

STUDY DAY DEDICATED TO JOSÉPHINE BAKER (1906-1975)

Petit Palais, March 15th 2024

- **Welcome address by Annick Lemoine**, Director of the Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris

This study day is organized in the context of an ambitious exhibition that reflects on twenty significant years, between 1905 and 1925, when Paris was a source of radiance in both artistic and industrial realms. A section of the exhibition "Le Paris de la modernité" is dedicated to the Revue Nègre at the Théâtre des Champs Elysées and the arrival of Joséphine Baker in Paris in 1925.

The purpose of this day is to go beyond the exhibition and dive into the heart of the matter. We aim to cross perspectives from both sides of the Atlantic. How is Joséphine Baker perceived in France, in the United States, but also in England or even in Africa?

- **Introduction, by Juliette Singer**, organizer of the study day, Chief Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, curator of the exhibition "Le Paris de la Modernité, 1905-1925", Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris

When she arrives in Paris at the age of 17, Joséphine Baker immediately became a part of the city's cultural landscape and began a true love story with both the city and France. As a music hall artist, she embarked on a magnificent artistic career while also advocating for universal values, championed by France: a country not governed by any laws on racial segregation. A resistance fighter during World War II, she spoke out during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963, alongside Martin Luther King Jr. Her commitment is also reflected in her adoption of twelve children from very different backgrounds, her "rainbow tribe," to whom she imparted her values. As a woman and a historical figure, she still seems remarkably close to us: "The closer we get to Josephine, the more she shines through her simplicity," as noted by Juliette Singer.

- **When You See Josephine, You See Her Mother, Denise Ward-Brown**, Professor at the Sam Fox School of Visual Art & Design, Washington University, and **Joanna Dee Das**, Lecturer in the Performing Arts Department, Washington University.

Born in Saint Louis, Missouri, on June 3, 1906, Josephine Baker grew up in a culturally rich environment, particularly in music, but also marked by numerous tragedies. At the age of 11, Josephine witnessed the 1917 East St. Louis massacre against African Americans, from which she narrowly escaped by hiding in a barrel.

After the Civil War, slavery was abolished in the United States (1865). Up until then, African Americans had been caricatured on stage by whites in blackface, but they gradually took control of their representation and reclaimed their own image, especially through dance.

The Jim Crow Laws prompted the Great Migration in 1936. By moving to the northern states, African Americans brought dances like the « Cakewalk » with them. Born during slavery, this dance mocked the gestures of masters who themselves attempted to imitate European aristocracy.

Over time, these dances were increasingly accompanied by ragtime music, such as the « bunny hug » and the « grizzly bear ». White Americans, accustomed to the Foxtrot, had to adapt to these new, more energetic rhythms that were very popular in nightclubs. Ragtime and blues then merged to give birth to jazz, with musicians drawing inspiration from dance movements.

It was in this rich musical context that Josephine Baker was born, at a time when blues and ragtime were beginning to merge. Her own mother, Carrie McDonald, danced in nightclubs like the Gayety Theater where these musical trends were in vogue. It was thanks to her that Josephine Baker learned to dance. She performed in some shows and gained attention by combining her mastery of dance with a solid sense of burlesque. Such a blend of genres was uncommon in music-hall at that time.

Josephine Baker gained recognition with "Shuffle Along," the first Broadway show entirely staged and performed by African Americans, considered revolutionary for its energy and emphasis on improvisation. "Shuffle Along" brought a breath of fresh air to Broadway, inspiring the production of less rigid, groundbreaking shows.

In the United States, it has become more and more common practice to perform "land acknowledgements," which involve actions of recognition towards the indigenous communities that once occupied ancestral lands. Denise Ward-Brown and Joanna Dee Das have embraced this approach by studying the early history of black dance in Saint Louis and how significant figures have left a lasting mark on a place. This is the case with Josephine Baker, the jazz ambassador to the world, who was trained in Saint Louis. However, after her departure in 1920, the city nearly demolished the African American neighborhoods where she grew up. To honor the history of Josephine Baker, Denise Ward-Brown and Joanna Dee Das visited the locations of Josephine Baker's youth in Saint Louis in 2020 to explore the influence that local culture may have had on her life and art. A film was made with dancers from Washington University: "Seeking Josephine Baker: Dancing on the Land."

