

Life Unleashed

"Art is about getting your 'self' out of the way so the truth of life can be channelled through you."

Maggi Hambling talk at Alde Valley Spring Festival 2018



Movement in the art of Maggi Hambling

Parallel Project for OCA Printmaking 2
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Linda Mayoux
SNo 511740

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Life Unleashed: the art of Maggi Hambling

Maggi Hambling's recent self-portrait shown at the Alde Valley Spring Festival April 2018 dominates the hall. The viewer's gaze is immediately transfixed by the defiance of the right eye. But then restlessly circles around the swirling marks, drips and textures of the rest of the face, head and shoulders. The half smiling humanity of the mouth leads to a re-assessment of the eye moving from the half semblance of certainty on the righthand side before dissolving into chaos on left side. A face in continual movement.

Maggi Hambling's evening talk at the festival was humorous and attentive to the audience. Eyes twinkling, not smoking the cigarette between her fingers or swigging the whisky in the glass placed in front of her, she mostly repeated anecdotes and thoughts I had heard or read before on video or the many books I had collected. But what shone through above all from her presence was the passion and integrity of her artistic vision. Her intensely human and courageous vision of life and death with all its tragedies and comedies.

What unites Hambling's work is not technique *per se*, but her ability to harness a range of techniques communicating energy, passion and movement across different media to communicate her vision. Her art covers a wide range of genres: portraits, emotional abstracts, landscapes and the sea, political themes of global warming, migration and war (see Annex: Summary Chronology). She works in different media primarily with oil paint, based generally on drawings and watercolour. But these have a very tactile quality drawing on sculpture. Part of her practice also includes etchings and aquatints and monoprints.

It is this harnessing of technique to vision (for example Fig.1 Suicide Laugh from her early Towards Laughter series) that first led me to choose Maggi Hambling for this project.

This parallel project reviews selected drawings, paintings and prints to focus on:

- a) the different ways in which Hambling uses different techniques to create movement and energy in her drawings and paintings
- b) how these techniques are reflected or different in her printmaking.

The final section of the project reflects then on:

- c) the implications for increasing intensity and movement in my own printmaking – particularly monoprint but also other processes like drypoint, linocut and collagraph.



Fig.1 Maggi Hambling *Suicide Laugh*
1992. oil on canvas. 213.4x152.4cm

Directing the eye: line, tone and composition

Most of Maggi Hambling's work starts with drawing in charcoal, graphite or ink.

Hambling's first major drawing is the very large imposing ink drawing of Rosie the Rhino - a stuffed exhibit at Ipswich Museum - when she was still at school (see Fig.2). Even in this early drawing there is a considerable amount of movement. This feeling of being alive created partly by the shapes and composition – the upward pointing horn between the fierce and arresting eyes and the pricked ears – ready to charge. The contrasting swirling marks and variety of line around the body add to the sense that Rosie is charging – or about to charge – towards you.

Hambling's drawing style was heavily influenced by Rembrandt's "ability to capture his face as if about to speak, caught in a moment of hesitation, off guard, devoid of any vanity" (Hambling, quoted Ramkavalon 2016 p.14). and Giacometti's sculptural approach to making art like "a blind man groping in the darkness". (Hambling, quoted Ramkavalon 2016 p.16)

Rembrandt's self-portrait (Fig.3) uses tonal shapes to create a sense of life and movement through leading the eye round and down the figure then up to the left eye. Hambling's large ink painting of her father (Fig.4) extends Rembrandt's use of tone to incorporate movement of ink down and over the paper to draw attention to his busy hands. Contrasting with the hard-edge concentration of the eye.



Fig.2 Rosie the stuffed rhinoceros in Ipswich Museum Rhino, 1963. Ink on paper. 48.3 x 34.9 cm.



Fig.3 Rembrandt Self-portrait c1628-9



Fig.4 Father painting 16/1/94 (IV) 1994. Ink 61x49cm.



*Fig.5 Cedric,
February 8th 1982
charcoal on paper
76.2x55.9cm.*

Hambling's skill in conveying movement in simple pencil drawing is perhaps most evident in her drawings of friends and parents on their death bed or in the coffin.

