

Fashion designer celebrates Paris icon

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A fashion designer has celebrated the career of a dancer that took Paris by storm in the 1920s and later fought the Nazis in the French resistance.

Known as the "Black Venus", Josephine Baker took centre stage in Paris for the first time in decades on Thursday after the Nigerian designer, Gozi Ochonogor, unveiled her autumn-winter collection.

Entitled "A Kiss for Josephine", Gozi told journalists: "I'm really inspired by strong black women ... she is about the best sort of icon you can find out there."



One of the more modest designs at this week's show in France

Baker's significance

Before the Second World War, Baker was famous for her dance routines and the clothes she chose not to wear.

But once Germany occupied France, she cooperated with the resistance, smuggling messages written on her music sheets.

After the war, Baker was decorated by the French government and went on to campaign for black civil rights in the United States - where racial prejudice denied her recognition until the 1970s. She died in 1975.

Paris

Gozi, who was showing her collections for the first time at Paris fashion week, lives and works in London.

Her designs are strongly influenced by the spirit of 1920s and 1930s fashion - but the bare backs, slicked-down hair, crystals and feathers fused with contemporary cuts and fabrics.

"I like to compare what erotica is today and what it was in the 1930s - mix it and put it together, a kind of soft eroticism, although not quite as soft as back then," she explained.

The show opened with a stunning piece of body jewellery in tribute to the stage costumes once worn by the artist herself.

The resulting designs cover even less than a Rio carnival costume, and brought the 1920s stage careening onto the catwalk.

More wearable designs

On the more wearable register, Gozi had draped fabrics tamed under a thick belt or pinned in close to the hips with leather straps, forming a series of suits and dresses, with slanting, layered hemlines adding an urban touch.

Offering the distinctive Baker touch, less practical-minded creations included knee-high black boots rimmed with red and orange flames, worn with next-to-nothing - a transparent nylon stocking-suit or a simple set of black lingerie.

Or there was a swishing cloak of ostrich feathers stitched onto fine black gauze and topped with a single feathered headdress.

Profile

Born in 1974 in the Nigerian capital Lagos, Gozi trained as a software engineer in London before launching into fashion.

"As a Nigerian you have to do things that are a bit pragmatic, like becoming a software engineer," she explained.

Once her studies completed, however, the designer turned her full attention to the fashion world.

She started designing her own clothes while still studying, selling them at west London's Portobello Market and acquiring several retail customers in Paris and Japan.