

Feature



Assiut - From Tourist Art to Belly Dance Costuming *Dawn Devine**

A favorite of Hollywood productions such as Cecil B. DeMille's "Cleopatra," Assiut was also widely used for dresses in old Egyptian musicals. Today, this versatile metallic mesh fabric is used extensively in belly dance costumes. An expert in Middle East costuming shows how.

Exotic and fascinating, luxurious and expensive, Assiut (also called Asyut, after the city of its origin) is remarkable for its ability to look like liquid silver, with fluid drape, sparkle and shine. Prized by belly dancers and vintage clothing collectors alike, Assiut is known in Egypt as *tulle bi telli*, or "mesh with metal."

Assiut cloth is made in two steps. The ground fabric is an



High-quality modern Assiut fabric. Photo by Dawn Devine.

industrially-manufactured tulle mesh. The metal designs are a hand-embellished embroidery technique, using narrow strips of flattened metal tape and a large-eyed blunt needle. The metal tape is folded and cut, then hammered flat, forming individual diamond-shaped dots, which have variously been described as spangles, metal spots, tied tinsel and even sequins. While some Assiut features patterns with a high metal content, quite dense and complicated, the ground cloth still remains supple and flexible.

Assiut – A Brief History

There has been little academic scholarship on the history and use of Assiut cloth. When it is mentioned in costume or textile history books, it is usually dismissed for its connection to the tourist trade, and as being neither high-art nor indigenous craft. The most important book on the history of Middle Eastern costume, *Arab Dress from the Dawn of Islam to Modern Times* by Yedida Kalfon Stillman, doesn't even mention Assiut at all. Consequently,



An Assiut trio. Photo by Dawn Devine.

there is a great deal of myth and folklore that is woven into the popularly accepted history of this textile.

Let's start with a few fascinating facts. First, there are no surviving examples of Assiut that predate 1870 in any museum collection, but it's rumored to have originated in ancient Egypt. The ancient Greek historian of the 5th century, Herodotus, observed that Egyptians used fine mesh over their beds at night to keep gnats from biting. Bratton, in his book, *A History of Egyptian Archeology* (p. 120), notes that a tent-like bed canopy was found in the tomb of Hetepheres, the mother of Kheops. While the cloth was long gone, it seems reasonable that this rig was used to support a protective mosquito net.

Fast forward to the Industrial Revolution. Modern mesh fabric became widely available in the 19th century after the invention of the Bobbinet machine in 1806 by John Heathcoat. The fabric was originally called "English net" but became widely known as Tulle,

named after the lace-making center of France. The bobbinet machine effectively transformed the very complicated and time consuming process of creating mesh by hand. A French firm (whose name is lost in time) brought the first Bobbinet to Assiut, Egypt in the mid-nineteenth century. With this one machine, Assiut became the largest producer of Egyptian mosquito netting, a textile that is essential for combatting malaria.

During the great era of the Grand Tour, Egypt was an expected and much-anticipated stop for travelers. Trinkets of every variety, some sold as antiques, other produced and displayed in mass quantities, were sold to nearly every visitor. Towns vied with each other to create unique items to appeal to the eye and taste of the eager western tourist buying souvenirs. A traveler could purchase pottery, miniature copies of ancient statuary,

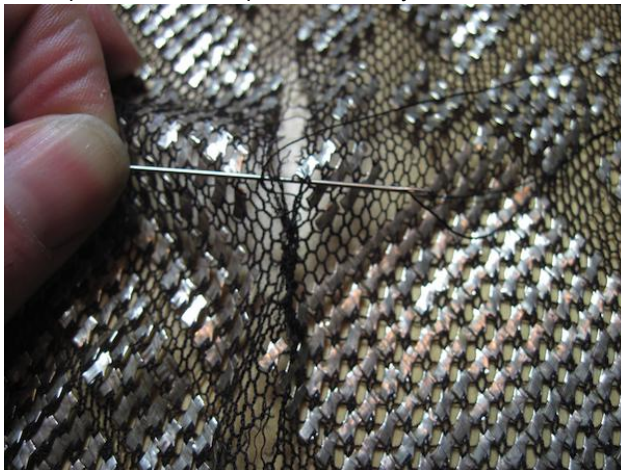
jewelry and clay pipes, vases carved from alabaster and other stones. With each stop, tourists could engage in the cultural experience of haggling with the vendors and feel like they were coming away with a deal, a memory and a memento.

