

A Short History of Today's Raqs Sharqi

By Amira and Marissa L. Harris

The women of the Middle East have long used dance to celebrate all that is uniquely feminine. A marriage, pregnancy or childbirth has always been cause for rejoicing and is also a time when the older generation is called upon to share its knowledge. For thousands of years, strong yet feminine dance movements were used to teach young women about married life while helping prepare their bodies for childbirth and motherhood. These fertility rituals were women-only affairs from which men were excluded.

Nomadic peoples transported these movements and the rhythms to which they were performed from India through Central Asia into Northern Africa and Europe, resulting in a family of dance traditions that can be found on three continents. This variety of dance styles has come to be known in the west as Bellydance, a term that is commonly believed to have been coined at a fair held in San Francisco in 1889, where Turkish dancers were seen performing with exposed midriffs.

Middle Eastern dance has gone through many changes over the course of the centuries, having grown from a ritual activity intended only for the eyes of women into a performance art. While the dance is often still shared amongst women, professional dancers now perform for mixed-gender audiences. Unfortunately, a negative stigma is sometimes attached to female dancers who perform in public and in some places public performances have been discouraged or prohibited altogether. Ironically, it is in the countries of the Middle East where the dance is most regulated and controlled, while the art form is thriving in the rest of the world!

While Middle Eastern dances for men do exist, these tend to be folkloric in nature and do not embody the graceful feminine nature of the women's dances. Bellydance is an art form created by women, essentially for women, and no other dance form celebrates womanhood as it does.

A truly feminine art form, Bellydance is for dancers of every age, shape and size. Emphasizing each person's natural beauty, encouraging her unique sensuality, Bellydance allows women to express themselves in a healthy, positive way.

No other dance training is required for a woman to Bellydance. The movements are body-friendly, gentle, and much less strenuous than other types of exercise. While dancing, hormones called endorphins are naturally released into the bloodstream. These endorphins are the body's way of naturally healing stress, building self-esteem, and improving psychological health.

The intricate muscular movements involved in Bellydance engage the entire body from head to toe. While learning to isolate different body parts, the dance student gains muscular strength and control. Bellydancing shapes the body by creating lean muscle, improving posture and magically melting away the pounds. Gentle on the joints, Bellydance movements are suitable for all women, including the elderly, those who are overweight, and those who are recovering from an injury or illness. Bellydance teaches women to accept and celebrate their bodies as they are, helping to improve each dancer's self-image. For all these reasons, Bellydance has become the preferred fitness activity for women around the world.

The mesmerizing beauty and woman-centered nature of Bellydance are powerful attractions. In addition to the positive impact the dance has on women's physical and psychological health, dancers are drawn to the beautiful costumes and the wide variety of props that are incorporated into the dance. Finger cymbals and spoons are often used to accompany the music while veils fill the air with color. Swords, candelabras, trays, baskets, and candles are balanced on dancers' heads and even more unusual props (such as live snakes) are incorporated into performances!

Bellydance's popularity in the West is growing so quickly that there are already more self-proclaimed bellydancers in the United States than in the entire Middle East. The dance has become the basis for huge social gatherings, camps, festivals and retreats that bring together thousands of like-minded individuals from all over the world. Geared towards first-time dancers, Amira's Bellydance 101 DVD has been produced in the hope that it will encourage, inspire and continue to expand the growing Bellydance community.