

PERIOD PERSIAN DANCE

Mistress Sindokht Bayat al-Herati, Tribe Zareefat, Meridies

The movements taught in this class are based on a comparison study of recent classical Persian dance and illuminations, carvings, ceramics and textiles from the SCA period, which depict female dancers.

ARMS:

Snake arm poses are found repeatedly in the period sources. They seem to be one of the definitive marks of a Persian dancer.

Forward or In-front-of-the-body arm poses are also found in one or two examples.

The use of these two poses gives the recreation dancer a wide range of arm movement.

Elegant and graceful arm movements characterize recent Classical Persian Dance and the period sources echo this. The indications are that the arm work is the basis of Persian dance.

SHOULDERS:

This is a movement that is very difficult to find in illuminations. Artists did not often depict the detailed movements of a dancer's shoulders. This is however a very important part of modern classical Persian dance. However, Soudavar, does contain an illumination which depicts multiple dancers and their many varied shoulder movements. These should definitely be added to any Persian dance reconstruction.

HIPS:

Hip Twists: A flat forward/back hip twist with no upper body involvement is seen in two separate examples. The artists were careful to emphasize the twisting motion of the hips and the stationary position of the upper body.

Unweighted Up and Back Hip: This movement is seen in an ivory carving and is accompanied with a traditional arm frame to emphasize the hip movement. With the weight on one foot the unweighted hip is twisted back and lifted up causing the unweighted foot to lift off the ground. As the hip is released to a center position and then pulled back up again, a rocking motion is created.

FOOTWORK:

Flat/Ball: This step is found in many different styles of Middle Eastern dance. In period, I have found it in India, Persia and Egypt. One foot is always in a flat position and the other foot is on the ball. Different styles move with this

arrangement in different ways. The Persian illuminations show dancers moving forward and sideways with this movement. It can be done slowly or with great speed. It can also be done in a 1-1 pattern or a 1-2 pattern. Example: flat – ball or flat- ball-ball. The flat- ball- ball pattern is very common in classical Persian dance. Classical Persian dance uses the flat-ball movement in many different patterns and tends to move on the diagonal.

There are two illuminations, which depict the dancer “hopping” on one foot. In both, the dancer has small handkerchiefs in her hands and this may indicate that a “Handkerchief Dance” used hops. Until more information comes to light, it is hard to conclude how dancers used this movement. It is possible that this movement is the Persian version of a Sogdian Whirl.

There is one illumination that depicts a lunging or rushing move performed in a sideways traveling direction (Bahari). This one illumination gives us insight into the faster movements that were performed in period.

FLOORWORK:

There is an example of a dancer in a seated position from period. She is dancing with her arms, making sweeping gestures, her hands covered with her long coat sleeves.

A second example of a Persian dancer doing a “bedoiun knee drop” was found in an astronomical illumination (Binyon). The dancer is depicted on one knee with the other leg in a bent position as if it was about to “drop” to the floor. In traditional dance this movement is used to “walk” while in a floorwork position.

PROPS:

Veil/Sash: Examples of a dancer dancing with a long thin sash or folded veil exist. The sash is usually draped across the dancers body and wrapped loosely around and down both arms. There is an example of a folded veil held over the dancers head with both hands, so obviously the sash/veil was removed and danced with off the body as well. However, there is NO indication that anything resembling modern veil work was done. This was a much more limited style.

Zills: There are many examples of dancers performing with short, cylindrical, wooden zills, similar to claves. These served the same purpose as modern zills. There is also an example of a dancer performing with an unusual set of zills. These consisted of two ‘Y’ shaped pieces of wood, like a wishbone, with zills attached at the tips of the ‘Y’. There is a modern instrument from Spain that resembles this only it is fitted with wooden castanets and is played by shaking the castanets together. The zills in the Persian example appear to be metal, but were probably played in a similar manner.

Coat and Chemise sleeves: There are many examples of dancers performing with their long coat sleeves or chemise sleeves pulled down over their hands. This serves to again emphasize the hand and arm movement.

Handkerchiefs: There are illuminations, which depict dancers dancing with small handkerchiefs in their hands. In two of these illuminations, the dancer is hopping and that may indicate that the use of handkerchiefs was associated with a more folkloric and higher energy dance. Or the handkerchiefs could have been used the way that the extended coat sleeves were used, as an extra emphasis on the hand and arm movement.

Hair Braids: In many illuminations the dancers have extended and probably fake hair braids. These braids are wrapped in colorful material and end in a tassel. The braids are very long and are depicted dragging on the floor behind the dancer, tucked up into the dancer's belt, tossed over a shoulder, or draped over one arm. Evidently the dancer used the braid as a prop while dancing.

MUSIC:

Many of the illuminations depicting dancers also depict the musicians playing for them. Most of the instruments are melody instruments, which indicates that the melody was important in the dancing. However, many of the depictions include frame drums either played singularly or with the melody instruments. In recent Classical Persian music, the dombeck drum has become more popular. Many pieces are melody instruments only. This was not so during period. The use of the frame drum implies a definite rhythm element although this drum has a low, soft sound that would not overwhelm the melody.

Classical Persian music, during period, was played improvisationally within a framework called a dastgah. This lends credence to the improvisational role of the dancer, as it is difficult to choreograph to music that is never the same. I have found no evidence to support the idea of choreography in Persian court dance during period.

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