waiters wouldn't come near us.”*

The surrounding tables were served their food.

Josephine flounced out of the restaurant. She got straight in touch with the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and filed a complaint against the club. A demonstration of the NAACP at Stork followed. Newspapers wrote articles on this.

Then an American columnist accused Josephine of being a communist. This was at the highpoint of the Cold War.

The American security service, the FBI, kept an eye on Josephine. Her American tour was mostly cancelled.

When she performed in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1952 she said: *“America is a barbaric country where they profess a pseudo, Nazi-like democracy. Praise God that men like Perón exist.”* Péron was Argentina's anti-American president. In the following years, Josephine was hardly ever allowed to enter America.



Display

Josephine Baker was a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) which has been fighting for equal rights for black Americans since 1909.



Photo

There was no formal race segregation in 1950s New York. But in practice, black people were often discriminated against and turned away, especially in chic restaurants and clubs. In the 1950s, an African American New Yorker had the following to say: *“Every time I'm downtown I see concealed signs on the door of every restaurant, saying "Negroes, Keep out!"*

March on Washington

In 1963, both black and white Americans participated in the March on Washington for the rights of African

Americans. It took place on 28 August, the same day as the brutal murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till in 1955.

The perpetrators were acquitted.

The turnout was huge: 200,000 to 300,000 people marched together. Martin Luther King delivered his "I have a dream" speech. But Josephine was also allowed to speak. After years of being unable to perform in America, in her French military uniform, decorated with medals, Josephine Baker addressed the crowd:

"The results today of seeing you all together is a sight for sore eyes. You're together as salt and pepper just as you should be. Just as I've always wanted you to be and peoples of the world have always wanted you to be. You are a united people at last because without unity there cannot be any victory."

Audio guide: March on Washington

Letter

Prior to the March on Washington, Josephine sent President Kennedy a letter, probably to avoid getting turned away or arrested. Her fear was not ungrounded; the FBI was keeping a close eye on her.

She wrote to Kennedy to say that she was taking part in the March: "not as a rioter, but as someone who believes deeply in the rights and dignity of mankind and the pressing need for unity among all peoples."

Source of inspiration

Quote

"I wanted to be more like Josephine Baker, because she seemed like she just was possessed and it seemed like she just danced from her heart." Beyoncé, 2006

Filmscript

In 1975, just after the successful premiere of a new show, Josephine Baker dies of a brain haemorrhage. She is 68 years old.

After her death, she became an inspiration to countless artists

Such as Diana Ross. The German band Boney M. Singer Beyoncé. Madonna and Rihanna.

Arguably, her influence on the world of fashion is even greater. She inspires designs by Jean Paul Gaultier, Prada, Dior and many other brands. Josephine Baker symbolises ultimate femininity, raw dance and the roaring twenties.

She also remains a model of resistance for activists. In 2021, to much fanfare, Joséphine Baker became the first black woman to be interred in the French Panthéon in Paris, where famous Frenchmen are buried.

The French President, Macron, had the following to say: “Josephine Baker did not defend a particular colour of skin [...] she fought for the freedoms of each and every person.”

On the same day, the black mayor of St. Louis, Josephine's birthplace, says that Josephine has been a major inspiration for the Black Lives Matter movement. As a child, Josephine had been oppressed and discriminated against in St. Louis; nowadays her portrait and name can be seen throughout the city.

Sedrig Verwoert, *Strange Fruit 2.0*

Dancer and choreographer Sedrig Verwoert created the performance *Strange Fruit 2.0* in 2024, in which he explores the history, struggle, and resilience of the Black

community. For the film shown here, he was inspired by Josephine Baker and her famous banana skirt. "*I see her banana skirt as a powerful symbol of both exoticism and self-liberation. The skirt was originally used to fuel colonial fantasies, but Josephine Baker succeeded in transforming it into a statement of self-expression and resistance.*" The original skirt from the performance is on display in the showcase.

Strange Fruit 2.0 Concept & Choreography | Sedrig Verwoert

Performance | Alanna Archibald

Film | Wouter Verberkt

Music Composer | Phantom Wizard

Lissa Brandon, Call Me Josephine

The Resistance Museum Amsterdam and OSCAM (Open Space Contemporary Art Museum) invited contemporary designers to draw inspiration from Josephine Baker. Lissa Brandon won this open call with her moodboards. For the final outfit *Call Me Josephine*, Lissa asked herself the question: What would Josephine Baker wear if she were alive today? She chose a combination of elegance, expressiveness, and innovation, adding a message: The revolution is near, move from love not fear.

Lissa: "With this message, I want to call for action; it's an invitation to not look away, but to stand together against injustice, just as Josephine did. In a time when democracy is under pressure and racism and oppression are daily issues, the message reminds us that change starts with activism."

Made in collaboration with Alliance Mode, Slightly Different Patterns, Yizon Studio, and Moosje Jaël Hekstra.