Cedric 1982 (Fig.5), drawn from memory is particularly poignant. A triangular composition using rule of thirds that continually leads the eye around and out of the frame then draws it back in. After the image is perceived as a whole, the very detailed but delicate and darker drawing of the grasping hands attract attention first in a line down the arm, then jumping to the eye looking out of the frame towards an unknown subject. One then sees the faint erasures of hand movements. This pencil drawing in many ways has more movement than a similar painting of her father's hands as he also was dying from cancer in 1998.



*Fig.6 Father 10.1.98
1998 from father
sketchbook. Graphite
on paper 20.7x29.7cm*

A comparison of two drawings that are apparently similar in technique further highlight her skill in contrasting stillness with movement. The sketch of her father sleeping seems very still - despite the swirling pencil lines. In the horizontal composition the closed dark mouth draws attention first. In the second drawing with diagonals and triangles, the dark mouth is open and the lines around are like breath still breathing even though in this drawing he is dead.



*Fig.7 Father 22.1.98 1998 from father sketchbook. Graphite on paper
21.2x30.3cm*

Restless marks

Movement was a feature of many of Hamblings earlier figurative paintings from late 1980s onwards. These use well-established compositional and textural techniques of diagonals, contrasts between blurred and sharp lines and textures.

In 'Dead Bull' 1987 from her Bullfight series - the opposing diagonal lines coupled with the blurring of the bull dragged in the dust bottom left. This portrays a very powerful image of force and resistance. In Cormorant with Fish 2003 she uses dynamic diagonal composition and energetic lines and textures to portray the drama of the catch.

Hambling's 'signature style' of restless movement through flowing and dissolving lines developed from 1998 onwards.



Fig.8 *Dead Bull*
1987. oil on canvas. 94x76cm.



Fig.9 *Cormorant with Fish* 2003.
oil on canvas 30.5x25.4cm

This was first evident in her portraits. The contrast between her and other portrait painters who have influenced her - particularly Frances Bacon - can be seen in the ways they painted Henrietta Moraes - a muse and writer considered a 'Queen of Bohemia'.

Bacon used photographs of movement and superimposed movement in different shapes - an almost Cubist approach. In his painting of the younger Henrietta in the 1960s he uses overlaid dry rapid brush strokes and angular distortion. This creates a strong contrast between Henrietta's mouth and her eyes and body. The effect is one of inner turmoil hidden from the viewer.



Fig.10 *Frances Bacon Henrietta Moraes*

Hamblings paintings of the older Henrietta (see photo Fig.11) are based on intensely observed charcoal drawings in her sketchbook drawn in last years of Henrietta's life when her health and effects of alcohol and her tempestuous life' were engraved on her face. In her book 'maggi & henrietta' Hambling charted Henrietta's decline in the final six months of their close relationship (Hambling, 1998).



Fig.11 *Henrietta photo late 1990s*

In the drawing in Fig.12 the movement in Henrietta all revolves around the eyes through a combination of dynamic strokes and smudges that give the eyes such intensity and life. In Fig.13 the drawing from memory of Henrietta in her coffin - as with the drawing of her father - she combines stillness and continuing movement. The closed and slightly softened line of the eyes contrasts with the overlaid dynamic lines of the face and mouth - a person still alive.

From 2000 onwards her portraits and other paintings became increasingly dynamic in their markmaking. Many of her paintings - following Giacometti - also have a tactile sculptural feel like the work 'Henrietta Eating a Meringue' of the same year (Fig.14). The 2001 painting of Henrietta from the 1998 drawing creates movement through overlapping lines contrasting with the spaces between (Fig.15). The different tone between the left and right side of the face makes the viewer's eye move back and forth, particularly between the intensity of the eyes. The juxtaposition of reds and complementary greens, merging in places to browns with occasional splashes of yellow and complementary purple where each stroke has its own individuality increases the sense of movement.

Later portraits like Henrietta/North Sea wave 2004/5 (Fig.16) start to develop and echo her wave paintings - overlaying paint in multiple textures and flickering colours rather than markmaking underpinned by white space.



