



## Art and Knowledge

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**Abstract.** The question of whether art can provide humans with knowledge remains a subject of sharpest controversy among philosophers, artists, and art critics over time. The controversy is no less complicated now than it was historically, nor is it any closer to being resolved. Recent objection to art's epistemic value maintains the basic line of reasoning that art lacks propositional contents in the sense of propositional knowledge – since works of art do not typically express, clear, explicit propositions in the way that language does. More than ever, this tends to render the epistemic value of art highly questionable. However, a contrary line of response in defense of art's epistemic value involves identifying some other epistemic aims, and showing how art's conduciveness to them justifies its epistemic value. Identifying with this approach, I argue in this paper for the epistemic value of art. Drawing upon Nelson Goodman's Art-symbol-theoretic, I argue that although art may not always provide factual knowledge (in a propositional sense), yet, through its symbolic nature, art is capable of conveying ideas and experiences in a way that shapes our *understanding* of the world – where, besides knowledge, *understanding* is here identified as an epistemic aim.

**Keywords:** Art, Epistemic Aims, Understanding, Nelson Goodman, Knowledge.

### 1. Introduction

Over time, the relationship between art and epistemology has been fraught with controversies and debates. Whereas it seems obvious that our interactions with works of art can yield something meaningful in terms of our perceptual and emotional experiences, it does not, however, seem so obvious that such aesthetic experiences and interactions can produce propositional knowledge – where knowledge is often expressed in clear, factual, or declarative propositions. Hence, the question whether art is of any epistemic value has remained controversial in the

history of philosophy of art. Whereas for some philosophers, artists, and art critics, art possesses epistemic values because it contributes to our understanding of the world, others, denying this claim, argue that aesthetic judgments are not only not objectively true but also that art, generally, lacks the sort of propositional content needed for knowledge claims. Hence, works of art do provide us with knowledge about the world, irrespective of the fact that we do respond to works of art, and even commonly believe we can and do learn from such works.

Given such art critics' position, arguing in defense of art's epistemic value appears difficult. It does seem there are only three options available for this basic desideratum: (a) reject the recent analyses of knowledge that make the epistemic value of art questionable, (b) accept the recent analyses of knowledge but argue that they are compatible with the epistemic value of art, or (c) find another epistemic aim (besides knowledge) and show that art is of significant help in achieving this aim. In this paper, I will consider option (c), since the first two options do not seem quite promising to me. I argue that, at least concerning pictorial art, this option seems more promising. By reconsidering some basic insights and ideas from Nelson Goodman, I identify *understanding* as an epistemic aim to which (pictorial) art makes a significant contribution. I argue that insofar as it fosters human's cognitive ability of *understanding* – indispensable for gaining insights about the world in a non-propositional way – art is epistemically significant; for, in this way, it offers some insights about the world in a manner that go beyond purely factual knowledge. Hence, engaging with art is not just a perceptual and emotional activity, but also a fundamentally cognitive experience that yields some basic epistemic aims.

### 2. Concept and Nature of Art

The term, “art”, has lent itself to diverse interpretations throughout history and across cultures such that there has been no generally accepted definition of what constitutes art. However, for this discussion, I identify with Francis Sparshott’s conception of art as “a diverse range of cultural activity centered around works utilizing creative or imaginative talents, which are expected to evoke a worthwhile experience generally through an expression of emotional power, conceptual ideas, technical proficiency, and/or beauty” (Sparshott 1982: 2). Generally, art encompasses various forms, styles and medium, and often it goes hand in hand with a people’s (cultural) identity: “The arts may embed and embody belief systems ... arts shape identities of individuals and cultures. Art can take the form of rituals; it might incorporate religious symbolism and sometimes it embodies the history of a particular culture or community” (Gulinck 2019: 1).

Three classical branches of art often identified: Visual Art, which includes, painting, sculpture, photography, and graphic design; Performing Art, which includes, theatre, music, dance and film; and Literary Art, which includes, poetry, fiction and non-fiction (Vasari, 2007). However, in recent time, the concept of art has expanded to include: Conceptual Art (that emphasizes ideas over traditional forms), Installation Art (that uses space and environment to create an immersive experience), Digital Art (that uses digital technology to create new forms of expression), and Street Art (graffiti, murals and stencil art, created in public spaces often with a focus on public commentary) (Vasari 2007: 5).

