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## **16<sup>th</sup> Century Persian Dance**

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There are no primary sources of Persian Dance for obvious reasons; even the most preserved Persian Dancer of the 16<sup>th</sup> century wouldn't be able to show us many moves at this late date. While Islam is a supporter of the decorative arts and music thrived throughout the high Middle Ages, dance as an art form was a second-class citizen.

### **The setting**

For this particular re-creation dance, the setting would have been an interior garden courtyard of a palace of the local liege lord<sup>1</sup>. The dancer is a party guest herself, either a noblewoman, companion or servant of one of the nobles present. The dance is not choreographed, an impromptu addition to a party where there is music, wine and high spirits.

### **Modern Assumptions**

Modern Belly Dance is most often based on the Egyptian "raqs sharqi (or Eastern dance). The dominant solo dance form of Egypt. Rooted in pre-Islamic times it has always been taught within the family and performed on celebratory occasions but in the 10th- and 11th-century Islamic courts and 18th-century Ottoman courts it took on a more refined classical style.<sup>2</sup>" Oral tradition amongst dancers today relegates energetic jumps to Turkish (Ottoman) dance, and always speaks of Persian dance in vague terms of being refined, more delicate and gentle with very subtle hip movement and a lot of hand and arm gestures. It is generally assumed that these dances were not choreographed, and if any choreography was done it was an oral tradition and is lost to the modern researcher.

Much is known about Persian dance at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century thanks to the patronage of the Qadjars in 1796<sup>3</sup>, and afterward in the rise of modern Belly dance in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but very little is written of what came before. How was this dance different and similar to that done three hundred years previous under less-friendly-to-the-art rulers?

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<sup>1</sup> See "Palaces, Pavilions and Pleasure-gardens: the context and setting of the medieval majlis" by Dominic P. Brookshaw for more information about this particular setting; the article speaks particularly about poetry in the garden courts, but it is also a setting for dance and other revelry.

<sup>2</sup> "raqs sharqi" The Oxford Dictionary of Dance. Debra Craine and Judith Mackrell. Oxford University Press, 2000. Oxford Reference Online. Oxford University Press. Case Western Reserve University. 10 February 2006 <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t74.e1941>>

<sup>3</sup> Cited in many sources including "Persian Dance and Its Forgotten History" by Nima Kiann and the above Oxford Dictionary of Dance entry.

## Historic Evidence

There are four distinct categories of secondary information I've used to determine the movements included in my dance:

1. Literary references
2. Pictorial evidence
3. The language of Gestures in Persian art
4. (The most arbitrary) movement implied by contemporary music

### 1. Literary References

*Dance, when you're broken open*  
*Dance, if you've torn the bandage off.*  
*Dance in the middle of the fighting.*  
*Dance in your blood.*  
*Dance, when you're perfectly free*<sup>4</sup>.

There are no dance manuals that survive, so all of the references to dancing in literature are very oblique, however some conclusions are possible from the weight of evidence. We do know for one that people danced, not just slaves or professional entertainers but also noble men and women on specific, festive occasions. Nazimi's beautiful Fatima has "quick footed in the dance" included in the litany of her beauty<sup>5</sup>.

In the poems of Rumi (a famous 13<sup>th</sup> century poet) there are allusions to dancing like the swaying of tree limbs,<sup>6</sup> reeds sway "free in the many ways they dance"<sup>7</sup> and dancing like dust motes in a beam of light<sup>8</sup>. His poems overflow with dancing, he mentions friends dancing at a wedding<sup>9</sup> (which raises dancing from an activity done by servants to one done by friends and family) and that "it's lucky to hear the flutes for dancing coming down the road..."<sup>10</sup> Describing a lively party in another poem, Rumi talks of the dust rising from the feet hitting the floor (notably this was a gathering of male Sufi's)<sup>11</sup>. Yet another poem "the lover wakes, and whirls / in a dancing joy" implies a whirling or turning movement to dance<sup>12</sup>.

