

## The Introduction of Middle Eastern Dance into the United States

*By Dr. Laura Osweiler (Amara)*



“Scene in a Tunisian Café – The Scarf Dance”  
A Facsimile of Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Historical Register of the Centennial Exposition, 1876

This is the first known image of a Middle Eastern dancer in the United States; an Algerian woman at the Centennial International Exhibition of 1876 in Philadelphia. As the first exposition in the United States, the Centennial Exhibition became the standard. Not only were visitors encouraged to peruse the numerous museum type exhibits, but also to interact with and purchase items from the guest nations.<sup>i</sup> The Centennial exposition also established the negative treatment of Middle Eastern dancers at these events. For example, according to a New York Times article, “An immoral Coffee-House,” there was a raid at a Turkish café (near one already established), because of immodest dancing by the woman.<sup>ii</sup>

The Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago was much larger in scope than the Centennial Exhibition. It was divided into two main areas: the White City, which contained neo-classic architecture and a number of buildings, such as the Woman’s building and foreign buildings, and the Midway Plaisance, which included the amusement portion. Middle Eastern culture was represented in both. For example, in the White City were the Ottoman Pavilion and Egyptian, Algerian, Syrian, and Tunisian exhibits<sup>iii</sup> and in the Midway were a Street in Cairo, the Algerian and Tunisian Village, the Persian Palace, the Turkish Village, and the Moorish Palace. Due to the coverage, documentation, and sheer number of visitors at the Columbian Exposition, Middle Eastern dance became, in an unprecedented manner, fully established into dominant

narratives about race, gender, class, and religion<sup>iv</sup> that constructed strong stereotypes of belly dance which continue in contemporary American culture.

At both expositions, Middle Eastern dancers were invited to the United States to re-present their cultures in “living exhibits.” They entered into a society which did not have many Arab immigrants,<sup>v</sup> and therefore, a community to comment on the ways in which the Middle East was re-presented at the expositions. The Middle Eastern dancers also entered into a country where the images and knowledge most literate Americans had of the Middle East came from curiosity and variety shows, paintings, newspaper articles, guidebooks, and novels. These texts offered Americans images of Middle Eastern dancers who were sexual, vulgar, and indecent, danced for men and money, and most importantly, could not speak for themselves.<sup>vi</sup>

The documentation of Middle Eastern dance at the Columbian Exposition consists of photographs,<sup>vii</sup> drawings, newspaper articles, souvenir books, and published personal accounts written by white American men. The dancers’ voices are not recorded in print until after the Chicago Exposition during trails for indecency. This textual silence of course makes it difficult to read beyond the dominant narratives and to find marginal ones, but not impossible.

My goals for this paper are similar to the ones Jane Desmond’s explores in “Embodying Difference,” in which she asserts that although studying cultural resistance, appropriation, and cultural imperialism is vital in understanding power relationships, it can also overemphasize the “lost” in a dance form, especially when looking at dominant groups’ appropriation of “subordinant” groups’ practices. Instead, she is interested in the creation of hybrids and syncretism and how the “adopting group” is changed by its new products. As a practitioner of Middle Eastern dance I am interested in the dancers’ viewpoints. However, I am not trying to “speak” for them, but instead, I want to explore aspects that are not readily acknowledged by writers in their time and contemporary academic discourse. By not only exploring what dominant narratives constructed in terms of the dancers’ images and social positions, but also, by looking for marginal narratives, I hope to open new perspectives on Middle Eastern dance in the United States then and now.

The texts which occasionally accompanied the photographs from the Columbian Exposition present inconsistent information about the dancers. They may indicate the dancer’s name and where s/he comes from, offer descriptions of their costumes, makeup, movements, routine, and popularity, whether s/he was also a singer and/or musician, and record the audience’s reactions. These texts not only present “factual” descriptions, but also, place the dancers within dominant racial narratives. Robert Rydell, In All the World’s a Fair, asserts that the purposes of the early American expositions were to demonstrate America’s progress both at home and abroad, to foster a sense of national pride, and to boost economic growth and development. The expositions cultivated opportunities for the ruling class to popularize “evolutionary ideas about race and progress” (Rydell 5) through scientific, artistic, and political means.