Fig.12 Henrietta 7/6/98 (1V) 1998 charcoal on paper, 61x48.2cm



Fig.13 Henrietta's death from memory charcoal on paper 24" x 19"



Fig.15 Maggi Hambling Henrietta 2001 oil on canvas 96.5x91.4cm



Fig.14 Henrietta Eating a Meringue Sculpture 2001



Fig.16 Henrietta/North Sea Wave 2004/5. oil on canvas, 117.5x87.5cm

Textures of passion

Waves and water

It was in her wave paintings that the development of Hambling's signature dynamic impasto style can be most clearly seen.

By 2009 smearing, movement and overlay of paint and solvent coupled with the much more close-up composition had replaced earlier figurative work (Fig.17) to create something much more dynamic (Fig.18). By 2011 canvases later exhibited as 'Wall of Water' had become extremely large (6' x 7') with cascading impast paint that completely envelop the viewer (Fig.19).

The 2016 large Edge paintings depicting melting ice caps (Fig.20) continue to use some impasto, but capture the direction of movement as the ice crashes into the sea by use of solvent drips that contrast with the dabs of solid impasto of the ice.



Fig.17 Wave Breaking, January 2008. Oil on Canvas 51 x 102 cm



Fig.18 Wave returning, 2009 Oil on Canvas



Fig.19 Wall of Water VII, 2011 Oil on Canvas 72"x84"



Fig.20 Edge VIII. 2016. Oil on canvas. 198 x 226 cm.

War

In War Requiem and Aftermath Hambling applies these techniques to themes of war and politics (Hambling, 2015). Requiem's victim series (eg. Figs. 21 and 22) are reminiscent of Auerbach's chaotic impasto portraits of the 1990s. There is a progressive abstraction that increases their poignancy and horror. The very tactile impact also draws on her sculptural work (see Fig. 14 above) and the small sculptures for the companion exhibition 'Aftermath'.



Fig.21 'Victim II', 2013 Oil on canvas
12 x 10 ins



Fig.22 Victim XLV 2015. Oil on canvas
12 x 10 ins

In the Battlefield series she uses different directions of movement to convey the violence and aftermath of bombing. In Battlefield V (Fig. 23) the paint froths and bubbles in smears across and down the painting, never still. In Battlefield I (Fig. 24) by contrast, the apparently frozen white shapes (petrified praying figures or whitened ash?) move upwards to meet the flows of solvent ash fall out streaming down. As in some of her earlier portraits combining apparent stillness of death with continuing movement.



Fig.23 Battlefield V detail right 2013. Oil on canvas. Total canvas size 30.5 x 80cm



Fig.24 Battlefield 1 2013. Oil on canvas. Total canvas size 30.5 x 80cm

Movement in Hambling's printmaking

Etching

Hambling started etching at Ipswich in 1962-64. She viewed this method of printmaking as 'another way of drawing'.

"My love of the physicality of etching began at Ipswich. The acid bites into the plate to various depths and when the print is made, the plate is embedded into the paper. In contrast to the flatness of lithography, an etching is literally three-dimensional" (Hambling, quoted Ramkavalon 2016 p.16)

Her early etching was influenced by Rembrandt with its dramatic chiaroscuro and dynamic line. But in the early Seated Nude etching of 1963 (Fig.25) she takes this further. She achieves a variety of texture to create an overall sombre and reflective feel. This stillness is counteracted by the movement in the diagonal pose and foreshortening on the hand that create depth, the diagonal line shading across the form and the very thin scratch lines across the plate. The woman is portrayed as a strong figure – like Rosie the rhino she is likely to charge if provoked.



