

# Iranian classical dance as a subject for empirical research: An elusive genre

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## Abstract

Dance has entered mainstream empirical research: dance as an experimental stimulus, and dancers as movement experts. Informed by several sources, including primary sources (original, historical documents, and oral reports, such as interviews with practitioners and academic scholars of Iranian dance genres) and secondary sources (research literature), we describe what we label “Iranian classical dance” within this paper as an important resource for empirical research, not only in humanities scholarship but also, and importantly, for empirical aesthetics, emotion psychology, cross-cultural psychology, and affective neuroscience. For this purpose, we (1) describe the aesthetics, characteristics, and history of Iranian classical dance; (2) outline issues of definition and systematization; and (3) give an overview of the cultural complexities and sociopolitical issues regarding Iranian classical dance in the past 40 years, which have shaped its current form. After the political revolution of 1979 (Iranian solar calendar year: 1358), dance in Iran—both as everyday practice and as a cultural heritage—was first forbidden, and now remains heavily restricted. International, interdisciplinary research teams can contribute to safeguarding Iranian classical dance in the future by firmly enshrining it into empirical research on human dance. We outline empirical research perspectives on Iranian classical dance, dataset resources, and expert communities.

## KEYWORDS

cross-cultural, dance, emotion, empirical aesthetics, Iran, Iranian classical dance, neuroaesthetics, Persia, Persian dance, psychology

## INTRODUCTION

Since the seminal papers in the mid-2000s by Cross and colleagues and by Calvo-Merino and colleagues who used Western ballet and Brazilian capoeira dance movements as materials in the domain of neuroscience of action perception, dance has entered mainstream empirical research: dance as an experimental stimulus, and dancers as movement experts.<sup>1–6</sup>

The main objective of this paper is to introduce Iranian classical dance<sup>a</sup> as an important resource for empirical research in empirical

<sup>a</sup> The terms “Persian dance” and “Iranian dance” are often used synonymously. In Iran, however, the term “Persian” is used only when referring to the national *language* of the country (see Church,<sup>7</sup> p. 322), or the specific Persian ethnic group, one of many residing in the country. In the case of the dance genres of Iran, Iranians use *Iranian* dance. However, outside of Iran and in the Iranian diaspora, the term *Persian* dance is more common, to the dismay of some practitioners inside Iran. On the other hand, the term “Iranian dance” is also complicated,

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aesthetics, emotion psychology, cross-cultural psychology, and affective and cognitive neuroscience. For this, we rely on several sources about Iranian classical dance. These include primary sources (original, historical documents, but also oral reports, such as interviews with 17 dance practitioners and academic scholars of different Iranian dance genres, conducted online in 2020–2021, and a series of autobiographies of dancers in Iran during the first half of the 20th century<sup>15–18</sup>), and secondary sources (research literature). We must state that the information provided here, despite all efforts, is likely incomplete. Thus, what we provide here is what is referred to as a “nonexhaustive literature review” in the empirical sciences. For example, archives may remain hidden within Iran, to which we have no access.

First, we describe Iranian classical dance in terms of its aesthetics, main characteristics, and history. Second, we examine its definition and possibilities for systematization as a codified movement language. Third, we describe the cultural and sociopolitical complexities surrounding this dance style today, touching on what has been coined as “choreophobia”<sup>8</sup> (defined as “fear of dance,” but referring to the Iranian peoples’ ambiguous relationship with dance), and highlighting the lack of state support and its effect on the further development of the dance style. Finally, we outline the value of Iranian classical dance—given its characteristics—as stimulus material and general object of study for the empirical sciences.

Albeit not a scientific objective, this paper would also like to raise awareness of the dance style “Iranian classical dance” throughout the academic world in accordance with the UNESCO’s Convention 2003 for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, specifically of Article 1, points (c) and (d).<sup>19</sup> Despite the abundance of dance in the underground sector of Iran, this dance style is in danger of underdevelopment and loss. This is due to political restrictions and prohibitions of dance, especially for female dancers, in Iran since the Islamic Revolution (IRR) in 1979 (Iranian solar calendar year: 1358). There is also a reluctance within some segments of the Iranian society to recognize that there is a classical dance tradition in Iran,<sup>8,20–23</sup> and even an inclination to sabotage the idea of studying Iranian dance academically. Examples are illustrated in Shay (1999, p. 7),<sup>8</sup> but also two of the authors of this paper have experienced instances of this type of sabotage.

## SOURCES

For the present paper, we relied on several different sources. Primary sources include original, historical documents like autobiographies of professional dancers who worked in Iran during the first half of the

as it may refer not to a single style but to a series of *different* dance genres practiced within Iran. Within this paper, we will refer to the single dance style that we are describing as “Iranian classical dance,” being well aware, however, that the word “classical” in the context of this dance style is debated among Iranian dance scholars. We explain why, and our rationale for using it. For ease of reference, however, it is important to note that this particular dance style, to which we are referring here, has been called “solo improvised Iranian dance,”<sup>8</sup> “Persian dance,”<sup>9,10</sup> “Miniature dance,”<sup>11</sup> “Tehrani dance,”<sup>12</sup> “National dance (Raqs-e Mellj),”<sup>13,14</sup> or so-called Iranian classical dance<sup>13</sup> by other scholars and practitioners.

20th century,<sup>15–18</sup> but also oral reports, such as interviews. During 2020–2021, we conducted 17 interviews with current dance practitioners and academic scholars of different Iranian dance genres. Our secondary sources consist of the currently available research literature on the topic. The information provided here is likely incomplete because archives may remain hidden within Iran, to which we have no access. The literature review is, therefore, what is referred to as a “nonexhaustive literature review” in the empirical sciences.

We also present QR codes to online video services to illustrate some of the dance movements mentioned. Please note that the authors do not take any responsibility for the content, ads, or data protection regulations of sites in the QR codes.

We will now briefly describe how the oral reports (17 interviews) were obtained.

## Interviewees

Our oral sources were experts (practitioners or scholars) in different genres of Iranian dance (Table 1).

## Materials

Interviews were held over Zoom and recorded via the record function, and via a handheld Zoom H5 recorder. Interviews were transcribed using the software *f4transkript* ([www.audiotranskript.de](http://www.audiotranskript.de)).

Interviews were held between March 2020 and March 2021, were semi-structured, and comprised four main topics: (1) aesthetics and characteristics; (2) issues of definition; (3) historical background and cultural complexities; and (4) sociopolitical issues. See Table 2 for the general questions asked of all the interviewees.

Interviews were held mostly in English (some words and sentences were said in Farsi for clarification) and transcribed by five assistant researchers, one of whom was a native Farsi speaker. The Farsi words and phrases said during the interviews were left blank by the non-native transcribers, and were later translated by the Farsi-speaking transcriber, or by one of the authors who is a native Farsi speaker.

## Referencing of sources

Due to the interdisciplinary nature of this article, we briefly outline how we are referencing our various sources within this article.

Our oral sources’ main statements in relation to Iranian classical dance are presented as numbered notes in the online [Appendix](#). These interview materials are cited throughout the article, from here on, as numbers in brackets. For instance, “[2, 3]” refers to statements 2 and 3 made by the interviewees, and can be found in the online [Appendix](#). Bibliographic sources (articles, books, book chapters, autobiographies, webpages, etc.) continue to be cited as superscript numbers per this journal’s guidelines.

**TABLE 1** Oral sources: Overview of interviewees' expertise.

Interviewee	Profession (dancer/scholar, etc.)	Expertise
1. Katherine St. John and Lloyd Miller	Musicians, researchers, writers	Both: 50+ years of experience as researchers and practitioners of Iranian and Afghan music and dance.
2. Helene Eriksen	Ethnologist, dancer	30+ years of experience in dancing and teaching dances from North Africa to Central Asia. Lectures and publishes on dance ethnology and costume studies.
3. Robyn Friend	Scholar of Middle Eastern and Balkan linguistics, folklore, and ethnology	40+ years of focus on Central Asian, Iranian, Turkish, and Balkan cultures. Studied Iranian linguistics and music.
4. Aleksandra Kilczewska	Iranologist, Indologist, choreographer, instructor, dancer	15+ years of experience in research and practice of Iranian dance and Persian and Dari languages. Focus on contemporary Iranian dance inspired by traditional elements.
5. Delsie Khadem-Ghaeini	Iranian dancer, choreographer, instructor	20+ years of experience in Iranian dance, 5+ years of experience in choreographing and teaching Iranian dance. Focus on both "classical" and contemporary Iranian dance.
6. Heather Rastovac Akbarzadeh	Scholar-artist, dancer, choreographer, researcher, author	20+ years of experience in research on Iranian dance. Focus on Iranian dance in relation to gender and sexuality and sociopolitical issues.
7. Azita Sahebjam	Iranian dancer, choreographer, artistic director	50+ years of experience in performing and teaching "classical" and folkloric Iranian dance.
8. Mahsa Hojjati	Iranian dance scholar, dancer, writer	20+ years of experience researching Iranian folk dances and 12 years of field experience in Iran.
9. Banafsheh Sayyad	Iranian dancer, choreographer, teacher, artistic director	25+ years of experience in Iranian dance. Focus on Sufi mysticism. Teaches and performs dance as an interplay between trance and directed movement. Focus on spiritual embodiment of contemporary Iranian dance.
10. Niosha Nafei-Jamali	Dancer, choreographer, instructor, artistic director	30+ years of experience in traditional and contemporary dance in the Iranian cultural diaspora.
11. Elaheh Hatami	Iranian dance researcher, author	Focus on analysis of choreography and research in the impact of exile on Iranian dance.
12. Miriam Peretz	Dancer, choreographer, instructor, artistic director	20+ years of experience in performing and teaching. Draws on Central Asian dance, <i>Sama</i> (whirling) dance, and contemporary Iranian dance. Practices, performs, and teaches dance as a transformative experience.
13. Anonymous	Iranian dancer, choreographer, instructor	20+ years of experience in Central Asian and Iranian "classical" dance, focusing on building community through sharing dance as a cultural practice.
14. Anthony Shay	Dancer, scholar, professor	60+ years of expertise as a dancer and musician, with focus on Iranian and Eastern European dances. 20+ years' experience as academic scholar in dance studies. Has directed dance companies and written books and articles on Iranian dance.
15. Natalie Nayun	Dancer, instructor, choreographer	20+ years of experience in contemporary and folkloric dances of Central Asia and the Middle East. 15+ years of teaching. Conducts research in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.
16. Hadiyah Azma	Iranian choreographer and dancer, researcher of dance and dance anthropology	20+ years of experience in performing and teaching traditional Iranian dance. Trained in contemporary dance. Choreographies are informed by both traditional and contemporary Iranian dance.
17. Nancy Rose Aktas	Performing artist, instructor, choreographer, studio owner, dance company director	55+ years of experience as a performing artist, instructor, choreographer, studio owner, company director, and researcher, as well as head of wardrobe. Currently works as a costume designer, creating theatrical replicas of ethnic and historical dress, primarily of the Caucasus, Central Asia, Iran, and North India.