Assiut shawls became prized by women travelers for several key reasons. First, they were easily recognized as being from a particular place. So an Egyptian shawl from Assiut could be worn to public events back home and visibly demonstrate their status as a world traveler. Secondly, these shawls are all unique and have a beauty, luster and quality all their own, making them simply lovely objects to wear and treasure. And lastly, unlike pottery, they are easy to pack and are unbreakable. Assiut shawls reached their zenith of popularity in the 1920's during the global wave of Egyptomania following the discovery of the many royal tombs, including the splash caused by Howard Carter's discovery of King Tut's in 1922. [See "*Look Like an Egyptian*", [VC vol. 8 issue 3](#) for more on the *Egyptomania* craze.]

Belly dancers and vintage clothing collectors alike vie for these luxurious textiles to enhance collections, to integrate into costuming, or simply to wear. The exotic look of these shawls clearly evokes not only a sense of place but also of timelessness. Savvy collectors look for finely woven mesh, lovely patterning and a high quantity of metal. Antique shawls are sometimes in very poor condition, but splits



Liquid silver Assiut pants. Photo by Dawn Devine.



Repairing vintage Assiut fabric. Photo by Dawn Devine.

can be repaired using fine thread and careful sewing.

Assiut Costumes for Belly Dance

Contemporary belly dancers can buy ready-made Assiut costumes. Assiut fabric is



Assiut robe and belt. Photo by Alisha Westerfeld.

integrated into casual hip wraps, long flowing robes, and is used to cover a bra and belt sets. In the world of belly dance, the bra and belt set are known as *bedlah*, which is the Arabic word for “uniform” and considered the professional costume of the Middle Eastern belly dancer (left).

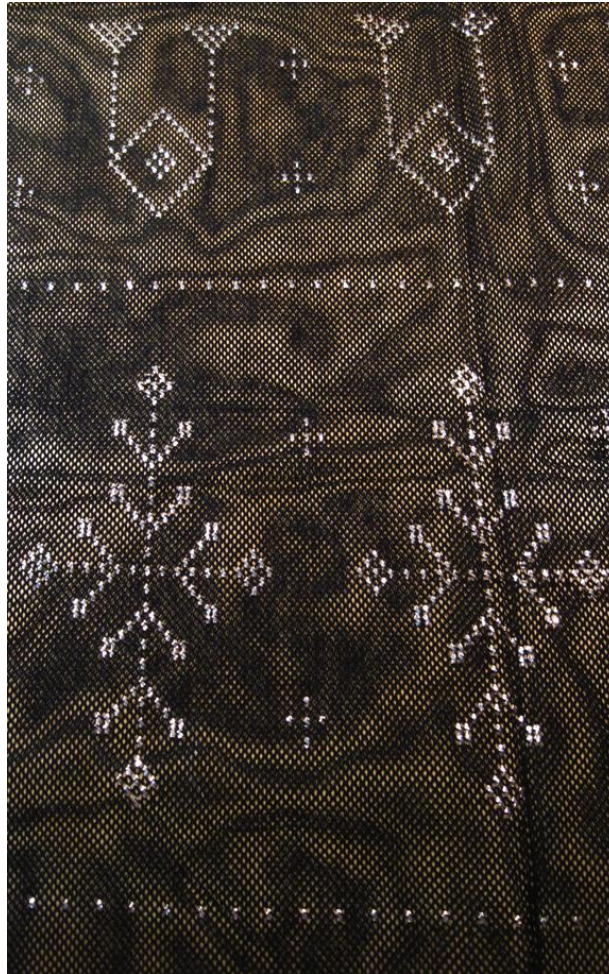
Assiut is a great cloth to use for belly dance costumes.

