

Originally published at: http://www.discoverbellydance.com/persian_dance_primer.htm
1 July 2001



Persian Dance Style

Based on an interview with Dr. Robyn C. Friend, PhD

Persian dance is rooted in one, very small place: the Fars Province, located in the southwestern part of modern Iran. From this area, however, Persian language and culture spread through contacts with India in 3000 BC and the later conquests of Darius the Great in the 5th century BC. **Art, song, and dance** began to be **influenced by Persian aesthetics** in what are now the modern countries of **Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India**. Robyn Friend, a scholar of Near Eastern and Balkan cultures, explains it this way: “The emphasis on detail, ornamentation, and many, many features of visual art, performing art, music, dance, and costume are similar over this broader Persian-influenced area.” Differences become more readily apparent in the villages of these countries because village life tends to preserve the diversity of the local folkloric dances.

The distinctive style of Persian dance is most seen in its expressive **hands, eyes, and face**, combined with small, **understated hip movements** and movements of the **upper torso**. This style of dance can be performed sitting down. Often, dancers perform with zils, or finger cymbals, to accompany the musicians.

The Music of Persian Dance

There are no big orchestral arrangements. “You might have a melody instrument and a drum,” Robyn says, “or you might have two melody instruments and a drum that might play together at the same time or they might not.” Many dancers would find Persian dance music difficult to dance to since it is not in common four bar arrangements and is not the same for every phrase. “**If there’s one instrument, he’s improvising**,” Robyn says, “So you don’t know what’s coming next, unless you really know the music and know what’s possible. Because it’s not an infinite range of possibilities, it’s a range of possibilities within the Iranian aesthetic and tradition.” It’s rather like jazz musicians who get together to jam. They all know a variety of improvised riffs that can be applied to a certain group of melodies. They can all contribute something to the musical mix and still keep the musical integrity of the piece.

A dancer skilled in a variety of dance steps, meters, and combinations is able to traverse from one strain of Persian music to the next. The more **experienced** a dancer and the more **intuitive** a dancer, the better able she would be to dance with any group of Persian musicians, though it would be infinitely easier to dance with a

regular band whose musical quirks you know. Since Persian **dance is traditionally taught by mothers to their daughters**, young women performed at home for family parties, not in public performances. Musical styles and improvisational patterns from family musicians would be familiar to these young dancers.

However, for dancers of Robyn's caliber, dancing with a live band is much more challenging. She herself finds performing with her band much more satisfying than with recorded music, even though she could memorize the changes as with any other piece of music. "Not only do I like the way they [her band members] play," she says, "but they follow me. I mean **I'm following them but they are also following me**. If it looks like I'm initiating a change, they'll go with me.

Dance as Language

There is a language in Persian dance, Robyn says. "**Persian music is like talking**. There is a beginning, a middle, and an end. There is punctuation, emphasis, and rhythm." But most of all, there is interaction with the audience. Because of the expressiveness of facial features, eyes, eyebrows, lips, there is an intimacy created between the dancer and the observer which makes it less of a concert hall performance dance form. This intimacy comes naturally from small, family gatherings or even village settings where the dances first began. Later, Persian dance developed in the court of the Shah to an elevated art form. By no means, however, are the family or village dancers less classical or traditional than those of the Shah. The difference is mainly that the **cities developed the high court culture** and this spread from city to city, whereas the **villages continued to develop very individualized styles** independent of each other.

Persian Dance Costume

The Persian dance costume and hairstyles have adopted some of these urban/rural influences. **There are two distinct costumes**. One comes from **19th century oil paintings of the Qajar dancers** and shows a long skirt with a long-sleeved jacket that has little extensions that come out over the sides of the hip. The jackets are open with a sheer blouse or fastened down the front. Pants were worn underneath the dress. In Qajar times, these court dancers were supported by the Shah and were often rewarded with jewels. Many of these costumes have elaborate gold embroidery and are beaded with pearls and gem stones. An egret, a small, paisley shaped hat made of jewels and pearls and doffed with a feather was often worn. Strings of pearls were also worn from the neck. Sometimes a large jeweled half-bracelet was tied around the upper arm. Hair styles were long and elaborate, with side locks and bangs either cut or tied into shapes.

Sometime **in the 19th century, the costume changed** to a short skirt with a sheer blouse and either an open or closed jacket. Tights or bare legs were acceptable at home, but pants were worn underneath when the dancers went outdoors. The costumes were embroidered or beaded with pearls, but not jewels. The hair was kept long, but styled very simply.

Outlook for Persian Dance

Like most other Middle Eastern and oriental dance forms, the **dance styles are being popularized** and, in some cases, preserved by dancers in countries other than the country where the dance style originated. Persian dance has found a home in Los Angeles. Ironically, many **young people in Iran are learning about Persian dance in secret** from dance tapes created in LA by Iranian-Americans and smuggled into Iran. A lot of these tapes are commercial tapes made by owners of dance studios and choreographers/dancers like **Mohammed Khordadian**. These tapes have a pop style, musically and choreographically. Therefore, the character of Persian classical dance is changing to reflect these American influences, though there are still families and teachers who are keeping the traditional style alive. **Today, public performances are very rare** and usually at small, women-only concerts.

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