

History of the belly dance: is it to entice men or a female's rite of passage?

Abstract

One of the most beautiful-classical forms of dance which has persisted since 220 B.C.E. (Before the Common Era) came from the Egyptian culture with its traditional 'bedlah' (suit) or suit. But it grew from the off-spring of the Arab Empire (Islamic expansions, 632-1492) and then spread towards India.¹ It has been said or noted that from this dance style evolved the traditional patterns used by the Indian women with their saris, to the Romani (Gypsy) women while dancing flamenco in the medieval period, and the later burlesque techniques which flourished in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. Belly dance didn't only influence these latter cultures, but it further influenced in the ways of dress and fashion for females. A dance taken from humble origins and converted into something for the international spectrum to glorify the body of women who wished to be in contact with Mother Earth/Nature. This dance wasn't only for a female's rite of passage. It was modified through different times in history to be danced in the courts of the Imperial Palaces across the Middle East. Through time, even used by the infamous Mata Hari to spy on men and used to get information during World War I. Belly dance grew, and with time became part of the line-up of classical dances. Because it is one of the oldest and most enjoyed worldwide. With this paper, I intend to demonstrate that belly dancing isn't only to entice. It is more than that, it can be adapted to a woman's anatomy and give her way into womanhood.

Keywords: belly dance, Egypt, Arab cultures, 'bedlah', Mata Hari, India, Roma-flamenco culture and burlesque

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Introduction

What started as an Egyptian-cultural dance 2,200 years before and evolved into a cultural phenomena which has literally galloped across the world. Different cultures along the Middle East have argued that the belly dance originated in their respective societies. The Arab Empire had much to do with this honor in spreading the dance. But one thing is conclusive, the credit many times over has been given to Egypt.

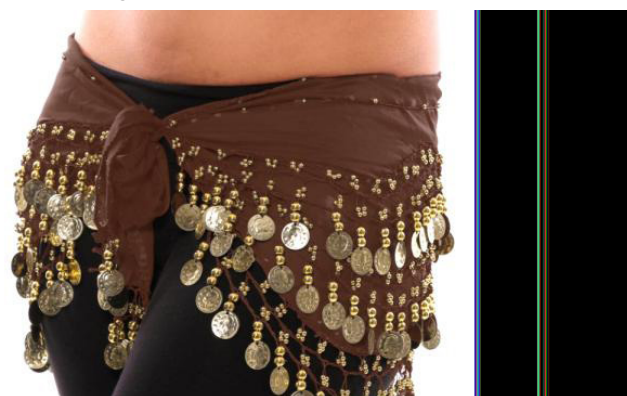
Egypt is one of the oldest societies on record, with over 7,000 years of history. Part of the evolution of the belly dance came through their social system. Therefore, they deserve the major credit for what this culture has given the entire world: whether it be through art, public performances in theater or the streets and the Golden Age of Egyptian Cinema (1940s to 1960s).²

This exotic and tantalizing dance has always symbolized, especially through movies, a motivating factor to entice men or get their attention in a very sensual-sexy way. It has also inspired countless women to learn the movements for a greater emphasis in the continued promotion of health, better body and development of their femininity. However, looking over the history, is this the only reason the dance is good for?

Actually, historians have debated over and over about this issue. That yes, the belly dance has a beautiful dance pattern to get an adult males' attention. In truth, that is only one reason. It is also meant to reflect on not only a cultural experience, but one of passage into womanhood. In the Middle East this began/begins in a female's life around 13 to 16 years of age. When a young lady technically became/becomes a woman; although still a child. She would have to perform

these rites of passage. During her puberty years she began growing breast, hips got wider, voice got softer or in a lower pitch and she also started to bleed/menstruate on a monthly basis. Therefore, according to this society, it was her time into adulthood. Her moment of transition. Because once these things began to happen, she was 'ready' for womanhood, marriage and furthermore, to have babies.

The special dance she would have to perform would show-off her femininity. It wasn't a place for men, but it was amongst the priestesses of the temple to see this rite of passage and therefore, declare the transition of a girl into a 'woman'.



As the centuries passed, it was used more to exploit a woman's femininity and tempt a man into doing whatever she wanted. History gives constant examples: Delilah tempting Samson³ or King Herod being enchanted by his daughter's dance (Fourteenth Chapter, Verse Six in the Book of Matthews, New Testament, King James' Bible). For whatever the reason, the dance did persist.

Therefore, the idea of the classical-belly dance has turned into that kind of phenomena and I quote a female, "I do more the belly dance to attract men!" Given that this is the most common perception on why women still perform this particular dance.

The reasons here are not to judge, but to give this classical dance an exposure which isn't only sexual; moreover, one which is cultural.

However, let me be perfectly honest. Belly dancing was made-invented to adapt to a woman's body. In this art form, the center piece of the entire dance were/are the hips and belly area. The latter usually was the main focal point or as shown in the image below these lines. Other forms of the dance or dance techniques use the following: arms, legs and head movements.



Image by amazon.com

Yes, there are different styles and techniques when travelling through the Middle East. The main styles come from Egypt, Turkey and Lebanon. But other styles exude throughout these lands; whether a person is in Morocco, Israel, Greece or as to the far east of Iran.

