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# THE EDUCATIONAL LEADER



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By Philip Evergood,  
Noted American Artist

Address Presented at Kansas State Teachers College,  
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# THE EDUCATIONAL LEADER

VOLUME XVIII • NUMBER 1

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## Art In Our Time

PHILIP EVERGOOD

I am most honored and gratified to be with you all at a very important time in the history of your great college—its approaching fiftieth birthday. I have amazingly come to you out of the skies, alighting from a big aluminum bird which brought me over nearly half the breadth of America to visit with you. As I alighted from this monster with wings I held my speech in one hand and the proverbial olive branch in the other. I now give both to you in the spirit.

The subject on which I have come all these miles to speak to you is one on which no man or woman can assert any absolute or positive authority, as may be done perhaps in dealing with the anatomy of the human body, or the physical laws which govern the movement of water currents and tides. Art is a subject about which no intelligent man or woman gives an opinion without studied thought, humbleness and an open mind. In its agelessness art challenges, for it always appears vital and new if it is good art. We do not know how old art is. We do know that this desire in man to create a little world for himself to augment the living physical world into which he is born is as old as man himself. I come here to you not as a theorist, nor an expert, nor a sage, nor a pedant, but as an individual who has been working with the materials of art for thirty odd years—in other words a practicing artist.

In all progress there must be periods of self evaluation. I believe that now is a very appropriate time to examine modern art. We have arrived at the middle period in a century of stupendous movement and change in man's world. In art there has been an equal amount of turmoil, tension, confusion, upheaval, and change. Art, you must know, is a reflection of life, so the one conforms pretty much to the pattern of the other. What we have here to

decide is: what is progress and what is not? Which directions will lead into the limitless chambers of light and which into the dead end tunnels of futility and confusion?

Everyone who has been to any of the large exhibitions in our museums and also abroad in recent years must have noticed what is happening. Great hall after great hall is filled with the amazing and the stupendous. Gigantic in scale and as small as postage stamps (but generally gigantic) these growing thousands of canvases and sculptures are emoting out of the subconscious. Splashes of color, pools of color right out of the can, bathroom fixtures squashed flat and welded to metal shavings, color mixed with



Mom's Cathedral

plaster and poured on, bits of rope stuck in, slices of newspaper adhered powerfully here and there, an occasional slab of wood and strips of spaghetti thrown in for good measure, red triangles and blue squares are everywhere in evidence, snake-like lines and curves in big bold slashings of black, splashings of dots hurled on like thunderbolts. One large canvas I saw recently in one of our most famous and respectable national institutions of art consisted solely of tiny criss-crossings—the only variation over the large surface of these little pickings was that some were a half tone or so darker than the others. The catalogue title, which I did not see, might easily have been “Muted Harmony in X” or “World of X Number X.” One completely black canvas had two tiny red dots in the center, like two little eyes. It could have been called “Daniel in the Lions’ Den” but that would have made it too near to realism. It was called “Penicillination Urpax No. 3½A.”

Experiment is one thing—it is important. But nonobjectivism has waged such an effective campaign and is backed by so many wealthy and powerful sponsors who have brought their force to bear upon the museums that art has become the child of the exclusive. It has gotten out of hand. The babe has become the monster, an enfant terrible.

The recent Carnegie Institute Exhibition, the first under its new director, was a cross section of abstract and nonobjective art of the countries represented. It was not a cross section of the world of art in my opinion which I understand the great patron intended these annuals to be. It is perfectly proper for people to build great new museums to the glory of nonobjectivism if they wish to, like the Guggenheims are doing in New York City, as long as the people and our national culture are not denied their equal and vital share at least of the human elements in art.

One important museum of modern art which claims to be open minded and to give all trends equal emphasis is really not. It puts on an occasional show as it did a few years back of “Romanticism in Art”—it borrows a hundred or two canvases by our early painters such as Morse, Copley, Innis, Blakelock, Twachtmann, Ryder, Eakins, and Homer, and invites a few selected works from the contemporary scene and there you have what appears to be a generous gesture towards realism which lasts on their walls for a month or two. Sop, my dear friends, just a little sop thrown out to appease. As to what they purchase—ninety percent of their collection is abstract and nonobjective.

