

Middle Eastern Dance

Introduction, Movements, and FAQs

Introduction

The Music

Middle Eastern music can sound strange at first to American ears, because the notes of the scales often lie only a quarter-tone apart, rather than a half-step. What sounds like dissonance are actually extremely subtle differences in tone. Other characteristics include complex rhythms, use of improvisation and ornamentation, and a call-and-response form. (Click here for more information)

The Dance

The dancer literally *embodies* the music, as different body parts move to different rhythms. The dancer's job is to increase the audience's awareness of the music, while at the same time expressing the emotions behind it.

The Groove

When it all works together, Middle Eastern music and dance are virtually inseparable art forms—the music drives the dance, while the dancer simultaneously influences the musicians. Many times, the dancer and the musicians are *improvising* around a central theme, similar to American jazz musicians.

The Audience

The audience is the final piece of the puzzle, adding the sense of celebration and spontaneity that brings the performance to life

Movements

Costume—Colorful fabrics and shiny beads draw the eye to where the rhythm is being expressed, especially the hips!

Facial Expressions are a vital component of the dance. Arabic poetry often comments on how the eyes express emotions.

Hair may be covered for folkloric dances, uncovered for classical dances. Dancers in the Arabian Gulf region may toss their hair in time to the music.

Hands—Delicate hand movements ornament the dance. A dancer may also play the underlying rhythm of the music on her *sagat* (finger cymbals).

Arms create a frame that draws the eye to the isolated movements of the hips. They also move in sinuous, snake-like fashion, or in graceful curves around the body.

Torso—Unlike classical ballet, which focuses on moving the limbs in intricate patterns, Middle Eastern dance focuses the viewer’s gaze on the torso—the region of the body from the shoulders to the hips—because this is where the rhythms are most frequently displayed. So don’t be shy—go ahead and look! Remember that the point is not to expose the body but to illustrate the musical rhythms and express the joy of movement.

Upper Torso—A dancer can express a particular rhythm by lifting and dropping her sternum or rib cage, or she may use the rib cage to fluidly undulate the spine.

Belly—The belly generally moves in a rippling, fluttering, or undulating motion. The belly may move slowly or quickly depending on the tempo of the music.

Hips—When in doubt, look here! There is a vital relationship between the hips and the drums, because the hips usually move in time to the main drumbeat.

Legs—Although the lines of the torso are visible, it is traditionally considered inappropriate to display the legs. Hence, they are usually covered with swaths of fabric.

Feet—Unlike classical ballet, the point of Middle Eastern dance is not to move the body through space in patterns, but rather to embody the music. Although folkloric and group dancers may move about the room with quick and delicate steps, a solo dancer generally covers less space.

What’s the most amazing thing about Middle Eastern dance? That all of the complex movements described above are being performed *simultaneously*, in a relaxed and joyous fashion, while still expressing the passion of the music.

FAQs—Frequently Asked Questions:

Where does the dance come from?

From every region of the Middle East, including Egypt, Turkey, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and North Africa. Middle Eastern dance also has branches in Central Asia and in nomadic cultures such as the Bedouin and Romany (Gypsy).

What are the different styles?

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

Folkloric—Dances based on distinct regional styles. Examples range from the lively rhythms and colorful costumes of Upper Egypt, to the *zar*, a dramatic dance ritual from North Africa, to *khaleegy*, a delicate, graceful dance performed in the Arabian Gulf by women dressed in flowing beaded gowns and accompanied by female musicians.

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*. 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.

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.

Where is the dance performed?

In the Middle East, dance and music are woven into the fabric of everyday life, a vital part of weddings, feast days, and family gatherings. However, only professional dancers perform for the general public. In the United States, dancers perform in theaters, restaurants, and at family celebrations in the Arab-American community.

Do the individual movements mean something?

No. Unlike classical Indian or Hawaiian dance, where a set vocabulary of gestures correspond to literal meanings, Middle Eastern dance is an abstract, musical form. The dancer is expressing emotions and illustrating the music rather than telling a story.

What's that funny noise the audience keeps making?

That's the *zagroota* (plural = *zaghareet*), the traditional ululating cry of Middle Eastern women. It is a way of expressing appreciation for the performer, like an audience yelling "Bravo!" at the opera.

What do we know about the history of the dance?

The earliest records are found in the tomb paintings of pre-Pharonic Egypt and the writings of Roman travelers. Dance and music flourished during the Golden Age of classical Islamic civilization, in the 8th through the 10th centuries. Over the centuries, distinct styles developed in different social classes. Lower-class dancers at street festivals were known for their raw, earthy style and folk instrumentation, while urban professional dancers refined the movements into a graceful and sophisticated art, accompanied by a classical orchestra. In the 1920s and 1930s, choreography became popular for the first time as dancers created extravagant, Busby Berkeley-like numbers for film and television. The rise of Arab nationalism in the 1950s led many countries to create national folklore troupes, bringing the dance to a wider stage. Always a component of social life, the dance's popularity as a *public* performance has waxed and waned many times over the years. Currently, censorship and a conservative climate restricts the movements of the dance, as well as the manner in which it is presented.