

# LISTENING THROUGH THE LENS

## A Selection of Images from The Fouad Debbas Collection

Middle Eastern dance was first introduced to a European public at the 1889 World Fair in Paris with the *Street of Cairo* exhibition, which featured musical and dance performances by *'awâlim*, commonly referred to as belly dancers. During this period, photographers played a part in the fabrication of the Oriental dream by staging and photographing Egyptian singers, musicians, and dancers in their studios.

Music as folklore is widely represented in images from the 19th and early 20th centuries. Bedouins are extensively depicted as the archetypal musicians of the Orient, as many images from The Fouad Debbas Collection show.

Music is not only a form of entertainment but also a means by which to express faith and to meditate, as the images of whirling dervishes attest to. The technical means available to photographers at the time did not allow them to freeze action, and so they sought to choreograph carefully staged action scenes.



*“Neither Arabic singing nor music is ever written down. Guided solely by their memory and inspiration, artists never play a melody the same way twice; each one produces different variations on a known theme, playing and understanding the melody in his or her own way. Arabic singing is curious; once one becomes accustomed it, it is delightful. It embodies the spirit of the land and harmonizes with it, lingering for a long while on monotone notes only to suddenly lift to high-pitch tones; the effect is like minarets soaring from domed mosques.”\**

**Belly Dancers**  
Egypt. Circa 1870–80  
Original photographer: Sebah  
Colored etching

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<sup>1</sup> E. Lockroy, “Voyage en Syrie. Mission de M. Renan en Phénicie,” in *Le Tour du Monde*, 1863, pp.33-64. Quote p.47.

\* All the quotations were translated from French into English for the purpose of this exhibition guide only.

## Orientalism meets Oriental dancers: The Figure of the 'âlma'

Middle Eastern dance was first introduced to a European public at the Paris World Fair in 1889, and an American one at the Chicago World Fair in 1893. Both Fairs included an exhibit called *Street of Cairo*, and newspaper journalists described the event as a “musical orgy.”<sup>2</sup>

The public gathered in crowds, hypnotized by the famous 'awâlîm dance described by Gérard de Nerval in his *Voyage en Orient* in 1851, and whose image remains in the collective unconscious.



Dance of an 'âlma in Cairo  
Postcard

Albumen print, unmounted, in Mansell Album  
Original photographer: Bonfils Studio  
Circa 1880–95

2 Julien Tiersot, “Promenades musicales à l’Exposition,” *Le Ménestrel*, 26 Mai 1889, pp.165-166.

Artists and photographers, such as the Bonfils Studio in Beirut, were creators of an ideal Orient. Through their exoticizing lens, the figure of the 'âlma bewitches the Occident.

Active during the 18th and 19th centuries,<sup>3</sup> 'âlma [pl. 'awâlîm] was the name reserved for a specific category of female Egyptian singers and dancers, who were highly educated and very knowledgeable in the literary arts. An 'âlma would have been invited to a wealthy home, and received in a room adjoining the harem. She would sing behind a wooden lattice or *moucharabieh*, hidden from the male gaze. Only an exclusively female public could enjoy full view of the 'awâlîm's performances.

Nowadays, the word 'âlma designates not only women dancers, but also their entourage of musicians. Musicians can be male or female, and the 'awâlîm's performance is practiced at wedding ceremonies. Up until the 1970s,<sup>4</sup> entire generations of 'awâlîm could be found on Mohamed Ali Avenue in Cairo.

Henry Cammas and André Lefèvre, who visited Egypt in 1859, describe the harsh conditions of daily life in Esna (south of Luxor), from which they originate.<sup>5</sup>

*“The surrounding population is hardly in a position to pay them for their talents; experts in physical expression, but incapable of performing any kind of work, they are forced into short term solutions, into taking out loans which render them slaves to money lenders. The difficulties of such an impoverished existence mean that despite their abundance across Egypt during the time of the Mameluks, the number of 'awâlîm is now decreasing day by day. Esna is their last refuge, and was without doubt their cradle.”*

3 M.(Claude Etienne) Savary, *Lettres sur l’Egypte, Où l’on Offre le Parallèle des Moeurs Anciennes & Modernes de Ses Habitans, Où l’on Décrit l’état, le Commerce, l’Agriculture, le Gouvernement du Pays, & la Descente de S. Louis À Damiette, Tirée de Joinville & des Auteurs Arabes, avec des Cartes Géographiques*, 1st tome, Onfroi, 1785, p.149. See also: Frédéric Lagrange, *Musiques d’Egypte, Cité de la Musique/Actes Sud*, 1996, pp.74-75.

4 Nicolas Puig, Farah, *Musiciens de nocés et scènes urbaines au Caire*, Sindbad, Actes Sud, 2010, p.73.

5 Henry Cammas and André Lefèvre, *Voyage en Egypte*, 1859, Paris, L. Hachette et Cie, 1863, with 30 woodcut illustrations.



