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SKOWHEGAN SCHOOL
OF PAINTING & SCULPTURE
Skowhegan, Maine

Lecture by Agnes Mongan
Summer, 1970

Transcriber: Judith Stoodley

Hugh Gourley, Introduction: 1970 seems to be an anniversary year for quite a few institutions, as well as states. Maine's celebrating it's sesquicentennial this year; the Metropolitan Museum is having an anniversary; the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston has its anniversary this year… And the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture is celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary this year. And it's a pleasure to welcome you all here this evening… for the exhibition honoring the twenty-fifth year of the Skowhegan School. The exhibition, as you know, is devoted to drawings by the faculty, visiting artists, and alumni at the school. It's appropriate thus the Colby College Art Museum, which celebrated *its* tenth anniversary last year, to have an exhibition *honoring* the school. Since the founding of the Skowhegan School there have been very close connections between the School and the Museum. Before that there were very close connections between Colby College and the Skowhegan School. Just as it is appropriate that we show the Skowhegan Anniversary Exhibition, it is also appropriate that our guest lecturer this evening, Miss Agnes Mongan, should be our speaker. She has spoken *at* Skowhegan, and has been a very valued member of Colby College's—the Colby College Art Museum Advisory Council. I would like to welcome Miss Agnes Mongan, and her sister, Miss Elizabeth Mongan, to Waterville. This evening Miss Mongan will speak on the American tradition in drawing. I don't think she really needs any introduction. She is the director of the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard; has published widely in the field of Master drawing; and is responsible for a number of major drawing

exhibitions held in this country, always accompanied by very beautiful catalogues. It's a great pleasure for me to introduce Miss Agnes Mongan. (Applause)

Agnes Mongan: Thank you very much, Hugh. Ladies and gentlemen, please remember that I was persuaded, somewhat against my better judgment, to come here this evening—and I say my better judgment, persuaded against my better judgment, 'cause I *cannot* claim to be an expert on American drawing…. I have been wondering what I could say to you about the contemporary American drawing that would be, to use that overworked and popular word, *relevant*, or even interesting. You may all be disappointed in what I have chosen to do, and call me a coward. Or, also given the circumstances, perhaps something worse; for although we are here to celebrate the opening of a fascinating exhibition, a distinguished and varied exhibition, of contemporary American drawing, I'm not going to talk about the drawings in that exhibition. I made that decision for several reasons. The first is that when I began to think about what I was going to talk about this evening, the selection hadn't even been made. The second is that when Hugh Gourley sent me a list of names of the artists included there were a hundred and fifty artists. Now how could I, in fifty minutes, comment fairly on the work of a hundred and fifty, or a hundred, or even *fifty* artists, for that matter? I could pick out the two dozen or so who are friends of mine, or whose work—with whose work I am familiar, and I could talk about those artists. Could anything be more unfair to the dozens of artists with whose work I became acquainted in a single example only this late afternoon? For until this afternoon I had not seen the show; and, as I say, I find it very exciting and fascinating, but not having seen it, I didn't think I could comment on it. Under the circumstances it seemed to me that the wisest—and possibly even the most profitable thing to do was to give you a sort—as a sort of preparation for *you* to have a greater understanding of what is there, a quick review of certain key characteristics of American draftsmanship in the last century and three quarters. And to let you, with that brief preparation, come to your own conclusions about how today's artists are carrying on, or changing, or breaking the various aspects of that tradition. For, in a measure, they do all three. I will speak of no living artist, great though the temptation to do so may be. Now the American tradition, comparatively speaking, is not an old one; but it (unintelligible). And this in spite of the fact that everyone who writes about American drawing begins by saying that the history of drawing in America has yet to be written. And this, in fact, is true. Yet even without a written history to refer to, American drawings have an appearance of character… and awe… of

