

A Naval Academy...Of a Different Sort

Whatever you think the history of belly dancing might be, you are probably wrong. No one really knows how this ancient dance form started or whether it was tied to fertility rites, to goddess worship, to strengthen abdominal muscles prior to childbirth, or to the sheer joy of dancing. Belly dancing, or more correctly, oriental dancing, was most likely performed by women for women. Belly dance is one of the oldest forms of dance in the world, and has been practiced for thousands of years. It has roots in the various ancient cultures of India, the Middle East and the eastern Mediterranean.

While the hip movements are similar to those found in the native dances of Africa, Haiti and Brazil, the fluid and graceful arm gestures come from Persia, northern India and other regions of Asia. The classic Egyptian, Turkish and Persian styles remain primary, but there are now tribal and fusion forms of the dance that have quickly grown in popularity. Originally, the dance was probably associated with fertility rights in ancient Eastern cultures, intended to strengthen connection with the body and spirit, and celebrate womanhood and sensuality. Once patriarchal religions took hold throughout the regions, belly dancing was maligned and regarded as a dance performed by harem women and the like, and hence went underground.

America was first introduced to belly dance at the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago, when the famous dancer Little Egypt shocked and titillated the masses with her hypnotic movements.

“In the past few decades, belly dance has once again emerged as a joyous and positive art form that is popular worldwide and performed by women and men of all ages. With the efforts of famous performers like the Bellytwins and various celebrities to expose it to the masses, the dance continues, bigger and better than ever.” (Source: *"The Way of the Belly: 8 Essential Secrets of Beauty, Health,*

Happiness and Outrageous Fun" by Neena and Veena Bidasha with Nancy Bruning)

Some interesting facts:

-The Dance of the Seven Veils originated not in ancient times, but with Oscar Wilde's play, *Salome*.

-The two-piece bra and skirt ensemble that belly dancers wear in the United States was probably originally a Hollywood costume design.

-Vaudeville adapted belly dancing as the “hoochy koochy.”

[<http://www.gardenandhearth.com/FamilyFunSouthwest/Utahs-Belly-Dancing-Festival.htm>]