“Salina”  
From Oriental and Occidental



“Rahlo Jammele (Jewish Dancing Girl)”  
From Oriental and Occidental



“Rosa, The Famous Dancer of Constantinople”  
From Turkish Theatre Souvenir  
“Rosa, The Turkish Dancer”  
From Chicago Times Portfolio of the Midway Types



“Nazha Kassik (Jewish Dancing Girl)”  
From Oriental and Occidental

Texts of that period present varying degrees of racist attitudes towards the female Middle Eastern dancers at the Midway, which is my focus in this paper.<sup>viii</sup> For example, Algerian, Jewish, and Turkish dancers were described by Hubert Bancroft, J.W. Buel, and in The Dream City as not vulgar. This was because their costumes were modest and their dancing graceful.<sup>ix</sup> These descriptions are different from those written about “Persians” and Egyptians.<sup>x</sup> For example, Buel comments about the Egyptian dancers, “we behold

them here, destitute of animation, formless as badly-stuffed animals, as homely as owls, and graceless as stall-fed bovines.” Buel also notes their dance “is extremely ungraceful and almost shockingly disgusting.”



“Three Dancing Girls from Egypt”  
 From J.W Buel’s Magic City  
 “The Dancers of Cairo Street”  
 “Zakia, Fahima, and Nabiweah – Cairo  
 Theatre”  
 From “Snapshots”  
 From Jewell N Halligan’s Halligan’s  
Illustrated World’s Fair



“A Performance in the Egyptian Theatre”  
 From J.W Buel’s Magic City  
 “Preparing for the Danse du Ventre in the  
 Street of Cairo Theater”  
 From Jewell N Halligan’s Halligan’s  
Illustrated World’s Fair  
 “A Dance in the Street of Cairo Theatre”  
 From The Dream City

The Columbian Exposition directors justified the amusements of the Midway as educational and containing important scientific merit. They sold the Midway exhibits as standing in for the “real” and presented the performances as being ethnographically correct and untainted by Western influence. However, the dance and dancer had been transposed from one culture to another and placed in a different context. Joseph Roach’s concept of surrogation: the process by which “culture reproduces and re-creates itself” (Roach, 2), which he discusses in Cities of the Dead is helpful with this inquiry. He contends that people and cultures are continually trying to replace, reproduce, and recreate situations but they rarely succeed in being like the original. This “failure” can be a rich source of material and knowledge.

The Middle Eastern dancers reproduced aspects of their culture in this new place, but had to adapt to the exhibits’ space. They were now on presidium stages. Based upon my experience of Middle Eastern dance of watching contemporary Middle Eastern dancers, I observe that unless they have experience in a theater, contemporary Middle Eastern dancers perform on stage in the manner they are used to off stage. With the caveat that these are two different time periods, I would speculate that the Middle Eastern dancers at the expositions did not change their dance very much in terms of movement, use of space, facial expressions, energy, costume, and music in order to perform on stage.

The Middle Eastern theaters in the exposition<sup>xi</sup> were unadorned except for some tapestries in the back. The musicians and dancers sat on divans at the back of the stage. The theater setting was different from the homes, courtyards, and/or outdoor spaces in which the Middle Eastern dancers were used to performing. At the exposition, they danced in front of large numbers of people. For example, the Algerian and Tunisian Village theater had 1000-1200 seats.<sup>xii</sup> The large distance between performer and audience also differed since the Middle Eastern dances no longer performed in intimate settings where dancer and audience could have direct interactions. In fact, in the Middle East, there is a term, *tarab*, which labels this relationship and its impact on the performance. A few writers<sup>xiii</sup> noticed this interaction between dancers and musicians through vocal and musical encouragement. I suspect that because the Middle Eastern dancers were skilled in adapting to the likes and dislikes of their audiences at home, they learned quickly what American audiences preferred. The dancers' purpose had also changed since they were no longer participating in a variety of capacities, such as rites of passage, art, and entertainment, but instead, for "educational" and entertainment purposes. In addition, the Middle Eastern dancers had to adjust to audiences that did not understand the cultural context of the dance, could not watch them with the dance's aesthetics or cultural values, and did not know the rules of engagement.