- **"Josephine Baker, the Music Hall Genius, and the Question of Afro-Descendants in Paris,"** by **Brian Scott Bagley**, artist and founder of the future Josephine Baker Museum and the Afro-Descendants of Paris.

Brian Scott Bagley plans to open a museum in Paris dedicated to the memory of music hall in general and the figure of Josephine Baker in particular. As a dancer and a keen connoisseur of the illustrious figure of the Revue Nègre, he shared his vision of the artist and presented her journey from Saint Louis to Paris, while enlivening his discourse with anecdotes that have contributed to the living legend of this star with incomparable glamour who illuminated the Parisian nights of the roaring twenties, the golden age of the music hall.

- **La revue nègre, panel discussion moderated by Juliette Singer**

1. **Nathalie Sergent**, Director of Editions and Multimedia at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées.

Josephine Baker made her debut performance in Paris at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées on October 2, 1925. A manifesto of modernity, this theater, inaugurated in 1913, played an active role in the history of choreographic creation by hosting Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes.

Charged with forming what would become the Revue Nègre in Paris, American producer Caroline Dudley was responsible for Josephine Baker's arrival in France. This show, entirely composed of Black artists, also included Sidney Bechet. The posters and programs of the troupe accompanied Josephine Baker's subsequent successes on stage; the scenes performed on stage were described, including the famous "Jazz Nègre," the true highlight of the show, which earned Josephine the nickname "Queen of the Wild Dance." Initially absent from promotional materials, her name, and then her face, quickly appeared in October 1925. It was thanks to the illustrator Paul Colin, who created the posters for the revue, that Josephine Baker's stylized silhouette became iconic, with its Art Deco curves.

2. **Pascale Obolo**, Cameroonian visual artist, producer, curator, and filmmaker, founder and editor-in-chief of the contemporary African art magazine "Afrikadaa."

Pascale Obolo analyzes the theme of the banana skirt worn by Joséphine Baker at the Folies Bergère in 1927. This costume, whose significance has evolved over time, now takes the form of a manifesto for contemporary Afro-Caribbean artists and Afro-feminist artists alike, as it questions the representation of black bodies and their significance attached to this costume.

In 2018, Jean-Paul Gaultier reused the banana skirt, having a black man wear it in a revue he staged at the Folies Bergère. This nod to Josephine Baker, who wore it in the same venue ninety years earlier, lies at the heart of the artistic dimension of his show. However, things take a different turn when American singer Beyoncé, who wears this skirt on stage with an oriental musical backdrop. In this case, the artist gives a color retro projection of Josephine Baker's image and carries this lineage as heritage. Reintegrated into contemporary black musical culture, the banana skirt becomes a symbol that erects on stage the persistent racial prejudices. While Josephine Baker may not be the author of her own staging, her skilled embodiment serves as a lesson to the new generations in taking control over the representation and image of one's body.

3. Raphaëlle Delaunay, Performer, choreographer, and educator

Raphaëlle Delaunay shares her interpretations and experiences regarding the banana skirt model, which she wore at the age of 10 as a costume during Claude Bessy's party, a star dancer and former director of the Paris Opera Ballet School. As a child, she had no awareness of the symbolic weight of this costume.

As she grew older, she realized the paradox inherent in Josephine Baker's dance: a choreography that appears very joyful but whose meaning and significance are often too narrowly interpreted. She then decided to deeply analyze Baker's dance, which manages to play with racist stereotypes while remaining both desirable and powerful at the same time.

- The legacy of Joséphine Baker

1. "Joséphine Baker, the Universal," by Brian Bouillon Baker, son of Joséphine Baker.