something that I think we can recognize when we—even though we haven't yet defined it. Until quite recently we could react to it as quickly as we do in our own instantaneous assignment of certain human (unintelligible), in categories, automatically, without hesitation, without conscious thought. How do we, for example, instantly know the inheritance of someone, as we so often do; and we say, "Oh," after one quick glance, "these are Italian origins," or "these are Irish origins," or "these are Latin"? Generally we're right in that quick estimate. And then the man we are referring to speaks a sentence, and we add, "Oh, he's from up country," or "the deep South," or "Texas," or perhaps even "France." We do it, of course, on the basis of experience, visual and oral (aural?). Without knowing it, we are reacting to a whole series of signals which we have unconsciously categorized and stored. Do we ever question the validity of these signals? I think not. So we have also come to know the American state. I can't tell you quite how, except in this way; but at least let us take a few examples, as far away as you can see an American. So let's (unintelligible) Champs-Elysees, or the Via (unintelligible), or even the Piccadilly Circus, you can recognize their compatriots. Or from dress and stance, and manner of moving, the latter perhaps most clearly of all, will have played a role in your instant recognition of his American-ness, if I can call it that. Most of all, however, it was probably something about his place of expression. Where did the American place come from, and what does it contain? Since man is so sensitive, so eloquent and so perceptive, I thought that tonight we might look at—first at what the American draftsman has said in rhyme about the American state. And then turn briefly to what it is said about that other constant, which that place has inhabited, the American scene, the American landscape. I realize this leaves all kinds of categories of drawing; but I firmly believe that if you learn only a little from this brief examination, you can transfer some of the terms of the evocations to other parts of the drawing, whether they're abstract, expressionist, surrealist, or whatever. In past years I've often referred to the *language* of drawing. Semantics and linguistics have developed so fast and so far in recent years that I hardly just *dare* refer again just to *language* of drawing. I cannot follow the famous MIT theorist, Professor Noam Chomsky, very far; although what I can understand, I find fascinating. Some of you will have seen a recent number of the *Times of London* Literary Supplement that was devoted to articles on the recent advances in linguistics. The lead article, as always anonymous, which (unintelligible) the others said—and I quote—"Most linguistic research is both sober and empirical, but it is of importance to a lot of people, not professionally concerned in it, because its results are no longer contained

in it—because its results are no longer contained by the old lines of demarcation between linguistics and other fields of inquiry. Language has long had a philosophy, and a psychology, and it is increasingly acquiring a biology and a sociology." Now I suspect that the last is true also of the visual arts in our time, as possibly it is likewise true of all fields of communication. We have been familiar with the philosophy and the psychology of art; the biology and the sociology is more unfamiliar, and so more difficult. As far as language and rhyme is concerned, we have come to know that we don't always have to understand all aspects of the language to—use a familiar phrase—"get the message." Let me give you three examples, not from the spoken or written language, but from the graphic arts. (pause) Now… does this the poem on the left, if it is a poem, is important; and would add to our enjoyment, could we read it. Yet this is spirited and sensitive drawing of bamboo in rushing water, a brush drawing by the Ming artist, Wang Ku, now in the Freer Gallery in Washington, tells a story, and we don't actually *need* the poem to tell us how astutely the artist has observed the scene; and how subtly and truly he has recorded its essence. Surely we get a large part of this message without the writing. Similarly, if we move to another country, the fact that was true of Chinese drawing, is true of the this, that the Japanese Zen monk, Sen Gai, who in the early 19th century, drew these two portraits of Zen patriarchs of his sect, was a very extensive monk indeed. We only need to look at how he saw the patriarchs to realize, not only what he thought of them, but what he himself was like. Nor… to move further west, do we need to read the Arabic inscription to get a least a part of the message of this charming illustration of a mare and her foal, a page made in Baghdad, in the year 1209. In short, drawing is a universal language. Each of you has probably also recognized instantly its national accent—Chinese, Japanese, and Islamic. Can you recognize as quickly the American accent? Curiously I think not, not quite yet. But it is recognizable, even with all its tunnels and accented variations. Now let us begin with the beginning of the 19th century, with a portrait drawing, to begin our series of portraits, a drawing by Rembrandt Peale, a portrait of Dr. Charles Warren. This drawing belongs in the collection of John Davis Hatch, in Lennox, Massachusetts. The sitter, Doctor Warren, lived from 1753 to 1815; and he was the first professor of anatomy at the Harvard Medical School. His painted portrait made from this drawing hangs today in the Harvard Medical. He was of a famous—in fact a *still famous* medical family in the history of Massachusetts. And like all busy doctors, he was loathe to give time to posing. Rembrandt Peale, the artist who drew, the son of Charles Wilson Peale, had studied with his father, and then