*Note:* Our oral sources were dancers, scholars, or both. Their expertise ranged from particular Iranian folk dances to Iranian classical dance. A few had expertise across domains. Interviewees were selected by the authors based on the individuals' presence in the active dance community world-wide, or in the international scholarly discourse of Iranian dance.

**TABLE 2** Interview questions asked to all interviewees.

	Question	Reason for question
1.	What is your relation to Iranian dance?/Tell us about yourself and your educational path.	Understand the interviewee's expertise in and their relation to Iranian dances and other dance styles.
2.	How would you describe Iranian "classical" <sup>a</sup> dance? As a non-Iranian/as someone of Iranian descent, what fascinates you with this dance style?	Determine if there is a consensus of common cultural aesthetic themes or elements that draw dancers and scholars to this dance style.
3.	What do you know about the history of Iranian "classical" dance?	Explore the historical knowledge and sources of the interviewee and compare these across interviewees.
4.	Who was your first teacher?	To compare views and draw commonalities between interviewees' education history and the teaching methods they have experienced.
5.	How is Iranian "classical" dance similar to and different from other dance styles that you know?	To help define the aesthetic parameters as well as boundaries of this movement language as a cultural expression.

Note: Questions asked during the semi-structured interviews with experts in various genres of Iranian dance, held between March 2020 and March 2021.

<sup>a</sup>The word classical has been put in quotation marks because it is the term we are using in this paper to refer to this particular genre of Iranian dance, but not all of the interviewees would agree with that label. However, all interviewees recognized this dance genre and spoke in detail about it.

## CHARACTERISTICS AND AESTHETICS OF IRANIAN CLASSICAL DANCE

### What is Iranian "classical" dance? Historical and geographic context

There are various folk and regional dances practiced at festivities, celebrations, and general social gatherings by the different ethnic groups residing within the geographical boundaries of today's Iran, (Balouchi, Kurdish, Bojnurdi, Turkmen, etc.).<sup>24</sup> In addition to these folk dances, a distinct movement style has developed in the central region of the country (Tehran, Isfahan, Shiraz) [11], as well as in Kerman and Shushtar.<sup>11,16</sup> It is not a folk dance, although it clearly has its roots in the social dances of these regions, and its development continues to be stimulated by these. For historical, cultural, and sociopolitical reasons, the dance style is not commonly referred to as Iranian "classical" dance, although it could be described as such (Ref. 7, pp. 5–6), much like Iranian classical music (Ref. 7, p. 323), which developed alongside the dance style. However, it is also true that the dance style does not fulfill (yet) what is commonly referred to as "classical" dance within the Western context.<sup>25</sup>

While the debate about the name of this dance genre is ongoing [6, 36, 50, 92, 114, 129–134, 144, 157–159] and the existence of this dance as a "classical" form is questioned and often denied by scholars and some practitioners of this dance style [6, 134, 144], there is no doubt that Iranians, scholars and nonscholars alike, visually recognize this dance style. In the words of one of the main scholars of the field, Anthony Shay (Ref. 8, p. 94): "Iranian solo improvised dance forms a highly idiosyncratic and individual performative practice within a culturally stylistic framework which, nevertheless, all culturally competent Iranians [...] recognize as 'their' dance tradition." An Iranian can spot another Iranian at a party just by observing their body movement during their dancing, even if the dancer has never had any formal dance education [18, 28].

The core of this movement language is likely to have existed for centuries, as it is very ingrained in the way Iranians from all over the nation move to Iranian traditional music of the central regions of the country [1, 2, 11, 31, 33, 54, 64, 72, 90, 103]. Historical sources suggest that this movement language originates from an urban dance that was popular in the district of Tehran,<sup>8,13</sup> and that it already existed in the Safavid and Qajar dynasties (16th century onward), where it was performed as improvisation by professionals, at courts and in the homes of the aristocracy, as much as in mainstream society.

Travelogues of European travelers in Iran during the Safavid (ca. 1501–1736), and Qajar (ca. 1789–1925) dynasties (discussed, e.g., in Refs. 8,26, and 27) suggest that dance events were a recurrent spectacle at the court of the Persian rulers. The movement descriptions in these texts hint at similar aesthetics to those seen in Iranian classical dance today,<sup>28</sup> including curving lines and fluidity, as if "water [is] flowing through the dancers and [...] their movements" [104].

Regarding body poses and positions of Iranian classical dance, some traditional Negargari (or, "Miniature") paintings from the Safavid and Qajar dynasties (1501–1925) seem to show dance movements, body positions, and body lines that look very similar to those in Iranian classical dance today. "Particularly in sixteenth century palace decorations and ancient illustrated manuscripts through the Timurid, Safavid, and Qajar Dynasties, until the early 20th century, it has been fascinating to analyze and re-discover dance language and style very much Iranian. Iranians have called this language 'Rakhse [sic] [raqs-e] Miniature' (Miniature Dances)."<sup>11</sup> Also, even though we cannot infer anything about movement transitions that happened between poses depicted in these paintings, we can recognize them as "iconographic evidence which depicts the dancers in poses indicating that symmetry and balance typify the activity of solo dancing."<sup>8</sup> See Figure 1 for examples.

Iranian classical dance (and music) was first called *motrebi*, and later, *ru-howzi*.<sup>13</sup> *Howz* is a pool of water typically found in the yard of old Iranian houses, and the word *ru* means "on top of." So, *ru-howzi*



**FIGURE 1** Historical paintings illustrating images possibly showing Iranian classical dance. Examples of Negargari paintings from the past five centuries portraying dance and dance scenes. The paintings show the aesthetics of attire, dancing occasions (mostly at court), and dance positions. (A) *Woman Dancer* (1630). Drawing in black and brown ink, heightened with gold and watercolor colors on paper with golden seedlings; by Muhammad 'Ali Musawwir. Louvre Museum. Attribution: Jean-Pierre Dalbéra from Paris, France. CC BY 2.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0> via Wikimedia Commons. (B) *Female Dancers and Musicians* (18th century). Gouache on paper; by an unknown artist. National Museum of Warsaw. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Iran\\_Female\\_dancers\\_and\\_musicians.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Iran_Female_dancers_and_musicians.jpg). (C) *A Dancing Girl* (1778). Oil on canvas; by Muhammad Baqir. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Museum purchase funded by Franci Neely and Sabiha and Omar Rehmatulla at the 2015 Art of the Islamic Worlds Gala, 2015.65. Photo copyright: Photograph ©The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Will Michels. (D) *Banquet with Dancing Girls*, Shah Abbas I Receives the Moghul Ambassador Homyun (17th century). Fresco, by an unknown artist, Chehel Sotoun Palace, Isfahan. Ninara from Tehran, Iran. CC BY-SA 2.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0> via Wikimedia Commons. Illustrations such as these allow for a tentative dating of the dance style to the 16th century. Some scholars, however, would like to date Iranian classical dance back to prehistory. For this, they cite evidence of dancing figures on cave paintings and pottery found in the region of today's Iran from prehistoric times. "The dancing figures on the prehistoric ceramics lead to the conclusion that the dance functioned as a part of religious ceremonies and rituals [in Iran]." <sup>22</sup> Shay, however, firmly states, and we agree, that these sources do not allow for such conclusions to be made. <sup>8</sup> What the cave drawings found to date show is dance (specific features are required for archaeologists to identify a sample of cave art as dance <sup>151-153</sup>), and this is exciting in itself, as it suggests the existence of dance in the region very far back in time. However, it does not allow the dating of Iranian dance, classical, or otherwise.

refers to "pool-top" entertainment. The hosts of a party would cover their *howz* with panels of wood and rugs to make what we know today as a "stage." However, the invited guests sat *around* the stage, and not in front of it (similar to an arena-style theater). Guests were entertained by musicians and dancers, called *motrebs* (meaning "entertainer"), who would perform on top of the *howz* in this intimate, circular setting. Thus, *motrebi* is a form of professional dance, the movements of which formed

the basis for the development of *Raqs-e Melli* ("national dance"), which we call Iranian classical dance in this article. The *motrebi* dances also had athletic and acrobatic elements: "The dancers often balanced or manipulated in highly acrobatic fashion such items as teacups, saucers, candles and daggers," <sup>8</sup> but the *ru-howzi* dances, the successor to the *motrebi* dances, were less technical. <sup>13</sup> A less elaborate form of this dance style was practiced at social festivities, in women's quarters, and

at private gatherings.<sup>13</sup> This popular dance style has been influenced by dance genres in countries surrounding Iran, by the Indian Romani people [25], by Azeri and Georgian dance [187], and more recently, by popular culture portrayed in Indian, Egyptian, and Arabian movies in the 1960s and 70s [44, 123].

The style of Iranian social dance we see today is likely a descendent of the *ru-howzi* dance style and the versions of it that were performed at the court for rulers. This social movement language is the foundation for Iranian classical dance as it is practiced today by dancers in the underground dance scene within Iran and in the Iranian diaspora [7, 8, 45, 86, 153, 169]. The “short” documented life of Iranian classical dance does not render it any less important. Its significance as an essential Iranian cultural heritage is illustrated by its presence in today’s Iranian pop culture, the powerful developments of the underground dance movement within Iran, and the multinational endeavors to promote the dance form by the diaspora community of Iranian classical dancers and choreographers.

