

## All that jazz

### Josephine Baker's Image, Identity & Iconicity

**Gary L. Lampley**

*has held positions as a retail executive, fashion stylist and in various fashion showrooms; all allowing for the examination of dress, adornment and appearance. As a faculty member in the Department of Art at Howard University, Lampley brings his years of apparel experience into the classroom. His knowledge has inspired others to explore the meaning of clothing and choices in dress within society.*

#### **Abstract**

When Baker was offered an opportunity to move to, Paris, for her dance talents, she did not hesitate to take the chance. Baker arrived in Paris the summer of 1925, during the height of France's obsession with American jazz music and all things exotic. Immediately after her famous performance on October 2, 1925, Baker appeared in a jazz club wearing an ice-blue dress, cut on the bias. It had been selected for her from a Paris design house. This glamorous side of Baker quickly dispelled the notion of her as primitive. Her body type and cinnamon skin proved to be the perfect model for the masters of fashion. Baker quickly became a woman who others wanted to copy.

Josephine Baker, who symbolized the beauty and vitality of African American culture during this time, took Paris by storm personifying many of the modern ideals associated with jazz music. Through private dealings with the masters of various modes whom she attracted, as well as with the pervasive public persona she created, Baker influenced architecture, urban and interior design, fashion, sculpture, graphic arts, painting and photography. This influ-

ence establishes her as one of the most famous symbols of the jazz age, the first African American superstar and a universal icon.

*Keywords* primitive, exotic, fashion, icon, jazz

### Introduction

As the twentieth century evolved, music influenced people of African descent and their style---and for the first time, African American music and style makes a definite impact to mainstream culture and society. Sacred and secular music traditions had existed side-by-side since the arrival of large numbers of slaves in the early 19th century: a secular music that consisted of field hollers, shouts, and moans and used folk tales and motifs; and a mystical music – the spirituals – that became well known after the Civil War when the Fisk Jubilee Singers toured the nation and, eventually, the world. Although the Negro spiritual remains to many, the most beautiful African American musical expression created in the United States – the most important African American folk music has been the blues, a genre that set the pattern for hundreds of blues songs when W.C. Handy, an African American composer, wrote St. Louis Blues in 1914. Handy changed the course of American popular music by integrating the blues idiom into the widely fashionable ragtime, itself the creation of another African American composer, Scott Joplin.

There was, as yet, no name for the music African Americans and Creole musicians began to play together in New Orleans. But the eventual result would be a brand-new music — jazz, unarguably the most original contribution to world culture of the United States. By the mid-1920s, the free spirited jazz was being played in dance halls, roadhouses and speakeasies all over the country. Nothing quite like it had ever happened before in America.

Jazz has been called the purest expression of American democracy because it is built around the same principles; individualism/compromise and independence/cooperation. The music involves a variety of rhythms which are in some way unexpected and which make part or all of a tune off-beat. This confluence of African and European music traditions wasn't heard until around 1917 and suddenly Americans are jazz crazy and the jazz age was about to begin.

### **An African American Superstar**

Josephine Baker is known as one of the most famous symbols of the jazz age, and the first African American superstar. Will Friedwald, author of *A Biographical guide to the Great Jazz and Pop Singers* states that Baker “was the single most important American musical expatriate of the last century- especially African American – especially female Africa American” (Friedwald 2010, 571). Josephine Baker was a key player in the way that American music was created abroad. However, rather than being an exceptional singer, her talent was more in the icon that she created.

As a young girl she grew up in, St. Louis, Missouri. Her family was extremely poor, and at a very early age she began working. As a teenager she got a job touring with, The Jones Family Band and The Dixie Steppers in 1919, performing comedic skits. In 1923 after first being turned down, she got a role in the musical, *Shuffle Along*, as a member of the chorus. This groundbreaking musical introduced African American composers, dancers, singers and actors to the musical scene in New York. Baker quickly became a crowd favorite because of her comedic performances. She then moved permanently to New York City, and performed in, *Chocolate Dandies*, at the Plantation Club. Chorus girls who performed there were typically of a much lighter complexion than Baker who had a darker skin tone and a style of dancing that was more expressive. The crowd loved her unique tempo or the way she disrupted the regular flow of rhythm which in itself mimics one of the main characteristics of jazz.

