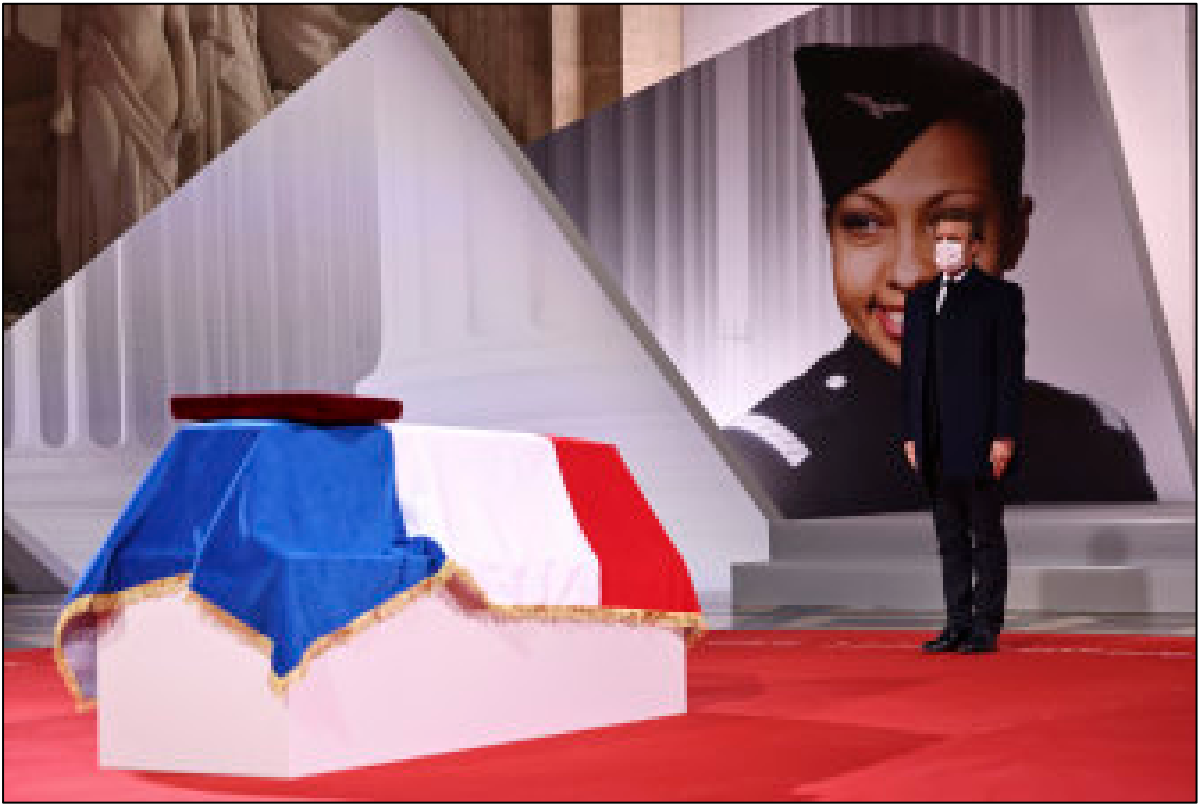


‘France is Josephine’: Black artist Josephine Baker honoured at tomb of heroes



French President Emmanuel Macron pays respect to the cenotaph of Josephine Baker, covered with the French flag, at the Pantheon in Paris.

By Sylvie Corbet and Jeffrey Schaeffer
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Paris: Josephine Baker — the US-born entertainer, anti-Nazi spy and civil rights activist — has been inducted into France’s Pantheon, becoming the first black woman to receive the nation’s highest honour.

Baker’s voice resonated through the streets of Paris’ famed Left Bank as recordings from her extraordinary career kicked off an elaborate ceremony at the domed Pantheon monument. Baker joined other French luminaries honoured at the site, including philosopher Voltaire, scientist Marie Curie and writer Victor Hugo.

Military officers from the Air Force carried her cenotaph along a red carpet that stretched for four blocks of cobblestoned streets from the Luxembourg Gardens to the Pantheon. Baker’s military medals lay atop the cenotaph, which was draped in the tricolour flag and contained soil from her birthplace in Missouri, from France, and from her final resting place in Monaco. Her body stayed in Monaco at the request of her family.

French President Emmanuel Macron paid tribute to “a war hero, fighter, dancer, singer; a black woman defending black people but, first of all, a woman defending

humankind. American and French. Josephine Baker fought so many battles with lightness, freedom, joy.”

“Josephine Baker, you are entering into the Pantheon because, [despite] born American, there is no greater French [woman] than you,” he said. “France is Josephine,” he declared.

Baker was also the first American-born citizen and the first performer to be immortalised into the Pantheon.