For those members of my audience who are not initiated into the manner of so-called nonobjective thinking, this is how the non-objectivists reason:

"The forms, colors, and shapes of nature have been familiar to man since his creation. Man has become associated with these



Dowager in a Wheelchair

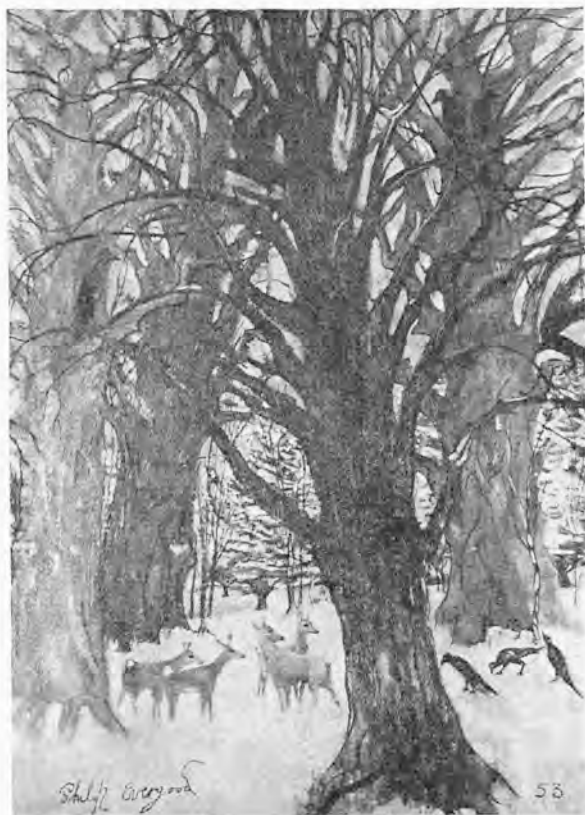
objects sentimentally and as sentiment has no place in art (because it is a revoltingly weak human attribute) all the objects associated in man's intelligence with his personal life and his feelings relative to these objects have no place in art. The realist artist is actually capitalizing on the ignorant public's sentimental attachment to the familiar objects in nature built up through association over aeons of the past. Nonobjectivism is not acceptable to the average ignorant sentimental human being because it is a new, daring form of art—a graphic distillation of the intangible in man—his psyche and his inner senses, which makes it as far away from the pollution of objective mundanity and boredom as is the stratosphere. This virtue makes it, and it alone, the art of the present and the future, which has no bearing on nor relation in any sense to the dead art of the past."

This kind of thinking must be counteracted. Time, anyway, will take its toll on "Art for Art's Sake." It is itself too boring to last. People require meat besides the truffles, the caviar, and the eclairs.

My friends, man's evaluation of an esthetic comes as much out of his philosophy of life as does his human behavior. Personal experience develops a philosophy which has the greatest bearing on man's behavior towards man and towards art, which is man's most personal expression of life. The great artist behaves in a certain way towards a canvas or a hunk of granite because he has been conditioned by experience, and out of that has developed good judgment and a definite will to plan the approach to this material. Accordingly the ideological concepts he has constructed (his love of certain things and his distaste for others) immediately show up. This is inescapable and rightly contrived.

Michaelangelo has one set of ideologies which he has set down in clear, tangible terms. Bruegel and Rouault have different ones. But the power that flows through the work of each has come to them through the same source—experience of life, relationship with people, a certain clear line built by contact with moving, living organisms—by an understanding of how these fit together and tick within the whole. Great artists of the past were capable of making bold and even momentous decisions and acting accordingly, such as Michaelangelo's ability to drop his creative work momentarily and set to the practical task of designing battlements to defend his home city of Florence against an invading army. Or Courbet, great and tender painter of nature, who boldly led the attack with his friends the peasant workers of Paris in the destruction of the Vendome Column during the uprising of 1871, for which he later

was imprisoned. Or the youthful El Greco's surprising decision to leave the glitter and the grandeur of Italy where he could have been fabulously successful as the brilliant student of Bassano and Titian, for the comparative obscurity and struggle of a life in Toledo, Spain. Or Paul Gauguin's unusual abandonment in middle age of family and civilization for a primitive South Sea Island



Forest in Winter

existence and an unknown grave. The work of these men is great, because it concretely reflects their lives. There is no separation here, there is no deception here, their lives, their dedications, their loyalties, their work, are all one structure, one monument, not perfect necessarily from all standards, but concrete and one.