When Baker was offered an opportunity to move to Paris, for her dance talents, she did not hesitate to take the chance. Baker arrived in Paris the summer of 1925, during the height of France’s obsession with American jazz music and all things exotic. She performed an original burlesque routine in a show entitled, *La Revue Negre*. This performance instantly made her a star and from that point on, Baker became an all-around, triple threat entertainer: singer, dancer, and actress, and she also soon became Europe’s most popular and highest paid artiste. As a performer, Baker’s presence on stage has sometimes been described as genderless. Baker is right on trend as women’s dress styles gradually moved from the barrel silhouette at the beginning of the decade to the H silhouette that ultimately dominated, downplaying any bust or hip curves. The style became devoid of any frill, with a very asexual look. Not mascu-



[banana skirt, performing] By Walery, French, 1863-1935 (<http://www.vaudeville-post-cards.com/>) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

line or male but more little boy. She appealed to every race as well. In addition to her success performing on stage, Baker also had the opportunity to perform in films. She starred in, *Siren of the Tropics* in 1927, *La folie du jour* in 1929, *Princess Tam Tam* in 1935, *Moulin Rouge* in 1927, and *The French Way* in 1954.

Baker was widely known for her bold, confident and outgoing attitude and because of this she was often described as elegant and exotic or primitive which embodies the Art Deco movement of that time. With the fusion of her personality, Baker was known for stepping out of the box with her stage and personal wardrobe. From the first night she stepped on the Paris stage, she captivated the audience with her sensuality and dancing with only a feather skirt. Baker pushed the envelope with her costumes. Her signature look became dancing in nothing but a beaded necklace and a string of bananas around her waist. Baker performed wearing the banana skirt all over the world, and was known as the “Black Venus”, “Black Pearl”, and “Creole Goddess”. The bold, brazen, and exciting moment of watching a

woman dance topless with a string of bananas was a huge turning point for Baker and fashion.

### **Primitive, Modern or Both?**

During the nineteenth century, and continuing through the present, it has become necessary to put quotation marks around the word “primitive” as it refers to cultural objects. Clearly, this process involves an increasing appreciation of ethnic culture, but it also raises problems on both sides of this cultural exchange. Most recently, this issue of primitivism with its dangers of commodification and the appropriation of voices and styles is situated at the heart of theories and controversies concerning race, gender, and class, and elite versus popular modes in the study of culture. This illustrates that the inner feelings about one’s own culture and foreign culture produces within a cultural split in personality. Most ethnic people are forced to make a choice and are not made to



[banana skirt seated] By  
Walery, French, 1863-1935  
[Public domain], via Wiki-  
media Commons

understand that the cultures need not clash but could perhaps exist together.

In *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives*, the author Marianna Torgovnick is scornful of Modernist definitions and ideas about the primitive. Torgovnick argues that we “all take the West as norm and define the rest as inferior, different, deviant, subordinate, and subordinatable” (Torgovnick 1991, 21). However, Baker clearly offers evidence that some of the arts that various ethnic societies have provided for modern western culture has played a central role in the development of major modern literary, performing and decorative (fashion) arts. The literature, politics and art of the Harlem Renaissance – roughly a period from 1915-1940 also confirms this. It was a time when African American writers, artists, philosophers, activists and musicians, congregating in New York City’s Harlem, sought to define African American culture. The era has most frequently been thought of as a 1920s-only phenomenon, and many have suggested that it was

less a renaissance than a first flowering of a collective artistic spirit. In any case, Torgovnick has demonstrated that the primitive may be considered modern, without accepting the foreign and sexist abuses of which it has been an instrument.

This notion mirrors on some levels the opinions of Edward Said’s Orientalism. The feeling of Orientalism takes for granted, an Orient with such specific characteristics which have been misrepresented by the West. “The Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, different”; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, “normal” (Said 1979, 40). These are binary oppositions which creates the need for dialogue. Said asserts Orientalism is the West’s approach of coming to terms with the understanding of the other. He points out that these depictions, next to numerous other representations of the East are images, portrayals and not natural interpretations, and that these descriptions have become repetitive motivations of Western conduct and point of view. The West, Torgovnick asserts, might have developed a “history in which primitive societies were allowed to exist in all their multiplicity, not reduced to a seamless

Western fantasy... when the majority of Euro-Americans can accept that our nations-for all their present comforts and power--exist on the same plane with other social and political entities" (Torgovnick 1991, 247). But perhaps this optimistic trust in openness to different views of knowledge and social reality is itself the ultimate seamless Western fantasy.

Mary Louise Pratt in her essay *Arts of the Contact Zone* encourages us to look at culture – both the important arts and activities in everyday life to find values and meanings of a group in society. The notion is that by gazing more directly at other cultures and our own culture, and how cultures are represented, we learn more about ourselves and our place on the planet. More significantly, we become conscious of the politics that live in daily life. Pratt clearly makes this point by describing how important it was for Guaman Poma to know the culture he was addressing in his *First New Chronicle and Good Government*. She stresses the necessity of his knowledge about the Andean culture when she states that "Guaman Poma constructs his text by appropriating and adapting pieces of the representational repertoire of the invaders" (Pratt 2002, 612). Only using information about another culture is it possible to converse with people of that culture correctly and successfully. This theory should include people of all social classes and should integrate them into all activities equally.

