

THESIS
DUALISMS IN THE ITALIAN COUNTRYSIDE

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ABSTRACT

DUALISMS IN THE ITALIAN COUNTRYSIDE

In my paintings I explore the duality between referential and abstract forms. I believe human nature seeks to make clarity out of chaos. In my works, I provide direction for my viewers without giving all the information with the intention that they piece the imagery together. This body of work was influenced by what I saw of the Italian countryside in the spring of 2011: cypress trees, figures, archways, Renaissance iconography and hilltop cities, which were perfectly contrasted against the natural landscape. These forms serve as a springboard for the creation of highly abstract images. Through the use of impasto paint and linear drawings, I explore the connection between geometric and natural forms.

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INTRODUCTION

My paintings are based on the perception of what I saw of the Italian countryside. I was fortunate enough to study abroad for the spring semester of 2011 in a small Tuscan city called Castiglion Fiorentino. Though the art history classes and museums that I frequented during my three month stay were riveting, solitude and nature are my most treasured memories. On a daily basis, I biked to various Tuscan cities such as Cortona, Fionora della Chiana, Florence, Castiglion De Lago and Montepulciano.

My underlying motivation for creating this series of work is my longing to be brought back to the place of both solitude and focus, and to evoke those feelings from my viewers. I attempt to parallel the mesmerizing beauty of the Italian countryside in my own paintings, not by realistically representing the scenes that I saw, but using paint application, color and enmeshment of abstract and referential forms to elicit from the viewer a similar feeling.

James Elkins said, "Pictures can move us strongly, unexpectedly, and even to tears."¹ I allowed the meditative beauty of Italy to overtake me. I hope my paintings from that time cause my viewers to say, as a viewer from a Mark Rothko exhibition explained, "I have not meditated so long - so peacefully - in quite a while."²

DUALISMS IN THE ITALIAN COUNTRYSIDE

A dualism, a division of something conceptually into two opposed or contrasted aspects, is a term that I use to describe the referential and abstract forms in my paintings. Dichotomy, the

¹ James Elkins, *Pictures & Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 10.

² Elkins, 24

state or quality of being two or in two parts, also describes what I am speaking of.³ For simplicity I use the two terms interchangeably when I refer to such dualisms as clarity and chaos, impasto paint and linear drawing, architecture and geometry and abstract versus representational forms.

The hilltop cities in Italy seem to have been created specifically for their natural environments. What better way is there to describe the dichotomy of referential and abstract forms than to describe the combination of the architectural and man-made forms contrasted against the organic backdrop of the landscape?

ABSTRACTION / REPRESENTATION

Some believe that abstract art has somehow replaced or rendered obsolete representational art. The debate between abstract and representational art, however, is arbitrary and, I believe, archaic.⁴ It is my aim to bring representation and abstraction together to demonstrate that though they are different, the two are connected. I am neither a figurative painter nor an abstractionist. I tend to move back and forth between the two.

“It is evident that all abstraction represents something, and that all representation abstracts from something. It’s just a little less obvious that representation only takes place in and through abstraction and vice versa.”

- Barry Schwabsky⁵

Anywhere with You (Fig 1) is a landscape that I have abstracted to represent my thoughts about the future. Sometimes in my life, I only have a vague direction of where to go, so I am left searching for clarity. But I have found comfort in all the chaos. *Anywhere with You* hopefully

³ <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/duality>.

⁴ Barry Schwabsky, *The Widening Circle: The Consequences of Modernism in Contemporary Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 4.

⁵ Schwabsky, 8.

provides the perfect balance between abstract and representational forms. I give enough definition of the forms to allow viewers to interpret the imagery as they will and pose their own questions: Are the four forms in the top right and the top middle trees, figures, or buildings? Do they reside in front of the dark green plane, or are they in the background? Is it their reflections below them or shadows? Is the large turquoise field in the bottom two-thirds of the painting a body of water or a field? Are the dark, barely visible, forms rocks creating a path upon which to step? Or are they breadcrumbs that have been mostly consumed by animals in the wild, leaving the viewer endlessly searching for a direction back home? Those questions make *Anywhere with You* a painting that uses shape identification to toe the line between abstract and representation.