Since the Middle Eastern dancers were portrayed as authentic, audiences and exposition directors were either ignorant and/or able to ignore modifications that the dancers made in their performances. By not acknowledging change, the dominant narratives constructed traditional Middle Eastern dance as a static dance form. This presentation also ties into the Orientalist trope of the time that Middle Easterners focus on tradition and are "incapable" of progressive change.

The Middle Eastern dancers were also pulled into feminist debates. For example, male writers present the Board of Lady Managers, a group of upper class white women who over saw the Women's Building in the White City, as developing a unified position against the dancers.<sup>xiv</sup> However, the Board was not a homogenized group in terms of feminist causes<sup>xv</sup> or in their response to the morality of the Middle Eastern dancers. For example, the Chicago Tribune reports that Isabella Hooker, Helen Barker, and Mrs. Wm. Felton wanted the theaters closed.<sup>xvi</sup> They along with the male writers of the day viewed Middle Eastern dance as being inappropriate for any good women to watch.<sup>xvii</sup> However, other Board members supported the Middle Eastern dances. For example, Sallie Cotton writes in her journal that she "[w]ith Mesdame Bartlett and [Parthenia] Rue went to the Turkish Theatre as guests of Madame Korani. The dancing is wonderful gymnastic performance...." (Weimann, 569).<sup>xviii</sup> Several men also supported the Middle Eastern dancers in an ethnological and scientific light against the moralists' outrage. For example, Frederic Putnam who ran the Department of Ethnology wrote in his "Introduction" to Oriental and Occidental, that the Egyptian *danse du ventre* was a national dance that was misunderstood by American viewers.<sup>xix</sup>

At least two members of the Board of Lady Managers, Bertha Palmer, the Board's President, and Margaret Leech<sup>xx</sup> and Director of Works, Daniel Burnham complained to Director-General Davis about dances. In fact, Leech labels them "vile, licentious foreign dances" (Broun, 226) and Burnham complains that they were "not in harmony with the tone of the exposition or the American code of morals" ("Trouble on the Midway" 2). The New York Times reported that a Chief Executive Order was issued to close the

Persian Theatre on August 5<sup>th</sup> (“Trouble on the Midway 2), but the managers of the theater refused to comply.<sup>xxi</sup> The dancing continued as the Commissioners discovered that the contracts with the Midway concessionaires only allowed them to “supervise the dress and apparel” (Trouble on the Midway 2) of the dancers.<sup>xxii</sup> Since the objections were not based on the dancers’ clothing, the Commissioners had no recourse.

Several writers of the time recorded an event that shows some Middle Eastern participants were not content with how their country was being represented.<sup>xxiii</sup> Initially at the Persian Palace, a troupe of men performed athletic feats. Halligan notes that the men “failed to attract visitors in the numbers that were necessary to enrich the proprietors” (Halligan 308). Therefore, female dancers were brought in to perform. However, the Persian men threatened to stop working and close the Palace not because of the dancing per say, but as Moen-Ol Saltaneh in his Chicago Travel Memoir recalls, because they were French women pretending to be Persian (Akbarī and Khounani 16).<sup>xxiv</sup> One of these dancers is mentioned by name. Belle Baya who had performed at the Paris Exposition of 1889 and who according to Prince Roland Bonaparte,<sup>xxv</sup> attended the Paris Exposition was from Algiers. The result of the protests by the Persian men<sup>xxvi</sup> led not the end of the dancing, but instead, as Halligan notes, were sent back home (Halligan 308).

Both the racial and gender narratives placed the Middle Eastern dancers into the lower and working class status, despite the fact that some of these dancers may have been members of the upper class at home.<sup>xxvii</sup> This classism continued after the exposition, with *danse du ventre* along with its Americanized version, the hoochie koochie, becoming a part of the working class theater of the burlesque and vaudeville circuits. Since the elite and scientific community no longer supported and contextualized the dance as a “national” dance form, its sexualized and immoral components were sold as its primary features. The dance moved further away from its cultural contexts and developed a new identity in American popular culture.