## Characteristics and aesthetics

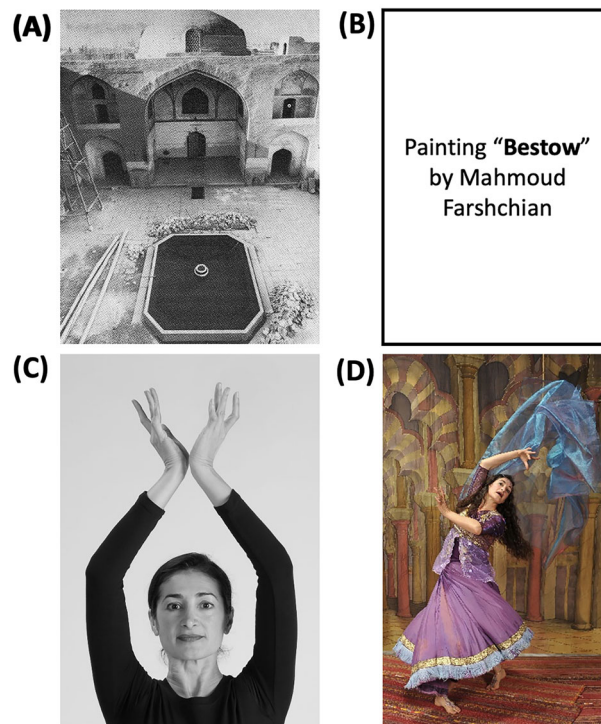
Iranian classical dance is a dance style characterized by its arm and hand movements [4, 29, 40, 48, 55, 72, 89] (e.g., Qalammu, Runama, Nasim),<sup>10</sup> a certain suppleness of the spine during the movements [11, 18, 64, 103, 177], subtle hip and shoulder movements [29, 73, 109, 155] (e.g., Takshaneh, Takbasan),<sup>10</sup> a frequent use of a triplet step (e.g., Segam),<sup>10</sup> and moving to the syncopated 6/8 rhythm of the music that this dance style is most often danced to<sup>10</sup> [1, 12, 38].

Part of the aesthetics of this dance is its fluidity and cyclical nature: the movements rarely stop, but flow from one to the next [29, 64, 104, 175]. This is reminiscent of other Iranian visual art forms, like calligraphy or Iranian Negargari (miniature) paintings. The composition is circular and images are arranged so the spectator’s eye flows from one object to the next. “Everything just connects” [64]. This is both a philosophical and a spiritual phenomenon [3, 65, 75, 103] and is clearly visually observed and kinetically experienced in Iranian classical dance.

The geometric relationship between the parts of the body, both in still positions and during the dance movements, along with forming specific bodylines, expresses certain aesthetics that are also seen in Iranian architecture, tapestry, pottery, and jewelry.<sup>8,10,29</sup> For example, when comparing elements in Iranian architecture and dance, we observe that the arms and hands frame the face, just as large arches in a building frame smaller ones. Symmetry is another common aesthetic criterion in architecture, which is embodied in both the body positions and movement patterns of Iranian classical dance.<sup>10</sup> See Figure 2 for examples of these similarities between Iranian art forms.

## Delimitation from other dance styles

When defining the boundaries of any dance, it helps to compare it with other dance forms in terms of basic similarities and differences. Iranian



**FIGURE 2** Iranian visual art, architecture, and Iranian classical dance movements and positions. In Iranian arts, common motifs and themes portray geometric balance in their use of curves and angles to frame images. These images are often derived from nature and the cosmos and designed with a harmonious, flowing composition.<sup>10,29</sup> (A) Architecture example: From *The Sense of Unity: image of Masjid-i Ali courtyard in Isfahan*, reproduced with permission by Nader Ardalan. (B) For images showing the flowy nature of movements expressed in Iranian visual art, we recommend the image “Bestow” by Mahmoud Farshchian, along with other miniature paintings by the same painter. The artist could not be reached to obtain the permission to reproduce the paintings here. (C) Dance position (called *Parastu*, from Shahrzad Khorsandi’s Iranian dance syllabus, *Shahrzad Technique*, which is described in the section “A syllabus of core Iranian classical dance movements?”) that is reminiscent of Iranian architecture (see picture in A). Photo by Dana Davis, for *The Art of Persian Dance*, reproduced with permission. (D) Dance movement (one arm in fifth position, the other in third, from *Shahrzad Technique*) reminiscent of Iranian Negargari painting motifs (see picture in B). Photo by Carl Sermon and Ma’shuqa, reproduced with permission.

classical dance is often compared to Spanish flamenco, Indian classical dance, Egyptian belly dance, and Central Asian dance genres [19, 48, 54, 65, 66, 106, 112, 113, 120, 123, 155, 176, 181]. We briefly describe the most significant differences between Iranian classical dance and these dance styles in terms of movements, however, without touching on the enormous additional subject of the different musical genres involved. Similarly, there are many folk dances in Iran, and reviewing the differences between Iranian classical dance and each of these would go beyond the scope of this paper.

Compared to Iranian classical dance, which tends to have a fluid, circular, and surrendering quality [65, 103], Spanish flamenco movements are generally danced with an expression of ferocity and strength

[65, 176] and with powerful footwork, mostly using shoes with a heel, while Iranian classical dance is danced barefoot or with soft shoes. While flamenco can have abrupt changes of direction,<sup>30</sup> Iranian classical dance's connection with the circularity of nature emphasizes smooth transitions between movements [64, 103].

Emphatic eye and eyebrow movements are part of both Indian classical dance and the traditional movement language of Iranian classical dance [1]. However, in Iranian classical dance, they are less elaborate and more subtle. In Indian classical dance, eye and eyebrow movements are scripted clearly into movement vocabulary, and are usually part of a story, while in Iranian classical dance, they are based on individual improvisational expression. Hand movements in Iranian classical dance tend to be “flowery and blossomy” (i.e., circular and sinuous movement) [4]. In classical Indian dance, there are many clearly defined positions of the hands called *mudras* that have specific expressive meanings—a concept that does not exist in Iranian classical dance [5, 182]. Another significant difference between Indian and Iranian classical dances is systematization. For Indian classical dance, the 2000-year-old *Natyasastra* syllabus outlines all movements, repertoires, canons, and expressive elements (movements, costume, and scenery) in detail.<sup>31</sup> There is no such syllabus for Iranian classical dance.

In Egyptian belly dance, intricate hip isolations in vertical/sagittal, horizontal, and transverse planes of motion are a significant part of the movement vocabulary.<sup>32,33</sup> Hip shimmies, belly ripples, and sinuous waves that travel over the body are common in this dance style. While hip movements and body waves exist in Iranian classical dance, they are more contained, or smaller. In belly dance, the arms showcase the active body part, similar to the framing that is common in Iranian classical dance, as discussed above. However, in Iranian classical dance, the arms and hands are the main part of the expression, and hip and shoulder movements, though very much part of the aesthetics of the dance, are subtle [48].

Some scholars believe Iranian classical dance is danced throughout parts of Central Asia, a region referred to as the “Persianate” world or “Iranian cultural sphere.”<sup>8,34</sup> However, Iranian classical dance differs from these Central Asian dance genres in several important ways. Likely influenced by the presence of the Soviet regime in Central Asia, many of the dances of the region have been altered according to a different aesthetics. The main visual and kinaesthetic difference between these dances and classical Iranian dance is a certain erect posture that is very different from that practiced in Iranian classical dance. Allowing the spine to be fluid, and the head to gently fall over the shoulder gives Iranian classical dance its flowy aesthetics [5, 19, 30, 56, 143, 181] that is clearly different from the flow seen in the female dance movements, for example, of the Georgian Acharuli (see example here), or some Tajik dances (see example here).

## A syllabus of core Iranian classical dance movements?

In 2015, Shahrzad Khorsandi published the first syllabus and teaching format for the movements and body positionings of this dance style.<sup>10</sup>

The motivation was to give form to this movement language, for ease of teaching and documenting it. An additional benefit of that endeavor was that this systematization aided the implementation of this dance style into empirical research, where operationalization and experimental control are key. See some examples of this first proposed syllabus in Figure 3.

This movement vocabulary is also very prevalent in Iranian pop culture, as it is practiced socially throughout the country, even though such a syllabus has never been officially defined. Videos shared on social media for general entertainment often show Iranians dancing, intuitively using the core movement language that we outline above, which suggests important cultural transmission. See Figure 4 for an example.

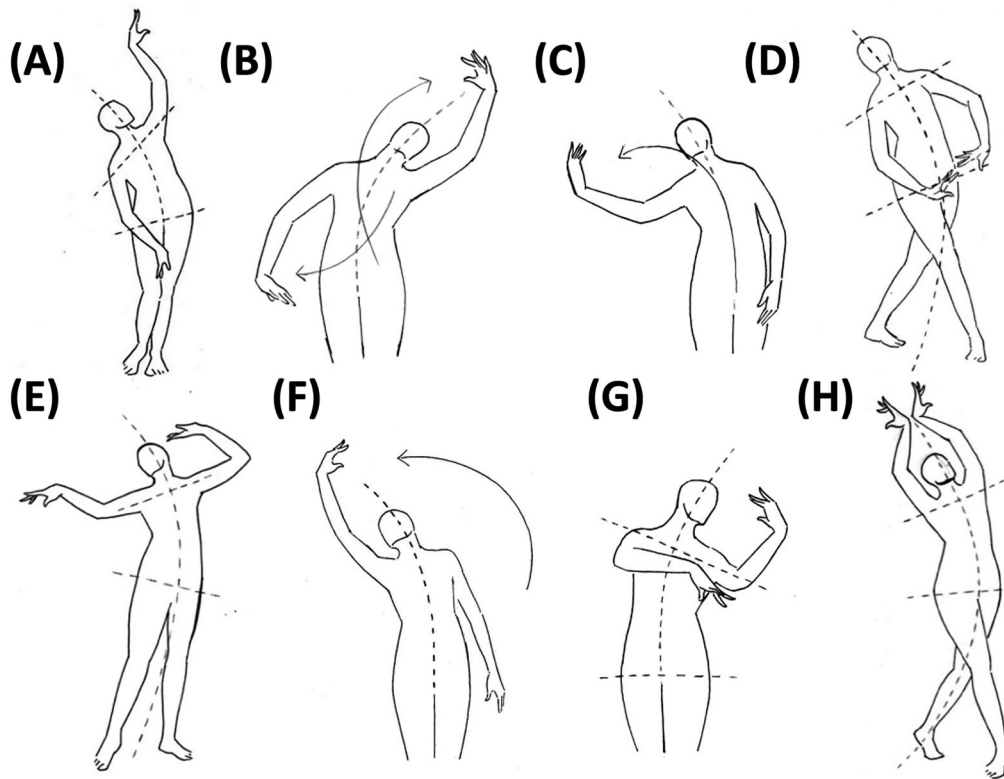
## SYSTEMATIZATION: TOWARD DEFINING AN ELUSIVE STYLE

### Issues of systematization

The idea of a systematized and “classical” artform is a very Western concept. Borrowing from scholarly work on classical music,<sup>7,35</sup> we may summarize that in scholarly discourse the term “classical” refers to a cultural practice (music, painting, dance, etc.), that has continuously developed within a specific sociopolitical and economic time and geographic frame, and that originated in some “Golden Age” of that artform. The upper social class will have stimulated its development. There will have been experts of the artform to disseminate it to subsequent generations, and a canon and a systematization of its theory will have been established, making it timeless. The artform would have its roots in the folk traditions of the culture, while there may still be a dialog with modern folk manifestations of the artform.<sup>7,36</sup> In its core meaning, “classical” means that it has an authority (a code or institution that sets the standards), a formal structured discipline, models of excellence, and a canon of works in performance.<sup>7</sup>

The dance genre that we describe here encompasses all of the above elements that are at the core of the definition of a classical art in scholarly discourse, with the exception of possessing a state-led official systematization and a canon. However, as we outline in this paper, there are good reasons for this absence.