Unlike sunsets, mountains, oceans and other natural elements, works of art are made by man. Joh Hospers observes that “among the things in the world to which we respond aesthetically, works of art are the most important single class” (Hospers 1980: 5). In many cases, there is the temptation to say that works of art are created specifically for the aesthetic experience or being enjoyed aesthetically, and that an aesthetic experience is a non-cognitive contemplation. This is not true in all cases; for, in many cases too, "it is commonly assumed art has the power to inspire, provoke, change our perception about the world or even engender beliefs about the world” (Worth 2000: 1). However, despite this understanding, the questions of what constitute the nature of works of art, remains a matter of debate and interpretations among philosophers. Hence, the nature of art and related concepts, such as creativity and interpretation, are explored in a branch of philosophy known as aesthetics (Kennick 1979: xi–xiii). Richard Wollheim describes the nature of art as "one of the

most elusive of the traditional problems of human culture" (1980: 1).

Philosophers have offered various theories about the nature of art. These include, Art as an Imitation of reality, which has deep roots in Aristotle’s concept of art as *mimesis* or representation (Levinson 2003: 5); Art as Form, which views art as not significant in anything in life, but simply as a set of colours, lines, shapes, textures, composition, sounds, materiality and structure, enjoyable to contemplate in themselves rather than for anything that they may represent (Hospers 1980: 6); Art as Expression, which sees art as a medium for the expression of human feelings (Collingwood 1983: 109-10); and Art as Symbols, which signify human feelings – (not in the case in which dark cloud signify rain), but in the sense that there is an *isomorphism* (similarity of structure) between art and human feelings: “art, especially music, is a highly articulate form of expression symbolizing direct or intuitive knowledge of life patterns – e.g., feeling, motion, and emotion, which ordinary language is unable to convey” (Langer 1953: 24).

### 3. Knowledge-Claim Controversies about Art

The question whether art can provide knowledge has been a complex and highly debated topic among philosophers, art critics and artists over time. Philosophers have remained divided over the issue, especially since Plato claimed in his *Republic* that artists are twice removed from ideas and can only produce likenesses of nature (597a-598a), as well as warned about the dangers of indulging in both mimetic and narrative representations of the world and of human actions (595-601). The ensuing debate has endured in the contemporary philosophical literature and revolves around such questions as: Can art to contribute to our quest of achieving our most basic epistemic aim, namely, knowledge? Is there any sort of propositional content that art can provide which resembles the content that we claim to need for other kinds of knowledge claims?

Whereas some contemporary philosophers, artists, art-critics, and art-historians answer this question affirmatively, others remain highly sceptical (Briesen 2014: 11). For such sceptics and critics, art is not productive of knowledge because it lacks propositional contents in the sense of propositional knowledge, which epistemology is essentially concerned with. Hence, in the light of the widely accepted analyses of knowledge, as justified true belief, it appears very difficult to see how art might

significantly be considered as a source of knowledge. According to Jochen Briesen, “by the lights of recent epistemology, it is highly questionable whether art is of any epistemic value” (2014: 11).

In its general sense, the term, “knowledge”, which itself, represents a flexible and internally diverse ideas, “relate to how persons can be said to have access to correct information” (Rescher 2003: xvi). Certainly, this can occur in different ways, so that they are various distinguishable sorts of knowledge, depending on what is at issue. Hence, it may be useful to differentiate between adverbial knowledge (e.g. knowing when, how, why, etc.), performatory knowledge (e.g. knowing “how-to” dance), knowledge by acquaintance (e.g. I know the owner of the shirt), and propositional knowledge (knowledge of fact, e.g., knowing-that something or the other is the case). Traditionally, epistemology focuses on propositional or factual knowledge of the sort where “*X* knows that *P*”, is paradigmatic. For this reason, to claim that the epistemic significance of art, the focus ought to be on propositional knowledge rather than the other sorts of knowledge. Propositional knowledge has been traditionally and widely analyzed as “justified true belief” (Dancy 1991: 23).