*Gone Primitive* is multifaceted and seeks to answer several important questions about the development, continuity and integration of the primitive from a social historical perspective. The overall message is that there must be an understanding of the relations between patron, artist, and art. The problem with this of course is that we have watched more of the (native) culture disappear in the third world. Pratt explains:

Thus if ethnographic texts are those in which European metropolitan subjects represent to themselves their others (usually their conquered others), autoethnographic texts are representations that the so-defined others construct in response to or in dialogue with those texts. Autoethnographic texts are not, then, what are usually thought of as autochthonous forms of expression or self-representation (as the Andean quipus were). Rather they involve a selec-

tive collaboration with and appropriation of idioms of the metropolis or the conqueror. These are merged or infiltrated to varying degrees with indigenous idioms to create self-representations intended to intervene in metropolitan modes of understanding (Pratt 2002, 608)

Torgovnick, Said, Pratt and indeed Baker explore the obsessions, fears, and longings that have produced Western views of the primitive.

### **The New Woman**

Baker, however, creates a sensation fully understanding the stereotype associated with her performances and the label primitive. She instead flips the script and was seen as more than just the dancing sensation of Paris. She became a symbol and was the epitome of the New Woman to the French. During the 1920s, French women wanted to retain their new-found independence acquired during the war. Many of them found themselves managing farms and taking office jobs; positions once held only by men. These women wanted to savor their new freedoms even though they still did not have the right to vote. To maintain this new sense of power, they used their sexuality in their outer appearances. To them, Baker represented the New Woman they aspired to be. She became an individual that other women wanted to copy. Her beautiful completion and confidence in being nude was liberating to and proved to the French that Black is beautiful. She did campaigns for Valaze Body cream, with a slogan that read "you can have skin like Josephine if you use Valaze Cream." Shops carried Josephine Baker perfumes and dolls in tiny banana skirts, and whenever someone would see a banana skirt they would automatically think of Baker. The image of Baker in the banana skirt was also made famous by artist Paul Colin and remains perhaps the most iconic image of Josephine Baker to date. Baker was also known for wearing a short, slicked down hairstyle, later called the Eton Crop. The Eton Crop would be crowned with Art Deco feathered, beaded, or glittered headpieces, and big, crafty jewelry.

Immediately after her famous performance on October 2, 1925, Josephine appeared in a jazz club wearing an ice-blue dress, cut on the bias. It had been selected for her from a Paris design house. This glamorous side of Josephine also quickly dispelled the notion of her

as primitive (as defined by the west). Her body type and cinnamon skin proved to be the perfect model for the masters of fashion. Baker's very glamorous personal sense of style off stage soon certified her as one of the most famous style icons of her time. She loved to wear opulent clothing, fancy furs, glitzy jewels, and 14k-gold fingernails. Josephine was the first Black woman to influence the fashion world. She was featured in many issues of the fashion magazines, *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*. The sultry songstress was also the muse and inspiration for fashion designers, Jean Patou, Paul Poiret, and Madeleine Vionnet. Baker also became a role model for French society women; they all wanted the Josephine Baker look. Fans who had gone primitive, rushed to copy her slicked-down, boyish bob, purchasing Bakerfix straightening pomade for maximum shine. French women would also go to Deauville, where they rubbed themselves in walnut oil and basked in the sun to try and emulate her coppery skin tone. American performer Marilyn Monroe expressed an interest in traveling to Paris and becoming a beloved, sophisticated woman of culture under the guidance of Baker herself.

Many other entertainers such as Diana Ross, Tyra Banks, Madonna, and Keri Hilson have performed with imitations of Baker's banana skirt or Eton Crop hairstyle and Art Deco influenced designs. In a September 2006 televised performance of *Fashion Rocks*, singer Beyoncé, paid homage to Josephine Baker wearing a banana skirt during her performance. Beyoncé used larger than life images of Baker as stage props and her Baker inspired dance was a timely reminder of why one of America's most famous expatriates is such an important icon.

Fashion designers continue using aspects of her 1920s styles into today's fashion. Jean Paul Gaultier who has long been considered the 'bad boy' of fashion with past collections that have included everything from cone-shaped metal bras, rubber girdles, skirts for men, and trompe l'oeil tattoos. He based his fall 1997 collection on African American culture. He captivated his audience with the unique individuality of African American style. His survey included looks from Harlem in the 20's influenced by mademoiselle Baker and jazz music. The Creole Goddess' banana look was also given tribute in Prada's Spring/Summer 2011 fashion show where they showcased models with marcel curl/eton crop hairstyles, and the collection consisted of banana printed flared skirts and blouses, so-



phisticated exotic prints, vibrant colors, and funky fur stoles. One of the most remarkable pieces in the collection was a white shift dress colorfully embroidered with an image that represents Baker.