What this study tries to prove that it isn't focused entirely on the sexual context. It is also to study why this dance adapted to a woman's body and her rites of passage. Why does it continue to grow in popularity? Furthermore, this dance is not to be taken in a negative light. It is to bring this art form from out of the literal 'dark ages' into view for the entire world to see and enjoy.

In contemporary times, the belly dance is practiced in 15 to 22 or so countries of the Middle East. Unless it is an ultra-conservative Muslim society, in which the dance isn't practiced or it is practiced in secrecy. But for the most part, this dance is tolerated in most cultures.

It was never meant or created to leer [the belly dance]. It was meant to be enjoyed by generations of women. Furthermore, it was meant to also be enjoyed in a natural setting by men.

With the above statement in mind, the popularity of the belly dance doesn't seem to wane after 22 centuries. Reaching India, to the far of corners of China, South Korea and Japan; influencing the furthest countries from the Middle East and Northern Africa. Through the last-two millennium it expanded or grew. Going into Europe. Possibly transported by the Arab-culture itself through the subsequent invasions of Europe during the Middle Ages or the Romani (Gypsy) people who took it via India and introduced it to Spain. The belly dance evolved from the traditional strumming and rhythms from the Middle East to

influence parts of the flamenco-dance style in the following way: how the music is played, people do a roundabout motion with their hips, perform the traditional turns and certain costume elements, etc.

This phenomena made a cultural impact around the world. As European explorers by the end of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries set for the 'New World', the dance would spread through the Americas--becoming popular in every way.

However, one thing which has held back the belly-dance craze. This dancing style hasn't been like: flamenco (said to have evolved from the belly dance itself), ballet, waltz, tango, salsa, mambo or cha-cha.^{4,5} All these previous styles have adapted to both sexes, male and female. With the belly dance, it has adapted for the most part to women. Making it harder for men to become part of it. And still, men are joining the ranks of this sensual dance; whether it is for culture, learn to dance or stay in shape. The prejudices of Western society in the last 30 years towards the Middle East or anything Arab has also affected its growth in parts of North America and Europe.

Experts have argued that the dance needs to be expanded to adapt to the male population. Yes and maybe so, however, when this dance was created, it was made for the sole purpose to adapt to a woman's physic, her femininity, her own sensuality and be transported on her own into the rights of womanhood.

Take your pick, whether it is only for women or for women to entice men. What this investigative paper tends to prove that it was invented by women to be enjoyed on their terms; nothing more and nothing less.

Methodology

Belly dancing wasn't even on my mind till recently when I was transferred and began working in Shenzhen, Guangdong, China. My desire was to get into shape, back into the motion of exercise and life, after a hiatus of eight years. With the challenges of being overweight, I stumbled onto different classes as I joined the local gymnasium in Guangming District. It was almost by mistake. I began to enjoy my life again and do exercise classes, such as: aerobics, an-aerobics, yoga & Pilates.

But with a wonderful variety of classes and teachers, I began to refocus my life in the area of dancing. This was when one Friday evening in November, 2019, I went on to experiment for the first time in my life a belly-dance class. The experience to be quite honest left me positively impacted. Wanting something more. It was wonderful and at the same time, I was worried, since I was the only male in the class. Afraid of invading these females' precious-personal space. Most males would be honored [and I was] to be amongst this 'harem' of beautiful ladies. However, that was not my purpose, it was out of sheer desperation to get my health back again and socialize.

I had experienced belly dancing, but only as an spectator. A man whom had seen live shows through the Americas, Europe, the Middle East, Africa and East Asia. Other inspirations about belly dancing were from Coco Lee's 2005 hit song, "Belly Dance".⁶

One night, I simply decided to do research on everything I could learn about belly dancing. I soon discovered much about this ancient dance and its rituals. Learning in the process that, here is one of the oldest dances recorded in world history. Here was my inspiration to start writing an article for the futurehandling.com website in Hong Kong and another was this investigative piece.⁷

During that first week after the belly-dance class, I thought about the topic and wrote a little over 700 words into an article. I had never written about this theme till now. Placing my idea, or call it my historical-opinion about the issue onto paper. This was one topic I had never touched base before and soon understood, that this dance wasn't only for women, but also for men. Inside a period of 50 minutes: it was good to sweat-off the kilos, exercise and tone the body. I found it to be good fun, while learning new movements!

From my second experience in the class, it was a sheer pleasure to learn from the teacher and these wonderful ladies. Personally, I felt accepted and they gathered around me in a warm welcome. After all, I was the first and only male to try the class. Furthermore, this art was something perfectly new to me. Soon, other males would join the ranks in the ever expanding-class crowd.

I went home with even more infused passion and decided to search further into the topic. With that said, I decided to do research on belly dancing and prove a point. Belly dance wasn't or isn't only to conquer a man's heart: it was for people to have fun, exercise and females have their own unique experience. It is also a dance which can easily open-up to men if they are willing to leave out all the machismo attitudes outside this space. However, there is one truth, I decided to write on this particular theme to not only prove that it is for a woman's rite of passage. It is for people to come together and enjoy.