The artist sitting in his studio today has to make re-connection with the world, not cut himself off. The great French writer Romain Rolland wrote in his "Europa" in January, 1934: "And in

the deed, Art is always involved in the struggle of the epoch, even when it pretends to withdraw from it—when it tries to protect itself with a childish label. 'Art for Art's Sake,' the mere fact that one withdraws from the struggle means, 'consciously or unconsciously,' that like Pilate, one washes his hands of the social injustices, that one leaves the arena to the oppressors and one lends himself in silence to the annihilation of the oppressed."

Society today is so complex that the artist finds it difficult to express in art all the complexities of our civilization—mainly because he has not been trained for this gigantic task. He has been trained to be a studio artist. He continually finds himself in a very academic frame of mind, concerned only with the materials and problems of his craft. In this state he is an easy prey of his subconscious. What is academicism? Producing a commodity in a manner or style which is acceptable to the present buying public. Nonobjective art is often made to do just that: supply the demand for a certain vogue in painting or sculpture. What new forms have these nonobjective artists added since the cubists in 1900 or so, taking Ingres as their god of purism, went one step further, by making the forms of nature into cylinders and cubes? What new discoveries have the nonobjectivists made and how have they constructively added? Does their art, free of objectivity, excite and thrill more than the great realists Goya, Bruegel or Daumier? These are questions which have to be answered.

Today everyone is using anti-enzymes and straining to be new and up to date. While the public is jumping up and down to the crack of the commercial pluggers' sugar-coated whip, nonobjectivism aids and abets the general retreat from realistic thinking—the realism of facing life and its momentous problems (such as the atom bomb) honestly and with true values, working for the betterment of mankind. It is easier and safer to be aloof and harmless and a dreamer and an esthete these days and also it requires less discipline, less sweat, less struggle in the production. To abstract from life is a very common form of today's opportunism.

In our present day chlorophyll-tinted, rocket-testing, space-dreaming world there is yet no new color, no new woman or no new man, and nothing very new has been added to art by the elimination of familiar objects from it. Yes, there may be new technical discoveries, new fashions, new faces, and new personalities, new happenings to affect the artist, but the basic human values never change. Nerves, sinews, heartbeats—the spring, the summer, the fall, the winter—the sun rising and setting—love, hate,

treachery, sacrifice—all these things are here in the world and they are reflected in art forever also. I have seen Chinese paintings of 600 years B. C. that could have been executed yesterday, they were so freshly close to the earth and to life. Design by man is just as sure and even in its earthly distribution and in its definiteness and excellence as the placing of the stars in the universe.



The Passing Show

From the wastes of the Sahara to Central Australia we find this man-made beauty. Last year, at the Brooklyn Museum, there was an exhibition of utilitarian Chinese objects. Some were much older than the Christian era, and much older than the reign of the Pharaohs. Most were as up-to-date, stream-lined and functional as the advertised chrome-plated, stainless-steel kitchenware which we use today, and which are supposed to stem from the Bauhaus, Picasso, Polynesian art, African tribal masks, Australian aboriginal

art, Frank Lloyd Wright, Roy Rogers, or what have you. These Chinese vessels, kettles, etc., of exquisite shape and balance, were equipped with many of the modern gadgets and some others. They had things like detachable handles and non-drip spouts. There were vessels which fitted together in a dove-tailed manner to save space on a table, collapsible bases, etc.—all this and great beauty too, to show that man, many thousands of years ago, was surprisingly advanced in the fine art of living and had a very high sense of esthetics.

Esthetics, to the Greeks who gave us the term, meant more than a line, a sensation, an experience in texture—more than a contrast in rough and polished surfaces, or in raised and incised dots, or the gossamer delicate in contrast to the ploughed in, entrenched and solid. These elements in art were taken for granted as an essential part of any artist's equipment, but only a part. Esthetics to the Greeks involved more nearly an expression of the higher thinking coming out of man—his religion, his mythology, his philosophy. Could one call it an esthetic with a purpose? An esthetic put to work to express nature and man's form, thoughts, emotions, and actions? Are people today often confused in art as in their daily lives, selecting secondary above primary values? Are they for the sake of being different, ultra new?

