

Dance Styles

Information and photos compiled by Sandie "Zatarra" Morehead

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Raks Sharqi, or classical is the most refined form of Egyptian music and dance. This style is more balletic, with smaller movements, isolation and lyrical, expressive arms and upper torso. A veil is often used, particularly for the entrance. The arms in Sharqi are straighter and more expressive, describing slow, airy patterns around the dancer.

Sharqi is more of a theatre dance, requiring space for large gliding steps and spins. An Egyptian-style dancer is likely to use only Arabic music--and then only the fully orchestrated current club-style arrangements. Music will probably lean toward a "modern" style--electronic instruments, accordions, multiple violins, etc. playing in layers, although there may be some traditional instruments included in the orchestra. Egyptian music for raqs sharqi is generally entirely instrumental, including instrumental versions of popular songs from the past as well as newer material that was designed from the outset to be instrumental.

Turkish is more showy and less grounded than traditional Raqs Sharqi, and includes floorwork, zill-playing and more wrist circling. Costume in Turkish dance is skimpy compared to Egyptian cabaret, although this seems to be changing now, and high heels often worn.

Algerian includes movements also used in Raqs Sharqi, such as shimmies, hip circles and drops. There is a strong Andalucian influence in the dance, particularly seen in the fiery hand movements.

Lebanese this is closer to Turkish than Egyptian dance and heels may be worn.

Persian can be energetic and fun as well as lyrical and very beautiful. Gestures and the eyes are very important, and the hips are used far less than the arms, hands and torso. Spins are used a lot as well as some graceful floorwork. Miming activities such as applying make-up requires an actress' awareness and control.

American Restaurant/Cabaret is a mixture of the above styles, with strong Turkish influences such as hip lifts and deep back bends. American dancers in particular, enjoy mixing other dance styles such as Flamenco and even acrobatics, with Egyptian steps. Veils and other props are often used, and the dancer concentrates on entertaining the audience.

Some of the best cabaret style can be seen on old Egyptian films from the 1940's where the crossover of Turkish and Egyptian styles can be seen. This is the style often used in restaurants and is more like what people imagine when they think "belly dance".

This style is a combination, influenced by dances in Turkey, Egypt, Lebanon, Armenia, North Africa, Persia, other Middle Eastern countries, and Hollywood, and leaves great freedom for personal creativity within a show business framework. It also incorporates many innovations that were created in the U.S., such as veil work and sword balancing. Most dancers of this style incorporate audience interaction and other "show-biz" approaches into their acts to grab and hold the attention of an audience that expects entertainment to be flashy.



A Cabaret style costume

U.S. Tribal combines influence from dances in Turkey, Egypt, North Africa, Persia, and other Middle Eastern countries, and leaves great freedom for personal creativity within a folkloric framework.

Most dance historians agree that the U.S. Tribal style originated with Jamila Salimpour in San Francisco, California, in the 1960's, with her dance company, Bal-Anat. In performing at the Renaissance Faire in the area, the group created a performance that was a fusion of ethnic influence and modern-day creativity, but presented with a historical-looking flavor.

American Tribal is a recent style developed in America. It combines movements and clothes from gypsy, Bedouin, and other Middle Eastern or North African tribes and is heavily influenced by Flamenco and Indian dance. It is most often performed as a troupe.

In U.S. Tribal, the performers combine dance movements, musical selections, and costuming from a variety of cultures and historical eras, add their own modern-day innovations, and present a made-in-the-U.S. original creation. The way I use the term in this article, U.S. Tribal includes not only the popular American Tribal Style (ATS) of belly dance, but also other interpretations of the Tribal idea.

U.S. Tribal offers dancers the freedom to employ their own creativity and create their own dance, costuming look, etc. within a loosely-defined framework that offers an alternative to the "glamorous" image conveyed by beads and sequins. Some try to convey a "woman-power" attitude, while others try to convey the mood/flavor of village dance as imagined by American dancers.



In this style, there are some who prefer a look that covers the legs and the midriff, as opposed to the cabaret exposure.



However, more and more troupes use the midriff baring cholis and coined bras as part of the costume.

Other Dance Styles:

Folk/Ethnic/Historical: This style consists of learning the particular style of dance performed in a particular geographic area at a particular point in time, then portraying it with corresponding music and costuming. The ethnic/historical style requires a commitment to research in order to present it well.

Some Ethic/Folk style include:

Romany/Gypsy: This style is inspired by the traditional dances of the Romany people, and has been popularized in North America by dance researchers Eva Czernik, Artemis Mourat, Dalia Carella, and Laurel Gray who have traveled around presenting workshops.



Banjara (India) woman dancing.

Sacred Dance: Ancient Middle East traditions include some rituals (sometimes called "trance dance" even though they're not exactly dances), such as the zaar (for exorcising evil influences), the guedra (for blessing), Sufi whirling, and the Sufi zikr. Usually, these moving meditations are accompanied by a strong, consistent drumbeat and possibly chanting. The movements are typically very repetitive. This combination of rhythmic, repetitive sound and repetitive motion can lead to a hypnotic state. Such dances include:

The Guedra: a trance ritual dance performed by a woman on her knees. She uses intricate movements of her hands to give blessings. She begins the dance on her feet, then drops to her knees when the rhythm changes. The dance can go on for hours.

The Zaar: an energetic pre-Islamic trance ritual done to exorcise negative energy and involves swinging the arms and head, shaking, pelvic tilts, and other loose movements. A zaar can go on for many hours, until the dancers drop down exhausted. There are somewhat similar trance dances in North Africa such as the Gnawa. Some Sufis from Turkey and around the world do a religious ceremony called Zikr (Remembrance of Allah). This also can go on for hours or days, and can involve spinning (Whirling Dervishes), rolling the head, bowing, arcing the chest from left to right and other movements designed to bring the participant closer to Allah. Phrases from the Quran are chanted.

Some Christian belly dancers are expressing their art in the form of liturgical dance. In Christian liturgical dance, the performer might portray a Biblical character or might portray an idea, or she might act out an event, such as the celebration of Christ's triumphant entry to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

Some modern-day Pagans find that belly dance offers them a beautiful method of spiritual expression. Goddess dance usually takes the basic movements of belly dancing, and incorporates them into a dance that portrays a goddess-related theme such as blessing or portraying a mythical character.

Sacred dance rarely uses typical nightclub-style costuming, props, or music.



These women may be Gracias or Bhils, or Banjara, in India.



Rajasthani women dancing the Ghoomar in Udaipur, India. This is basically a community dance for women and performed on auspicious occasions. Derived from the word ghoomna, pirouette, this is a very simple dance where the ladies move gently, gracefully in circles.

Sources:

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