

What is Bellydance?

[/www.venusbellydance.com/abt_bdance.htm](http://www.venusbellydance.com/abt_bdance.htm)

True historical data on bellydance is fragmentary -- there is relatively little documentation on women's work and activities throughout the age of literacy. Current theories on the history of bellydance are a confusing mixture of speculative extrapolation and personal bias which is then often presented as historical fact. There is much room for more stringent research in this area.

Despite the lack of accurate historical information, a few points can be agreed upon. Bellydancing as it is known today is very old. It retains its connection to fertility and eroticism by being an indispensable feature at weddings in many Middle Eastern countries, performing the multifold purpose of getting the bride and groom (who may have just met) in the mood, making a blessing of fertility on the couple, and providing entertainment for the guests. Today bellydance is enjoyed variously for its artistry, ethnicity, beauty, healthy eroticism and fun!

The movement vocabulary of bellydance is a conglomeration of styles from many regions--Lebanon, North Africa, Egypt, the Arabian Gulf, Turkey--as a result of cultural exchange historically through trade and shifting national boundaries. While Middle Easterners make the distinction between "city dance" (stage, cabaret) and "country dance" (regional folk dances), Westerners use the umbrella term of "bellydance" to refer to a broad range of styles united in the use of certain isolation movements, the most prominent and pervasive of which are the isolations of the hips. In addition, isolations of the chest, shoulders, head, hands as well as serpentine and undulating movements of the torso are often found. Another common trademark is a varying degree of flirtation and coquetry. The rhythms and instrumentation used from area to area often have some commonalities despite great regional variations but in all there is an emphasis on percussion.

Because it takes much education for Westerners to be able to recognize and appreciate these regional distinctions in style and practice, we have seen in places such as the North American West Coast, where access to Middle Eastern audiences is limited, the growth of a creative phenomenon which is now called by its proponents, American Tribal style. This version of bellydance combines costuming and movement ideas from many Middle Eastern cultures with trademark innovations that make it more accessible to Western audiences and adaptable to Western venues.

Belly dance is known in the Middle East as raks sharqi, literally, "dance of the East" or "oriental dance". The current western term may be derived from the French danse du ventre, so named because of the exposure of the midriff. Raks sharqi, the contemporary stage form derived from Egyptian baladi and influenced by early Hollywood glamour and western balletic training, is distinct from raks sha'abi or folk dances, which may nevertheless be featured in glitzed up yet authentic versions as part of an oriental stage show.

Today bellydance is enjoyed worldwide and is taught in almost every country. While a small percentage of enthusiasts use bellydance as an income supplement, and smaller percentage derive their sole income from performance and/or teaching, the majority of enthusiasts pursue it for mere enjoyment as exercise, recreation and socialization. Many perform regularly as amateurs or semi-professionals: bellydance communities worldwide are notable for their energy and enthusiasm in putting on collaborative performances, workshops and other events.

It is ironic that while traditionally Middle Eastern women have been discouraged from or censured for pursuing a career as a bellydancer, many Western woman embrace it as a means of rediscovering themselves and nurturing a stronger personal identity and sense of empowerment.

Why Bellydance?

Aside from the joy inherent in learning a beautiful dance art, enthusiasts report a wide variety of benefits gained from the practice of Middle Eastern dance:

- * Satisfaction from achieving new levels of physical mastery
- * A feeling of camaraderie, community, making new friends
- * Strengthening, reshaping and renewed acceptance of one's body
- * Greater freedom and range of self expression
- * Relief from back pain
- * Familiarity with different musical styles and cultures
- * Spending time for yourself
- * Bringing joy to others
- * Fun Fun Fun!



A Primer on Middle Eastern Dance Styles

by Soher Azar

Beginners are often confused about the many dance styles in Middle Eastern dance. Our dance comes from many countries, so there is great variety. The wide range of choices is one of the charms. There are general characteristics in each style, however, which differentiate them.