### 2. Pictorial Evidence

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<sup>4</sup> The Essential Rumi, page 281

<sup>5</sup> Fatima was a musician (a 'harp girl') and the favorite of the Prince protagonist whom he marries in the story. Nazimi from The Seven Princesses, "A Medieval Persian Romance" page blah.

<sup>6</sup> The Essential Rumi, page 145 "Tree limbs rise and fall like the estates arms", page 240 "The tree limbs will move like people dancing", page 280 "wind moves to dance / any branch that isn't dead."

<sup>7</sup> The Essential Rumi, page 94

<sup>8</sup> The Essential Rumi, page 106 "Watch the dust grains moving / in the light near the window / Their dance is our dance." Page 37 "Daylight, full of small dancing particles / and the one great turning, our souls / are dancing with you, without feet they dance"

<sup>9</sup> The Essential Rumi, page 71

<sup>10</sup> The Essential Rumi, page 42

<sup>11</sup> The Essential Rumi, page 250

<sup>12</sup> The Essential Rumi, page 275

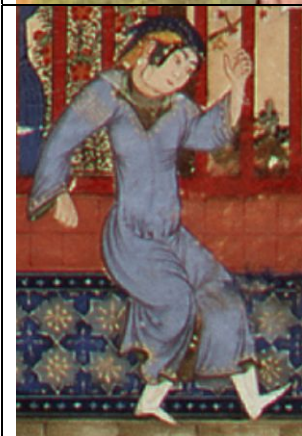


Here we see two boys dancing with castanets in short coats in a celebration scene from the Haft-Awrang manuscript from the 1550s

Interesting symmetry in their pose, this arm positioning is very common in pictorial evidence and is frequently believed to represent the 'snake arms' movement.



A picture of a lady dancing with two small scarves from "Siyavash and Fanagis Wedded" folio 185, Metropolitan Museum of Art.



A lady dancing in a risqué courtyard scene of ladies bathing, socializing and playing music. Original in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. A noblewoman, note the gold trim on her tunic, the near transparency of her veil and that she is wearing boots. Note the movement of the drapery of her skirt.



Lady possibly dancing (from a similar risqué courtyard scene, there was a musician seated next to her) (picture from Lentz, page 275, that same page has a black and white of the above image as well.)

Note how her coat swings back implying a forward movement.



Dancer with a scarf at a wedding celebration, I believe this dancer is actually male based on his clothing, notably the musician behind him is female. (picture from Lentz, page 55)

Note bent knee and crossed step.



Two enthusiastic dancers at the head of a processional scene (followed by warriors and a crowned lady upon a horse). Hard to say if those are castanets in their hands or something else, obviously the one dancer has a scarf. The Asian influence in the artwork is obvious. (picture from Lentz, page 188)



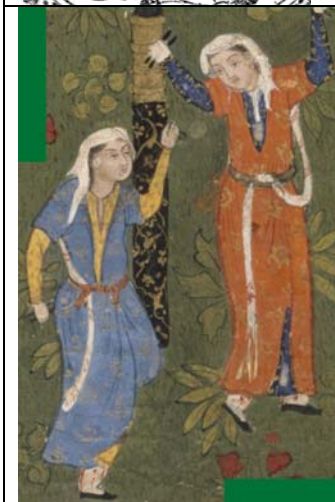
Dated 1458, this image shows a group of men dancing together. Note the long, hanging sleeves and how they emphasize gesture and also that they each wear a white scarf as well. Interestingly their hats are not the normal tall Safavid red hats (worn by the musicians and spectators), but shorter rounded versions; perhaps to allow the scarves or sleeves to pass over their heads without snagging?



Two ladies dance for lovers in a garden in this c.1527 manuscript (Diwan of Hafiz, f.67r). Note the C-shape stance and how the hems of their gowns sway backward implying a forward motion. Uncertain from my copy of the picture if those are castanets or small scarves in their hands; I'm leaning toward scarves though Hollie Williams identified this image as castanets (Williams, p.31) Their feet are difficult to see in this scan, but they are pointing forward same as the above examples.

