

Belly Dancing

There are many musical and dance traditions but not many of them are as old as belly dancing. Its roots lie in the Middle East, Turkey, Iran, India and Pakistan. There are different opinions on its very first appearance. Some historians think that it began in Egypt. Others think it was part of a religious ritual, performed by Temple Priestesses. The three main styles of the dance are the Egyptian, Turkish and a form hailing from Syria and the Lebanon. It has been part of the Turkish culture since the Ottoman Empire and Romany Gypsies also pursued the art. Men too would dance but usually away from the women.

Some Islamic countries censor the outfits worn in belly dancing and some are more liberal. Egyptian dance is censored but Turks are allowed to reveal more flesh. The Turkish tradition also includes the use of zils. These are finger cymbals and require a degree of skill.

This very individualistic way of dancing spread to the West in the 20th century and was shown in nickelodeon venues, burlesque and vaudeville shows. Immigrants introduced belly dancing to a mass audience in America in the 1930s and 1940s. Hollywood quickly caught on to its potential, showing movies that made stars of several dancers. Filmgoers were enthralled by the often provocative displays. Dancers would perform with silk scarves and swords in a sultry manner. The films often depicted the dancers as slightly wicked women of dubious morals.

Today, the emphasis has changed from entertainment to fitness. Westerners have taken up belly dancing to get toned and lose weight. It is good cardio-vascular exercise, builds upper body strength and encourages flexibility. Before embarking on a belly dancing keep fit class, it's a good idea to have a check up with the doctor to make sure that it's safe to proceed. Men find that it firms up the stomach muscles, which is good news for a paunch. Pregnant women have been advised to take part in order to strengthen their pelvic floor muscles. This can help to reduce the pain of childbirth. It's more fun than an epidural!

The dance has gone through many phases, seen as a respectable art by some and an excuse for titillation in others. It has had a seedy image, thankfully changed in recent times. Westerners feel a little self-conscious when trying it at first. It's not part of the culture in the West and it's been re-invented for the keep fit enthusiasts. Whatever the motives, it's good to keep old expressions of culture alive.