Further, it is also to dispel certain myths about the art. A majority of women admitted they learned this dance style to attract men or their husbands/boyfriends, etc. But it wasn't for men to come along, howl 'at the moon', whistle, throw obscenities and leer at them. This was the last thing on their minds or what they wanted! Because for decades, after belly dancing made its way into Western society, it was negatively introduced into the stripper-club way of life and stag [bachelor] parties. Therefore, for many practicing this cultural style of dance wanted to demonstrate the following: that it is a beautiful art not to be tarnished or to be made into something cheap. This art could be sensual, cultural at the same time and with something which in full view it is meant to be admired.

This investigative paper through analysis intends to expose the truth [as much as possible] and show for what the belly dance truly is, a dance adapted for women. Furthermore, it is to be enjoyed in a setting which is clearly for their rites of passage: from a girl to a woman and so forth. This paper also tries to literally 'drill' at the topic respectfully and carefully. For this is my unique chance to show a world which few know about and bring to light an art that is almost obscure with ignorance in a certain way. This is not to say that men cannot participate. They [men/males] can, but do it with admiration and in a respectful way! Belly dance after all is cultural and something which all should be able to enjoy!

Through this investigative paper, what I also intend to show is the following: its origins, intro into Western society, what it went through after the 1990s and where is belly dance today?

Especially after 1991, when the desire for anything Arabic or Middle Eastern literally 'soured' after the Desert Storm and Desert Shield wars took place.^{8,9}

It is in a way to bring back what is good and classical about the Middle Eastern background--without the prejudices and racism of war which have befallen in our contemporary times.

Now, this is the methodology which I intend to follow: to expose further the topic, bring it to light and hopefully for a new generation of people to enjoy the dance worldwide.

However, it is not to say that this investigation doesn't have flaws. Most of the times, it is my intention to remain objective; however, there are times in which I may fall into subjectivity. For this reason, I apologize ahead. With that in mind, please enjoy this investigation, 'History of the Belly Dance: Is it to entice men or a female's rite of passage?' Kind regards.

History

History has told the belly dance began 2,200 years ago. However, that is the documented version on the manuscripts since Ancient Egypt was ruled by the pharaohs. Then historians began taking a closer look at the facts and how this ancient-classical dance form grew. How it extended from the Egyptian coast across Northern Africa; as a matter of fact, this dance method went east and west with commercial exchange. It reached into Northern India. It was extremely influential in such a way that it crisscrossed back into Southern Europe and reaching into Spain with the Romani (Gypsy) culture.

Therefore, the history of this dance goes back further than its 22 centuries prior. Historians have argued countless times that this dance is more in the range of 6,000 years.¹⁰

With its initial beginnings in the holy-female temples throughout Egypt; women priestesses prepared a ceremony for young females when they reached the age of puberty. This ceremonious act was one to bring females into womanhood, with the rites of marriage and prayers for fertility, etc.

This dance began as a form of adoration and in a pagan ritual to a female deity. The dance itself had a deeper meaning than it was originally intended, since it came originally from a matriarchal-tribal way of life. It was a dance ritual preparing the woman's body to get pregnant and during pregnancy. This method consisted of movements to help improve the health of the female and assist her with ease when giving birth. However, nothing of the latter stated has been proven, just passed down in theory--according to the science and ancient-social practices.¹¹⁻¹⁴

The women gathered to dance together during social events. Also to prepare a female whom made it to puberty for marriage and during the marriage rituals before she met her groom.

But the dance's (belly dance) true exposure worldwide was when it was shown in French society. Initially the French called it, 'La danse du ventre' and voila, we have in translation--'the dance of the stomach' or how it is commonly known today as 'Belly Dance'. When it was demonstrated in the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 (World's Columbian Exposition), it certainly caused a commotion. Those who witnessed this hypnotic dance called it mistakenly so, the 'Dance of the Orient'.

The problem that once it was exposed to Western society, it was often and in a stereotypical way portrayed as a dance to entice for sexual purposes only. Therefore, from something spiritual in nature, in later years it was often associated with something negatively for striptease, burlesque (however, belly dance did influence burlesque and not the other way around) or used by strippers; which in truth, had nothing to do with it.¹⁵

The correct concept or term for this dance is, 'Dance of the East', referring to the Arabic term of 'Raqs sharki' (Eastern Dance) (1800s to the 1930s) 'Dance of the Orient' was the incorrect term given to the dance. If people refer to the belly dance as a dance of the orient, it would be more in line with countries like: China, Korea or Japan.

A. Was this dance only for women?

Possibly it was, as time evolved and society transformed itself, men came to belong as a part of this unique dance troupe. It was especially noticeable throughout the streets of Cairo, Egypt, when women and men performed together.

Later, as European empires emerged, the French and British began to exert their power over Egypt, this changed radically. European men preferred to see only female-solo acts. This was the dramatic change which occurred into the Nineteenth Century.

The dance itself went through an evolution: which started with women, afterward men were later allowed to join in and then men were banned from the dance troupes for female-only dancers.

With the European influence and once this dance crossed over the Atlantic Ocean into the New World, this movement had an entirely different connotation. It was considered in sexual nature to provoke men into an intimate encounter. Therefore, from this point it was given a negative stereotype and later in history, the belly dance was associated more with the 'exotic Mata Hari' types.

