



Chelydra

"Dancer With An Attitude"

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A TURTLE WOMAN

I have two interests which permeate my life; turtles and dance. As it turns out, these two subjects are not mutually exclusive.

My earliest recollection of turtles involves my favorite species, the Eastern box turtle (*terrapene carolina carolina*). The turtle was named Joe; I know that because someone had painted his name on the back of his shell. Every summer, from the fourth through the seventh grade, *Joe* would appear in our yard in Maryland. I don't know what happened to him after that, because my family moved. But Joe remains a distinct childhood memory.

After leaving Maryland, my interests turned to butterflies, moths, and horses throughout my high school years. I then attended East Carolina University (Greenville, NC) with my husband, and both of us majored in biology. Our favorite course was mycology - the study of fungi.

My second memorable encounter with a turtle was after college graduation. While moving back to Virginia, my brother-in-law decided to play Good Samaritan and save a snapping turtle crossing the highway. Well, snapping turtles don't take kindly to offers of assistance, and my brother-in-law almost lost a couple of fingers.

Two years out of college, my turtle mania began in earnest. My husband entered graduate school, majoring in vertebrate zoology. His master's research was on Phototaxic Responses of Hatchling Box Turtles. For three years, we maintained a population of thirty box turtles in my husband's parents' yard, marking the nests and placing them in the test chambers just prior to the hatch date. At home, we had a child's wading pool in the back bedroom with several young painted turtles, and an aquarium with six baby snappers (those rotters are mean the day they're hatched).

My husband received his master's in 1978, and we had to return all of our experimental subjects to the wild. We began to collect the inanimate variety in their place; turtles from around the globe in every room, in every shape, and in almost every material known to man. Every year a greater challenge than the last, finding an even better, stranger, more unique turtle than the year before.

Coincidentally, 1978 was the same year that I began to learn middle eastern dance. When the time came to pick a dance name, I decided to choose one which would reflect my biology background.

The resources available to me at the time did not provide Arabic translations for any of my favorite fungi or turtles. So I combed my old textbooks for Arabic-sounding names. Much to my dismay, none of the box turtle names met the requirement. The name I chose was *chelydra*, a genus for water turtles.

I have tried to continue the turtle tradition in my dance career. My first beaded costume, which I fondly refer to as Old Gold, featured two stylized Austrian crystal and bugle bead turtles in the belt motif. After a number of years trying to find someone to design a dancing turtle which I could use as a logo, I received a gift from heaven. Someone at work left a flyer for a science fiction convention on the copier, and there it was! A turtle with a tambourine dancing by a campfire while another turtle played the lute. No copyright, not a registered trademark. I use this dancing turtle as my unofficial mascot.

People, especially dancers, think all of this a little odd. And I suppose that it is. But that's because people have a number of misconceptions about turtles; they think that turtles are dark, dull, slow, and awkward.

Not so, my friends. No one who has ever seen a prime specimen of a male eastern box turtle - with his fiery red eyes, his glossy yellow and brown shell, and his bright orange head and legs - would ever think of a turtle as dull again. No one who has seen the lightning strike of a snapper, or tried to sneak up on a painted turtle basking in the sun, would ever think of them as slow. And no one who has seen the fluid grace of a slider in the water could call them awkward.

My choice of a name has caused me some internal conflict; for the most part I believe in maintaining authenticity in middle eastern dance. There's certainly nothing authentic about the name Chelydra, although I suppose it's no worse (and certainly more original) than naming myself after a Roman goddess or a Greek pastry. Until now, it was just my guilty little secret.

Recently, however, I have come to believe that I am not as far off of the mark as I thought in choosing my name. Both African and far eastern cultures revere the turtle as a symbol of fertility, wisdom, and long life. I have discovered that the turtle has been featured in other ethnic dance forms. Two years ago, a friend at work taped a hula special for me. One of the master teachers on the program had created a hula honoring the turtle. This year, I attended a performance of Les Ballets Africains from Guinea. One of their showpiece presentations was titled The Bell of Hamana, in which an old and wise tortoise teaches a woodcutter to live in harmony with his environment.

I have not yet created my Arabic turtle dance. Perhaps I never will. But it won't be for lack of inspiration. My friend Jelena has presented me with the world's one and only stuffed turtle in full cabaret garb. Some day I must do it justice.