Image of U.S.-born entertainer, anti-Nazi spy and civil rights activist Josephine Baker is projected on the Pantheon monument during the ceremony.

She is not only praised for her world-renowned artistic career but also for her active role in the French Resistance during World War II, her actions as a civil rights activist and her humanist values, which she displayed through the adoption of her 12 children from all over the world. Nine of them attended Tuesday’s ceremony among the 2000 guests.

“Mum would have been very happy,” Akio Bouillon, Baker’s son, said after the ceremony. “Mum would not have accepted to enter into the Pantheon if that was not as the symbol of all the forgotten people of history, the minorities.”

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Bouillon added that what moved him the most were the people who gathered along the street in front of the Pantheon to watch.

“They were her public, people who really loved her,” he said.



Pictures of Josephine Baker and a red carpet lead to the Pantheon monument, rear, in Paris on Tuesday.

The tribute ceremony started with Baker's song *Me revoilà Paris* (Paris, I'm back). The French army choir sang the French Resistance song, prompting strong applause from the public. Her signature song *J'ai deux amours* (I have two loves) was then played by an orchestra accompanying Baker's voice on the Pantheon plaza.

During a light show displayed on the monument, Baker could be heard saying "I think I am a person who has been adopted by France. It especially developed my humanist values, and that's the most important thing in my life."

The homage included Martin Luther King jnr's famed "I have a dream" speech. Baker was the only woman to speak before him at the 1963 March on Washington.



Josephine Baker holds a rhinestone-studded microphone as she performs during her show "Paris, mes Amours" at the Olympia Music Hall in Paris in 1957.

Born in St Louis, Missouri, Baker became a megastar in the 1930s, especially in France, where she moved in 1925 as she sought to flee racism and segregation in the United States.

"The simple fact to have a black woman entering the pantheon is historic," black French scholar Pap Ndiaye, an expert on US minority rights movements, told The Associated Press.

“When she arrived, she was first surprised like so many African Americans who settled in Paris at the same time ... at the absence of institutional racism. There was no segregation ... no lynching. [There was] the possibility to sit at a cafe and be served by a white waiter, the possibility to talk to white people, to [have a] romance with white people,” Ndiaye said.

“It does not mean that racism did not exist in France. But French racism has often been more subtle, not as brutal as the American forms of racism,” he added.

Baker was among several prominent black Americans, especially artists and writers, who found refuge in France after the two World Wars, including famed writer and intellectual James Baldwin.

They were “aware of the French empire and the brutalities of French colonisation, for sure. But they were also having a better life overall than the one they had left behind in the United States,” Ndiaye, who also directs France’s state-run immigration museum, said.

Baker quickly became famous for her banana-skirt dance routines and wowed audiences at Paris theatre halls. Her shows were controversial, Ndiaye stressed because many activists believed she was “the propaganda for colonisation, singing the song that the French wanted her to sing.”

Baker knew well about “the stereotypes that black women had to face,” he said. “She also distanced herself from these stereotypes with her facial expressions” ridiculing them.

“But let’s not forget that when she arrived in France she was only 19, she was almost illiterate ... She had to build her political and racial consciousness,” he said.

Baker became a French citizen after her marriage to industrialist Jean Lion in 1937. The same year, she settled in south-western France, in the castle of Castelnau-la-Chapelle.

“Josephine Baker can be considered to be the first black superstar. She’s like the Rihanna of the 1920s,” said Rosemary Phillips, a Barbados-born performer and co-owner of Baker’s park beneath the castle in the Dordogne.

Phillips said one of the ladies who grew up in the castle and met with Baker said: “Can you imagine a black woman in the 1930s in a chauffeur-driven car — a white chauffeur — who turns up and says, ‘I’d like to buy the 1000 acres here?’”

In 1938, Baker joined what is today called LICRA, a prominent antiracist league. The next year, she started to work for France’s counter-intelligence services against Nazis, notably collecting information from German officials who she met at parties. She then

joined the French Resistance, using her performances as a cover for spying activities during World War II.

In 1944, Baker became second-lieutenant in a female group in the Air Force of the French Liberation Army of General Charles De Gaulle.

After the war, she got involved in anti-racist politics and the civil rights struggle, both in France and in the United States.

Towards the end of her life, she ran into financial trouble, was evicted and lost her properties. She received support from Princess Grace of Monaco, who offered Baker a place for her and her children to live. Baker died in Paris in 1975 at age 68.

Rokhaya Diallo is a French journalist, writer and filmmaker in an opinion piece for *The Washington Post* last week wrote: “Today, the image of Baker is so loved that even Marine Le Pen, a leader of the far-right, celebrates her. And Macron has honoured her because she is a symbol of France’s universalist stance.

“Yet, at a time when immigration is at the heart of so many political tensions, and as French people of colour still face discrimination, it will take more than Baker’s elevation to show the republic has changed.”