### Conclusion

Today the urge has been to eliminate once and for all the use of words such as exotic and primitive to describe the other. We wish to demonstrate that we are all equal and that, so far as history goes, an enlightened “we” who live at the beginning of the twentieth-first century can see the hidden and not-so-hidden sexism and racism of the early twentieth century as it really was. The reason for colonialism was to melt ethnic people into dominant society. That somehow the finest thing that could be done for all ethnicities was to help them grow to be more similar to those from majority cultures and that they must abandon who they were to achieve high levels of success. Josephine Baker, who symbolized the beauty and vitality of African American culture during her time and who took Paris by storm personifying many of the modern ideals associated with jazz music completely dispels this notion. Beyond her historical importance as an integration pioneer and groundbreaking entertainment figure, Baker embodies America’s complex relationship with Europe as a place where yearnings for home may be redirected if never completely stifled. While she was a second-class citizen in her native America, through private dealings with the masters of various modes whom she attracted, as well as with the universal public persona she created, Baker influenced architecture, urban and interior design, sculpture, graphic arts, painting, photography and especially fashion. This influence establishes her as one of the most famous symbols of the jazz age, the first African American superstar and a universal icon.

### References

- Archer-Straw, Petrine. 2000. *Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s*. New York: Thames and Hudson.
- Baker, Jean-Claude and Chris Chase. 1993. *Josephine: The Hungry Heart*. New York: Random House.
- Baker, Josephine and Jo Bouillon. 1988. *Josephine*. New York: Marlowe and Company,

- Bogle, Donald. 1980. *Brown Sugar: Eighty Years of America's Black Female Superstars*. New York: Da Capo Press.
- Borshuk, Michael. 2001. "An Intelligence of the Body: Disruptive Parody through Dance in the Early Performances of Josephine Baker" in: Dorothea Fischer-Hornung, Alison D. Goeller, eds., *Embodying Liberation: The Black Body in American Dance*. Hamburg: Lit Verlag.
- Burns, Karen. 1997. "A House for Josephine Baker" in: Gülsüm Baydar Nalbantoglu and Wong Chong Thai, eds., *Postcolonial Space(s)*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.
- Fanon, Frantz. 1967. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press, Inc.
- Flickr. 2014. "Digital Image." Accessed August 8.  
<https://www.flickr.com/search/?l=cc&q=josephine%20baker>.
- Friedwald, Will. 2010. *A Biographical Guide to the Great Jazz and Pop Singers*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. and Karen C.C. Dalton. 1998. Introduction to *Josephine Baker and La Revue Negre: Paul Colin's Lithographs of Le Tumulte Noir in Paris, 1927*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.
- Hammond, Bryan and Patrick O'Connor. 1991. *Josephine Baker*. London: Bulfinch Press.
- Haney, Lynn. 1981. *Naked at the Feast: A Biography of Josephine Baker*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co.
- Kalinak, Kathryn. 2000. "Disciplining Josephine Baker: Gender, Race, and the Limits of Disciplinarity" in: James Buhler, Caryl Flinn, and David Neumeyer, eds., *Music and Cinema*. Hanover: University Press of New England.
- Logan, Rayford Whittingham, and Michael R. Winston. 1982. *Dictionary of American Negro Biography*. New York: Norton.
- Martin, Wendy. 1995. "'Remembering the Jungle': Josephine Baker and Modernist Parody." In: Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush, eds. *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism*. Redwood City: Stanford University Press.
- Nenno, Nancy. 1997. "Femininity, the Primitive, and Modern Urban Space: Josephine Baker in Berlin" in: Katharina von Ankum, ed. *Women in the Metropolis: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Pratt, Mary Louise. 2002. "Arts of the Contact Zone" in: David Bartholomae, Anthony Petrosky, eds., *Ways of Reading*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.
- Raboteau, Albert J. 2001. *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans* New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rose, Phyllis. 1989. *Jazz Cleopatra: Josephine Baker in Her Time*. New York: Doubleday.
- Said, Edward W. 1979. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Silverman, Debra B. "Nella Larsen's "Quicksand: Untangling the Webs of Exoticism." *African American Review*, 27: 599-614.
- Torgovnick, Marianna. 1991. *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Wikipedia Commons. 2014. "Digital Image." Accessed August 8. [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Josephine\\_Baker](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Josephine_Baker).
- Wood, Ean. 2000. *The Josephine Baker Story*. London: Sanctuary Publishing Ltd.