Brian Bouillon Baker is the seventh of the twelve children adopted by Josephine Baker and her husband, composer, and musician Jo Bouillon, who formed her "Rainbow Tribe." Caught up in the carefree nature of their youth, these siblings had no awareness of the exemplary nature that this "Tribe" might have. However, the Château des Milandes, where they were all raised together, had all the trappings of a modern and grand utopia. For Josephine Baker, this family indeed constituted a concrete act of commitment to universal brotherhood. Marked by racial segregation in the United States, she recognized only one race, the human race, without distinction of skin color.

When presenting his mother, Brian Bouillon Baker enjoys showing the photo taken by Studio Harcourt in 1940. Joséphine Baker looks directly at the camera. She smiles confidently, her hands resting on a vase. Executed by a prestigious studio with artistic ambition, it also testifies to the natural simplicity of the artist, a fundamental value she passed on to her children. It is both the music-hall artist and the mature woman who casts a humanistic gaze on the world before her commitment to the war. This photo, which reveals several facets of Joséphine Baker, holds

symbolic value, and reflects her life and commitments; this is why it was chosen for the ceremony marking her entry into the Pantheon in 2021.

2. Joséphine Baker's war, by Hanna Diamond, Professor of French History, University of Cardiff

While awaiting the release of her book in 2025, Hanna Diamond tells us about the significant military role that Joséphine Baker played during World War II.

This episode is not the most well-known of her life. Yet, she was a second lieutenant with the French Air Force. A photograph from 1961 shows General Martial Valin (1898–1980), commander-in-chief of the Free French Air Forces from July 1941 to June 1944, and then Chief of the Staff of the French Air Force from October 1944 to February 1946, presenting her with her Legion d'Honneur. This testifies to France's recognition of her, as she carried out missions for French, British and American intelligence services. Unsuspected, she was able to: "hide in plain sight," as the English expression goes.

Naturalized as a French citizen on her marriage to Jean Lion in 1937, Josephine Baker later explained that joining the Resistance was a way for her to thank France for welcoming her.

Her commitment began on the outbreak of the war. When the US Embassy called on American citizens to return home, Joséphine Baker decided to stay in France, believing that her place was alongside her French compatriots and that her French nationality would protect her. During the phoney war, she went to the Maginot Line and sang for the troops, she became godmother to many soldiers, and she volunteered for the Red Cross.

In 1942, she contracted an illness the true nature of which remains unclear. Although rumors declared her dead, she did recover and took part in counter-espionage activities. Working with Captain Jacques Abtey, her celebrity was an asset. He became her handler and trained by him, she obtained vital pieces of information from diplomats at the Japanese and Italian Embassies, which she passed on to him. Joséphine Baker's celebrity status allowed her to see and hear everything that was happening. For example, in Tangiers, a Moroccan city then under Spanish rule, Joséphine Baker was invited to dinners alongside Franco's officers, who exchanged information about their movements and those of German troops.

Joséphine Baker focused her efforts on defending French interests, first working for the Allies, then directly for France. Performing on improvised stages, she worked tirelessly on behalf of the Free French and her ability to craft and reinvent her person made her an invaluable tool of propaganda for the Gaullist cause.

3. « The Entry of Joséphine Baker into the Pantheon », by Laurent Kupferman, essayist, lecturer and author of the film « Joséphine Baker : un destin français »

The Pantheon highlights those who have contributed to the narrative and civic spirit of the French nation. Joséphine Baker's entry celebrates the free woman who engaged in numerous causes. Arriving in France in 1925, she realized that she could be perceived as a person and not just by her color. When she stepped down from the stage after speaking alongside Martin Luther King during the March on Washington in 1963, a journalist asked her what it felt like "to be a black icon": she corrected him, saying that in her view, there are no races or colors, but only one human race. With this statement, Joséphine wanted to emphasize not the differences but what unites us, and this is a fundamental value of the French nation.

In conclusion, Brian Bouillon Baker wished to share the trailer from France Télévision announcing the upcoming Olympic Games in Paris, featuring an excerpt from the song "J'ai deux amours" performed by Josephine Baker.