Fig.25 Seated female nude Etching 1963

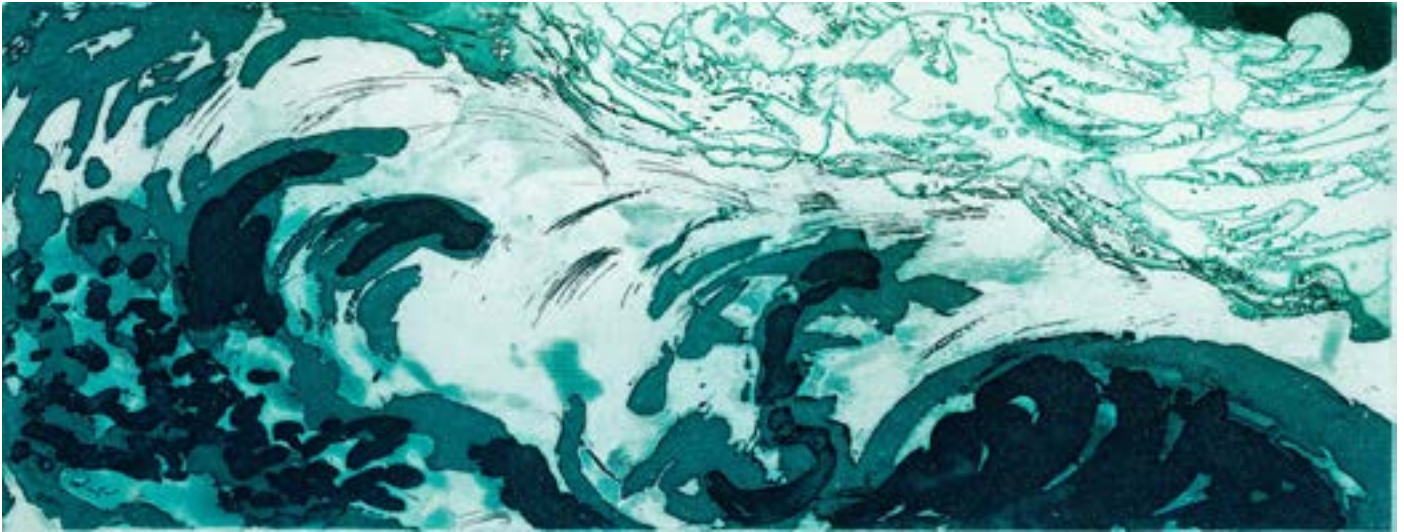


Fig.26 Wave V 2009 etching and aquatint, 6x9" (turquoise)

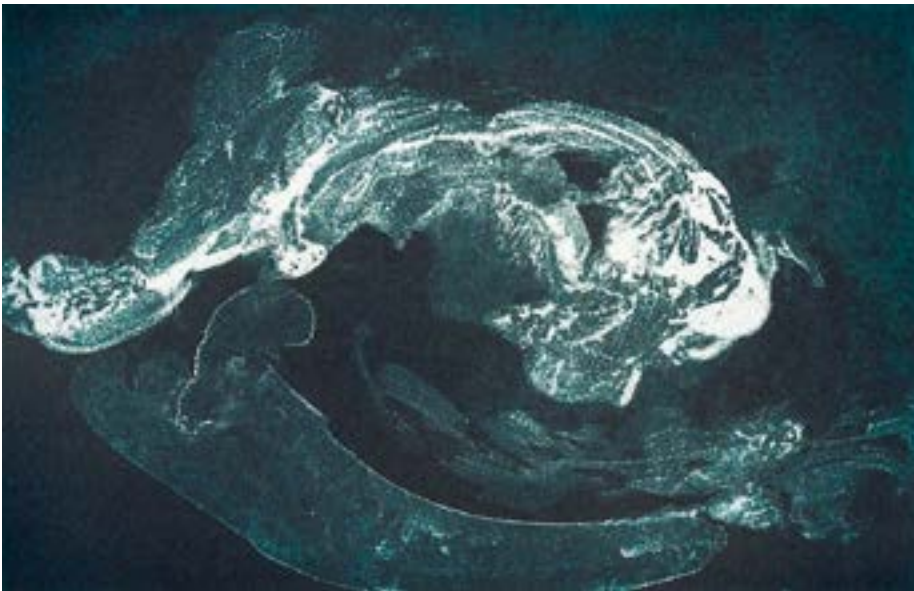


Fig.27 Wave II 2009 etching and aquatint, 6x9" (turquoise)

Her later etching and aquatints in her work on the Sea (Hambling, 2009) uses markmaking, textures and abstract shapes that in some ways echo the dynamism of her paintings (for example Wave V Fig.26). But particularly in etchings like Wave II and Wave III (Figs. 27 and 28 and detail Fig.29) the movement remains much more 'frozen' within the patterns of tone and edge lines.

