

Belly Dancing History Unveiled...

Belly Dancing has roots in all ancient cultures from the Middle East, Mediterranean and North Africa and is considered the oldest form of dance by many historical experts. It is a misunderstood art form that's had as many names as origin myths.

The greatest misconception about Belly Dancing is that it is intended to entertain men. Throughout history, this dance was performed by women, *essentially for women*, as a ritualized expression. The dance was not intended to be seen by men at all.

Thousands of years ago, our ancestors lived in a matriarchal society where they worshipped a Female Deity. She was *The Great Goddess*. She was called different names in various civilizations: Isis, Aphrodite, Athena and Artemis. Her High Priestesses danced at ceremonials and rituals. In the ancient societies, women's bodies were considered sacred because of their mysterious power to create life. The dance in its primitive purity represents maternity.

The rule of the divine feminine lasted thousands of years, but with the rise of a patriarchal society, most evidence of feminine power was stamped out. The Gypsies were most responsible for keeping belly dancing alive. Wandering from India through the Middle East, Europe, and eventually to the Americas, the Gypsies freely expressed their lives and passions through dance.

In some cultures, belly dance movements were used as training exercises for childbirth. Girls were taught to roll their abdomens, make their bodies ripple with soft undulations and gently move their hips to strengthen their bodies for pregnancy. While in labor, women of the village danced and sang in celebration of the new life on its way. During the birthing process, they gathered around the laboring mother to help her dance the baby into the world.

Eventually this dance became more of an entertainment-related art form, often performed at weddings and other celebratory occasions. It is used by many cultures in rituals, rites of passage, social gatherings, spiritual and religious practices.

Yet our society has a preconceived notion of the term Belly Dance, a notion based in media stereotyping, imagination, or misinformation rather than knowledge. Separated from its sacred, mystical roots, it has often been perceived in an unfavorable light.

Belly Dance has a variety of names in the cultures that produced them. The Arabic term "Danse Orientale" is used to distinguish it from the "Baladi" or Country Dance. To the Turkish, Belly Dance is known as "Oryantal Dansi" (Oriental Dance). The name arose from the traditional Turkish term Oryantal, which referred to the area now known as the Middle East, but once commonly called the Orient. To Egyptians, it's "Raqs Sharqi" – which literally translates to "Dance of the East".

The term "Belly Dance" is said to come from the French "Danse du Ventre" – Dance of the stomach. In 1893 an entertainment promoter first introduced it in the United States at the Chicago World's Fair. He coined the phrase "Belly Dancing" to stir up public interest and it created a controversy that became a media sensation. Presenting this dance to Victorian audiences, this corruption of the Belly Dance has had a lingering existence.

As people in the United States have embraced Belly Dance, many have found ways to integrate it into their personal spiritual practices. The majority of Western dancers who use the dance for spiritual exploration today do so outside of any particular religion or belief system. The survival of this ancient dance despite cultural and moral prejudices is a tribute to the appeal it has to the human spirit.

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Today, many people are seeking out the serenity of ancient Eastern philosophies and practices to help themselves rise above the stress and tensions of life in our modern era. Belly Dance is one of many Eastern forms that has become a popular antidote to our hectic lifestyle. Some of the earliest known civilizations, which flourished in the East, also yielded such disciplines as Yoga, Meditation and Tai Chi, as well as Belly Dance. Each of these forms practices holistic principles – the belief that the balancing and integration of mind, body and spirit is vital to being healthy and happy.

Not only is this dance form a spiritual connection between mind and body, it is a joyous expression of the feminine soul. We honor the belly as the core of a woman's being, her femininity, her center of power. The Belly Dance is a dance of empowerment, a celebration of womanhood!