This definition harks back to Plato’s conception knowledge in his *Theaetetus* as “a true belief, equipped with a suitable rationale” (291c – 210d), in attempt to distinguish between knowledge and opinion. The assumption behind this analysis of knowledge is that for the attribution of knowledge, a *belief* claim is not only necessary, it must be *true* and *justifiedly* held. How *justified* a person is in holding a belief depends not just on what he believes, but on *why* he believes, because, “knowledge is not simply a matter of having a true belief that is *somehow* justified, but rather, knowledge calls for having a true belief that is appropriately justified” (Rescher 2003: 4). Thus, there can be no problem in crediting *X* with knowledge that *P* if and only if *X* believes *P* on grounds sufficient to guarantee and realizes this to be the case.

However, in recent times, the adequacy of this traditional tripartite conception of knowledge has been called to question. Edmund Gettier, who particularly, reflected on the problematic nature of justification in his famous 1963 article, “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?”, raised the consciousness of epistemologists towards the inadequacy of the tripartite conditions in the analysis of knowledge as justified true belief. With his counterexamples, he demonstrated that knowledge is more than justified true belief; and that it is, indeed, possible for someone not to know even when he has a justified true belief, because of the unreliable nature of justification (1963:

122-23). In the sequel, a flurry of post-Gettier theories of justification have emerged in contemporary epistemology, such as, the defeasibility, causal, reliability, virtue theories, etc. – committed to the search for the supplementing condition (s) for knowledge. William Alston affirms that “the view that knowledge consists of true-justified-belief (+ ...) has been prominent in this century....” (1989: 57).

Notwithstanding these disquisitions concerning the adequacy of the tripartite conditions in the traditional analysis of knowledge, accepting these conditions as necessary for knowledge, seems to make the epistemic value of art questionable. This is because, art does not appear to be propositionally based. That is, “art does not have propositional content that can be learned in a traditional way, even though it can be seen to have effects that promote knowledge and that can either encourage or undermine the development of understand” (Worth 2000: 2). The propositional theory of knowledge, therefore, holds that one must have justified true belief in the content of a proposition to know. This appears reasonable under normal circumstances, but seems not to work at all in the case of art. Those who deny that art is of any epistemic value argue that “there can be no knowledge that is not propositionally-based” (Worth 2000: 2).

Certainly, engagement with works of art might lead to true beliefs concerning the works themselves, such as, their structure and form, who created them, when they were created, etc., but, “can we, thereby, come to know propositions that are not concerned with specific works of art?” (Briesen 2014: 12). For instance, the involvement with art does not produce true beliefs concerning the world we might be interested in. Jerome Stolnitz, for instance, posits that art does not and cannot contribute to knowledge primarily because it does not generate any sort of truths (1992: 191-200). Those who argue along this line want to defend the notion that since art cannot provide facts or generate arguments, then we cannot learn from it; and so, it is of no epistemic significance. Accordingly, art can thus be rejected as a source of knowledge because it does not provide true beliefs, and because it does not and cannot justify the beliefs that it does convey.

Given this circumstance, to insist on the epistemic value of art becomes rather difficult. However, those who insist that we can learn from art generally argue that our engagement with art arouses certain emotions or activities that are able to facilitate or produce knowledge. In other words, they often find another epistemic aim (besides knowledge) and show that art is of significant help in achieving this aim. They maintain that there are some aspects of the artwork

which can help to produce greater understanding of the world around us: “If we can learn from art, we must be able to do so in a manner that diverges from the traditional notion of justified true belief, but that still holds some sort of legitimate ground” (Worth 2000: 4). This is the position I adopt in this paper, which seems promising, at least concerning pictorial art, using the theoretical framework of Goodman's symbol theoretic.

#### 4. Goodman's Art-Symbol-Theoretic

Nelson Goodman (1906–1998) is one of the most influential twentieth-century American philosophers. His theory of art as symbol, outlined in his work *Languages and Art* – considered a major contribution to Philosophy of Art and Aesthetics (Cohnitz and Marcus 2024: 1) – presents the view that art is a system of symbols that convey meaning and reference (1976: 3). Indeed, for Goodman, that aesthetics is but a branch of epistemology, and, works of art are symbols that require interpretation (Elgin 1998: 2). Art can function as a form of symbolic language, and that it does provide knowledge, but in a unique, non-literal way. Paintings, sculptures, musical sonatas, dance pieces, etc. are all made of symbols, which possess different functions and bear different relations with the worlds they refer to. Hence, artworks require interpretation, and interpreting them amounts to understanding what they refer to, in which way, and within which systems of rules (Giovannelli 2017: 3). Understanding works of art is, therefore, not a passive absorption, but of active intellectual engagement with symbols whose syntactic and semantic features are often elusive.