in London; and with his—and in London he had studied with his countryman Benjamin West. There is in this portrait, in the handling of the chalk, and in its finesse, and in its (unintelligible, sounds like participation), it seems to me, a good bit of what Peale had learned in England. And yet there is also, it seems to me, that curious American flavor, not as strong as in the two pastel portraits that Copley made before he left Boston for England, but still recognizable; and I decided it's a combination of the sitter's instinct to challenge, and the artist's determination to be honest. With no courtly inheritances, no demands of a nobility, no standards of acceptability except capacity, the artist can be as unflattering and direct as he wishes. The earliest 19th century American was quite masterly, full of challenge, artist and sitter alike. And again and again it comes through, as it comes through it seems to me very clearly in this drawing. These qualities affected even that fine visitor, (unintelligible), who came to the United States at the time of the French Revolution, and stayed a number of years, and made over seven hundred portrait drawings. He not—He was self-taught; he learned *how* to make the drawings by studying the encyclopedia. He made his own paper, that pink which is familiar to many of you; he made his own implements; and he made his own tools. He had an instrument that he called the "physiospark", and through that he made—got the shadow and made the profile portraits of these people; and… from a large drawing—the drawings are in scale about *that* size, he made small engravings. If you bought the drawing, it was twenty-five dollars. Fortunately a large number of them have survived; and I think… there's something of the French aristocrat in this, in its touch and technique. But again to my way of thing, about the expression of the man, there is something American. This is a portrait of "Governor Plummer" (spelling) of Connecticut; and it was made 1806. And the face is a kind of face that is still familiar to us today, perhaps no longer in the government and Congress, but very familiar certainly on American campuses… not handsome, slightly amused, quite ugly. –But strong. Curiously enough, once "Saint Emmon" left this country, when the French—when Napoleon fell-- and went back to France, he never drew again; he became the curator of the "Museum" (unintelligible Cija?), which he stayed curator of until his death in 1852. That is saying to an American who never left home, "William Sidney Mott". This drawing, a portrait of an unknown lady in the Fogg Museum' was drawn in 1842, as signed and dated at the lower, which perhaps you can see. It is a completely native talent. If you think—but it *does* make one think of the Ingres drawings of the same time—If you think of the Ingres drawings, there's a similarity of pose, in the way Simon dated, and in

technique; that is a simple graphite pencil on white paper. But the Ingres drawing would be one of infinite finesse and elegance of line, and exquisite craftsmanship. This drawing is more direct, more simple, unflattering, honest. It is also extraordinarily competent, and deeply sympathetic. I don't know why, but over and over again, the women in these portraits are very sad-eyed and serious, where the men are alert, and sometimes, as I've said before, even aggressive. Now let us move on again, for another ten or fifteen years, to that son of the State of Maine, Eastman Johnson, who lived from 1824 to 1906 (or 1896). He too is best probably known to you for his (unintelligible) scenes, such as the so-called "Old Kentucky Home," or "The Wounded Drummer Boy." But he began his career as a portrait draftsman, a self-taught portrait draftsman in his hometown of Lovell, Maine; and when his family moved to Augusta, he came with them, and continued making portraits. And then later he went abroad; he passed several years studying in Germany; he had a residence of several years in Holland; and he traveled in Italy and France. But he remained an undeniable American. And his American qualities, it seems to me are peculiarly visible in his remarkable portrait drawing of "James Poston Dobbin", a North Carolina Democrat, who served as Secretary of the Navy from 1853 to 1857. And this drawing is signed and dated 1856, so it was made on year before Dobbin ceased to be the Secretary of the Navy; he served under President Pierce. Well this drawing, which is now in the Addison Gallery at Andover, is, I think, in its somewhat casual appearance… and… manner, and handling, *quite* American. One would not even suspect that it was a year after the artist had spent—I think it was eight years abroad. The casualness of the handling in no way detracts from its honesty and dignity. I find it a moving and memorable portrait, far more memorable than many of Eastman's—Johnson's later painted portraits. If we move on again, nearly a generation, into the 1870's, this time let us look at the work of a woman artist, Mary Cassatt; and we find a (unintelligible) emphasis; and yet again some constants. It was drawn in France, where as you know, that Philadelphia Girl lived most of her life. And it shows, of course, a strong influence of Degas. But it is and extremely tender, gentle drawing of deep understanding of maternal love… international, perhaps, but in its simplicity and mode of expression, there's also again something here that's deeply American. This drawing belongs to (unintelligible) at the Fogg Museum; and it comes out of the collection of a famous Frenchman, "Bertolais", whose mark is at the corner. The erasures and the rude drawing show how the artist was working towards her desired emphasis, and yet never overstated it. It is subtle, I think, and lovely. Let us… move on again…