B. Who was 'Mata Hari'?

Mata Hari (from the Malay, its translation means 'eye of the day' or 'to captivate') was a Dutch-born entertainer (Margaretha Zelle) who slept with men for financial gain. She was an extremely famous burlesque dancer in Paris, France at the beginning of the 20th Century; who had gorgeous exotic-dark looks. She used her different belly and Hindu techniques during her dance shows. She was especially famous for her 'temple dance'. As her popularity waned by 1915, at the dawn of World War I, because of her age and men having the preference for younger dancers--she later became a spy. Many historians assert that she became an Agent for the French Intelligence Services; however, she later 'turned' and became a Double Agent for the German-High Command during the War. Already 40-years old, she fell in love with a young-Russian officer (Vladimir de Massloff) and this has been overly stated as her main motivation for making money as a Double Agent. When she was caught in 1917, she was swiftly put on trial and as soon as she was found guilty, promptly executed! Possibly being used as a 'scapegoat' by the French for their losses during WWI. No definite proof as ever been presented if she had 'turned/become a double agent' or not!

Not to blame everything on the poor Mata Hari, but it has been said because of her--she gave the belly and Hindu styles a bad reputation (the dance being called, 'obscene'). However, this is only half the truth, the reality was, these dances were already made sexual in nature once they reached Europe and America.

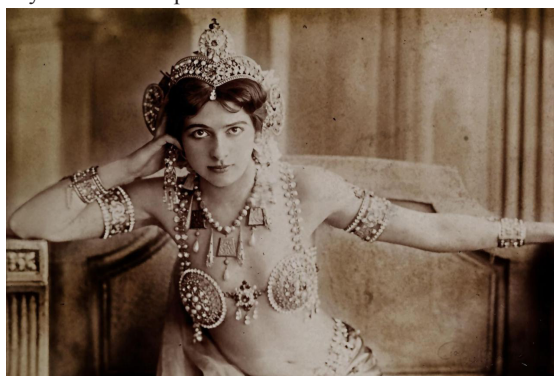


Image from the Smithsonian Magazine (Bibliothèque nationale de France).

C. The belly dance has two mainstreams

The dance itself has two mainstreams. One is from Egypt and the other from Turkey, with different variations and not only Middle Eastern in influence. Belly dancing has adapted to Western, African, European and Asian techniques.

But the two most important always resound with Turkey and Egypt:

a. Turkey

The dance style in Istanbul since medieval times was heavily influenced by articulate movements of the hips and torso. Where many dancers use more finger cymbals and veils.¹⁶

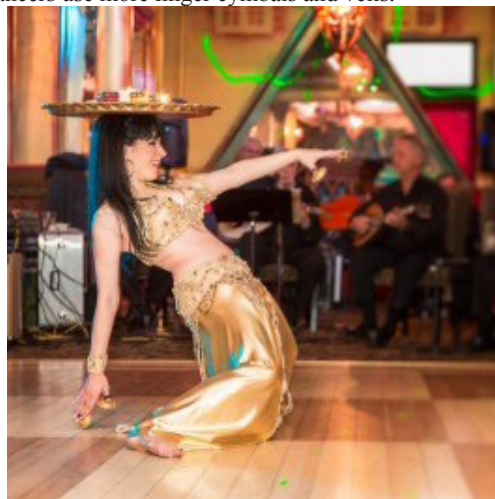
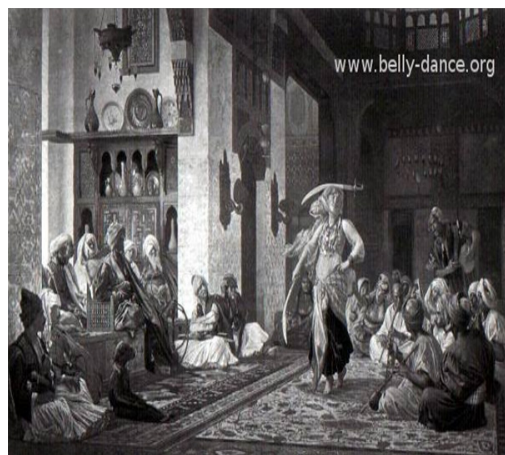


Image from ancientartstudios.com

b. Egypt

Street performers who danced around Cairo, Egypt were known as 'ghawazi' (Return to the invader). Their methods were more traditional than the Turkish rituals. Not only did these dancers perform their shows on the streets; the troupe had a male and female ensemble. It was a common sight in coffee houses and during public festivals, etc. Few times did the Egyptian style depend on props or other ornaments. To give the show intensity, sometimes a cane or sword was incorporated into the act.¹⁷ The dancer was acknowledged more for his/her technique and the costume used. By the twentieth century, the Arabic word 'Baladi' (My country) was incorporated into the belly dance world. This meaning it was a dance and costume used by the country [Egypt] in its folklore.



If comparing both dance styles, the movements of each exquisitely beautiful in their own right. Obviously, the Egyptian-belly dance is far older than the one from Turkey. The reasons for this is the following: as the Arab influence and empire spread across the Middle East, Asia Minor, Northern Africa and Southern Europe--so did this dance. The Egyptian style took a stronger influence when nightclubs began opening up during and after the 1920s.