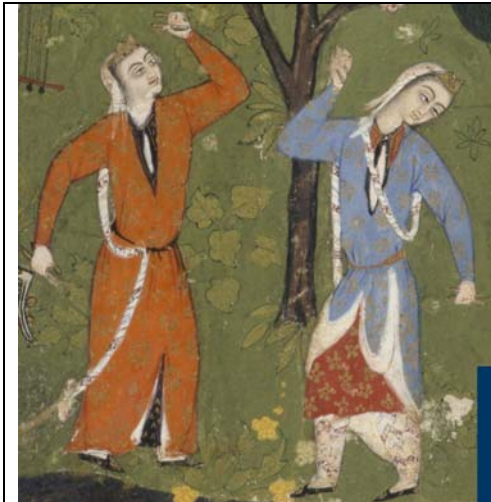




A dancer with castanets from a mid-sixteenth century bowl. Note how the tassel end of her braid (hanging from the belt) swings outward implying movement. Her veil (or is that some sort of hat?) also swings out.



Two ladies dancing with castanets in a garden. Rylands Library MS. 910 page 115a. Dated 1518.



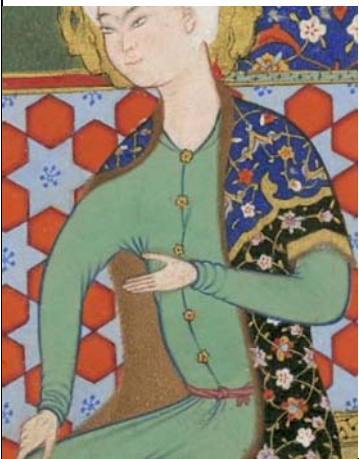

Note the second dancer has both arms up and the first has only one foot visible on the ground indicating a hop-like move.


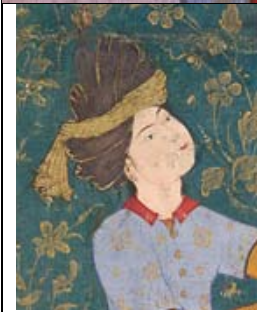
	<p>Another image from Rylands MS.910, this one from page 395a (The similar treatment of the faces suggests the same artist painted both miniatures). Again our dancers have castanets and their feet are pointing forward.</p>
	<p>This dancer is from Rylands MS. 932 page 27b, dated 1542.</p> <p>Note: One scarf instead of two, odd puckering at her waist.</p>
	<p>Sadly small image from a Rylands Collection manuscript pictured in <u>Medieval Persian Court Poetry</u> by Julie Scott Meisami. An invaluable picture as it shows a dancer in a kneeling position. Note also the two small scarves.</p>

In conclusion; we see that one hand up, one hand down (with bent elbows) and knees bent in the same direction is symbolic of dance in Persian pictorial art. Most other positions shown have another dancer present, making it easier to identify the scene as dancing within the language of Persian book arts. We can say that dances were performed with scarves and castanets and that dancer's clothing was very much the same as that worn by the rest of the citizenry of the time, save perhaps for a preference for slightly shorter hems, ankle length rather than floor length. Female dancers are almost universally depicted with their head bent slightly and all the dancers depicted have their feet pointing in the same direction.