Modern Assiut has a thicker mesh base, which doesn't unravel or fray when cut, making it perfect for use with appliqué

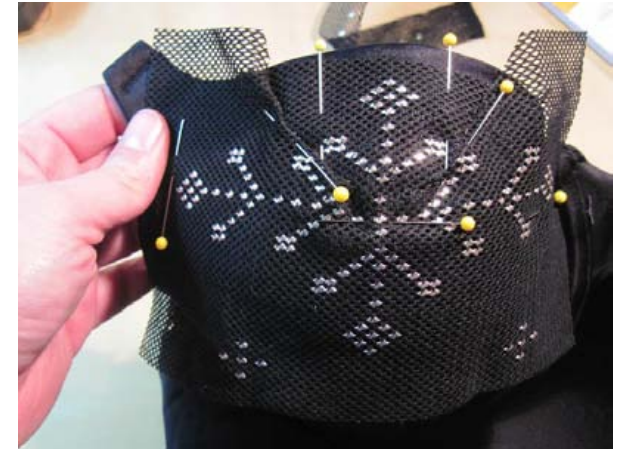
techniques. Bedlah sets begin with a store-bought bra, a custom-made belt base, and a length of modern Assiut.

For this project, I choose to highlight the snow-flake motif taken from a modern Assiut shawl (below).

The first step in making a bra is to position the first focal appliqué and pin it into position. Because we are shaping a two-



Modern Assiut shawl. Photo by Dawn Devine.



Whip-stitching fabric to bra cup. Photo by Dawn Devine.

dimensional piece of cloth around the three-dimensional shape of the bra, the goal is to place the darts in areas without embellishment. I pin in two smaller darts, slip stitch the darts down, and then whip stitch around the outer edge of this first piece (above).



Essential tools for hand-stitching Assiut dot ribbon. Photo by Dawn Devine.



Stitching Assiut dot ribbon to bra. Photo by Dawn Devine.

To cover the raw edges, I turn an embellished strip cut from the Assiut into a ribbon by folding under the raw edges. Because of the nature of the mesh, this Assiut dot ribbon is flexible and molds and curves to the shape of the bra and appliqué. At this point, you can choose to use a sewing machine to craft these strips, but hand stitching them preserves the flexibility of the ribbon. (above).



Stitching rows of coins into place. Photo by Dawn Devine.



Finished Assiut bra and belt. Photo by Alisha Westerfeld.

Once the surface embellishments are finished, a few rows of coins are added to enhance the movement, sparkle and shine. Using a cord to string the coins into place reduces the amount of hand-sewing,

distributes the weight of the coins across the surface of the bra, and allows them to flip and bounce as the dancer moves (bottom left).

After the bra is complete, repeat the process to make the belt (left). Assiut bedlah sets are great when paired with an Assiut robe, skirts or pants, as shown here.

Sources of Assiut Fabric

If you have a local belly dance supply store that carries Egyptian textiles in your area, you can select modern Assiut fabrics in person. Otherwise, there are a several on-line stores that sell modern Assiut shawls and fabrics. Check Ebay and antique stores for antique Assiut.

[CraveEgypt](#) – Ebay store carries tribal and pharonic jewelry, handmade leather, and Assiut shawls and dresses.

[PureEgypt](#) – Egyptian firm carries jewelry, belly dancing supplies and Assiut shawls and fabrics.

[SafteCraft](#) – a selection of Egyptian and folk-lore costumes and Assiut shawls.

***Dawn Devine** (aka Davina) is an author, costumer, dancer, and historian. She has written more than a dozen books on how to design and make Middle Eastern belly dance costumes including “Costuming from the Hip” and “Embellished Bras.” She writes a blog called “Costumer’s Notes” devoted to sharing fashion and costuming history and design. She currently lives in Silicon Valley, CA. Visit her [web site](#) for more information.*