The Belly Dance world also has a third stream, one which focuses on both dances from Egypt and Turkey meshed in together.¹⁸ The Lebanese style of the belly dance (Raqs Sharki Lubnani) is one which goes perfectly with: backward movements of the torso [sometimes extreme], kicks, splits, strong shimmy in the motion of the hips [or whole body], elongated big-golden skirts [sarongs] which flow outward to give the dancer grace and poise.

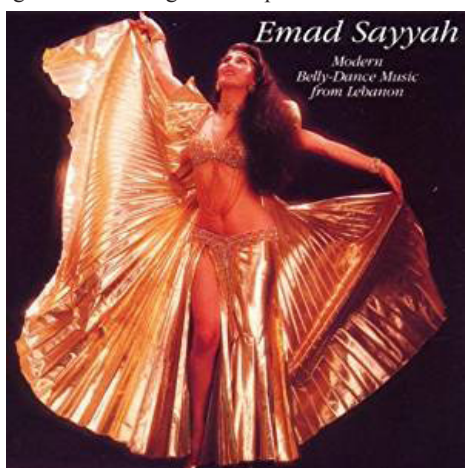


Image by stylecraze.com



Image by Femina

In the evolution of styles, other than the Lebanese dance--a Greek technique called the Tsifteteli was born. Method was possibly developed in ancient times to worship of the Goddess Aphrodite

(Venus). However, this cannot be completely confirmed. The fact is, the origins of the Greek-Tsifteteli came through a culture of crossroads. From the Turkish 'Chifteteli', meaning 'two strings': which one is from Turkey (country who colonized and occupied Greece for 400 years) and the other from the Middle East. Women wear rhinestones on their costumes and during performances dance in groups like in a discotheque.¹⁹ My earliest memories were as a young man in San Diego, California seeing a performance of this style in a restaurant called, Greektown.²⁰

D. Aftermath

It wasn't without controversy the development of the belly dance world; especially in conservative Egypt. For a society who didn't allow women to expose their torso, even less the arms, hair or feet--by the 1950s, this culture went through a transformation. It began with dancers like 'Little Egypt' and doing intricate movements with her upper body. This made conservative-Egyptians very angry, but the rest was history and the changes this dance brought to the rest of the world. From the wearing of a corset to not expose the torso, to a dance which would show the torso completely and with exotic movements which magnetized those who watched this unique-dance style.²¹ However, it was banned again after the 1950s and dancers weren't allowed to show their belly according to the Muslim laws of virtue and respect. It remains the same till present-day.

But this dance whether it is in the Egyptian or Turkish form already had caused controversy at the Chicago World's Fair of 1893. One, because the free movement of the torso offended many conservatives and second, [not proven] that it nearly gave the essayist Mark Twain a heart attack.

The height of the belly dance craze had had its time before, but never like the years between the 1950s to the 1990s. When everything Middle Eastern was treasured, considered cultural and more exotic. Everybody wanted either an opportunity to learn the dance or in their majority, see the dance.

With the growth of the feminist movement in the 1960s, came radical changes. That by the 1970s and 1980s America, belly dance came to symbolize something uniquely different. It came to represent not only femininity. It became a symbol of pride amongst feminist to not only showcase their bodies and consider themselves goddesses. This art form became one with empowerment. The belly dance world was connected to something more than that, people also went back to the source. Therefore, looking for spiritual meaning/connection in the dance: from Mother Earth, to birth rite and marriage. Taking this dance to a whole new level, one to make women feel equal to men. But nothing last forever and like every dawn, there is also a dusk!



Image from arabesquebellydance.com

This changed completely after the First Persian Gulf War. By then, anything from the Middle East or anything which came from Saudi Arabia was looked upon with suspicion and paranoia. Forgetting what a valuable legacy this dance had given the world with other equally famous classical dances.

Into the 1990s and the beginning of the Twenty-first Century, sadly this dance had [although classical] not even been inscribed as part of the UNESCO ICH (Intangible Cultural Heritage). This has been the case since the early 1990s, because of strong prejudices of where the dance originated from; not viewing what this great art form has given the planet. Starting with its beginnings in Egypt and spreading out to the entire globe. For those fans of the belly-dance world, they'll have to see what the future holds and hope it is brighter. Since this dance deserves its incorporation into the ICH list as part of a classical breed of dances to influence the world entire through history. Time will only tell...

