

Abstract

Title: Spectacular Dress: Joséphine Baker's Fashions and Black Paris, 1925-1975

Author: Bennetta Jules-Rosette
Distinguished Professor of Sociology
and
Director, African and African-American Studies
Research Project (AAASRP)
University of California, San Diego

Joséphine Baker's legacy as an image and a popular icon remains alive today, but it is shrouded in myth and mystery. Born Freda Josephine McDonald to an impoverished family in St. Louis, Missouri on June 3, 1906, Joséphine Baker came to France in the autumn of 1925 as a dancer with the black American vaudeville troupe *La Revue Nègre*. Entering France at the height of the colonial era and during a period of rapid socioeconomic upheaval between two world wars, Baker was an instant success with her *danse sauvage* (savage dance), performed first in feathers in 1925 and later in a banana belt. Although this primal image of the mythic figure Fatou overshadowed much of Baker's early career, she later used dress and high fashion to transform herself as a performer and a social activist. Moving from homespun fashions to *haute couture*, and from the music hall to the realms of opera, film, and politics, Baker became the toast of the worlds of Parisian fashion, art, and theater. Her growing visibility as an international star made her a pivotal figure who was able to transform spectacular dress into political spectacle.

This presentation examines five performative strategies of image and identity construction deployed by Baker during the course of her career: (1) exoticizing race and gender; (2) reversing racial and cultural codes and meanings; (3) displaying difference through nudity, cross-dressing, song, and dance; (4) exploiting images of cultural difference; and (5) universalizing the outcomes to reach a worldwide audience. These strategies emerged gradually over Baker's career and were marked by poignant fashion statements, ranging from the primal ingénue and vaudeville clown of the 1920s to a fashion sophisticate during the 1930s and beyond. She later shifted from her primal and Black Venus images to maternal, military, and activist self-representations. Baker lived her life as an echo and reflection of her art. Baker's process of image construction allows us to examine how life and art mirror each other in the worlds of social action and performance.