

St. Louis-Born Josephine Baker To Be First Black Woman And Entertainer To Enter France's Pantheon Monument

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ST. LOUIS — The Missouri Historical Society and Alliance Française de St. Louis will pay tribute to St. Louis-born Josephine Baker's life and legacy during an event called "Josephine Baker: J'ai Deux Amours" on Tuesday, Nov. 30 from 6:30 to 8 p.m. at the Missouri History Museum. A world-famous singer and dancer, committed civil rights activist, and a key player in the French Resistance against Nazi Germany during World War II, Baker, who died in 1975 at age 68, will become the first Black woman and first entertainer to receive France's highest honor by being inducted into Paris' Pantheon monument.

Baker will be inducted into the monument during a ceremony on Nov. 30, 2021. The Pantheon is a burial place for prominent French figures such as scientist Marie Curie, writer Victor Hugo, and philosopher Voltaire. Of the 76 national heroes currently entombed in the Pantheon, Baker will be the sixth woman and one of the very few individuals not born in France to receive the honor.

"In 1906, a star was born in St. Louis," said Isabelle Heidbreder, executive director of Alliance Française de St. Louis and honorary consul of France in St. Louis. "This 'little devil,' as she would later call herself, was to become the highest-paid entertainer of her time. She danced. She sang. She was a movie sensation. She joined the French Resistance and flew airplanes in the armée de l'air (French Air Force) during World War II. She refused to sing in segregated nightclubs. She marched for civil rights and dreamed alongside Martin Luther King in Washington. She adopted 12 children of different races, ethnic origins, and faiths: her tribue arc en ciel (rainbow tribe). She was Josephine Baker and she lived life her way."



Free and open to the public, “Josephine Baker: J’ai Deux Amours” will feature a presentation about Baker’s art, activism, and service, remarks from Yannick Tagand, the French general consul to the Midwest, and special performances. Visitors can also see a

display of ephemera from the personal collection of St. Louis collector Mary Strauss. The playbills, photos, posters, and costume drawings will be on view at the Missouri History Museum Tuesday, Nov. 30, 2021, through Sunday, Dec. 5, 2021.

“Josephine Baker is an example of someone having a vision, overcoming numerous obstacles, and becoming an international icon,” Strauss said. “Many African American stars acknowledge they have been influenced by her. Josephine Baker’s story is a great example of believing the sky’s the limit, reaching for the stars, and fulfilling your dreams.”

Visitors won’t want to miss Baker’s stunning dress and boots, a 1930 show program from the Casino de Paris, and a 1949 poster from the Folies Bergère, all on display in the Missouri History Museum’s St. Louis Sound exhibit open now through January 2023.

“We’re thrilled to offer the community the opportunity to come together to learn about this legendary St. Louisan and celebrate everything she contributed to both art and culture and to her ‘two loves,’ America and Paris,” said Emily Underwood, community initiatives specialist for the Missouri Historical Society.

Additional information about “Josephine Baker: J’ai Deux Amours” is available online.

About the Missouri Historical Society

The Missouri Historical Society (MHS) makes history meaningful and accessible through its three physical locations in St. Louis: the Missouri History Museum, the Library & Research Center, and the Soldiers Memorial Military Museum. MHS has been active in the St. Louis community since 1866. Today, MHS serves as the confluence of historical perspectives and contemporary issues. Collecting for more than 150 years, MHS houses one of the largest collections of artifacts and historical materials of any regional history institution in the United States. Missouri Historical Society Members and donors support its work of collecting, preserving and sharing the history of this region. The Missouri History Museum and the Library & Research Center receive funding from the St. Louis City and County taxpayers through the Metropolitan Zoological Park and Museum District.