to an American who lived a large part of his life abroad, John Singer Sargent. He was forty years old when he made this portrait of the French composer, Gabrielle Faure; and it's now one of our drawings in the Fogg Museum. It was made, as you can see, in 1896. It has a somewhat European flavor, that's true; it has a kind of aristocratic aloofness that is in tremendous contrast to the Eastman Johnson, for example. But it also has… a zest, and a freedom in its line that differs markedly from any French or German contemporaneous portrait that was made in Europe at that time. We have to look very carefully at the drawings of Sargent, because sometimes they are nothing more than sketches, and sometimes he was as bored as the subject, as he makes us feel. But here, obviously, he was amused and interested by Gabrielle Faure; he was even more amused by Consuela, Duchess of Marlborough—Consuela Vanderbilt, the then Duchess of Marlborough. He made the portrait of the Marlborough family in 1905; and this drawing, which is now in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, I think is an extraordinary drawing from Sargent's hand; because he's done it with such visible delight in his sitter. It is so spritely. You probably are all familiar with her appearance in later years, because you've seen her picture in *Vogue* or in the *New York Times*, as Madame (unintelligible, sounds like Bi-tern); but here as a young woman is the Duchess of Marlborough. He's caught her, I think, in a most perceptive, lively, and sympathetic moment. Again to turn to an American who has felt the French influence, this is a Charles Hudson drawing, made in Gloucester, Massachusetts in 1919. This is another drawing we've had at the Fogg, "A Portrait of Julie." I haven't yet discovered who Julie was…. Now you look and see some influence of Manet and Degas here…. They clearly lie behind certain uses of the… pencil. And yet, could there be a more direct, or more challenging representation of this young girl? Again I think the American quality is absolutely (unintelligible); you wouldn't take her for a French girl. You can quite well believe this is exactly as she looked in Gloucester in 1919. There are a number of drawings in this country of… young people. I thought for a long time that it was only the French artists that got the peculiar mixture of sadness and waiting… and… perception that the French artist has been so remarkable in capturing without sentimentality in the faces of young people…. But there is an extraordinary series of American drawings of young people. There is, for example, this charming drawing that George Bellows made the year before he died of his little daughter, which drawing—again in the Fogg—which he called "Lady Jane." It was a wet day, and she'd found some costume upstairs in the attic of an 1883 lady of small stature—and you know our stature

has increased—and Jane put on the costume of the 1883 lady and came downstairs; and her father was so enchanted with her, he took a lithographic crayon and made this drawing. And again I say that… the sympathy, the understanding of the child, the solidity of the drawing, and the quickness with which it's make, make it a memorable drawing. I've been showing you drawings of painters. Let me show you the drawing of a sculptor. This is Joe Davidson's portrait of Anatole France, which he made in France in 1922. You are probably all familiar with "Legole" portrait of Anatole France; or, if you aren't, you know the Rodin sculpture. Here's a sculptor trained at the Art Students League in New York, who also looked at that remarkable French writer; and you can almost see him working out the planes. It's as though his pencil here was his chisel, the way he has blocked it out. You can sketch *immediately* the likeness, but there is the difference—a Redon drawing curiously enough does not approach… sculpture in this way, almost as though with a chisel, but Joe Davidson does. (unintelligible name) drew a landscape; and I can remember going to his studio one day in Paris when he taken one of the first transcontinental planes across the United States; and because the plane was moving so fast, the dawn lasted a very long time. And he made a whole series of watercolor drawings of dawn coming up across the United States. And he was so excited, the excitement got into the drawings; it was a *beautiful* series of watercolor drawings of landscapes, just piled in light. I don't know whatever became of those. But with a pencil, this is what he did. Or… to take another American of whom we're very fond, "Miss Dame Lee Kidd". She has something of German Expressionism in it. Or… "Charles Damon's". (unintelligible) But had it been a German drawing, in thi… deformation, there were be a touch of cruelty, I think. If it had been a "French Nabe" drawing, and it owes something to the "Nabes", it would have been more (unintelligible). The American is just truthful, without being cruel; and it comes through, I think, as an extraordinarily sympathetic portrait, as indeed his drawings for the illustrations of the stories like *The Turn of the Screw* are also extraordinarily sympathetic. And then, for the last one that I'll show you in this series, another drawing in the Fogg Museum, our own Ben Shahn's drawing, "A Portrait of Sacco and Vanzetti. I was being so transfixed, for years, with these two faces, with all they have to say, of… suffering and patience and sorrow, that it was a long time before I even saw the handcuffs which chain them together. Now, this drawing is in a very living tradition; an so this *is* something that lives. It hasn't altered *beyond* recognition; it has altered some because, if it didn't alter it would die. And it's not dying; it's just living. Let us