Famous-female icons in the belly-dance world

The list composed in this investigation deals with 10 of the world's best female-belly dancers. Some names came from the web, and more often than not, lists which stated repeatedly the same names over and over. But to gather this information, also there was a need to mix in past performers with contemporary ones. There are great dancers out there which should have been mentioned and I didn't. For that, many excuses. These 10 have influenced the belly-dance culture around the world and therefore, like a phoenix, made its rise to transcend space and time.

i. 'Top 10 Best:

- a. Shafiq Al-Qibtiyya was born in Cairo, Egypt, 1851 and a student of the famous Shooq. The latter was the first Oriental dancer in Egypt. Shafiq was notoriously famous by the 1920s for her 'candelabra dance'. She danced subsequently in 'El Dorado' and later opened her own nightclub, 'Alf Leyla'. She became tragically addicted to cocaine and died a destitute in 1926.²²
- b. Farida-Mazar Spyropoulos or better known as 'Little Egypt' was a renowned dancer born in 1871, Syria. She was the first dancer to expose the raqs for American audiences to enjoy during the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, 1893.
- c. Badina Masabni, one the greatest of the greats. Badina wasn't only a dancer, but she was responsible for opening the Opera Casino. A business woman in all her right... Originally from Lebanon and born between 1892 or 1894 (nobody is certain). She already had made her mark in Egypt by the 1920s. She was ultimately responsible for launching the careers of belly dancers into the 'Golden Age of Egyptian Cinema'.
- d. Tahiya Karioka was born between 1915 and 1923, nobody is certain, in
- e. Ismaileya, Egypt. One of the great dancers in the 'Golden Age of Egyptian Cinema'. She left behind 150 movies to her credit.
- f. Hekmet Fahmy or the 'Mata Hari' of Egypt was a former dancer at the Opera Casino. She worked in the Kitkat Cabaret, which was founded by Beba Ezzedin. Hekmet wasn't only a great dancer, but a spy during World War II. Her job was to extract information from the British and pass it on to the Germans.

- g. Samia Gamal in her own right was the best of the best. Hailed as the world's greatest-belly dancer in her time. She was born in 1924, Egypt. She studied initially ballet and modern dance, which quite possibly gave her the edge in belly dancing. Her unique style was especially attractive when she did her 'veil work' during performances. Samia achieved not only international status in Egypt, but also in 1950s Hollywood. Films which are classics in the Hollywood-adventure/fantasy genre, 'Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves' (1954) and 'Valley of the Kings' (1955). Gorgeous human being and wonderful dancer, indeed.
- h. Naima Akef was part of the 'Golden Age of Egyptian Cinema'. She won the Bolshoi Theater Prize in Moscow, Russia. Part of a generation to perform in movies, theaters and productions.
- i. Fifi Abdou is one of the contemporaries after the 'Golden Age of Egyptian Cinema'. Born in Cairo, Egypt, April 26, 1953. She is a belly dancer and actress.
- j. Shakira, from Barranquilla, Colombia (b. 1977) is a singer with albums in Spanish and English. An international-super star in her own right... And one of the things which has made her notable for her work is her incorporation of the Lebanese-belly dance style into her performances. Shakira's ancestry is from Lebanon and with her music fine tunes this dance into pieces like, 'Hips Don't Lie'.
- k. Rachel Brice, responsible for fusing belly dance into the tribal-dance style. She typically does performances around Portland, Oregon (U.S.A.). When she isn't performing locally or in an international setting, she is teaching these same fusion techniques to students at her Studio Datura.

²³For the most part, who began exposing the belly dance culture to the world started with 'Little Egypt'. It climaxed by the time Samia Gamal came around and her name reached international stardom in Hollywood.^{23,24}

The period of the 'Golden Age in Egyptian Cinema' lasted two decades, but many of the Egyptian movies produced gave exposure not only to the belly dance. It helped Egypt by exposing these ancient-dance elements and showcasing these actresses to the world. Between the 1940s to the 1960s, Egypt made technically stylish movies which were in comparative competition for their quality and beauty with the following cinematographic giants at the time: the United States, France, Italy and Mexico.



In the picture, Samia Gamal. Image by reorientmag.com

²²Jegede, Abayomi. Top 10 Most Famous Belly Dancers of all Time. Trendrr. 2019.

²³Lo Iacono, Valeria. 10 Most Famous Belly Dancers. World Belly Dance. 2019.

As decades passed, the art of belly dancing began to fuse after the time of Fifi Abdou. In the 1990s, even after belly dance or anything Middle Eastern faced a backlash. But it was still wonderful to see performers like Shakira, who incorporate her dance background and music perfectly together.

On this list, I studied and stated 10 of the best in a very opinionated fashion; furthermore, it doesn't mean greats such as the Egyptian, Nagwa Fouad shouldn't have been included. She should have, for a woman who has been in Egyptian-film industry for a better part of 50 years.

Other contemporary greats are: Amani from Lebanon with her sexy-belly dance and jazz elements, and the French born of Algerian ancestry, Amelia Zidane who fuses belly dance and flamenco in a perfect-zen like manner.

With Rachel Brice coming along, we'll just have to see what is next in the belly-dance world. There is now a new growth in this art, an infusion, because it isn't only about belly dancing anymore. The art hasn't become static, it's always progressive! There are new techniques, styles and fusions always evolving from the belly dance, tribal and other forms which come together excellently.

The belly-dance costume and its evolution



Arab dance costume worn by a dancing girl (Almah - Grecian)

Image by world4u.eu

If a young lady was of child-bearing age/puberty, in Hebrew she would be called an Almah (Virgin, Maiden, What, etc.). For Arabs it was nearing the same concept, but it held closer to a young lady who danced--showcasing her 'child-bearing' hips. This was not an uncommon event in the Middle East. It is this way in certain areas of the Northern Africa, Asia Minor and Middle Eastern Society; whether a person agrees with this exploitation and sexism or not, it's the way it is!