Middle Eastern dancers at the early American expositions brought into American culture a marginal narrative of gender. Through, their movements, dances, clothing, femininity, and social behaviors they expressed in public a freedom and control over their bodies which upper class white American women did not “own” and had difficulty controlling. Since Middle Eastern dancers offered practices that were frequently out of line and offended upper class white American sensibility, 19<sup>th</sup> century dominant narratives of race, gender, class, and religion focused on the sexuality of these dancers and participated in the constructed of the stereotype – a hypersexual, low class belly dancer who performs for men and money. Some members of the upper class upheld the dance as presenting nothing socially wrong or as a national dance it should be respected or at least tolerated.<sup>xxviii</sup> Yet other non-Middle Eastern Americans explored and adopted Middle Eastern dance to transform their personal identity and American society. For example, according to archive materials in the Midwest Dance Collection, Christina Olson, a twelve year old from Chicago, performed at the Turkish Theater. Today, Middle Eastern dance’s position in the United States is just as complex. Dominant narratives continue to ignore and/or put down lower and working class dance forms mainly because of the sexualized position of the dance. Some practitioners counter the lower class associated sexuality by claiming it is not an “authentic” characteristic, while others embrace the hypersexual as a way to counter dominant narratives.

## End Notes

<sup>i</sup>The Egyptian, Ottoman Turkish, and Tunisian governments' exhibits in the Main Building displayed of building facades and numerous objects, such as textiles, furnishings, pottery, metalwork, and jewelry. In addition, the exhibition contained the Turkish and Tunisian cafés, an Algerian pavilion, a Moroccan villa, and Syria and Palestine bazaars.

<sup>ii</sup> Apparently, the directors and commissioners had no issues with the 2 male and boy dancers that also performed.

<sup>iii</sup> In the White City, the Agriculture Building contained an exhibit from Egypt, the Women's Building exhibits from Algeria and Syria, and the Main Building exhibits from Egypt, Tunisia, and Turkey.

<sup>iv</sup> There were Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the Midway. For example, James Shepp notes in Shepp's World's Fair Photographed that "A Street in Cairo" employed Coptics. Shepp, as do Hubert Howe Bancroft in The Book of the Fair and Benjamin Cummings Truman in History of the World's Fair also mention Muslims lived in Midway. Two photographs in Oriental and Occidental, Northern and Southern label dancers as Jewish (Oriental and Occidental "Rahlo Jammele (Jewish Dancing Girl) and "Nazha Kassik (Jewish Dancing Girl)."

<sup>v</sup> According to Eric Hooglund, in Crossing the Waters, between 1881 and 1914 there was an estimated 110,000 Arab immigrants to the United States (Hooglund, 3). Most of them were Christians from Mount Lebanon, in Syria; which at the time was a part of the Ottoman Empire.

<sup>vi</sup> See "No More Midway Dancing. Three of the Egyptian Girls Fined \$50 Each" in The New York Times.

<sup>vii</sup> The photographs do not show the dancers as part of the living exhibits. Instead, they pose in front of backdrops containing the pyramids and palm trees, a forest, an Orientalist room, and a plain background in a studio. In a few cases, the dancers stand in or outside the theater. The photographs offer insight into the dancers' outfits, props, and expressions.

<sup>viii</sup> Male Middle Eastern dancers were presented as dangerous and violent. For example, sword and shield dances could be seen in the Persian Palace (Buel "Swordmen in a Mock Duel") and Turkish theater (Turkish Theatre Souvenir "The Swordmen" and Chicago Times Portfolio of the Midway Types "Two Swordmen of Damascus") and the Torture dance of the Assiaieu (Isawiyya)/Aissoire at the Algerian Theater (The Dream City "The Tall Algerian" and "The Algerian Theatre"). In the case of "Simon of Zeibek," the Turkish Theatre Souvenir notes that in Smyrna, because where they lived "there are many thieves and robbers, you will find them always prepared for battle" (Turkish Theatre Souvenir "Simon of Zeibek"). An exception to this can be read in the Turkish Theatre Souvenir's description of "The Gypsy Dancer of Syria" in which it states, "they have great control over their muscles, and their dance must be seen to be appreciated... (Turkish Theatre Souvenir "The Gypsy Dancer of Syria").