A professor from my undergraduate studies projected a landscape on the wall for the students to paint from. Since he was using a slide projector, he was able to control the blurriness of the projection. For the first half hour of the class, a highly blurred image was projected for us to paint from. All we could see were vague blotches of color. A half hour later, he clicked it into a little more clarity, and did this four or five times so that by the end of the class, the landscape was so clear that we could see details like grass, leaves, birds and clouds.

To further explore the notion of a blurred way of looking at a painting, I made a series of three landscapes. *Castiglion Fiorentino*, *Fioana della Chiana* and *Cortona* (Fig 2, 3, 4) are titled after the names of the three quaint neighboring Tuscan towns that inspired the work. Instead of using my professor's technique of blurring a painting from less representational to more clear, I used the three paintings to explore his concept in reverse, progressing from high representation to much less objective. These three paintings all have very different palettes, styles, and represent different times of day. Only their horizon line unifies them.

Santa Chiara, the study center I stayed at, is located on top of a hill. I wanted to represent with some degree of clarity what I saw of Castiglion Fiorentino from the window of my dorm: rooftops, trees and a landscape that gradually receded into space. In *Castiglion Fiorentino*, (Fig 2) I chose to use colors that were mostly true to what I saw in order to leave lots of room for me to abstract the two paintings that followed.

Cortona, 10 kilometers southeast of Castiglion Fiorentino, is another city built on a hilltop. It became a weekly ride because I liked the burn I felt in my legs from climbing the steep base of Cortona to the top. At dusk one day, I viewed the Tuscan planes from about half way up the hill. In *Cortona* (Fig 3) I knew I could not perfectly capture the experience, so I portrayed the essence of the colors and atmosphere I saw that day.

I used spatial crowding to represent the Tuscan landscape as a visual description the emotional side of staying in a foreign country. In the United States, it is good etiquette to keep gazes upon strangers short. If one is caught staring, he or she is to look away immediately. In Italy, personal space is defined by much narrower parameters. The locals did not seem ashamed when I caught them staring at me, especially since they were not used to seeing female cyclists, especially not those with American print on their jerseys. To emphasize the feeling of being judged wherever I went, I made the tree forms to look like figures, crowded together like cattle in a field, staring. Some of them are figurative have windows that resemble eyes. To further the feeling of agoraphobia, I vertically stacked the buildings and trees with little recession of landscape into space, and a minimal amount of negative space, with the intention that the viewer, searching for a resting spot, comes up empty.

I approached the work with a distorted spatial orientation. I used four strong diagonals to create five separate zigzagging segments of the work. The foreground resides in a similar spatial plane as the background to create spatial hierarchy. To give importance to selected areas I used varying degrees of representation and abstraction. The areas that are more clearly defined or textured with paint are more important to me than those less defined. Some of the sections are clearly defined; some are described by rough brushstrokes, giving a vague impression of a tree, a house, or a church.

The five sections of the painting alternate between high representation and abstraction, to demonstrate the waxing and waning emotional proximity I felt toward Italy and its people throughout the duration of my stay. The top segment of the painting shows cypress trees outlined by a pale halo of backlighting from the setting sun. Directly in front of the haloed trees are more clearly defined forms that protrude into the viewer's scope of vision. Although forms technically become more blurry as they recede into space, I described the section directly below it with less clarity, placing more emphasis on trees and buildings. At the very bottom, the piece spatially recedes again with a vague definition of two larger tree-forms, to reinforce the spatial distortion.