The costume in its origins was created to exalt a female's femininity; therefore, it covered the vital areas of a person's body. And still it showcased a woman's pubis area, her hips, belly and breast. Mind you, her body was dressed, so she wouldn't look immodest. At the same time, along her costume she wore different glitter belts, bras which made the torso the main attraction of her body during the dance and several layers of skirts along her waistline to exalt her hips.

When did this change? When the dance was introduced to American audiences at the Chicago World's Fair of 1893, by then a dancer began showing more of her torso without any cover/corset. Considered scandalous in those days. Today it can be considered a vital manifestation in the costume's evolution.

One thing must be made clear. With the exposure of the torso it never cheapened the art. It just made it better, since a woman [and till this day it is true] who is a true belly dancer doesn't show her breast or groin in any vulgar form or fashion, unless she's a striptease dancer and this isn't belly dancing. It is something else entirely.

A. Items for the costume

- Hip scarf - depending on the belly dance-technique practiced, this is worn to glorify a female's hip movement. Some are made in coins, beads and with fringes. However, these came to be too noisy for classes. Therefore, teachers prefer a wrap-around scarf in layers to exude the movement of the hips. The scarves come in bright-pastel colors, meant to call attention and accentuate that portion of the anatomy.
- Belly dance skirts are typically made out of velvet and chiffon. The materials are meant to assist in the proper flow of the dance. Furthermore, it is typically used in the Turkish oryantal or called a Rakass.
- Belly dance tops - the bra is made out of coins or beads to cover the breasts. The top itself is worn somewhat above the navel. In Indian culture, the women who do the dance according to Hindu traditions will wear the bra under their saris as part of their modesty. The Indians call this part of the garment, choli.
- Pantaloon are used, but in a wider way, with an elastic band for the waist. Recognized as a popular fashion in the 1990s, these types of pantaloons are worn. Called harem pants or chalwar in Persian culture.
- Bedlah - this costume is worn by the majority of belly dancers; in which is beaded with a bra, hip belt and long-skirt. Typically the midriff is bare.
- Beledi or baladi - it is something which means 'our country', folkloric for Egyptian-Arab. But it is also the garment worn, which is also called, Gallabiya. A piece dress worn by belly dancers that is decorated in sparkling beads; made simply in cotton and for cabaret performances. This unique fashion originated in Cairo, Egypt.
- Kaftan, alabaya & Kalegi Dress - it is single-piece dress that is loose fitting. Covers the entire body and it is typically worn before, during or between performances. Buttons for the dress are set in the front and can easily come undone before a show. Worn traditionally by the Moroccan styled-belly dancers.
- Head bands or turbans - long worn in Middle Eastern society since ancient times; however, this kind of head wear [for some strange reason] is identified more with the Roma-Gypsy culture.

Noted especially in Spain, where dancers wear this headpiece as a part of the costume to beautify the body and performance.²⁴



Image from miladies.net



Image from costume-world.com.au

Sarongs - this long skirt, as mentioned before is worn in the Lebanese style of belly dancing. But it is also part of the main costume for a belly dancer. This long-skirt with fringes can easily swing at the height and passion of the dance. Considered the soul of the dance. Worn in a glittering patterns that is attractive to the eye. Dancers will prefer it in red or gold/yellow.²⁴

One more part of the costume which cannot be overlooked are the shoes. Those which are usually soft-sole to wear, like the ballet shoes in gold. Some belly dancers do wear these items; however, traditionalist consider that belly dancing ought to be performed in the old-fashioned way. As with the bare midriff, it's important to do the dance with bare feet. But that is a matter of opinion.

If any person was to look at this belly dance-fashion statement, it is impressive how little has changed in the traditional wear in the last-several thousand millennium. If not, to only transcend much more beautifully. Few things have become different, except for the way the

midriff is shown, and that came in the last 126 years when it was introduced into Western society.



Image by worlddanceheritage.org

Who practices belly dancing around the world?

Belly Dancing as such became more popular once it spread outwardly from North Africa, the Middle East and India. Richly cultured. It went into Europe and later to the Americas. The magnetism of this dance is one of the 10-most popular dances around the world.²⁵ Electrifying audiences not only onstage, but in cinemas and television shows around the globe. Its popularity hasn't stopped. However, where it was once popular through the Western world, that has certainly changed dramatically.

Presently, there is a growing trend throughout East Asia; where more women are doing belly dancing to attract the opposite sex, their husbands and boyfriends.

Furthermore, with the economic rise of China, this dance has definitely become more and more popular in the last 20 years. Men do practice the belly dance, but it is still a dance that over 70 to 90 percent of the women are in control.

Popularized through the Eastern-part of the world. Many young females whom are interested in this dance start practicing it while in College. After College, it is a means to an end: whether it is to do for fun, keep in shape or become a teacher and continue with it as a career opportunity.

A Chinese teacher who teaches Pilates here in Guangming, Shenzhen, but also does belly dance told me and I quote, "I've been in belly dancing since college. That's when I did it for fun. The beginning of belly dance should be developed in a period of ten years. I was told by a teacher that early belly dancing came from Egypt. It was basically performed by a woman to please a man through the dance and become more charming.