<sup>ix</sup> Several male writers depict these dancers in positive terms. For example, The Dream City (The Dream City "The Algerian Theatre") and Bancroft (Bancroft 877) describe the Algerian dancers' costumes as loose and long, and therefore, added to the dancers' decency. Buel also comments that the Algerians' "movements were more graceful than were those of the Egyptian and Persian dancers, but there was a resemblance in the muscular exercise...." (Buel "An Algerian Girl"), while Oriental and Occidental, Northern and Southern calls Salina, an Algerian dancer, "one of the handsome women on that wonderful Street of Nations" (Oriental and Occidental "Salina, the Algerian 'danse du ventre'"). Oriental and Occidental makes similar statements about the Jewish dancers at the Moorish Palace, "[u]nlike the Egyptian, Persian or Turkish dancers these Jewish girls moved with a willowy grace in dancing which to Western eyes, trained to the habit of admiring steps in which the feet and ankles play the prominent part, was most pleasing" (Oriental and Occidental "Rahlo Jammele (Jewish Dancing Girl)." Chicago Times Portfolio of the Midway

Types and World's Columbian both indicate that the Turkish dancer, Rosa, was “graceful” (Chicago Times Portfolio of the Midway Types “Rosa, The Turkish Dancer” and Trumbull White and W.M. Igleheart “Rosa, The Turkish Dancer). Jewell Halligan in Halligan's Illustrated World's Fair also saw that these Jewish dancers were “perhaps beautiful” and “modest” (Halligan 291).

<sup>x</sup> The Portfolio of the Photographs of the World's Fair describes the Persian dancers as presenting “flagrant vulgarity” (Portfolio of the Photographs of the World's Fair, np). Halligan calls an Egyptian dancer in the photograph, “Preparing for the Danse du Ventre in the Street of Cairo Theater,” “fleshy and unlovely to the Caucasian eye” (Halligan 288).

<sup>xi</sup> Howells notes that in A Traveller from Altruria the Turkish theater had scenery to represent “home-life and adventure in Mahomedan countries” (Howells 574). For descriptions of the theaters, see Portfolio of the Photographs of the World's Fair, Oriental and Occidental, Bancroft, Shepp, and Truman.

<sup>xii</sup> See Banks and North 688, Rand 215, and Buel np.

<sup>xiii</sup> For examples see Portfolio of the Photographs of the World's Fair and The Dream City.

<sup>xiv</sup> Halligan reports that the Board of Lady Managers opposed Middle Eastern dancers' performances and regarded them “as a public nuisance” (Halligan 288).

<sup>xv</sup> See T. J. Boisseau's “White Queens at the Chicago World's Fair, 1893” and Jeanne Madeline Weimann's The Fair Women for detailed discussions of the different types of turn-of-the-twentieth-century feminisms. Also see the Approved Official Minutes for primary examples.

<sup>xvi</sup> Barker is quoted as saying in a Chicago Tribune's article, “[t]hey are many, of them, not representatives of foreign nations, but women of Chicago, chosen to act those disgusting parts” (“Want Midway Dances Stopped” 1).

<sup>xvii</sup> For example, The Dream City states, “[n]o ordinary Western woman looked on these performances with anything but horror, and at one time it was a matter of serious debate in the councils of the Exposition whether the customs of Cairo should be faithfully reproduced, or the morals of the public faithfully protected.” (The Dream City “A Dance in the Street of Cairo Theater”). Halligan makes a similar statement, “[b]ut it is said to the credit of American womanhood, that thousands of the well-balanced wives and mothers of the United States departed on the moment that this Oriental posture-dance began; and of those who tarried, probably all wished themselves away – so remarkable are the contrasts between Eastern and Western customs” (Halligan 289).