On the other hand, another important point needs consideration: Defining and systematizing a dance style is culturally uncommon in Iran [6, 26, 36, 43, 59, 83, 96, 136]. There are social-epistemological differences (East–West) in how to approach knowledge and its systematization. And as mentioned above, the term “classical” is a very Western concept, and in the context of dance in Iran, “most people associate [‘classical’] with Western ballet” [144]. In fact, there is no Farsi translation for the word “classical,” because no such phenomenon exists in Iranian culture. It is simply called “kelasic” (a Farsi pronunciation of the English word). Hence, scholars are hesitant to call the dance form we refer to here “classical”<sup>8,21</sup> (and many alternative names have been proposed,<sup>13,37–39</sup> see also footnote a, and Hojjati



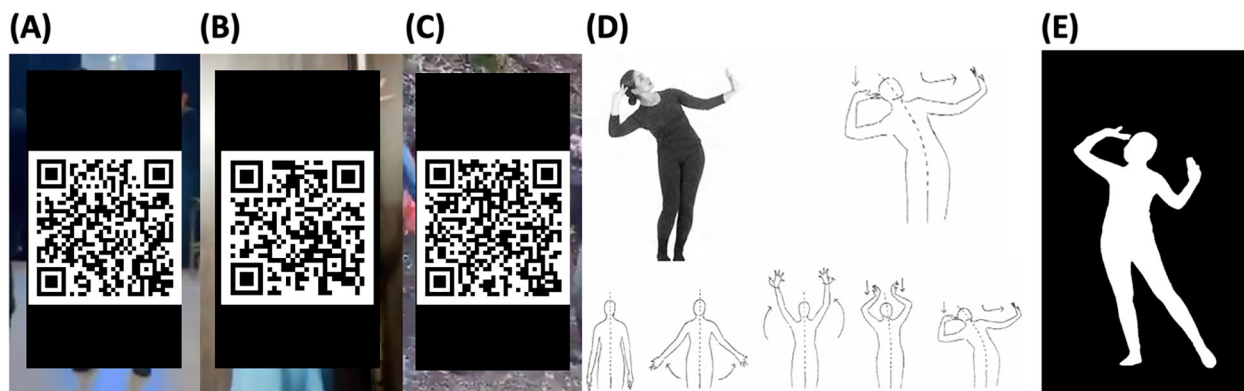
**FIGURE 3** Examples of core movements in Iranian classical dance. Movements shown: (A) *Qalammu* (paintbrush), (B) *Ahiz* (pulling motion as with a sword being pulled from its scabbard), (C) *Raha* (release), (D) *Ranesh* (settling), (E) *Delroba* (heart-stealing), (F) *Shokufeh* (blossom), (G) *Nama* (showcase or view), and (H) *Parastu* (shorebird). Most of these movements can be used as connecting movements, or ending positions. The syllabus<sup>10</sup> contains 98 movements and positions. It has seven sections that define the categories of movement: foot, hand, and arm positions, hand movement, arm movement, isolations, foot patterns, turns, and figures (specific combinations of arm and leg movements and positions to present desired aesthetics and emotions). These movements are explored in various planes of motion and different bodylines, and analyzed in terms of the geometric relationship within the body. Much like Western classical ballet or Indian classical dance, which have a nomenclature and a movement vocabulary (e.g., *plié*, *tendu*, *passé retiré*), the movements of Iranian classical dance have been analyzed into their components. With the collaboration of an Iranian linguist, Dr. Kourosh Angali, as well as several other Iranians well versed in Farsi, a nomenclature was created (e.g., *Qalammu*, *Ahiz*, *Raha*, *Ranesh*, *Shokufeh*, *Delroba*, *Nama*, *Parastu*; the first five are arm motions and the last three are figures). Khorsandi is in a very unique position to offer such a syllabus. She has a master's degree in dance, has been focusing solely on Iranian dance since 1995, and was born and raised in Iran. She is today based in San Francisco, USA, and is a prominent figure in the Iranian diaspora dance movement. For the syllabus, Khorsandi assembled the core movements and positions of the dance style, for which no official systematization nor universal nomenclature had yet been published. It is important to note, however, that many dance practitioners have had their own systems of teaching and notation, without ever publishing them. We elaborate upon this issue in section "Systematization: Towards defining an elusive style." About her practice with this core movement language, Khorsandi says: "Sometimes, after performances, Iranians from the audience, especially older ones, approach me and say 'I've never seen Iranian dance performed this way before, but it really takes me back to Iran. Thank you so much!,' which for me is an important marker that what I am doing is right."<sup>154</sup>

[in preparation]]. Furthermore, for Iranians who view and practice Iranian dance as a natural and spontaneous activity [32, 67, 69, 72, 90, 124, 137], that is, a *bodily* practice, transmitted via the observation and imitation of others' *bodies*,<sup>7,40</sup> the idea of Iranian dance as a structured, classical form, that is *written*, can be daunting. Placing it in an institutionalized box of written rules and conventions would seemingly kill the dynamic essence of the dance. The fear of stagnation and of "who sets these rules and parameters" cause hesitation to accept a codification of the dance style [43, 127].

Yet, we (and others [42, 53, 60, 61, 81, 97, 163]) argue that codification can have significant benefits and does not necessarily impose

one "box of rules." Western modern dance is taught systematically and academically, and yet within modern dance, there are a variety of techniques with vastly different embodied expressions (e.g., Graham,<sup>41</sup> Limon,<sup>42</sup> Cunningham,<sup>43</sup> etc.). Even in classical ballet, where codification and systematization has been strongly established, we see variance. For example, the schools and academies of the English Royal Ballet,<sup>44</sup> the Italian Cecchetti technique,<sup>45</sup> the Danish Royal Ballet with Bourneville technique,<sup>46</sup> and Russian Vaganova technique<sup>47</sup> are all based on the same core in terms of movement vocabulary, yet the execution of the movements has subtle differences that constitute boundaries between the styles and that give the dances a





**FIGURE 4** Sample of Persian dance movements in popular culture: *Delroba*. The figure shows a common movement that is labeled *Delroba* (heart-stealing) in Khorsandi (2015).<sup>10</sup> *Delroba* is a pushing motion, the end of which can be a still pose. However, the transitions within the movement are as important as the final pose. These transitions give the movement flow [18, 29, 32, 64, 104], and the special Iranian movement flavor. These types of movements are present in popular culture and gestures, and humorous videos that include these movement are shared widely on social media by Iranians inside and outside Iran. Please note that using the above QR codes will take you to the sites Twitter, YouTube, Vimeo, Instagram, and so on. The authors can take no responsibility for the ads or other content available on these sites. Please review the data protection of each site before deciding to consume the content. (A) A video that went viral on Instagram in the summer of 2022 of men in a barber shop suddenly bursting into a dance when they hear music. (B) Video shared by millions on WhatsApp in the summer of 2021 of a girl who recites a complicated Persian poem, fails, and then bursts into a funny dance instead. (C) Video that went viral on Twitter in the summer of 2020 titled How Iranians Go Hiking. The video shows a group of non-Iranians hiking, walking normally, and then a group of Iranians hiking, slowly passing by the camera in a line while dancing, rather than walking. (D) *Delroba*. Academic rendering of the movement shown in panels A–C (each of the videos in A–C includes a person performing the *Delroba* move at some point of their dance), as defined in *Shahzad Technique*.<sup>10</sup> The top panel illustrates the ending position, while the bottom panel illustrates the movement transitions that lead to the ending position. (E) One frame of a stimulus showcasing the *Delroba* movement from the Iranian Classical Dance Movement Library.<sup>138</sup> Each of these videos contains several dance movements of the Iranian classical dance movement syllabus, even though such syllabus has never been officially defined.

slightly different aesthetic—and ballet, of course, continues to evolve in neo-classical directions (e.g., Refs. 47 and 48).

Considering that Iranian classical dance fulfills most of the criteria for a definition of “classical,” and that, according to Michael Church, “classical is the adjective best capable of covering what every society regards as its own Great Tradition,”<sup>7</sup> we explore the possibility that Iranian classical dance could indeed be termed “classical.”

Defining the boundaries of the movement language that we are referring to as “Iranian classical dance” would have a series of advantages, the main advantage being that it would provide a necessary frame of reference. The current lack of an academic framework causes problems for practitioners and scholars of this dance form. For example, when auditioning for a local ethnic dance festival in San Francisco in the late 1990s, one of the authors of this paper (S.K.) was repeatedly denied permission to perform at the festival. Although Iranians both in Iran and in the diaspora recognize her dance as Iranian, the non-Iranian festival judges questioned the legitimacy of her movement as “Iranian dance” and instead chose an American dance company to perform “Persian dance” for the festival. This happened because the non-Iranian judges had no source for a reference established by Iranians. They could only compare Khorsandi with the other, non-Iranian group that had a longer existence in the area and thus had established themselves as the authority on the dance form. The other author of this paper (J.F.C.) has had the experience that other Western scholars have questioned the legitimacy, and even the existence, of Iranian classical dance. As discussed throughout this paper, there has been a

lived tradition among Iranians who practice this dance style in similar ways in the social and in the performative context, likely since the 16th century, and there has been a—somewhat hidden—discourse on the topic for many decades.<sup>8,27</sup> However, due to the culturally ingrained reluctance of many Iranians to allow dance to be part of a definition of art and due to government restrictions in the last four decades, it can appear that there was neither a lived practice nor a discourse. Thus, without a formal reference for Iranian dance, it is often misrepresented by non-Iranians who tend to tap into aesthetic mechanisms familiar to Westerners (e.g., in choice of movements, scenery, storylines, costumes, narratives)—which are often orientalist and reminiscent of invented traditions.<sup>49</sup> And when such are the only resources available, even some Iranians may unknowingly continue this misrepresentation.

Besides, there is often confusion about the well-documented classical ballet tradition within Iran before the Islamic Revolution in 1979, *vis-à-vis* Iranian classical dance, for which we have little explicit documentation and that is often known in the literature under a different name, as “national dance” (*Raq̄s-e Melli*) (though see below).