I became a teacher many years ago. I didn't only teach belly dancing, but also: Pilates, anaerobic and aerobics. It's all out of interest, teach students to dance, see their bodies become much more healthy. They [the students] are also very happy with a sense of achievement."

The belly dance is still a very big part of the Middle Eastern culture and women will perform it during weddings. An example of this type of dancing is done in Lebanon. It is called a Zaffe and it is performed-done for the newlyweds.²⁶ It is the dance of love and desire. A custom which is popular and has not stopped. After the 1990s, things began to shift on the desire for the belly dance. And it basically went from West to East.

Conclusion

In spite of the problems often associated with this dance and its Middle Eastern heritage, the popularity of the belly dance continues to grow into the Twenty-first Century. The dance does have its share of critics. But nothing has been able to stop this desire to learn how to dance it.

Once treated as a Western-social fad, it has somewhat changed route and become part of an explosive growth in East-Asian countries. Taking popular traction in China, Japan and South Korea.

Therefore, putting aside all prejudices and encouraging a new generation of women to learn this art form. Women will come to classes to learn it for exercise and to be more attractive for the opposite sex, their husbands/boyfriends, etc. This has been overstated before and this won't stop.

Once the dance isn't vulgarized. So it is important to consider which direction will the dance be taken. Will the dance be for nightclubs and stripteases? Or, will this dance be a cultural manifestation for women to gather, learn its culture and do a dance for all to fall in love with? This is the main point to take into consideration.

Only time will tell and several things are happening. The belly-dance culture is going through a renaissance of its own. Its being pushed into the spotlight once again. Men and women are flocking to join. Something that in the past was only for females--can now be enjoyed by a new generation of dancers, [male and female]. This is a good thing.

My past mistake was the following. Leaving this dance [the belly dance] out of my study, 'The Art of the Dance' (Otero, 2018). I thought about this dance form; however, not knowing or ignorantly so, believed it was only a solo dance for women. While becoming a practitioner, now I comprehend, it is much more than!

The bad thing... With wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and Yemen; this has radically changed the fabric of what people think about the Middle East. This is particularly true in North America and Europe.

But one thing is constant, this dance is one of the oldest in the world and should be given 'its day in the sun'. An opportunity... Not to be rejected easily because it simply came from the Middle East, a Muslim country or Egypt for that matter. It deserves a chance to be exposed; especially when other more sexual-sensual contemporary dances have been allowed into the genre of Western society without any thought whatsoever. Then, when something, such as the belly dance comes to light--it is quickly and ignorantly rejected out of the notions built since that tragic day, September 11, 2001 (Bombing of the Twin Towers, New York, U.S.A.).

I have seen multiple belly-dance shows throughout my career and travel experiences. I experienced these performances from: Puerto Rico, to the United States (San Diego, California), Argentina, Spain, France, Italy, Morocco, Israel, India, Turkey, Egypt and now in China. Do you know what all these shows had in common? Other than the fact that the dancers were extremely sexy, it brought a sense of culture which most contemporary-crazed dances do not or cannot do; especially those invented-developed in the last 40-years. The styles [of belly dance] I saw were uniquely special in their own way; with the elements of each culture involved. The belly dance was extreme, sensual, with its unique variations in the outfits worn and gave a sense I was learning something new from every respective society I visited. For this reason, it ought to be a measure of pride in the history of the belly dance, for those who teach and the others who practice it.

In conclusion, the belly was invented as a rite of passage for females around the world and for this, the dance ought evolve even further. But the dance should be allowed to become part of a human beings repertoire. Women ought to know what is in their best interest and do the dance according to their wants-desires. If it's for performance, then it is, as it can be to entice a beloved or most commonly to do exercise and therefore, better one's health.

One of the things it ought to never be equated with is: striptease, nakedness, vulgarity, prostitution or burlesque (And it is not to say that the burlesque techniques are all that vulgar; once it is performed in the style of the Moulin Rouge, Paris, France or Club Tropicana, Havana, Cuba. Because it can be classy and artistic); but it is a reminder that belly dance inspired burlesque and not the other way around.

The American-belly dancer, Serena Wilson worked tirelessly to dispel those myths. She thought the belly dance was for: events to reflect on love, desire and proper-cultural entertainment. Belly dancing was not made for stag parties, but it was made for weddings; belly dancing was not made for Bar Mitzvahs (a wild party to just entertain the 'boys' or grown men), but it was made for a Bar Mitzvha in a family gathering setting (Fox, 2007). This dance was created to glorify a woman's body in her own uniqueness; not to be exploited, leered or only for sexual pleasure.

Does this dance deserve international recognition? As in the old-English slang one would say, "You bet ya!" It's about time this dance got its proper recognition as a World-Cultural Heritage and got its chance to be on top. This dance compared to others has been around for millennia and has been practiced continuously, non-stop. Compared to other dances which are rarely practiced or have seized to exist. Therefore, placing all stereotypes aside: that it came from a Muslim country, that it is to sexualize, from the Middle East or 'land of terrorism', which is an absolute fallacy. "It is about time" that this dance got its dues as a cultural relic!

With that stated, this concludes the study. Thank you for your time and reading.

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Authors declares that there is no Conflict of interest.

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