## Bedouins, the preferred models for photographic representation



Bedouin *rababa* players

Postcard

Original photographer: Bonfils Studio  
Original publisher: Dimitri Tarazi & Fils  
Circa 1900–10

A significant number of images found in The Fouad Debbas Collection seem to suggest that Bedouins were the most musical people in the Middle East. Were they really all musicians? Or were they only role playing for the camera? Living as nomads outside major towns and villages, Bedouins may have been instrument makers, having easy access to raw materials such as wood, goatskin, and ewe's leather, among others. This might explain why they are depicted playing all types of instruments in these images. Moreover, the hypothesis that they were in fact simply posing as musicians is supported by a large number of images in which incorrect positioning of the instrument can be noted.

In his book on Bedouins, published in 1816, Mayeux describes their dance as an impromptu succession of jumps and howling. Their howling, an expression of both joy and pain, melted with the sounds of the drums, castanets, *darabokkê*, *rababa*, and lutes.<sup>6</sup> Bedouins do not need an occasion to dance. They dance to celebrate a wedding, a birth, a circumcision, but also whenever the mood takes them.

Music, as a practice associated with Bedouins, is part of the region's folklore. European travelers were fond of such images depicting tribal dances.

<sup>6</sup> F. J. Mayeux, *Les Bédouins, ou Arabes du Désert*, ouvrage publié d'après les notes inédites de Dom Raphael, sur les moeurs, usages, lois, coutumes civiles et religieuses de ces peuples, Tome 3, Paris, Ferra Jeune Librairie, 1816. Mayeux describes the following instruments in his text: "el-Thâr," "el-Thâçât," "es-Sçanaoudj," "el-Dharabokkêh," "el-Thambourah," "er-Rabâbêh."

## Dance as an expression of a collective male fever

European travelers who had the chance to witness “native dances” tell of how privileged they were to enter the circle of the performers. Specifically reserved for men, their native dances are a demonstration of collective energy and majestic fever.

In 1878, French traveler Léon Cahun was invited to attend the “Ansariés” dance during his stay with the different peoples of Syria<sup>7</sup>:

*“The seven step-sons of the Emir Ismael, dressed in their most beautiful costumes and adorned with their best weapons, hold hands, each one pushing his right hand and the left hand of his neighbor slightly behind their hips. The leader, on the right hand side of the line, shakes a handkerchief, and improves a well-rhythmed song of which all the dancers repeat the chorus in unison, jumping alternately from the right to the left foot. From time to time, the leader stirs up his companions, crying ‘Heukh, no!’, and so everyone jumps higher, and pushes hard on the heels of their boots, covered with three iron spikes.”*



Above  
Dance of the Ansarieh  
Sketch after a photograph  
by F. Régamey  
Illustration in “Les Ansariés,  
par M. Léon Cahun, chargé d’une  
mission chez les populations  
païennes de la Syrie,” 1878

Below  
Native dance, Syria  
Postcard  
Original publisher: Sarrafian, Undated

<sup>7</sup> Léon Cahun, “Les Ansariés,” *Le Tour du Monde* 38, 1879, pp.369-400.

## Music as an expression of mystic trance

Last but not least, one cannot evoke Oriental music without mentioning its use in religious ceremonies. Religion in the Orient has long been a source of curiosity to European travelers.

Publishers of postcards and stereoscopic views often describe on the backs of the images, in a European vocabulary, the actions taking place and the ceremony the viewer is looking at. In the Orient, religion expresses itself in music whether through a call to prayer, during liturgical songs, or Sufi ceremonies.

Tourism brought Sufi whirling to the Western world, which had become fascinated by the *dhikr*, or devotional acts of the Islamic faith. Music, *zikr* (sacred chanting), and poetry gathers followers together. The Mevlevi order of Sufis practices the *dhikr* by performing a whirling meditation. They are widely known as the whirling dervishes.

Only a few images of whirling dervishes can be found in The Fouad Debbas Collection. However, none depict their actual dance. During Bonfils' active years from 1880-1900, photographic technology still could not freeze movement. Instead, photographers used a neutral background and dressed the Dervishes in their ceremonial attire: a *tennure*, a sleeveless white frock, the *destegul*, a long sleeved jacket, a belt, and a black overcoat (*khirqqa*) to be removed before the whirling begins. The dervish sometimes also wears a felt cap (*sikke*) in addition to a turban wrapped around his head.<sup>8</sup>



Whirling Dervishes  
Postcard  
Original publisher: Unknown, Undated

<sup>8</sup> Schimmel, Annemarie. *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975, p.325.

## The Fouad Debbas Collection

The Fouad Debbas Collection is a photographic collection comprising over 30,000 images from the Middle East – namely Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and Turkey – from 1830 till the 1960s. It was built over the course of two decades by Fouad César Debbas (1930-2001), who was an ardent believer in the importance of collecting and preserving images as a means of safeguarding cultural heritage.

Housed in the Sursock Museum, the Collection consists of photographs, postcards, and stereoscopic views, in addition to loose albumen prints, etchings, and books, all of which relate to the region. The Collection, Orientalist in character and replete with commercial clichés, forms an important part of the Sursock Museum's collection, highlighting photography's key role in the development of modern art in Lebanon.