Goodman strongly rejects the idea that art is only emotional or decorative. He insists that art can be cognitive – it can teach and inform us. Hence, concerning art in particular and to symbolic activities in general, Goodman advocates a form of *cognitivism*: by using symbols we discover (indeed we build) the worlds we live in, and the interest we have in symbols—artworks amongst them—is distinctively cognitive (Giovannelli 2017: 3). For him, there are some aspects of the symbolic nature of artwork can help to produce greater understanding of the world around us. Symbolizing is for him, the same as referring; for, the essential nature of symbols is to refer: “to be a symbol means to be a symbol for something, to stand for something, to refer to something” (1976: 5). Furthermore, that something is a symbol, is a symbol of a given kind, only within a *symbol system* of that kind – a system governed by the syntactical and semantic rules that are distinctive of symbols of that kind. Art is a type of symbol system similar to language that conveys meaning through symbols, signs and representations (Briesen 2014: 19).

Just like language uses words and grammar to convey meaning, art uses symbols (like colours, shapes, sounds, etc.) in structured ways to communicate.

Hence, a fundamental notion which is at the core of Goodman's theory of symbols is that of *reference*. He distinguishes between two direct (literally) and distinct modes of symbolic reference, namely: Denotation and Exemplification. In other words, Goodman's theory sees artworks as that which denote and exemplify. Denotation describes reference to something outside the work of art itself, just as in case of a word and what it applies to. An instance of *denotation* is the relationship between a “label,” such as “John F. Kennedy,” or “The 34th President of the United States,” and what it labels (Goodman 1976, Chapter 1). Of course, labels can be particular or general, as reference can be to an individual, as in the “JFK” example above, or, severally, to all the members of a set, as with “blue” concerning all blue items. Just as words could be used to denote either single or several things or individuals (e.g., the word, Jones, may denote a particular individual; and “Black” may denote all black things, pictures (i.e. paintings, drawings, photographs, etc.). Arts are like words in this respect: they refer to something conventionally and not because of certain resemblance relations (1976: 3). In art, denotation can occur through *representation* (artworks can *represent* objects, people or scenes), and *reference* (artworks can refer to ideas, concepts, etc.).

Exemplification, on the other hand, refers to the relationship between a symbol and the properties it possesses or instantiates. This occurs when a symbol (such as an artwork) possesses certain properties or characteristics that it refers to or exemplifies. Goodman sees artworks as not only capable of denoting something else, but also exemplifying the properties they instantiate or possess. Thus, he explains that exemplification is “possession plus reference” (1976: 53). Artworks can possess and so, exemplify *properties* such as colour, shape, texture, or rhythm. They can also *express* emotions, ideas, or attitudes through their properties. By exemplifying some of its properties, an artwork (e.g., an abstract painting) refers (at least) to these properties or to the class of things that instantiate these properties (Briesen 2014: 20). When a feature is referred to in this way, it is “exhibited, typified, shown forth” (Goodman 1976: 86). For instance, while any blue object is denoted by the label “blue,” only those things, e.g., blue color swatches—that also refer to “blue” and analogous labels exemplify such color, are “samples” of it. Thus, in exemplification, a symbol points up and hence refers to features it serves as a sample of.

Besides constituting literally or direct reference-relations, denotation and exemplification, according to Goodman, can occur metaphorically and both ways of referring, can work together in chains of reference (1976: 69). For instance, a painting of a rainy landscape can exemplify sadness (1976: 20). But to exemplify sadness, the painting has to instantiate sadness—that is, the painting has to be sad. Of course, a painting cannot be said to be "sad" in the literally sense, but it can be said to be "sad" metaphorically speaking. Thus, the term "sad" can metaphorically *denote* a picture and a picture can metaphorically *exemplify* sadness. In Goodman's analysis, metaphors, typically bring about rearrangements in a field of reference, which affect several labels at once. It is important to emphasize that, for Goodman, metaphorical usage is no less real or connected to knowledge than literal usage, and metaphorical truth is no less a form of truth than literal truth. Indeed, the literal and the metaphorical in a sense lie on the same continuum. Whether the application of a label (and the corresponding possession of a feature) should be considered literal or metaphorical is just a matter of habit—specifically, a matter of the *age of the metaphor*, for old metaphors lose their metaphorical status and become just literal applications.

