

Collecting Your Dowry

By Michelle

While the flash of jeweled bras and the glitter of beaded belts makes us feel like a goddess, and while the low-cut décolletage and undulating bare midriffs of our cabaret costumes give us that Marilyn Monroe appeal, there is something equally mesmerizing, albeit in a completely different way, about tribal or ethnic costumes. How is it that you can still feel beautiful, even glamorous, when covered from head to toe? The answer, I propose, is a dichotomy: less is more and more is more.

Less is More When you are wearing an ethnic-style dance costume you (generally) are more covered-less skin is exposed. The benefits of Less is More are two-fold: you, and any figure flaws you may feel you have, are disguised, allowing you to feel more comfortable in your dance, and freeing you from worries that you'll fall out of a costume or jiggle when you should be undulating. Such confidence shows in your dance, emboldens you to interact with the audience more. Then, particularly with an audience unfamiliar with our dance form, Less is More makes them more comfortable. The erroneous stigmas often associated with the sensuous cabaret costumes are avoided. The dance appears more "family-oriented" and people do not feel embarrassed to watch you hips or your chest move.

More is More On the other side of the spectrum, to pull off a successful tribal look, your dowry must be rich. In tribal times (which still exist in some areas), women wore every bit of wealth they had to attract a husband. A strand of beads and a couple of bracelets did not make the cut when the neighbor girl had stacks of metal around her wrists and a neck-full of necklaces, not to mention earrings, rings, pendants, and pins to offer her would-be groom.

How to begin your dowry? First, be patient. As tribal women collected their possessions over years, so too will you have to gain one piece at a time to achieve your perfect look. Second, begin to acquire beautiful, authentic-looking pieces. Third, don't discard the cheap stuff. Finally, layer until you can barely stand up! Patience-save your pennies and attend dance workshops where vendors will be present. Buy mail order. Look in the phone book-many bead stores carry the makings for beautiful ethnic jewelry, if not the actual pieces themselves. You've found a bejewelled choker necklace complete with fifteen coins! Or five silver tassel covers that were actually affordable. You traded for the garnet ring with the incredible silver wire work. You skipped lunch for a month to afford the two-inch-wide bracelet inlaid with lapis. You have a great start.

Now, look in your jewelry box. You have a strand of stone beads your mother gave you, a silver kohl bottle you don't know what to do with, even a couple wood-bead hippie necklaces from who-knows-where. String the kohl bottle on a chain and put all necklaces on. A stack of wire bracelets from the Madonna eighties? It's a start. One pair of dangly earrings, and one malachite earring, the mate to which you lost last summer? Not a problem. A silver ring for every finger because they were ten for a dollar? Good.

Now, you've got all your cheap jewelry on and you think your good stuff will only be lost in the tin? Nonsense. What you've done is set the background against which your authentic pieces will shine. What will come across to your audience is the wealth of your dowry. Rings on your fingers, bells on your toes, the odd earring on your turban along with the second coin necklace you couldn't refuse, bracelets to your elbows, necklaces from chin to chest!

As the years progress, you may find you have enough "real stuff" to get rid of the hippie beads. Or you may find that you can't part with them because they've carried you through so many successful performances. Regardless, the net effect is an authentic tribal look that makes you feel beautiful and, yes, glamorous. But now that you've acquired all this wealth, who needs a husband?