

Middle Eastern Dance as known in the SCA, encompasses many cultures. For this brief SCA orientated outline, Middle Eastern will include areas from Egypt to India, Kazakhstan to Yemen.

History:

“Dance is found among all men whether in primitive or advanced societies. Its functions vary in these societies from religious to pure entertainment. So in all probability dance goes back as far as man himself” (Massey, 1999)

Through statuary and written record, the performance of dance can be traced through century and millennium in temples, courts and countryside. It was used as an entertainment, storytelling, and religious media.

One of the golden ages of court dance occurred in the 16th century. Dancers from cultures connected by the Silk Road performed and shared their dance styles under the patronage of the Mughal rulers.

Much of the dances were lost during Muslim, British, and Islamic rule/occupation. Dancing was viewed as unseemly and forbidden or driven underground with vestiges only found in brothels.

In the early 20th century, traditional dance began its resurgence, becoming a channel for cultural identity. Much of the dance had to be ‘reinvented’ and adapted to modern and European patronage. As example, Persian and Uzbekistan incorporated ballet, while Egyptian and Turkish became ‘cabaret’.

The SCA has further adapted these cultural styles into the improvisational dance that occurs at camping events around campfires to the sounds of drums – and sometimes melodic instruments.

Performances venues for dance in the SCA are typically limited to feast and some specific bardic/performance events.

Basic Materials:

Garb – dress appropriate to the culture your dance style is based, i.e., try not to wear Indian and dance Egyptian. A dancer’s garb choices also tend to change based on kingdom and climate.

Other additions:

- ♦ Hip-scarves/coin belts – a modern adoption that helps draw attention to your movements
- ♦ Zills/finger chimes – fun if you are skilled, but show consideration of your dance neighbor
- ♦ Ghungurus/ankle bells – an Indian accessory, used more for performance than dance circles

Basic Technique:

Unless specified otherwise, most dance styles taught and seen around campfires is American Cabaret or California Tribal, what most people think of when they hear ‘Belly Dance’. Both are modern American interpretations of classical Egyptian.

Some Period Dance Styles:

Egyptian

- sharp or undulating hip, torso, and shoulder movements
- 'shimming' or fast shaking of hips and shoulders

Turkish

- similar to Egyptian, but utilizes more hops/jumps and increased hip isolation.

Persian

- Focus is on intricate, graceful arm and hand motions
- Little motion in hips, some soft swaying is used
- Soft foot work with pirouettes on toes

Indian

- Smooth transition between precise body, hand, arm, and eye postures, each symbolizing a specific storytelling element.
- South Indian tends to be more sensual while North focuses on percussive foot work and pirouettes on heels.

Glossary – Terms are highly variable based on style. Some common to SCA dancing:

- ♦ Dance or Drum circle: a gathering of drummers and dancers joyfully sharing improvisational music and movement. Most rhythms and scales are Middle Eastern in origin.
- ♦ Hafla – a Middle Eastern Party

Sources for info:

Dance, like any physical discipline can only be truly understood by personal teaching. My recommendation is to research local dance studios and find one that suits your interest and style preference. Egyptian is the easiest to find, and most adaptable to the SCA dance circle venue. Other dance styles can be more elusive to track down and open to new students, but it is well worth the effort.

Reginald Massey, India's Kathak Dance: Past Present and Future, Abhinav Pub. New Delhi, India. 1999. ISBN 81-7017-374-4. (Great book if you are interested in Kathak and origins of Indian Dance)

<http://www.uzbekdance.org/> - good description of the blending that occurred on the Silk Road

<http://www.jawaahir.org/index.htm> - site has wonderful info and links to Egyptian sites

<http://artira.com/nimakiann/history/history.htm> - great history of Persian Dance

And like most SCA research - examination of period paintings and sculpture

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