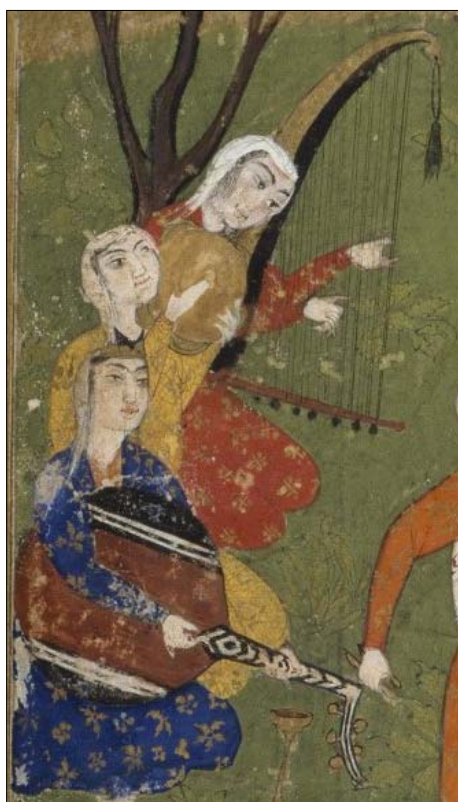
### 3. The Language of Gesture in Persian Art

With the very elegant stylization of figures and subtlety of expression, Persian manuscript illumination developed a language of gestures to display emotion. It is my theory that as these gestures were readily recognized as indicative of particular emotions in visual art, they could have been incorporated into Dance.

Gesture	Meaning
 <p>Hands clenched, fingers facing inward at breast (like Superman about to rip off his shirt)</p>	<p>Mourning or sorrow (picture from Diwan of Hafiz f.77r c.1527)</p>
 <p>index finger over mouth (like our modern 'shush')</p>	<p>Surprise, amazement (picture from Haft-Awrang f.161b)</p>
 <p>One hand up and open.</p>	<p>“I am speaking” lets the viewer know who is the narrator or person being quoted in the text. (picture from Haft-Awrang f.115a) Note; the fire coming out of the man’s head is the Islamic version of a halo; showing his divinity.</p>
 <p>One hand up on a level or above the head, the other down, both away from the body with elbows bent (Walk like an Egyptian?) Knees bent, both in the same direction.</p>	<p>I am dancing!</p>

	<p>back of hand (covered by sleeve) to cheek.</p>	<p>Uncertain. Weariness?</p>
	<p>Gazing heaven-ward</p>	<p>Worship, belief or love (frequently depicted as gazing toward the object of the subject's affections, but also symbolic of divine love)</p>

#### 4. Movement implied by Music



*I am a tambourine. Don't put me aside  
Till the fast dancing starts<sup>13</sup>.*

The most arbitrary of this evidence is my own interpretation of the music of the time and its rhythms and melodies.

Nearly all of the dancing images in manuscripts are accompanied by musicians, usually three instruments are represented, a harp-like instrument, a tambourine and a large guitar or oud-like instrument. These same instruments appear in feasting scenes by themselves indicating that the instruments for dance music are very much the same as other classical Persian music.

Persian Classical music follows specific tone sets called Distagahs. These tone sets are well documented and noted for their frequently 'melancholy' air<sup>14</sup>. I was able to obtain and listen to what is regarded as one of the best collections of these Distagahs; unfortunately no tambourine was used and therefore

<sup>13</sup> The Essential Rumi, page 94

<sup>14</sup> From liner notes in "Classical Music of Iran" by Ella Zonis Maher.

the individual recordings lack strong rhythms. We do know that the dance music involved percussion from the pictorial evidence (largely tambourine and castanets), and I believe that the dance music as performed would have had a more definite beat than the recording I have, however not knowing any musician's trained in classical Persian music and instruments, I was limited to what I could find on a recording. I did attempt to convince a musician to play a tambourine along with the recording, but the musician was not confident in his ability to match the proper rhythm and the music as recorded. For this performance the musical track was edited for length.

*Drumsound rises on the air  
Its throb, my heart.  
A voice inside the beat says,  
"I know you're tired,  
But come, this is the way"<sup>15</sup>.*

Tatatumtum tatum tatadum<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The Essential Rumi, page 122

<sup>16</sup> Line of rhythm from a 13<sup>th</sup> century poem, "The Essential Rumi" page 272

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Love and Yearning: on-line exhibition of Persian Art (excellent site, allows zooming)  
<http://www.asia.si.edu/exhibitions/online/loveyearning/>