now, having looked at the faces, look a little bit at the landscape. And let's go back to the 19th century. In the Fogg Museum we have this extraordinary drawing by Washington Allston, made after he came back from living in Rome. A—well it makes me think of "The Flying Dutchman;" but it was made at least nine years before Wagner wrote "The Flying Dutchman." It's a white chalk drawing on a dark brown ground; and it's filled with *Sturm und Drang,* with motion, and emotion, and drama. It was seen by Mrs. Jameson, that famous lady who wrote **The Legend of the Saint**, in his Cambridgeport studio, when she came to the States; and she praised it before it won any praise from people on this side of the ocean. Sometimes it takes a while for us to be able to judge what it is in our own thing. If this is a drawing of a Romantic idealist, let us look at one by a lesser—totally unromantic man, George Loring Brown. He made this exact—something you would almost say *dull* drawing of the Bay of Naples in 1835. And this also is the answer—there was whole series of precise, accurate, literate… exact landscapes. Just a pencil with a few touches of white on kind of yellow-brown paper. Well let us look at a drawing by "Innes", made after 1850, when he had been to France and seen what the Barbizon School was doing. He translates it into his own idiom. It's much more romantic that the Barbizon every would be; it's more personal; it's more organized, but merely because of this personal quality, and this lack of organization, it's also… more poetic, I think. And there's a complete contrast. Can we that a little bit clearer… do you think? It's kind of fuzzy from my… angle. It's one of the few… Innes drawings that has survived, and it's one of the *very* few that is signed. This… is also a drawing in the Fogg. Is that better? Well… as a complete contrast, let us look at a drawing by Eakins, who was working out the plans for that wonderful painting now in Cleveland. This is—the drawing's also in Cleveland. It was made in 1873. And… here he almost seems to foretell what the Cubists were going to do. It is thought to the last degree of exactitude; and yet, miraculously it doesn't lose either its freshness or its sense of motion. Or again another view of water and the sea, this drawing by Winslow Homer in the Cooper Union, made about 1885. And again it's a romantic drawing, but it's not romantic in the way that the Allston was. The Allston was with a great view; these are anonymous people. The weight of the water, and the weight of the solemnity of their work… the movement of the sea… the feeling of the air… the space between them and their ship—the whole drama of their occupation comes through in utmost simplicity on the green-blue paper. The slide doesn't show the richness of the paper, with the dark accent and the white. Or… again I have some drawings when made somewhat later than I