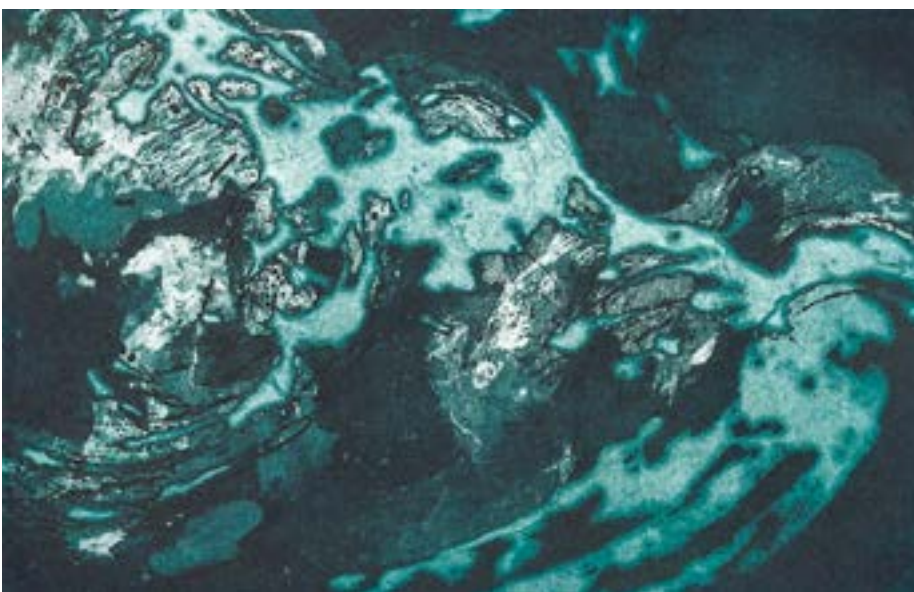


Fig.28 Wave III 2009 etching and aquatint, 6x9" (turquoise)



Fig.29 Wave X detail 2009 etching and aquatint, 6x9" (turquoise)

Monoprint: life studies

Hambling was introduced to monoprint in the late 1980s by Frank Connolly printmaster at Morley College after he had seen Degas's "Le Sommeil" at Hayward Gallery. Degas' monoprints achieve a dramatic chiaroscuro through the softness of the wiped shapes and unity of technique.

She describes her process: "Frank brought me the zinc plates, densely inked in solid black and I worked with solvent, rags, my hands and brushes (both ends) - drawing with light into dark. Speed is of the essence, otherwise the ink coagulates." The plate is then run through an etching press on dampened paper. (Hambling, quoted Ramkavalon 2016 p19)

Hambling's first monoprint monotypes were a series of four prints done from life of a life model at Morley College named Beryl (Fig.31). These are more complex in their shapes and marks, using solvent splashes as well as wiping. Their complexity in many ways decreases their dramatic impact compared to the simplicity of Degas.

In the early 1990s these were followed by a series of large monotypes of the artist/model Jemma de Vere Cole (Fig.32). Hambling admired her 'natural pleasure in posing. She is unself-conscious, supple and inventive. In these monotypes I am responding to the different moments of her standing, leaning, lying and sitting in the studio.' These life studies are more selective and considered in their use of line.



Fig.30 Degas Le Sommeil Monoprint



Fig.31 Beryl Reclining 1 1988. Monotype 18.7x22.9cm



Fig.32 Maggi Hambling Jemma 1990-2. Monotypes. 45.4x37.1cm

The portrait of Norman Rosenthal (Fig.33) is much more simplified with its dramatic light and shade. She had to work with great speed in order to capture the sitter's formidable unnerving stare. This portrait at first appears a still study of light on the face. This is partly because of the pose itself and uniformity of shape marks from beginning to end. But then things start to move with curves and triangles and contrast between the thick finger marks and thin stick marks, leading to the eye and then along the line of gaze and back to the expression of the mouth.

*Fig.33 Norman Rosenthal
1992. Monotype. 44.5x37cm*



*Fig.34 Life Monotypes from
'Claudius' exhibition at Alde Valley
Spring Festival 2018 photographed
with permission of the artist from the
originals mounted in glass*



The most recent monoprints from the 'Claudius' exhibition (Fig.34) have much more dynamic line and a 'smoky' appearance (even allowing for the glass glare on my photos opposite!) They have a much more abstract quality than the earlier life studies.

She herself classifies them as 'very good'. Sometimes however the reason for the marks she makes is not clear to me and seems rather uncharacteristically formulaic.