I believe this is so.

Are we, the artists, to hold in contempt the maturer concerns with life and devote ourselves to toys in a braggadocio of conceit? Should we, the artists, abandon struggle and the expressions of the right and the clear truth because we live in fear of being robbed of our freedom of thought and voice (so ominous and real a threat from certain distorted and powerful political forces today)? These questions face us. We can be ostriches, we can be mice, or we can be men of vision and courage. My friends, I tell you that this surge of nonobjective thinking in art as in other fields of expression is no haphazard spawning. It is a monstrous miscarriage, resulting from the general human fears of today which subconsciously urge flight and result in the individual losing his firmness of purpose, his integration with living organisms and contact with the real living world. Our mental institutions are filled with human beings who have lost their contact with life. The artist is faced with exposure to similar contagions—days of doubt, instability, economic uncertainty—fears of death, frightening days in our beautiful America—honor for the stool-pigeon, the wire tapper, the false smearer and the deceitful shouter of wolf in the night. Are there any lis-

teners who are naive enough to believe that these things do not affect the living breathing artist? Or are there any here still more naive who do not know that these ominous forces *do* exist?

I do not wish to dwell further on this frustrating note. But all these facts have a bearing on my thesis that art is an expression which comes out of personal experience. The painter's philosophy and reasoning grow out of his observation, from contacts with people, and what he sees as he lives. Personal experiences from extreme youth through the early formative years bring about certain rationalizations, develop certain ideologies, and make him arrive at certain philosophic conclusions.

To an artist the net result is what he puts down on canvas for the public to judge by its own esthetic and ideological standards. That is why we must also educate our public, the man in the street, develop in him a sense of esthetic values as well as ideological ones. If we are to develop the true glory which is here for the taking, in a country full of the most astounding natural resources and natural beauties as well as our great energies and our supreme technological superiority, our world should be full of hope if more of these energies and more of our thought and more of our national trust was put into art and culture. We are way behind in that. Let's face it. What I saw and see and what I put on canvas was not a perfect world, nor was it a world devoid of hope. The reflection of chaos and uncertainty is bound to appear not only in my work but also in the work of other painters living at the same time. We have seen many wars and much strife, my generation. And still the world was and is amply supplied with happiness and beauty both to see and to paint, and some of this has been also captured and retained on canvas by me and others.

I come to you only as a painter. You will judge my work and you will judge my words. Daumier said what I believe in blunt, terse words: "An artist is what he has gone through." On the basis of these words, if you are to know me, if you are to understand my work, you should know a little about my life—so I will tell you some of the bare and gruesome facts. My film is shown, my work is on view, I intend to complete the job. I will stand naked and unafraid before your searching gaze.

In my life I have had my share of variety—in some ways I believe that that was a good and lucky break. In my childhood I had all the healthful natural joys given to me by doting and loving parents—joys which are denied to so many in this unjust world. For months at a time during the long summers I would run like a

little Indian through the woods and over the white beaches of Maine, climbing through the high boulders, looking for sea shells or the nests of big birds, while my father was at his easel and my mother read Greek and Latin poems and studied books on philosophy and religion.



Moon Maiden

Later on when I was sent to England, the "sacred hills of learning" opened their gates to me. This awesome experience did not however exclude me from my share of "nature's full delights"—the sport, the pastoral joys or what have you. Along with my studies of Ovid, Shelley and Keats I engaged at that time in such full-

blooded pursuits as crew racing in eight-oared shells on the slow-moving waters of the Thames river at lushly green Henley—not to forget the enchanting, ecstatic moments of bliss, drifting languidly in a punt on the backwaters of the same river under hanging willow branches in the arms of my tall, fair-haired English sweetheart.

These pastoral joys and calm student days were short lived, but well appreciated. Soon after and suddenly, we were forced to suffer the icy fear of death from above in the London air raids of World War I. Our refuge was the cramped dank air raid shelter in the cellars of Chelsea within a stone's throw of Carlyle's house and where Whistler had his etching press at work near the river embankment at Battersea Bridge twenty or thirty years before. One bomb exploded within a quarter of a mile from where we were, hitting the Pensioner's home and killing fifty people. After one raid the whole street was covered with shrapnel fragments and bullets from the ground guns and we saw a line of five circus elephants calmly walking through the devastation of it all, abandoned by their keeper, each elephant holding the tail of the preceding animal in its trunk.