My intention was for *Foiano della Chiana* (Fig 4) to capture the perfect equilibrium between abstract and representational forms by providing vague forms in the foreground, a reference to a green field and a blue sky. I have not given all the information about whether the forms represented in the foreground are trees, clotheslines or totem poles. In this case, I feel that a tall vertical tree-like form can accomplish an even better feat than a highly stylized object. It is not important for me to render objects exactly; it is about representing an object with the perfect amount of abstraction. If the form becomes too detailed, then there is not as much to figure out and the process becomes more about representation than it does abstraction. Conversely, if a

form resides on the other side of the equilibrium, it becomes too vague and I have provided enough direction for my viewers.

SEARCHING FOR CLARITY IN CHAOS

Humans try to make clarity out of chaos, so I have tried to provide direction for my viewers without giving all the information, with the intention that they are free to piece the imagery together, interpreting it as they will.

Two of these works *A Destra o Sinistra?* and *Tornare* (Fig 5 and 6) are more formal and abstract in nature. They are not derived from any particular structure or form. In fact, the only truly referential element is the title of each work. “A Destra o Sinistra?” means “right or left?” in Italian. “Tornare” means “to turn”. Early in my experience in Italy, while on a bike ride, a cable on my bike came out of the attachment. I had only been in Italy for a week so when a local stopped to see if everything was okay. I pointed out my cable and managed to decipher that he was asking me which direction I needed to turn - right or left (a destra o sinistra?). I was a little lost so the local rider kindly rode with me to the bike shop in a nearby town. I will not soon forget those two words because they represent choice. I could have gone right or left and it wouldn’t have mattered in the long run. That experience became a springboard for formally exploring the two paintings. There are many ways to solve a problem in art. Whether I chose one way or another, I know I will eventually reach to a conclusion.

SHAPE VOCABULARY

The formal reason for painting *A Destra o Sinistra?* and *Tornare* was to explore a formal element that I call “shape vocabulary,” the sum of a variety of forms and shapes in a paintings. The more variety within a work of art, the more shape vocabulary it has. *A Destra O Sinistra?* and *Tornare* do not display a lot of variety of shape; I used abstracted rectangular and triangular

forms to parallel the experience of being a foreigner, where my Italian vocabulary was very limited. I was in a country where I could merely say basic phrases: How old are you? Do you have a wife? Kids? A cat? These three paintings parallel how a person might feel when first learning a new language. The problem I encountered in attempting to increase my shape vocabulary is that I did not have a reference from which to draw. Therefore, when I relied on my imagination to create the forms, two basic shapes arose: triangles and a rectangles.

John, (Fig 7) a topographical landscape, is an example of how I used pastels to create lines to define rectangles and triangles. I created smaller rectangular windows in many of the forms to reveal prior layers of paint and pastel. Though some of the line work has varied from what I used in the previously mentioned works, the shape vocabulary is still limited.

I began searching for an expanded vocabulary in one of my most recent paintings, *Botticelli's Feet*. (Fig 8) I initially expanded my shape vocabulary by arbitrarily juxtaposing archways, bridges, trees and other forms into my paintings. The issue I encountered was that the symbols resided on the surface; they did not seem to be integrated into the painting, so I painted over many of them. Basing the structure of the abstract landscape on a painting by Giovanni Botticelli called *Primavera*, (Fig 9) I was able to implement shapes that I couldn't imagine on my own. The elements that I took from his painting were the reds that unified the piece, the deep black color, sections of the pale flesh-colored forms, some of the substructures created by the negative space as well as (obviously) the feet from the figures. *Botticelli's Feet* has a more refined structure and shape vocabulary than previous paintings due to the appropriation of Botticelli's structure, forms, and color.

Since I define shape vocabulary as the sum of a variety of forms and shapes in a painting, it would seem that the vocabulary would be arranged formulaically, whether alphabetically, by color, or similar meaning. Contemporary artist Rachel Hibbard used such a formula when she created a series of 365 small works arranged in the form of a calendar of 365 days, each image representing a day of the year. (Fig 10) Her works are defined by a key to decode the subject of her images. For example, tornado = March; bee = 3; therefore, Tornado Bee = March 3rd.