Wave Monotypes 2014

It is in Hambling's large wave monotypes that her monoprint technique and sense of movement is most energetic. The monoprints were first shown at Marlborough Fine Art then the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge and the National Gallery to accompany her paintings (see catalogue Marlborough Fine Art 2017).

The large scale of these monotypes allows for simplified wave composition and shapes to be complemented by a very varied and complex range of markmaking and textural detail. These add to the drama and feeling of power of the wave.



Fig.35 *Wall of water VI, 2011*



Fig.36 *Wall of Water 6, 2014*

Implications for my own practice

This review of the art of Maggi Hambling has many aspects that I can take forward to my own work, particularly ways of communicating political themes as well as personal themes in a more compelling way. This goes beyond Maggi Hambling's printmaking and etching and monprint styles to her underlying energy and merging of styles across media, including drawing, painting and sculpture.

Maggi Hambling's painting is more all-encompassing than her printmaking. Her recent style ranges from figurative (as in Lebanon 2015 in Requiem and Aftermath Fig. 37) to highly abstract (as in Aleppo I in Edge Fig.38) and often blur the boundary between. Her Edge paintings continue to: *"offer a counterweight to the careful irony and self-conscious allusion of much contemporary art, demanding a direct and unmediated encounter with the viewer. These new works succeed in in convincing us that we are present at, and indeed become part of, their making. We are "on the edge", confronted by the fragility of existence, both ours and that of the planet."* (Marlborough Fine Art 2017)

Specific technical and particularly conceptual areas I would want to explore further in my own printmaking are:

- how to achieve a comparable energy and variation in markmaking and texture to those in Hambling's monotypes using oil-based inks and also her ink drawings, using more healthy water-based inks.
- how to achieve the subtlety and poignancy of her drawings following similar compositional, tonal and markmaking techniques in drypoint.



Fig.37 Lebanon 1985-2005. oil on canvas. 160x121.9cm

- how to merge the abstract with the figurative to increase impact through making the viewer look very carefully to arrive at meaning. This is possible not only in monoprint, but also collagraph and combination prints.

The most important thing that I take away from this project though is that what is important is the meaning and energy. As this review has argued, the power of her art is not technique *per se*, but Hambling's ability to harness technique to communicate her intensely human and courageous vision of life and death with all its tragedies and comedies.



Fig.38 Aleppo 1 2016 oil on canvas 36x48in

Annex:

Maggi Hambling's Work: Summary chronology

1960s	<i>Rosie the stuffed rhinoceros</i> <i>First etchings</i>
1970s	<i>Figurative political themes of homelessness and war</i>
Mid 1980s	<i>Freeing up and experimentation with mark-making</i>
1985-88	<i>Sunrise and sunset watercolour and oil landscapes</i>
1987	<i>Bullfight series</i>
1987	<i>Serpentine Gallery Exhibition 'Maggi Hambling: Paintings, Drawings and Watercolours'</i>
1988	<i>First Monotypes: Beryl</i>
1990	<i>First artist in residence at the National Gallery.</i>
	<i>Portraits of Max Wall</i>
1990-1991	<i>Towards Laughter</i>
1990 - 1992	<i>Life Monotypes: Gemma Series</i>
1994-1998	<i>Drawings of her father</i>
1998	<i>Drawings of Henrietta</i>
2000 onwards	<i>Distinctive wave painting and portrait style</i>
2014	<i>Walls of Water oil paintings and monotypes</i>
2015	<i>War Requiem & Aftermath</i>
2016	<i>'Touch' Retrospective at British Museum</i>
2017	<i>Edge</i>
2018	<i>Michael Jackson: On the Wall</i>

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Exhibitions visited

- 2009 'George Always' National Portrait Gallery
- 2010 The Wave Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge
- 2012 You Are the Sea Aldeburgh Festival
- 2014 Walls of Water National Gallery (Monotypes shown in the cafe)
- 2016 Touch - Works on paper Marlborough Fine Art
- 2017 Edge Aldeburgh Festival
- 2018 'Claudius' exhibition and talk at Alde Valley Spring Festival.

See also videos and links on my course blog page: <http://print.zemniimages.info/maggi-hambling/>

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