But what is it that determines to what a given symbol (such as work of art) refers? This question is important, as it is central to understanding of Goodman's view on how art conveys contextual meaning, and so, possess some level of epistemic significance, against the sceptics charge that art is of no epistemic significance – because is lack of propositional content and that aesthetic experience is non-cognitive. For Goodman, there is nothing internal to the symbol that determines what it stands for. This is instead determined by the symbol-system to which the symbol belongs. In other words, how a symbol refers—whether it denotes or exemplifies, what it denotes or which of its features it exemplifies, whether it does so directly or indirectly, literally or metaphorically—depends on the *system of symbolization* within which the symbol is found (Giovannelli 2017: 3). In Goodman's words: "a symbol is the sort of symbol it is—linguistic, musical, pictorial, diagrammatic, etc.—in virtue of its belonging to a symbol system of a certain kind. And symbols differ from each other according to their different syntactic and semantic rules" (Goodman 1976: 128–130). This is why the same work of art can refer to very different things in different symbol systems. An identical physical mark on the canvas, for instance, might belong to different symbolic systems.

Goodman suggests different *syntactic* and *semantic* parameters by which symbolic systems can be characterized. These include, syntactic and semantic density, as well as repleteness. The syntactic aspect of a symbol system is the "symbol scheme", which consists of a collection of symbols, or "characters," with rules to combine them into new, compound characters—associated to a field of reference. In the English language, for instance, the symbol scheme is made of characters as the letters of the Roman alphabet – "a," "b," "c," etc.—as well as compound characters such as "ape" or "house." Each character comprises all the verbal utterances and ink inscriptions, i.e., all the "marks" that correspond to it (Giovannelli 2017: 3). For Goodman, certain symbols, such as art, are syntactically dense, because they have a dense or continuous range of possible expressions, rather than a discrete set of expressions.

Semantic density, on the other hand, refers to the idea that the meaning of a symbol or an art work is nuanced and context-dependent, with a rich and complex set of possible interpretations. Goodman also believes that works of art are symbols that are "replete" with meanings, in the sense that many aspects of the symbols contribute to their meaning (Goodman 1976: 128–130). This is particularly, because, such symbols are dense (many aspects of the symbols are meaningful), complex (the symbol's meaning is multifaceted), and context dependent (the symbol's meaning depends on context). Thus, understanding an artwork requires considering multiple aspects of the symbol, since the repleteness of an art work contributes to their richness and depth.

Goodman's conclusions, on what roughly could be considered the question of what is art as well as on the question of artistic value, follow from his view that aesthetics is a branch of epistemology (Shottenkirk 2009: 137), and that there is ultimately no sharp division between art and other forms of human knowledge, because, "the arts function cognitively" (Elgin 1993: 171). In his view, art does convey knowledge – but not in a straightforward, factual way of propositional statements. Instead, art functions through complex symbolic systems that we interpret, and in doing so, helps us understand the world in different, valuable ways.

## 5. Implications for Epistemic Value of Art

Expectedly, Goodman's theory of art as symbol has had a significant influence on the philosophy of art, aesthetics and art criticism. With particular reference to the aim of this paper, his rich and systematic general analysis of art as symbol offers a valuable basis to

appreciate in what way art, especially pictorial art, can be regarded as “epistemic images” that provide a unique avenue for *understanding* the world in a way that goes beyond purely factual knowledge, but which is equally of great epistemic value. Although, art may not be said to be conducive to knowledge in the sense of the widely accepted analysis of propositional knowledge as justified true belief, yet it could be rightly said that art is conducive to *understanding*, where understanding is seen as an important cognitive activity and an epistemic aim, besides knowledge. As a fundamental epistemic aim, understanding involves grasping the relationship, connections, and underlying structures of a subject or the nature of reality whatsoever. Jochen Briesen’s illustration of the difference between understanding and knowledge, particularly, demonstrates *understanding* as an important epistemic aim:

Let us assume that a theory is in part constituted by a set of information. An epistemic subject *S* might well know all these individual items of information, but it seems reasonable to suppose that as long as all these individual items of information are not pieced together in the right way by *S*, *S* does not *understand* the theory. Hence, knowledge of individual pieces in a set of information is not sufficient for *understanding* a theory or a complex phenomenon. What *understanding* a theory or a complex phenomenon requires is the awareness of explanatory or other coherence inducing relationships concerning individual pieces of information (2014: 24).

