

## Josephine Baker Collection (AC80)

### ***Introduction:***

The Josephine Baker Collection contains a variety of documents produced in honor of Josephine or containing her name or likeness; as well as over twenty, large, framed photographs and artworks of Josephine Baker. Baker was a vaudeville performer, singer, and dancer. She was also bisexual, a veteran, spy, and activist.

### ***Descriptive Summary:***

Creator: FIC

Title: Josephine Baker

Size: 0.209 linear feet (1 box)

Collection Number: AC80

### ***Donor Information:***

Found in Collection

### ***Citation Note:***

Josephine Baker Collection (AC80), Black Archives of Mid-America, Kansas City, Missouri.

### ***Administrative Information:***

Reproduction Restrictions: Unrestricted

Access Restrictions: Unrestricted

### ***Biographical Sketch:***

Josephine Baker, born Freda Josephine McDonald, in St. Louis, MO on June 3, 1906. Details of her familial origins are disputed, but all agree she grew up severely impoverished, and began her career as a child street performer. At age 15, she joined a traveling theatre troupe. Eventually her performances led her to Harlem in New York, and finally France, in the early 1920s. Once in Paris, Baker became one of the most popular performers in the City of Love. Her most popular, and most well remembered, routine was the *Danse Sauvage* at the Theatre des Champs-Elysees, where her only article of clothing was a skirt made of whole bananas.

In 1927, Josephine became the first black female actress in a silent French film, *La Sirene des Tropiques* (*The Siren of the Tropics*). Her second film was *Zouzou*. She also went on international tours in the 1930s, and learned five languages, including finally learning French.

With the onslaught of WWII and Nazi occupation of Paris in 1940, Baker joined the French Resistance. As a spy, Josephine gathered intelligence from amongst Nazi patrons at her shows which she passed onto the French military. She also spied on American and British troops for Gen. Charles De Gaulle. During this time, several members of her troupe were also spies. In 1944, Josephine officially joined the military and became a second lieutenant in the French Air Force, along with many other women.

After the war, Baker joined the American Civil Rights movement. In 1951, she was labelled a communist and terrorist and banned from the US for a decade. President JFK finally lifted the ban in 1963. She was the only woman to give a speech during the March on Washington.

Josephine Baker married four times. Her first marriage was to Willie Wells in 1919 at the age of 16. They were divorced in under one year. Then she wed William Howard Baker in 1921. They were together for 4 years. She gained her French citizenship when she married Jewish man Jean Lion in 1937. Their relationship ended in 1940. Her last husband was Jo Bouillon, a French composer and conductor. They married in 1947 and divorced in 1961. In addition to the men she married, Josephine had a number of lovers of both sexes, some of whom were famous in their own right. Beginning in 1950, Josephine, age 47, began adopting children, eventually adopting twelve of various nationalities. At this same time, she purchased a castle in Castelnaud-la-Chapelle, a small village in SW France to raise her family. Unfortunately, in the last years of her life, she again experienced severe financial hardships, was evicted, and lost her properties.

In 1975, just 4 days before she was set to launch her comeback tour, Josephine Baker fell into a coma and died. She is buried in Monaco. In November 2021, French President Emmanuel Macron inducted Josephine Baker into the French Pantheon, a national mausoleum of French heroes. She is one of only 6 women to be included in the Pantheon, and she is the only black woman and only American.

***Scope and Content Note:*****Series 1: Newspaper Clippings**

This series consists of two newspaper articles about Josephine Baker.

**Series 2: Magazines**

This series contains three magazines. Josephine Baker appears on the cover of Quick and Sepia, while almost all of the Playgoer is devoted to her history.

**Series 3: Programs & Flyers**

This series contains flyers and programs of Josephine's performances or events held in her honor. The Programs are in French.

**Series 4: Ephemera**

This series features a calendar, a card, a facsimile of Josephine's signature, and items from Josephine's Intimate Restaurant in San Francisco.

**Series 5: AV**

This series contains a record of Josephine Baker and the envelope it was originally housed in.

**Series 6: Photographs**

This series holds two photographs of Josephine Baker. They are the same image.

**Series 7: Artworks**

This series contains 22 large, framed works of art. They have been removed from the Collection's area and hung in the upstairs Lecture Hall of the Black Archives of Mid-America at 1722 E 17<sup>th</sup> Terr, Kansas City, MO 64110.

***Collection Inventory***

Oversized items removed to Flat File Cabinet #1 Drawer #3

**Series 1: Newspaper Clippings**

f. 1 Articles

**Series 2: Magazines**

- f. 2 Quick, August 1951
- f. 3 Sepia, October 1977 [OS]
- f. 4 The Playgoer

**Series 3: Programs & Flyers**

- f. 5 Flyers
- f. 6 Programs
- f. 7 Folies Bergère [OS]

**Series 4: Ephemera**

- f. 8 Josephine's Restaurant
- f. 9 Autograph [photocopy]
- f. 10 Richard Martin [nephew]
- f. 11 Card
- f. 12 Images of Josephine
- f. 13 Calendar, 1991 [OS]

**Series 5: AV**

- f. 14 Cassette Tape
- f. 15 Envelope

**Series 6: Photographs**

f. 16 Prints #1-2

**Series 7: Artwork**

- a. 17 young Josephine Baker
- a. 18 Excelsior Magazine Cover

- a. 19 Josephine Baker with dancers
- a. 20 Revue Negre poster
- a. 21 Josephine Baker with six men
- a. 22 Josephin Baker, Berlin 1926
- a. 23 Josephine Baker with microphone
- a. 24 Montage of magazine covers
- a. 25 Josephine Baker and two men in blackface
- a. 26 Josephine Baker in blackface
- a. 27 Josephine Baker's wedding
- a. 28 Josephine Baker posed as an ancient Egyptian
- a. 29 Josephine Baker in uniform
- a. 30 funeral of Josephine Baker in Paris 1975
- a. 31 Josephine Baker evicted
- a. 32 profile of Josephine Baker
- a. 33 close-up portrait of Josephine Baker
- a. 34 Josephine Baker in long gown
- a. 35 Josephine Baker in banana skirt with feathers
- a. 36 Josephine Baker with cane
- a. 37 Josephine Baker in banana skirt
- a. 38 Eubie Blake and Noble Sissie

**Processed by Laura Darnell, March 2024.**

**Sources:**

Biography.com Editors. "Josephine Baker." Updated February 8, 2024. Accessed March 2024.  
<https://www.biography.com/artists/josephine-baker>

Harlow, Harlow. The Vintage Woman. "Josephine Baker and the Movies." Accessed March 2024. <https://thevintagewomanmagazine.com/josephine-baker-and-the-movies/>

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Norwood, Arlisha R. National Women's History Museum. "Josephine Baker." 2017. Accessed March 2024. <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/josephine-baker>

Pedram, Arno and Sylvie Corbet. PBS News Hour. "Josephine Baker makes history as first Black woman honored in France's Pantheon" November 29, 2021. Accessed March 2024. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/josephine-baker-makes-history-as-first-black-woman-honored-in-frances-pantheon>