Modern Egyptian cabaret dancing is very controlled, elegant, refined and often includes some ballet. Muscular control is emphasized and movements are small and internalized. "Less is More" seems to be the working philosophy. Egyptians must by law wear stomach covers, so many followers of the style do that also. An American dancer who dances this style is Shareen El Safy. Morocco dances *Old Style Egyptian cabaret*, eschewing the Russian balletic influences in favor of the original Egyptian dance.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is *Turkish style cabaret*. "Anything Goes" seems to be more of the working philosophy. Dancers are often very flamboyant, with large, earthy movements. Leaps and many pelvic movements are very common. The Karshilama is Turkish and is rarely danced in Egypt, where it was outlawed after the Ottoman Turks were ousted. Turkish dancers are often very scantily clad, but that's not a requirement of the style. Eva Cernik dances in the Turkish style.

Lebanese cabaret dance is somewhere between the Egyptian and Turkish styles. Ibrahim "Bobby" Farrah is Lebanese and teaches a very dramatic, elegant style with many poses, direction changes, and ballet influences. Leila Gamal dances in a style influenced by Bobby.

Of course, when we get into the folkloric basis of the dance, there are many more dance styles than countries. The videos "Dances of Egypt" and "Dances of North Africa" give a good starting point for understanding these dances, the movements of which have been polished and refined for stage performance.

Beledi is the dance of the Egyptian countryside; it is also the music. When taken to the stage it becomes an "Urban Beledi" with more glitzy costumes. The usual costume is a fitted caftan slit up one or both sides called a beledi dress. A triangular headscarf is also commonly worn. Many Egyptian folk dances such as



cane and basket dances are performed in beledi. *Tabtib* is the men's martial arts dance of Egypt, performed with the long canes which were historically used in combat.

Gypsy dance is another style which is widely danced in the U.S. Gypsies originally came from India and travelled thorough out the Middle East and Europe bringing their dances with them. The Ghawazhees were originally Egyptian Gypsy street dancers. Aisha Ali is an authority on Ghawazhee dance. Eva Cernik specializes in Turkish Gypsy style and Laurel Grey in Russian Gypsy style. Dalia Carella dances a combination of Gypsy stylings she terms "Dunyavi" or World Gypsy Style.



Khaleeji dance is the dance of the Persian Gulf States and Saudi Arabia. The dancers wear a very full, often highly embroidered caftan called a thobe nashal. Most movements are centered in the shoulders and there is a distinctive hair toss. Kay Hardy Campbell is an authority on this style dance.

Persian dancing is quite different from the dance of most Middle Eastern countries in that there are few abdominal movements and undulations. The graceful arm movements, shoulder shimmies, and twirls are similar. Robyn Friend is an authority on classical Persian dance.

There are various trance dances and dances to cast out demons; these are often religious dances. Examples of some of the most well known dances include: Certain Sufi sects perform "*Whirling Dervish*" twirling dances as part of their religious ceremonies. The *Zar* is "the trance ceremony of North Africa and the middle east", a dance used to placate demons/djinn; it is characterized by violent head tosses. *The Guedra* is a blessing dance of the Tureg of Morocco.

Most U.S. dances do not dance any pure form of the dance, but a amalgam-- *American Style Bellydance*. Some people add other influences such as jazz, ballet, and Spanish. Suhaila Salimpour adds a lot of jazz movements to her dance. Amaya adds many Spanish influences. Some dancers are very experimental and avante garde

in their creation of new dance forms: Z-Helene combines modern dance with Middle Eastern and Indian to create her Blue Wave style. *Tribal* is an American mixture of ethnic stylings with Fat Chance Belly Dance being a prime example.

This brief overview is not comprehensive at all, but it does give some idea of the wide variety and many styles of Middle Eastern dance. The broad spectrum is what makes the dance open to all and universally appealing. There is a style for everyone in our dance.

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