Thus, *understanding* is a key aspect of knowledge and learning, which involves making sense of complex information, identifying patterns, developing a coherent picture, and, of course, “systematically categorizing and organizing reality by systematically organizing our representations that refer to reality” (Briesen 2014: 24). *Understanding* is, therefore, crucial for critical thinking, analysis and evaluation of information about reality.

Goodman’s idea of denotation and exemplification, certainly, highlight the symbolic nature of art and the importance of *understanding* the relationship between artworks, symbols and reference. His theory lends functional support to the position of this paper that art is of epistemic significance, because it provides us with a powerful source of *understanding* or gaining some clear insights about the world – offering us unique perspective, through their symbolic properties and relationships to enable us relate or function well with reality in any context. Goodman, himself affirms that “the aims of art are the aims of symbolic activity in general, and they have to do with understanding”. Again, he notes that “aesthetic

attitude is not one of passive contemplation, but of active cognitive engagement; its main goal is understanding, not pleasure” (cited in Elgin 1998: 2). Thus, *understanding* is a broader concept than propositional knowledge, one that is not bound by literal truth, and that is thus applicable also to what admits of no formal truth-values: metaphors and paintings for example.

For this reason, artistic symbols are to be judged for the classifications they bring about, how novel and insightful those categorizations are, and for how they change our perception of the world and relations to it. Within this conceptualization, works of art could be conceived as “epistemic images”, capable of conveying ideas and experiences in a way that transcends verbal language and factual knowledge, as well as a window into different cultures, historical period and social contexts. Thus, the artwork can foster emotional *understanding* (can convey complex emotions, fostering empathy), cultural insights, as well as provide fresh perspectives which enable us to challenge assumptions and dominant narratives, promoting critical thinking and reflection. Art, certainly, challenges us to see the world in a new way, and critical perspectives on social issues. It makes sense, then, to agree with Goodman view that aesthetic attitude is not one of passive contemplation, but of active cognitive engagement, whose main goal is *understanding*, not pleasure.

Works of art are taken to possess the ability to give us imaginative and epistemic access to certain kinds of experiences relevant to moral knowledge and judgment. Not only can we respond emotionally to particular moral situations presented through artworks; we cannot help but find ourselves morally outraged or saddened by the plights of certain fictional characters. Sarah Worth submits “that art... can provide experiential and emotional stimulation, and ... moral knowledge is not simply propositional in nature (2000: 5). Works of art can give us examples of, and exercise in, certain morally pertinent activities. Thus, we come across circumstances and situations in art and literature that we might not otherwise come across in our daily lives. If we simulate our reactions to the situations the work presents us with, we have an *understanding* of how we might respond or how we would feel (John 2001: 34). The crucial fact here is that Goodman’s theory of art as symbol challenges to re-examine our presuppositions about what constitutes knowledge in a way that can permit us to reconceive knowledge in such a way that we may eventually come to understand how it can be gained non-propositionally. Hence, epistemology should treat

*understanding* as a focus of its concern, besides knowledge.

## 6. Conclusion

Though art may not be conducive for knowledge in terms of the widely accepted conception of propositional knowledge as justified true belief. However, in the light of Goodman's art symbol theoretic, the epistemic value of art can be appreciated, especially from the dimension of its potential as "epistemic images" – containing more than just the visible, but also a symbolic representation and higher understanding of the world, through which man come to understand certain aspects of reality (though in a non-propositional way). Art, particularly pictorial art, can, thus, be seen as a form of knowledge representation, capable of conveying complex ideas and emotions beyond what can be expressed through language alone. The epistemic value of art is by this means, not in doubt; for, art, undeniably, engenders in us the cognitive ability of *understanding* the world, which is a basic epistemic aim. An essential imperative for epistemology, therefore, is to treat *understanding*, besides knowledge as a focus of its concern.

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