## Western classical ballet in Iran

Mentioning Western classical ballet in Iran is important in order to clear up some misconceptions. Iranians have admired classical ballet since its introduction to the country in the early 20th century, and there is evidence that Qajar rulers (ca. 1789–1925) were interested in

ballet and sought to bring some of ballet's aesthetics to Iran in the 19th century.<sup>50</sup> Still today, some Iranians consider classical ballet, but not Iranian classical dance, an art (discussed, e.g., in Refs. 14 and 20). They see the latter as overly simple and not worthy of being performed on stage.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Armenian immigrants such as Madame Cornelli, Yelena Avakian, and Sarkis Djanbazian brought the teachings of ballet to Iran.<sup>9,15–17,20</sup> Rather than being inspired by old European folktales, their ballet repertoire was inspired by Persian (and Zoroastrian) mythology, literature, and poetry.<sup>15,16</sup> One early promoter of this dance genre in Iran was Nilla Cram Cook, a cultural attaché at the American embassy in the 1940s and 1950s. Her declared (rather patronizing) intention was to instill “pride of their national heritage” in Iranians, by “helping” them “revive” their ancient dance heritage. This was a bizarre objective, and a typical example of both orientalism endeavors and of nationalist politics. Thus, the presence of her dance company, the Studio for the Revival of the Iranian Ancient Arts (that used Western ballet with clearly orientalist perspectives to stage these “ancient arts”), explains much of the concerns that some Iranians have with regard to foreign influences on Iranian dance today.

By the mid-20th century, state-supported organizations were formed, including the Iranian National Ballet (1956), to which foreign ballet masters were invited to create a repertoire of ballet productions on Iranian stages, similar to that of the West and the Soviet Union. Their main dance productions were classical and romantic (Western) ballets (e.g., *Swan Lake*, *Giselle*, etc.). The state's support and promotion of ballet in Iran also sparked individual dancers to found private institutions. One such organization was Pars National Ballet, founded in 1966 and directed by Abdollah Nazemi, who grew up in Iran and was immersed in the movement language, but received ballet training by Armenian ballet teachers in Iran and then the Iranian Ballet Academy [52].<sup>9,14,50</sup>

It should be mentioned that in the mid-20th century (Pahlavi dynasty), there were also instances of Iranian-themed ballet productions, where stereotypical, even caricature-like, “Iranian” movements and costuming were inserted into an otherwise purely balletic production, with the goal of presenting Iranian culture on an international stage. This is obviously problematic. But this is a general problem with ballet productions and there is a discourse surrounding this type of cultural infusion and orientalism. Examples of this are reflected in the controversies surrounding the “Chinese” or “Arabic” dances in the ballets *The Nutcracker*, *Le Corsaire*, and *Scheherazade*,<sup>32,51,52</sup> and in particular also with regards to “blackfacing” in the ballets *La Bayadère* and *Petrushka*.<sup>53,54</sup> A recent example for this latter problem is the controversy around Neumeier's *Othello* for the Royal Danish Ballet.<sup>55,56</sup>

But besides unfortunate instances of orientalism in Iranian ballet productions, the 1960s and 1970s also saw the flourishing of a National Ballet Company (founded in 1956) in Iran that performed classics of the romantic and classical ballet repertoire (e.g., *Giselle*, *Swan Lake*, etc.) much-loved by Iranians.

Relying on bibliographic scholarly work and on autobiographies,<sup>15–18</sup> we have assembled an overview of some of

the different dance companies that existed in Iran during the 20th century in Table 3.

### Staged Iranian folk and “national dances” (*alias* Iranian classical dance) in Iran

Separate from the Iranian National Ballet was the creation of “Melli” (national) and “Mahalli” dance ensembles by the state (“Mahalli” means “regional,” but the academic term today would be “folk”). Examples of these are also outlined in Table 3. It is important to note that by this time, a distinction was made between ballet and “national dance” (the dance style we refer to as *Iranian classical dance* in this paper). The ballet productions served the purpose of gaining international recognition for Iran as a progressive country, while the national and folk dances were to instill cultural pride and to forge a national identity.<sup>20</sup> The national and folk dance ensembles, mostly the same cast as the national ballet, toured worldwide.

In the 1960s, there was a state-led effort to promote and develop the Iranian “classical” arts in general, including also Iranian classical music.<sup>40</sup> The Iran National Folklore Institute, founded in 1967 by the queen and funded by the government, hosted the Mahalli dancers, who, despite the company's title (“folk”), performed both national (i.e., Iranian classical dance) and folk dances. The company was led by Robert De Warren, a dance master from the English Royal Ballet. Folk dances were learned during field studies by De Warren and his team, and then performed as staged choreographies that were modified from the original dances and performed by the ballet-trained dance ensemble.<sup>16,57</sup> The national dances (Raqs-e *Melli* or Iranian classical dance) were inspired by Negargari (Miniature paintings) and the choreographies were based on the core Iranian movement language (of Iranian classical dance). However, the training of the dancers' bodies was ballet-inspired technique (i.e., balance, coordination, etc.) For an analysis of an example of this method, see the [Supplementary Materials](#), Section 1: “Haft Peykar, an example.”

Some scholars refer to these national dances (Raqs-e *Melli* or Iranian classical dance) as an invented tradition,<sup>49</sup> which refers to a practice or phenomenon that people consider ancient but that is, in fact, recent. Others go further and refer to what was going on as “choreographic politics.”<sup>21</sup> This is a process by which a ruling group utilizes a specific spectacular movement vocabulary, for example, Western or Russian ballet technique, to impose a tradition that has little to do with the dances of the people of the region.<sup>57</sup> Choreographic politics was practiced throughout the region of the Soviet Union throughout the 20th century, and historical sources suggest that a similar process was underway in the multicultural society of Iran during those times, just not under Soviet influence, but also that of American and English.<sup>8,21</sup>

It is beyond doubt that the infusion of Iranian classical dance with ballet could be detrimental for Iranian classical dance as a distinct style. Yet, some dance practitioners and scholars may mistake benign modifications to the dance genre, made to accommodate for the proscenium stage, as “ballet infusion.”

**TABLE 3** Documented dance companies, studios, and organizations in Iran in the 20th century (until 1979).

Year founded	Name of company	Patronage, funders, and so on	Dance masters(s), choreographers	Type of dancing/productions	Main productions/activities
1928	Madame Cornelli	Private	Madame Cornelli	General movement and musicality, character, and European and Russian folk dances	
1933	Madame Yelena	Private	Avedisian Yelena	Ballet	
1942	Tehran Ballet School	Private	Serkis Djanbazian	Ballet	Over 100 Iranian-themed ballet productions
1946	Studio for the Revival of the Iranian Ancient Arts	Government-funded	Nilla Cram Cook	Mixture of ballet and Iranian gestures combined with Iranian poetry, songs, and mythological stories	Productions of ballet-based dances with Iranian themes, poems, and mythology that were performed by the ensemble at the American Embassy in Tehran. Toured nationally and internationally.
1956 and 1958	Iranian National Ballet Academy, which 2 years later became the Iranian National Ballet Company	Government-funded	Directors: Nejad and Haideh Ahmadzadeh; Ballet masters: Ann Cox, William Dollar, Miro Zolan and Sandra Vane, Yvonne Patterson, Nicholas Beriozoff, Marion English-Delanian, Richard Brown, Robert and Jacqueline de Warren, Dudley Davies, Kenneth Mason	Classical, neoclassical, and contemporary ballet	Numerous ballet productions between 1958 and 1979
1958	National Folkloric Music, Song, and Dance Ensemble	Government-funded	Nejad and Haideh Ahmadzadeh	Field study and collection of Iranian folkloric dance, music, and traditions	Toured nationally and internationally, and performed for foreign guests of the government
1966	Pars National Ballet	Private	Abdollah Nazemi	Iranian folkloric and traditional dance performances. Training in ballet as basic technique.	Produced many dance and dance-theater productions for the Iranian National Television
1967	Roudaki Hall	Government-funded		The first center for performing arts in Tehran	
1967	National Folklore Organization	Government-funded	Robert de Warren	Field study, collecting and staging of Iranian folk dances. Hosted the performing ensemble, The Mahalli Dancers, and the National Dance Company	Many productions of folk and national dances of Iran. Toured internationally. Over 60 staged folk dances. All the material recorded in the field studies and archived were destroyed in the 1979 revolution

*Note:* Overview of some documented dance companies, studios, and organizations (ballet and nonballet) that have existed in Iran throughout the 20th century. Some were privately funded, others were supported and promoted by the government's cultural ministry. The fact that many of the ballet masters were Westerners, Russians, or Armenians is a concern for some practitioners and scholars of Iranian classical dance who have concerns about the processes of cultural imposition and appropriation.<sup>8,14,21,32,57,61</sup>

### Arrival of the proscenium stage in Iran: Natural development or cultural imposition?

The idea of a proscenium stage with a “fourth wall” (i.e., separation of audience and performer<sup>58</sup>), through which the audience views the performers—did not exist in Iran prior to the early 20th century. Its introduction changed the audience–performer relationship from the traditional “arena.”<sup>20</sup> The performers’ movements now had to be

bigger to be seen from further away. As a consequence, existing aesthetically relevant and genuinely Iranian classical dance movements were adapted slightly, such that they could be viewed from a distance. Thus, the difference was in the way the dance was performed [35, 58]. For example, the extension of arms and legs and expanded traveling movements on stage that we see today in Iranian classical dance are modifications that are the result of the transition from traditional, intimate performance spaces to a proscenium setting, and are

characteristic for the development of any dance form making this transition. For example, the introduction of the proscenium stage caused the same type of modifications in dances of Azerbaijan [186].

Yet, a nuanced look at the antagonism toward these changes among some practitioners and scholars of Iranian classical dance is in order.