<sup>xviii</sup> In a Chicago Tribune article, Mrs. James P. Eagle is quoted, “I have never found anything disgusting, but, on the contrary, much that was interesting and fascinating” (“Want Midway Dances Stopped” 1). In their Official Report, the only mention of this conversation was, “[a]t the request of Mrs. Felton, the resolutions containing the action of the Board in this subject were read for information. (Mrs. Price, North Carolina, third Vice-President, in the chair.) On motion of Mrs. Felton, an informal discussion on the subject was participated in by Mesdames Barker, Felton, Shepard, [Mrs. Mary Cecil] Cantrill, [Mrs. Ralph] Trautmann, [Mrs. James P. ] Eagle, [Mrs. Mary J.] Lockwood, Wise, and [Mrs. Edward L.] Barlett” (Approved Official Minutes, 3 Aug. 1893 159). Unfortunately, no more information was given about the conversation or their future actions.

<sup>xix</sup> For example, Putman writes in the “Introduction” for Oriental and Occidental

Here in the playhouse of the street were gathered dancing women, and her was to be witnessed the national *dans du ventre* which not being understood was by many regarded as low and repulsive. What wonderful muscular movements did those dancers make, and how strange did this dance seem to us: but it is not probable that our waltz would seem equally strange to these dusky women of Egypt. What is a dance, is a question one was forced to ask after a trip through the Midway. Every nation had its own form. With some it was a

rhythmic movement of the hands and arms; with others of the feet and legs; and with others of the body; some were ceremonial, others for amusement, according to national traditions and customs. (Putman "Introduction")

A New York Times article recorded a similar response from Secretary Edmonds of the Executive Department of the World's Fair to the National Association of Dancing Masters' objections to the dances. Edmonds writes that these dancers are "characteristic dances of Oriental nations," they are ethnological exhibits, and have been seen in several international expositions ("Cannot Stop Those Immoral Dances" 5).

<sup>xx</sup> In a New York Times article, Palmer recounts, "I do remember, in a letter to the Board of Managers, saying that whatever was suggestive of immorality in dance exhibitions should be repressed" ("Mrs. Palmer Misrepresented").

<sup>xxi</sup> According to a Chicago Tribune's article, Manager Debbas, Assistant Manager Bustang, and Mme. Akoun Benteny at the Persian Palace were told by Captain Morgan and Attorney Baldwin to stop the dancers' performances. Assistant Manager Bustang was outraged and is quoted to have said "[t]hey talk about the dances we have here as improper. I don't consider them half as bad as the high-kicking, the split, the serpentine, and shadow dances done by the girls in tights in the theater stages. They are the true native dances of Persia and the girls are always dressed in loose-fitting costumes instead of tights" ("Will be Like Cairo" 25).

<sup>xxii</sup> In the New York Times' "Cannot Stop Those Immoral Dances," Secretary Edmonds comments that in the contract there is a clause which gives "the exposition to supervise the dress of the dance," had been added to the contracts out of a fear that the ethnological exhibits "might contain objectionable features." ("Cannot Stop Those Immoral Dances" 2).

<sup>xxiii</sup> See Halligan, Mirza Mohammad Ali Moen-Ol Saltaneh, and The Dream City,

<sup>xxiv</sup> Halligan and The Dream City also note that these dancers were Parisian and not Persian.

<sup>xxv</sup> From Annegret Fauser's Musical Encounters at the 1889 Paris World's Fair.

<sup>xxvi</sup> According to Halligan, on June 19, 1893, Abdallah Edglar tried to set a fire to the Persian palace.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Karin van Nieuwkerk, 'A Trade Like any Other, Metin And, in "Dances of Anatolian Turkey," and Anthony Shay in Choreophobia, note that in Egypt, Turkey, and Persia, respectively, there were different classes of dancers.

<sup>xxviii</sup> One could read them as being hired only for their profitability, and therefore, as having their "sexuality" exploited by exposition directors and Middle Eastern businessmen. The expositions could also be criticized for the fact that the dancers were only an example, and a minor at that, of women's roles in the Middle East.

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