Other incidents which made a lasting impression on me as a young artist, even though they may appear to be insignificant to those who did not live them, come to mind. One was the time I wandered all day alone throughout the empty and deserted houses of the ancient city of Pompeii, coming across half buried urns and vases—a perfect bit of mosaic here, an undamaged section of a fresco there. Throughout the whole sun-drenched day on those stark streets of the deserted city, destroyed 2,000 years ago by fire and brimstone, I met no one. And a night with the sea-like wind on the hill amid the ramparts of ancient Toledo—the rain was driving and it was pitch dark, and inland Toledo seemed as though it was on a sea wall or breakwater—the sound of the waves could be heard below by some freak of nature. In the distance Moorish chants came faintly from this window and that housetop. I felt strange and distant and alone.

Another significant experience and one which made a lasting impression on me, in fact affected the whole of my future life, happened in New York City some few years later in about 1932. I spent a night talking with the homeless Hooverville jungle dwellers near West Street and Christopher, in an empty lot. Snow was on the ground, shacks were built of bits of packing cases, mattresses, pieces of cardboard and fragments of tin. Bodies of unemployed

Negro and white were clustered round a fire of driftwood and orange boxes. The name of one man was "Old Foot" (because one foot always felt tired), another was named "Terrapin" because he had killed and eaten turtles in his youth down South, another was "Bean Pod," and so on. They were all familiarly known to each other by these pet names. I talked with them and drew sketches of them until the dawn. I learned a lot about suffering and the courage of the oppressed and downtrodden that night.

As a result of this experience several of my best early paintings were born. "North River Blues" was one, showing a wharf jutting out into the Hudson, deep snow, half a dozen shabbily clad individuals huddled round the suggestion of a tiny fire. Snow is coming down—ferries and tugboats are seen distantly through it and there is a faint feeling of the Jersey waterfront off in the haze of the falling snow. Another painting that came out of that meeting with those men was "New York Jungle." This depicted some unemployed and destitute men asleep and resting in a pile of derelict automobiles. A third was a large painting I executed while employed as a government artist under the first work relief project for artists, the Public Works of Art Program—this project was short lived and superseded by a better and more universal W. P. A. program. My painting was a detailed study of the efficient and modernized docks on the Hudson with a conglomerate group of men in the foreground. As I was painting for the U. S. Government I called the painting "Government Report on North River"—North River being the New Yorkers' name for the Hudson River and the docks. There were many more equally vital experiences which had an effect on the work which came out of the man who lived them. And the experiences and the paintings go on.

In 1930 I had been working in France and had greatly come under the influence of Cezanne and Toulouse Lautrec. I was also warmly conversant with the work of Van Gogh, Daumier, Gauguin, Renoir and Modigliani. I felt these men were big and universal like Goya and El Greco had been to the world in previous decades, but my ultimate reaction was that of all this exciting pioneer work which had been recently done by the Impressionists, Post-Impressionists, and the later explorations of the Cubists and some of the more recent experimental groups from Klee to Beckmann, nothing seemed applicable to or remotely connected to America in design, color, form, or smell. Most of our best painters at that time appeared to me to be living in the era of Whistler and Sargent, or had become expatriates either by living in Europe and working

as Europeans or by importing a European flavor into their American studies. The idea grew slowly within me that the vitality of America, the vastness of America with its teeming millions of people, the modern America, had now become a fitting subject for the brush of a painter or painters, not in any competition to the monumental and amazing record which the camera had already made, but rather a plastic record as seen and felt by one man or a



Weeping Clown

hundred, set down in their own peculiar caligraphy and their own colors—perhaps distorted, perhaps halting, faulty, or uncertain, and limited always by their own shortcomings, but in their own true colors and in their own free way of setting it down—sometimes to be a general impression, sometimes to be pinpointed in its definiteness as to time and place, sometimes to be a critical analysis. In 1931 this seemed important enough to me to come back to the country of my birth and try to do it. I found that I was one of several painters with similar aims in view.