During the 20th century, cultural personnel from the Soviet Union traveled through its provinces (Central Asia), building folk and national companies<sup>21,59</sup> (e.g., Afghan Mahalli dance), some of which were, in fact, invented traditions.<sup>49</sup> Folk-dance movements from each province were plucked and then heavily infused with ballet technique with the objective to polish them and make them stageable (where using a proscenium stage was not part of the culture<sup>21</sup>). These new movements were then combined with fantastic scenery, costumery, and narratives, and spun into impressive choreographies that borrowed from, but also modified, reshaped, and even replaced the dances of the regions [5, 19, 41, 139, 145]. Today, the intention of creating those national dance ensembles is seen as an attempt to create a “national identity” in the Soviet provinces, something that scholars refer to as “choreographic politics.”<sup>21,57</sup>

Some practitioners of Iranian classical dance believe that the same politics were applied in the creation of “national dance” (*Raqs-e Melli*) in Iran during the decades leading up to the 1979 revolution, not only as Soviet choreographic politics, but, also Western ones. While Igor Moiseyev’s model of ballet was used in Central Asia after WWII, an earlier model, established in Armenian ballet, was used in Iran.<sup>57,60</sup> The bibliographic and autobiographical resources from the time indeed suggest that there were some examples of dance companies that were, to a greater or lesser extent, showcasing a hybrid dance style (“invented tradition”) heavily infused by Soviet/Western ballet technique.<sup>14,21</sup>

Throughout the mid-20th century, propaganda regarding dance in Iran was directed at removing “old-fashioned” art (Iranian dance genres) and replace it with newer and “intellectually richer” art (e.g., classical ballet).<sup>14</sup> This, coupled with the fact that many of the dance masters at the time were Western and Russian trained<sup>20</sup> (some with a somewhat ethnocentric gaze) and whose work is now considered by some Iranians as a political and cultural imposition<sup>8,14,20</sup> [44, 114, 133, 162, 169], cause some scholars today to caution that all staged performances of Iranian classical dance are now ballet-infused as a result of the developments in the 20th century [25, 44, 133, 169, 171], and propose, therefore, that a truly Iranian classical dance no longer exists.

### Debate: Has Western classical ballet infused Iranian classical dance?

Importantly, the idea of the existence of “pure” cultural traditions is no longer very prominent in humanities scholarship. The current view is that it is obvious that cultures have always been in contact and exchanged forms and content with each other. In fact, today the idea of clear cultural boundaries in artistic expression is linked negatively to 19th-century nationalism (and its repercussions in the 20th century),

which is another reason to consider the idea of a “pure dance style” inadequate.

Nevertheless, because of the presence of some orientalist perspectives and of the existence of ballet in Iran in the 20th century, some consider the national dances (*Raqs-e Melli*) (i.e., Iranian classical dance) and staged folkdance productions (*Raqs-e Mahalli*) that were choreographed and staged by non-Iranians to be a cultural imposition<sup>8,14,21,32,57,61,62</sup> [145, 162]. However, we believe that a more nuanced look is in order, when analyzing these historical sources of dance productions in Iran, as well as current developments in the scene.

There is an inherent difference between replacing movements, characteristics, or cultural mannerisms of Iranian classical dance with those of ballet (i.e., cultural imposition/infusion, as discussed in, e.g., Refs. 21, 57, and 63), and using fundamental technique and pedagogic methods prevalent in ballet (e.g., Refs. 64–69), to develop strength, flexibility, and body awareness, while explicitly using a vocabulary of Iranian movements to prepare the body for the embodiment of Iranian characteristics and aesthetics (i.e., artistic and aesthetic development as discussed in, e.g., [53]). This latter option would be completely in line with the development of Iranian classical dance.

The discomfort that some Iranian dance practitioners and scholars have with regard to classical ballet hinders a cross-fertilization between the styles. In fact, the two styles have some surprising similarities in terms of historical developments.

At the French and Italian courts in Europe in the 16th and early 17th centuries, there was not yet any separation between social and staged dances. Dancing (minuet, gavotte, etc.) was a serious enterprise and mainly for men.<sup>70</sup> The dance master was also the fencing master—and dancing was considered a basic technique for fencing, a critical skill for an aristocrat to protect his honor. Mirroring societal changes, a special style of danced movement emerged from these social dances, promoted by Louis XIV who established the *L’Academie Royale de la Danse* in 1661, and which then progressed into what we know as staged ballet, or classical ballet today, a both athletic and artistic form of bodily expression involving complex costumery and scenery.<sup>46,71,72</sup> This was when ballet became a performing art that was practiced and performed for entertainment and aesthetic pleasure (e.g., Refs. 73 and 74).

An important feature of Western cultural development in that period of time (starting around the 16th century) was an increased emphasis on analytical (as opposed to holistic) thought. Epistemic social norms about what is considered the right way of approaching and thinking about a problem gave Westerners a tendency to analyze and break down systems and patterns into their components, systematizing them for a better understanding and, ultimately, optimization.<sup>75–78</sup> These analytical thought processes were also applied to dance. Movements were analyzed, described, and then optimized with great detail to create teaching pedagogies.<sup>68</sup>

Dance notation likely also originated in those early days of systematic dance practice at French and Italian courts. Syllabi of movement repertoires and dance performances were written down starting in the 15th century,<sup>79</sup> and norms and nomenclature were developed around the 16th century.<sup>80</sup> Pierre Beauchamp (1631–1705), a French

violinist, composer, and dancing master, created the Feuillet dance notation system (Beauchamp-Feuillet system). This was a means to notate the baroque dances that all French aristocrats were supposed to learn in a given year. As an aide de memoire, the learners carried these little notebooks with the dance notations with them, and today, these notations offer us a rich trove of examples. Thus, through the teaching and notation, a common language for dance steps and movements came into being. The first ballet notation systems appeared (pioneered probably by the Stepanov notation system in the 19th century).<sup>80–83</sup> In some Western countries, like France and Russia, ballet dance and expression became something that was taught as early as 1661 in France, with *L'Academie Royale de la Danse* in Paris, and in 1738, with the Imperial Ballet School in St. Petersburg, Russia (with a French ballet master).<sup>64–66</sup> Archival endeavors were put in place early, and thanks to these, we have a rich body of evidence today (including paintings, drawings, writings, notations, costumes, canon descriptions, music notations, etc.), dating back to the beginnings of “classical” ballet (yet, even despite these efforts, controversies remain<sup>84</sup>). Due to these state-led developments, ballet was gradually elevated to a “high art” in the West (United States and Europe) and the Soviet Union<sup>45,47,85</sup> by the 18th century (we can date this to 1760 with the publication of the famous *Lettres sur la danse et les ballets* by Jean-Georges Noverre<sup>86</sup>); hence, we attach the label “classical” to ballet today. The *Ballet d'action*<sup>86</sup> is the genre of ballet performance as we know it today, where entire stories and narratives are conveyed to an audience, using the expressivity of the body along with sometimes metaphorical use of objects and costumery.<sup>72</sup> The stories of these ballet pieces are based on popular folk tales and legends of Europe (e.g., *Swan Lake*, *Giselle*, *La Sylphide*, *The Nutcracker*, *La Fille Mal-Gardée*, etc.).

Although Western classical ballet and Iranian classical dance seem to have emerged during similar times (16th century) and were elevated to court dances, there is no established teaching pedagogy for Iranian classical dance today, as there is for ballet. The benefit of having a standardized training pedagogy is illustrated by the following example.

One of the authors (S.K.) has worked with some Iranian classical dancers who are only able to execute some dance movements on one side of the body, and refuse to learn the movement on the other side, out of the fear of appearing clumsy. This limits their possibilities of expression. Ballet training methods consist of a system that ensures that all movements are taught and practiced with both the right and the left side of the body, and not be limited to performing a movement only on one side, allowing artistic freedom, both in improvisation and in choreography.<sup>45,47,67,69,85</sup> In S.K.'s experience, those learning and practicing Iranian classical dance, both inside and outside of Iran, do not have access to many established sources for this style, and often rely on YouTube, which offers no standards for genuineness. Besides, those practicing Iranian classical dance within the underground sector of Iran face hindering limitations and rarely have opportunities to develop technique, and often lack understanding of dance structure and the dancing body<sup>87</sup> [84].

We and others (e.g., [53]), therefore, believe that Iranian classical dance can be systematized, as an Iranian dance form, into a pedagogy *without* the infusion of ballet movements. Structuring an Iranian dance

class in the way ballet is taught in terms of a structured pedagogy with floor work, footwork, jumps, combinations, turns, stretches, right and left, and so on, but with Iranian dance movements and not with ballet movements, would train the dancers' bodies systematically for the stage.

Of course, the idea of this formal dance training is reminiscent of ballet training methods [53], but it can be entirely based on culturally relevant Iranian aesthetics. Such ballet-inspired training methods can be, and are developed today, by many Iranian classical dancers. However, these methods are based on an understanding that when performing any dance style, using the technique and aesthetics of that *particular* dance style is important, because it opens up a larger toolbox for expressivity. A dancer's body (and brain) trained in technique allows the dancer to embody small, but important nuances in the “Iranianness” of the movement style and its aesthetics and expressivity.<sup>10</sup>

Defining the movement language, a nomenclature, and a training pedagogy will determine the movement boundaries, which will then make it possible for dance artists to creatively push these boundaries without unrooting themselves from the core movement elements, and help in the development of the dance form. Beyond doubt, more dance scholars are needed to explore and analyze this dance genre in order to have an official consensus on a codified method.

## CULTURAL AND SOCIOPOLITICAL ISSUES

Several cultural and sociopolitical issues merit examination in relation to Iranian classical dance. They constitute the background against which to study and develop the dance form.

Historical sources suggest that in the minds of many Iranians, professional dancers in Iran were associated with the red-light district of large cities between the 16th and 20th centuries [16, 17, 83, 85, 136, 166]. Negative labels were attached to those who danced in public, especially to women.<sup>8,15,20</sup> While we can only speculate about the pre-20th century dancers' income and professions (though, see Ref. 26), toward the second half of the 20th century, in both the East and the West, dancers who performed on stages in the capital cities were increasingly formally trained artists. While this artistic development and the public discourse surrounding dance has continued openly in the West, it came to an abrupt halt in Iran in 1979 with the Islamic Revolution [173] and continues only in the underground.

### Dance movement censorship by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance

In 1980, all state-led support of dance within Iran was removed and all dance became forbidden, deemed as immoral and prone to “inciting public disorder.”<sup>20,22</sup> This was the end of professional dance in Iran. Even dancing inside private homes became illegal. Neighbors were known to report each other to the authorities if music was heard.

In the 1990s, a decade after the Islamic Revolution and the end of the Iran–Iraq war, bans on dance were slightly reduced, and performers

began to apply for permission to present public displays of “movement” (not “dance”) in theatrical settings.<sup>27</sup> However, they were met with many restrictions.

