

# What are the different Belly Dance styles?

There are three main styles; folkloric, classical, and contemporary.

**Folkloric:** Dances based on distinct regional styles are called *Raqs Beledi*. Examples range from the lively rhythms and colorful costumes of Upper Egypt, to *Khaleegy*, a delicate, graceful dance performed in the Arabian Gulf by women dressed in flowing beaded gowns and accompanied by female musicians. Some folkloric dances are performed by professional entertainers (such as the Ghawazee in Egypt or the Sheikhat in Morocco) and others are performed by the people at parties and celebrations. Folkloric dances are the roots of today's Belly Dance.

**Classical:** During the Ottoman Empire (which unified much of the Middle East under a single rule), many regional styles merged into the classical form of the dance, known as *Raqs Sharqi*. ("Dance of the East" in Arabic which, today, is often referred to as Belly Dance). This urban form of the dance, considered more sophisticated than the folkloric, is generally improvised by a solo dancer and represents her personal interpretation of the music. The traditional costume would have been the folkwear of the region with a sash tied around the hips to accent the movements.

Today, the term Cabaret is sometimes used to define the performance style seen in nightclubs. It often carries with it the assumption of a dancer wearing a *bedlah*, or 2 piece costume. The *bedlah* is a professional dancer's costume that became popular in the twentieth century when the dance as entertainment moved into nightclubs and movies. It is an Indo-Persian concoction inspired by Orientalistes' paintings and the West's fascination with the East. And, in turn, as Cairo became fascinated with the West, it became the accepted professional costume in Egyptian movies and nightclubs. The labels American, Egyptian, and Turkish refer to regional stylizations of the dance.

**Contemporary:** Today, dancers in both the Middle East and the United States are experimenting with new ways of presenting the dance, marrying the costumes, movements, music, and folktales of the Middle East with all the magic and technology of the Western stage. Like all great dance traditions, Middle Eastern dance is a living art form that is always adapting and changing while staying true to its heritage.

There are also contemporary dance forms that have been inspired by the Middle East, other world dances, and Orientalistes' paintings. American dancer Ruth St. Denis drew upon these themes in her works in the early 1900's. Another American innovation, "Tribal Belly Dance," evolved from Renaissance Fair Entertainment in the late 1960's. An example is Bal Anat, a dance troupe created by Jamila Salimpour. Jamila drew upon her imagination and experience from being a member of Ringling Brothers Circus to create a variety show which she describes herself as "half real and half hokum". Performance groups such as Bal Anat inspired a new generation of dancers with what was first called "ethnic" dance (with some groups identifying themselves as "tribes"), then "American Tribal." The tribal theme continues to evolve with Goth Tribal and other genders. What was once solely an American phenomenon, Tribal Belly Dance can now be found in Europe and many other countries.

As in the past, belly dance as a performance art continues to evolve out of the need for entertainment.