And what did these aims involve? What did they boil down to? The involvement and preoccupation with human beings: their activities, their shortcomings, their beauties, their struggles, their conquests, their sufferings, their happinesses. This was not an easy task, for I was scantily equipped for it. In fact the task itself is so mighty that half a dozen Rembrandts, Van Goghs and Rubenses would only be a match for it and then the territory is so vast that they would be obliged to call in some reserves—possibly a few Daumiers, Goyas and Bruegels would just about get the ball rolling.

I, at thirty years, was a comparative babe in art for all my academic training in Europe and for all my wanderings and observations of the great work of the past, for all my activities in the exhibition field. To go from painting imaginative biblical figures, sensitively drawn and imaginatively conceived as they were, to the down-to-earth robust rawness of a steel worker's boot, or his wrinkled salt-caked sweater, or his grimy blue jeans was a big jump, and to me a big challenge. I did not want to paint their world naturalistically—it was not my temperament to do so. I went again to the best men I knew for knowledge and inspiration. Who did I go to for the strength to help me to see living people? I went to those who had made the people of their day actually live on canvas—the inner part living as well as the flesh and blood—not just the peach-bloom skin of the exquisitely perfect exterior surfaces like a Salvador Dali, a Meissonier or a Bougereau are capable of, but something nearer to the flesh and mind and the movement of people. I saw it in men like Grunewald, Bruegel, Bosch, Daumier, Van Gogh. These men were not too effete to describe life. Grunewald for example was concerned with realism enough to paint a chamber pot at the side of the cot of the Virgin Mary and her Child. I went for strength to the painters of human beings—men who could paint them gloriously, with tenderness, strength, and warmth. These men were not afraid to face the real realities—the scars as well as the perfections—they were not hesi-

tant about making room for the ugly as well as the sweet human being. Take a look at Peter Breugel's "The Blind Leading the Blind." Has anything deeper or more worthy or more exquisite ever been placed on canvas by the hand of man? His blind people are neglected and ugly but in their dilemma and almost humorous awkwardness they tear at the very base of one's heartstrings. They have the same kind of immense human appeal that Charlie Chaplin's art has. In these years I had to re-educate myself—I began to have a new perception of what drawing meant. I looked again at Assyrian sculpture with new eyes and marvelled at the explicit-



Little Fireman

ness of the form and action in works like "The King Fighting with a Lion." I looked at prehistoric cave paintings and Mayan architecture embellished with monumental conceptions of ancient gods and men—these were human. I began to understand more clearly our heritage of humanism.

Painting comes about first through man's delight in colors, lines, details, spaces, movements which he comes in contact with continually from babyhood by seeing nature and things around him. Man's interest in using his hands and eyes to build things and to make things is the same impulse that makes him paint. Man's be-

ginnings in drawing and paintings were to express things around him which he saw and knew. I observed that no child ever draws or paints something which does not have a counterpart in objects or things seen in the real world he lives in. Children's paintings often look nonobjective and abstract but they are always attempts to express something in life. I looked at the dictionary and I found the definition of two important words. It said: "Formalism—excessive observance of form. Formality—sacrifice of substance to form." When a grown man sets out to make paintings which are purely nonobjective (or intentionally not like any object he has ever seen) he is at liberty and has a perfect right to do so, but by denying his own participation in the everyday, living world he restricts himself as a vital artist. He is indulging in Formalism and performing with Formality. This makes him a supreme sophisticate. What started out in his mind as being courageous, as being his own kind of freedom (because he expressed this freedom in renouncing all objectiveness) later became binding and eventually enslaved him—because he had to stick to this shallow creed, this isolated form of freedom, so rigidly.

The great Goethe once wrote: "All eras in a state of decline and dissolution are subjective. All progress eras have an objective tendency." And at another time he said: "As soon as one can approximate to himself and express the World—he is a poet." These wonderful words ring as equally true for the artist.

Let us hope that the present vogue in nonobjective thinking in America and elsewhere in the world today does not reflect any serious malignancy, does not signal the presence of any physical, spiritual or moral weakening or decay.

It is up to you, it is up to me, but especially it is up to Youth to establish true human values on an immovable, indestructible foundation for living, for culture, and for art.

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