showed you before for the girls, he made the little—this quick drawing of the little church around the corner in New York, again an echo of France, but far more discursive than any French drawing would be. This you see he has a certain lack of focus, and yet it has a lot of charm; and it is… it is American in its discursiveness. Or take again a sculptor, somebody like "Butson Borgland", who—that boy from Idaho, from the edges of the… wilderness, who went and studied in Europe and then made this watercolor. He had known the cattle grazing on the Great Plains, and yet he made this watercolor in Holland. You can see the windmill in the background; and here he has so absorbed the European idiom that he might almost be a European. Or… let us turn to a man I think familiar to you all, Charles Sheeler, in this drawing which he calls "Feline Felicity." He drew it in 1933, and we acquired it the following year in the Fogg Museum—that comfortable cat on a New England ladderback chair, dozing in the sunlight… done with great exactitude, and yet with incredible subtlety and understanding. And whereas this is all cycling with movement and with light, one year later he made this drawing, "Totems and Steel." And to get the measure of what he was trying to do, (unintelligible) the man. If you take the measure of the man, then you get the measure of the steel. And it may seem a far cry, but what started him on this kind of forte was looking at Piero della Francesca in Uffizi. When he saw stuck to walls, and then he looked around him, he could apply what he had learned from Piero to what was going on in the American scene. He made that—made this drawing and signed it in 1935. I meant to show you this evening a drawing by Marsden Hartley, a study for the "Mark de Praddens," which we have in the Fogg; but when I went to get the slide, which I was sure we had, we didn't have a slide. So I've brought instead his drawing of a dead plover, because I think that in the State of Maine I could not speak without mentioning what a superb draftsman Marsden Hartley. There are are whole series of dead birds. They're not like dead birds at all; they're not like the English or the French dead birds. Somehow even these dead birds look American. They're—again it's a question of simplicity, of the character of the line, of—they're a very moving series of drawings indeed. Or… let us turn to Charles Burchfield, that other American, his "View of an August Field in Sunlight." It seems to me an appropriate drawing to show you this evening, after the August fields that *we've* been looking at in sunlight… filled with light and air and… a shimmer, done with the great simplicity, the greatest understanding… and beautifully composed. Evocative and solid, and… and lovely. Or… for our last one, let's look again at our dear friend Ben Shahn; and this drawing he calls—

he made for "The Beatitudes." He said he was a city man; but look what he's put into this brief scene… the full grain in the man's hand… the feeling of a rich harvest… He spoke of the fact that he memories of his grandfather walking in the fields in Russia, and testing the grains of wheat. He's looking to see or put into the whole question of what we all may reap. I've not spoken of materials in these few words, because… the materials—the pen, the ink…the papers…the chalk—these are international. I've spoken of the American artist. He's been a restless creature, a traveler. I picked the (unintelligible); of the twenty people, or the twenty artists I've show you this evening, only two didn't go abroad. Many of them went abroad several times, even in the early 19th century when it was difficult. Only Burchfield and "Maas" didn't go it abroad; and yet "Maas", when his estate was settled, it was found among his books that he had (unintelligible, sounds like "Fellino Fellini"), that he had (unintelligible, sounds like 'Stradamus). And I think he must have had also some of those remarkable lithographic reproductions of the Ingres drawings; otherwise I cannot understand how he would have known so well what Ingres was doing. And if Burchfield's library had been examined, I believe we would discover that Burchfield also had been touched by… things beyond our own boundary. As (unintelligible) true if I had chosen any other twenty artists. In the beginning I spoke of language and semantics. We all know art is a universal language. In our time, and I think *only* in our time—and I don't *mean* to be playing with semantics—I think it has become an international one as well as a universal one. A Japanese, for example, would *not* have understood the Peal portraits. I think any Japanese today would fully understand the full import of this drawing by Ben Shahn. To sum up, from the opening of the 19th century until our time, I think we can say of American drawings that they've been—they've been romantic; they've been realist; they've been highly personal; and they're (unintelligible). If you will notice, there's been no grandiloquence; there's been no theatricality; there's been no heroics. Curiously enough, given out national reputation, there has been much (unintelligible), much directness, and much simplicity. If there has a been aggressiveness, it has been banished by a conversation. I'm going to close with a quotation from Charles P. Sheeler. "Nature," he said, "with its profound order, is an inexhaustible source of supply. Its many facets lend themselves freely to all who would help themselves for their particular need. Each one may filter out for himself that which is essential to him. Our chief objective is to increase our capacity for perception. The degree of accomplishment determines the caliber of the artist." And I think our chief objective is to—

when Sheeler wrote that he was speaking as an artist—"Our chief objective is to increase our own capacity for perfection." I think as viewer, our chief duty is also—our chief objective *ought* to be to increase our capacity for perfection; and that the degree of accomplishment then would determine the caliber of our taste. Thank you. (Applause)

(Male voice): I know you all will join me in thanking Miss Mongan for (unintelligible) so beautifully; (unintelligible) so I hope you all join us in our gallery. And thank you again Miss Mongan.

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