Since the 2000s, there has been a genre of movement called *Harekat-e Mowzun* (“harmonious movement”) that has been permitted, if performed by one gender for an audience of the same gender (e.g., performances by Fazaneh Kaboli and Heideh Kishipour).<sup>20</sup> However, dancers must apply for government approval from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (*Vezerat-Farhang o Ershad-e Eslami*). All movements and the story line must be approved by the Central Overseeing Council on Performing Arts of that ministry (*Shora-ye Markazi-ye Nezarat bar Namayesh*) at the Center for Performing Arts (*Markaz-e Honarha-ye Namayeshi*).<sup>28</sup> There are 14 rules that a dance performance must follow under this regime. The most common reason to forbid a performance is a violation of rule 6: “Promotion of corruption, indecency, and indecent behaviour.”<sup>28</sup> Women performing in the style of *Harekat-e Mowzun* must be covered such that no skin and clear body-line show, a hijab must be worn, and they ideally must keep their hands and arms engaged with carrying stage props, and doing something with a clear aim. Transitive movements and gestures should be used, as to not incite the audience with suggestive moves.<sup>20</sup> The performance must not be titled as “dance,” but as “movement.” The music used must not have a danceable rhythm, and the movements choreographed or improvised must not look like nor incite dancing. Men and women are allowed to perform on the stage in theatrical settings with an obvious preapproved message or storyline. Any movement deemed inappropriate (sensual or sexual) or any subjects implied that are deemed antigovernment or anti-Islamic are censored and often lead to consequences for the artists, including fines, imprisonment, and threats to their careers. Performances are often canceled at the last minute for a variety of reasons (and the producers’ investments—usually the dancers’ private funds—are lost), and performers and choreographers may be arrested [142].

Thus, a performance that makes it to the stage has gone through movement censorship. Staged performances that receive permission, unless they are theatrical movement and part of a play, are mostly dances with either mystical themes or folk dances that demonstrate fighting skills or daily rituals such as harvesting. Thus, the Sufi Dervish (mystical) tradition continues to be performed within Iranian Islamic society, as well as folk-dance traditions in some Iranian cultural groups that have combat or harvest dances performed only by men (see also following section “State support”).

The 14 rules—which are also not reliable, because even with government permission sometimes performances are canceled without a clear reason—are not in accordance with the internationally recognized United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which upholds the freedom of expression through the arts (article 19, UDHR, 1948). All of these warrant international awareness of and solidarity with practitioners of this art form. Yet, it is, and must remain, the choice of the Iranian people to foster any changes in their society, if they so wish.

## State support

The staged dance scene in Iran relies almost entirely on self-funding, as no government funds are directed at promoting and developing independent dance artists. The only government support is for men’s folk dances, the *razmi* (martial arts), and harvest and ritual dances. These are performed at national events, mainly to glorify Islamic holidays, with expressive elements of combat, masculine prowess, and the skills to defend the nation. Additionally, there is some support for harmonious movement (*Harekat-e Mowzun*) in theatrical settings, promoting religious messages.<sup>20</sup>

Most dance styles in the world thrive and flourish because they receive important government support, whether directly or through private foundations. This flourishing is reflected in an educational system of the dance style, technique development, academic discourse on the dance, access to specialized doctors and specialists in dance movement optimization, and societal education in dance through the presence of the dance style in the media (radio, TV, cinema, etc.), theaters, and dance studios. The consequences of not having this become clear when considering some dance-related funding statistics of other nations (see Table 4).

## Contradictions—Is it forbidden or not?

It is common to find contradictory information when researching dance in Iran. This is a reflection of its troubled past and multifaceted present [27, 46, 85, 86, 118, 140, 150–153, 173].

There are published scholarly books in which authors contradict themselves about dance bans on the very same page, “In today’s Iran, dance is not officially forbidden,” and then “Dancing is considered to be *haram*, ‘forbidden’ in Islam,” and again “In spite of the prohibition of dance in Islam,…” (Ref. 22, p. 43). The situation is probably best described by the same author (p. 58) as: “The status of dance in today’s Iran is very complicated. Dancing is not officially forbidden, but it is also not legal. The reason for this challenging situation can be traced to the different opinions regarding dance in Iranian society. The laws regarding dance widely depend on the tendency and the perspective of the government officials who are responsible for legislation.”<sup>28</sup>

Any information claiming that dance is *not* forbidden within Iran should, therefore, be taken with a grain of salt. Dance does exist in Iran, that is true. People dance, take dance classes, and watch performances, despite government efforts to suppress it. However, they do it, either under extreme restrictions and censorship, substantially limiting their creative and expressive output, or in the underground sector, risking their livelihood and their safety [27, 47, 63, 87, 151, 173]. It should not be assumed that dance schools and events in Iran exist in the same free and government-supported way as in many other countries of the world today. We have elaborated on this briefly in the [Supplementary Materials](#), Section 2: “How to speak about Iranian classical dance today?”

**TABLE 4** Examples of government funding in different countries for dance performances.

Country	Years	Funding objective	Funding	Reference
Australia	2012–2013	Dance	\$37,000,000	154
Canada	2012–2018	14 dance schools per year received an average of \$8,700,000 in state funds	\$52,366,000	155 (tab. 7, p. 30)
Italy	2020	Performing art dance	€11,562,933	156
England	2018/2019	Dance organizations	€45,971,000	157
Germany	2019/2020	Corona Crisis, 312 dance projects	€3,650,00	158

Note: In the West, total government funding for dance and dance-related work in the past 40 years, including education of the next-generation of dancers, has increased steadily, along with funding for the arts in general.<sup>159,160</sup> Government funding for the arts in Europe varies between 0.3% and 1.2% of GDP in the EU member states.<sup>161</sup> The visibility, appreciation, and role that dance, dance events, and dance organizations have in other societies are the result of an inclusion of this art form into the media (radio, TV, print, cinema, etc.), and strong state-led efforts to make dance participation and attendance available to everyone (e.g., subsidizing ticket prices for dance performances, promotional activities about dance in schools, providing grants and commissioning dance projects, etc.). In 2009, 16% of Australians attended dance performances; in Canada, it was 15% of the population in 2011. In the United States, the level of attendance is slightly lower (e.g., 7% in 2009<sup>162</sup>). According to the Eurobarometer Report 2013,<sup>164</sup> in 2007 and 2013, an average of 18% of the population in Europe had seen a public ballet, dance performance, or an opera at least once in the past 12 months. In Sweden, this number was 34%, while in Portugal and Greece, it was 8% of citizens.<sup>163</sup> It is unrealistic to expect Iranian classical dance to have developed at the rate of other dance styles in the international community, which have received such significant state support. Iranian classical dance does not have a supportive platform for presentation and discourse in present-day Iran, creating a huge challenge for dancers to explore, develop, and present their work. Additionally, the extreme restrictions on dance (including not being allowed to call it “dance”) have forced dancers and choreographers to resort to use movement styles that are less likely to cause trouble, such as *Sama* whirling or theatrical movement resembling Western contemporary dance [47]. If these restrictions continue, Iranian dance could eventually lose important traditional elements and transform into some other form of dance all together, resulting in the loss of a cultural movement language.

### Cautionary notes on the “West saves the Middle East”: The case of Iranian classical dance

Several scholars and our interview partners have highlighted the importance of a nuanced look at the sociopolitical issues surrounding Iranian classical dance [45, 46, 140, 150]. A “West saves the Middle East” narrative has existed in other domains, and there is some evidence to suggest that such a mindset may in the past have influenced public opinion to support military interventions and wars in the region (e.g., the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria), leaving the countries targeted by these well-meaning “savior” efforts of the West in disarray and, arguably, worse off than before (e.g., Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, etc.). Some historical sources today claim that both the coup of 1953 against Prime Minister Mossadegh and the revolution against the Pahlavi Shah in 1979 were instigated by Western powers.<sup>88–95</sup> Against this complicated backdrop, populations in the Middle East, including Iran, are not welcoming of what they see as Western influence. Given that some of such previous efforts have not brought about the promised positive change for the people in those regions,<sup>88–95</sup> Iranians remain skeptical of possible Western influences with regard to dance.

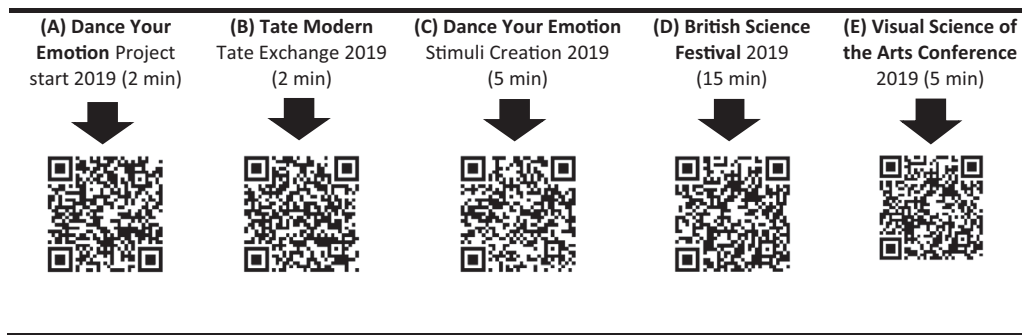
At the same time, Western academics and artists often feel compelled to help. Article 19 of the United Nations UDHR holds that “everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”<sup>96</sup> This article includes the freedom of artistic expression, that is, thus, being violated by the heavy dance restrictions that are in force in Iran. As incomplete as the implementation of this declaration still remains to this day, citizens of countries who are brought up in the spirit of Article 1 of the UDHR, are, nevertheless, likely to feel compelled to want to help when faced with the realities

in countries where Article 1 is overtly disregarded: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”

It is also important to realize that it is difficult to grasp the contradictory realities that exist today in Iran. There are documented facts about the past, yet some of these facts are often concealed or hidden under a veil of silence and denial because it is difficult to speak the truth when you perceive the truth as a threat to your safety, and that of your family and country. Some say this concealing and silence is a mode of survival.<sup>97</sup> This is a difficult balance to strike also in this paper, where enthusiasm and care for a dance style and concern for its documentation and further development may clash with sociopolitical realities.

Summing up, phrasing criticism against human rights violations in Iran (or any other country), for example, against the restrictions of free expression through the arts, is not straightforward for three reasons. First, “to criticize to improve” can imply a transformation that may not be accepted by a percentage of the population who are bound to long-established social conventions. Second, such criticism is feared by some to play into motivations to destabilize the country with military interventions (e.g., see Refs. 88–95). And third, it can potentially cause harm to the career and even the physical safety of Iranian dance artists and academics, both in Iran and abroad, to voice such criticism [118, 173].

Article 1 of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) holds that “the purposes of this Convention are: (a) to safeguard the intangible cultural heritage; (b) to ensure respect for the intangible cultural heritage of the communities, groups and individuals concerned; (c) to raise awareness at the local, national and international levels of the importance of the intangible cultural heritage, and of ensuring mutual appreciation thereof; (d) to



**FIGURE 5** Short outreach films about the Iranian Classical Dance Project. Scan the QR codes to see the videos on YouTube. The videos have been curated by our Iranian film team from 3fish (3fish.co). Please note that the authors do not take any responsibility for the content, ads, or data protection regulations of sites in the QR codes. Please note that using the QR codes will take you to YouTube. The authors can take no responsibility for the ads or other content available on these sites. Please review the data protection of each site before deciding to consume the content.

provide for international cooperation and assistance.<sup>19</sup> As an example of moving toward this ideal of safeguarding and bringing international recognition for Iranian classical dance, a group of native Iranian dancers, choreographers, and scholars have founded a grass-roots, nonprofit organization called the Dance Center of Iran (DCI), which is not affiliated with any political or religious ideology. We provide a brief overview of its activities and background in the [Supplementary Materials](#), Section 3: “Dance Center of Iran.” However, we stress that we can neither endorse nor explicitly support the views or activities of the DCI, nor can we provide any guarantees about its future developments, artistic, social, political, or otherwise. We merely cite it as an example for a current (2020–2023) systematic activity to safeguard and develop the dance form, undertaken mainly by Iranians living in Iran, and which we are aware of at this point of time.

In addition, we propose that international, interdisciplinary research teams of academics and practitioners can contribute to safeguarding this dance genre. One way to do this is by firmly enshrining Iranian classical dance not only into humanities research but also into empirical research on human dancing. In the next section, we give an overview of empirical research perspectives for the future, and present some existing empirical research, including Iranian classical dance, Iranian classical dance dataset resources, and expert communities of this dance style.

## EMPIRICAL RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES INCLUDING IRANIAN CLASSICAL DANCE

In the 1980s and 1990s, developmental psychology started to use expressive dance movements to research children’s affective development, namely, the ability to use expressive body movement to communicate and the ability to understand expressive body movement in others.<sup>98–101</sup> In 2005–08, the first papers in cognitive neuroscience were published using dance as stimulus and dancers as experts for researching the neural underpinnings of action perception and skill learning,<sup>1,4,6,8,102–104</sup> and many papers have followed suit (e.g., Refs.

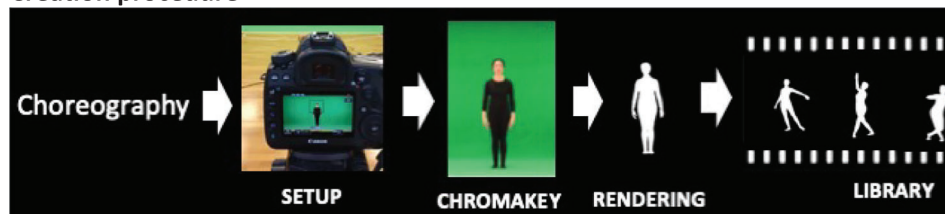
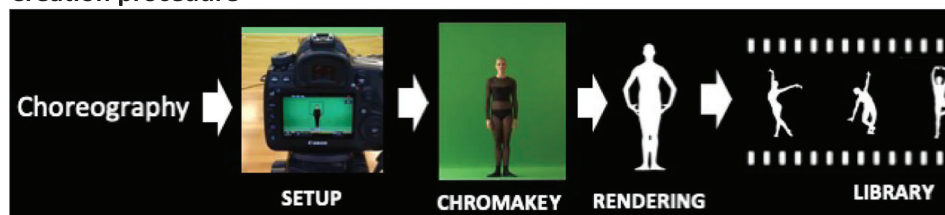
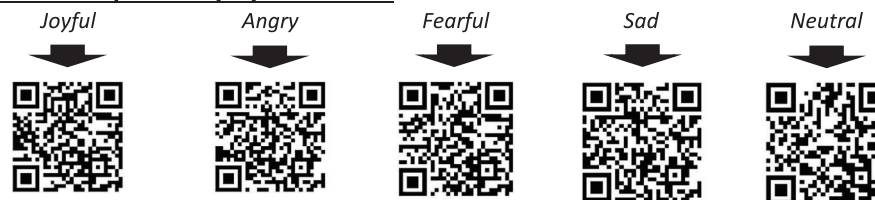
105–113). Dance has thus contributed to further our understanding of how skill learning triggers important sensorimotor plasticity (e.g., Refs. 112 and 114) and how viewers aesthetically evaluate full-body movements (e.g., Refs. 115–122).

The dance styles used in experimental psychology and cognitive neuroscience are mainly Western classical ballet (e.g., Refs. 2, 4, 6, and 123), capoeira (e.g., Refs. 1 and 103), Western contemporary dance (e.g., Refs. 104 and 124), and Indian classical dance (e.g., Refs. 124, 125; for a review, see Ref. 126). In health psychology, the branch of psychology that studies the many physical and mental health effects of recreational dancing, many more dance styles are under investigation, and the results showcase important positive health outcomes (e.g., Refs. 127–130).

Iranian classical dance has not yet entered empirical research, although both the historical and sociocultural context of this dance style, as well as the characteristics and aesthetics of Iranian classical dance movements, make Iranian classical dance a very promising and important resource for empirical research. Therefore, two of the authors of this review (J.F.C. and S.K.) have initiated a large-scale empirical arts-science project to show the potential of this dance style as a resource not only for humanities scholarship but also, importantly, for empirical research in empirical aesthetics, emotion psychology, cross-cultural psychology, and affective neuroscience.

For example, this review is part of a larger interdisciplinary empirical arts-science project that was funded by the British Academy (2017–2021). The title was “Universal and cross-cultural behavioural and neural responses to art (dance)” (ref: PM160240). Later, the project was also funded substantially by the Max Planck Society (2019–present). The team consists of scientists, dancers, and filmmakers. Eight empirical scientific articles<sup>131–138</sup> and seven theoretical articles or chapters (including this one) have since resulted from this project.<sup>69,139–141</sup> In addition, the team has participated in three international scientific conferences with six contributions. These contributions have been scientific talks,<sup>142–144</sup> scientific posters,<sup>145–147</sup> and three public outreach events showcasing our dance-science collaboration with Iranian classical dance.<sup>148–150</sup> The filmmaker team members (Fahima Farahi, Sina H.



**(A) Iranian Classical Dance Stimuli Set****Creation procedure****Intended expressivity by the dancer****(B) Western Ballet and Contemporary Dance Stimuli Set****Creation procedure****Intended expressivity by the dancer**

**FIGURE 6** Examples of five stimuli each of two dance stimuli sets (Iranian classical and Western ballet). Scan the QR codes to see sample stimuli videos on YouTube. Please note that the authors do not take any responsibility for the content, ads, or data protection regulations of sites in the QR codes. Stimuli sets were created with professional dancers who performed 20 sequences of Iranian classical dance or 30 sequences of Western ballet and contemporary dance. These had been choreographed to be about 8 s long, and the dancers performed each of the sequences five times, with a different emotional intention for each repetition. A total of 100 Iranian classical dance stimuli and 150 Western ballet and contemporary dance stimuli were obtained. These were submitted to observer emotion recognition and aesthetic judgment tasks. Panel (A) shows the creation procedure and five sample stimuli (joyful, angry, fearful, sad, and neutral) of the Iranian Classical Dance Stimuli Set.<sup>138</sup> Panel (B) shows the creation procedure and five sample stimuli (joyful, angry, fearful, sad, and neutral) of a Western Ballet and Contemporary dance Stimuli Set.<sup>135</sup> The video stimuli have been curated by our Iranian film team from 3fish (3fish.co), Susana Bravo Serra ([www.missisbravofilms.com](http://www.missisbravofilms.com)), and Stefan Redeker (Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics, Frankfurt, Germany). Please note that using the QR codes will take you to the sites of YouTube or Vimeo. The authors can take no responsibility for ads or other content available on these sites. Please review the data protection of each site before deciding to consume the content. The stimuli will be made available on the OSF after the publication of the original articles.

N. Yazdi, and Susana Bravo Serra) have curated five short films for dissemination purposes about different aspects and activities within our project (see Figure 5).

One example of the output from our project was the creation of two stimuli sets for cross-cultural research in emotion psychology, affective neuroscience, empirical aesthetics, and related disciplines: a Iranian

Classical Dance Movement Stimuli Set<sup>138</sup> and a Western Ballet and Contemporary Dance Movement Stimuli Set.<sup>134</sup> The stimuli are available at OSF for Christensen et al.,<sup>134</sup> and Christensen et al.<sup>138</sup> will also be available there after the publication of the source papers. A 2-min video about the project can be viewed via the QR code in Figure 5A. Examples of the stimuli can be accessed in Figure 6.

## CONCLUSION

Dance can elicit aesthetic pleasure; however, this is not all. Research from the past three decades shows that dance has deeper neurobiological effects on human mental, physical, and societal health than formerly assumed. Dancing is a behavior that piggy-backs on important neurobiological processes in the human body and is implicated in immune system functioning, cell restoration, and other aspects of physical health and well-being. Among the important cognitive effects, dance protects against cognitive decline and attentional deficits, and it stimulates creative problem-solving abilities. Through neural synchronization effects, while individuals dance together, dancing can have important social cohesion effects. Besides, dancing also plays an important role as a tool of communication of social, political, and artistic issues. In this way, dancing is a behavior that develops individual identity, self-awareness, and self-confidence, and potentially stimulates social and cultural cohesion and sparks political change. Thus, dance has powerful effects on individuals and the societies in which we live.

The fact that dancing was one of the first artistic activities to become outlawed after the regime change in Iran in 1979 and that, despite these restrictions, Iranians risk their safety to continue dancing, attests to the importance of dance in a society. Dancing is an intrinsic mode of human expression and a fundamental human right. It is our hope that by having outlined empirical research perspectives, we have illustrated the significance and usefulness of Iranian classical dance in empirical research and raised awareness about this dance form in general.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

J.F.C.: Conceptualization, methodology, software, validation, formal analysis, investigation, resources, data curation, writing—original draft, writing—review and editing, visualization, supervision, project administration, funding acquisition. S.K.: Conceptualization, methodology, validation, formal analysis, investigation, resources, data curation, writing—review and editing, visualization. M.W.-F.: Methodology, resources, writing—review and editing, funding acquisition, supervision.

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## COMPETING INTERESTS

S.K. is an active dance practitioner in this field and has a commercial dance school and dance company. Her book about Iranian classical dance and her dance school and company are listed within this article. The other authors declare no competing interests.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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