Like Hibbard, I found it helpful to give myself parameters from which to work. Learning a new language is easier when one follows an order, beginning with, for example, numbers, then the alphabet, then simple questions and answers. My artwork needed the similar parameters. Unlike Hibbard, I chose Italian forms to relate to my experience. It is unnecessary for me to define the forms I use in my paintings. Allowing these works to take on the experience I had in Italy is enough. If I define them further with a key, I would lose the abstract side of the referential/abstract duality. In *Botticelli's Feet* I did not define my forms with a key so that the viewer may interpret the loosely defined forms that reference Italy.

PROCESS

In my paintings, I use multiple layers of thin paint and chalk pastel to obtain broadly defined shapes to describe the binary of line versus mass. I start with an image, a theme or shape as a basis to start the painting. I then abstract the image by adding more layers of paint, oftentimes opaque impasto layers, leaving a few areas transparent to reference the earlier stages of the painting.

For example, I started with church arches a painting of the Madonna and Child in *Untitled*. (Fig 11) I carved five archways with chalk pastel, and then built up the surface by

adding bright layers of acrylic paint and gold leafing. I abandoned the original Madonna and Child figures altogether, but kept the golden background.

PALETTE

Celeste (Fig 12) is inspired by a mint-turquoise color that I saw repeated on window shutters, hand-painted shop signs, and of course, Bianchi bicycles. Bianchi, the bike that I rode around Tuscany, is manufactured in Milan. This painting is about the solitude and struggles of facing myself as I was riding my bike for three months during my stay in Italy.

One Sunday I was out for a 100 kilometer ride to Montepulciano and back. On the resulting painting, I chose a deep blue palette (Fig 13) because of the heavy rain. At first it began with a mist but quickly turned into a full-on rainstorm. All the convenience stores that I counted on frequenting to replenish myself from the nearly 3,000 calories I burned were closed for the Sabbath and I had one bottle full of a powdered drink mix. I had been battling flat tires the previous week, and that Sunday was no exception. Upon getting a flat tire, I changed it, only to be struck by a second. I feared that I would not make it back to our dorm at Castiglion Fiorentino without my fingers freezing and my feeling of starvation. The mind creates fears when challenged, but I decided to overcome those fears by breaking the ride down into 10 kilometer sections. I would ride as fast as I could for 10 minutes, allow myself a small drink, then do it again, until finally I safely reached Castiglion Fiorentino, just in time to get my third flat tire. *Montepulciano*, the city and the painting, represent an experience in a foreign land, where I overcame obstacles and will use the experience when I battle hard times in the future to remind myself that I can do anything I set my mind to.

The deep blue layers of paint that I used in *Montepulciano* still have a level of intensity. I chose a phtalocyanine blue, rather than a natural earth blue, because the rain pouring down that day does not merely stick in my mind as a natural down pouring of rain, but rain that pushed me to move forward.

Since this series of paintings is about connotations that I have about my experience in Italy, the palette I started with, seen for example in *Beginnings*, (Fig 14) is darker in color. It is reflective of my perception Italy my first two weeks there. I had a tough time adjusting to how slowly everything moved in the Italian culture. The people there seemed to take their time in everything, especially when something was time-sensitive. Businesses were closed over the lunch hour, sometimes from 12:30 pm – 4:00 pm. I became quickly annoyed and impatient because I was used to America, where businesses are open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The dark colors I painted in *Beginnings* are not light and airy like the culture of Italy. My palette is a color palette representing frustration with deep burgundies and dark blacks.

Just as a successful business needs a palette with its own unique sensibilities (McDonalds has a distinct red and yellow scheme that it has claimed as its own, Eddie Bauer has laid its claim to bold hues, and Martha Stewart's pale pastels define her business), so cultures have their own sensibilities. All parts of an aesthetic and a culture overlap and find visual parallels.

After I let the culture of Italy sink in, and developed the painting, I began to use lighter colors to parallel the lightness I felt when I finally settled into the country. My palette became an association of the place I was painting. (Fig 2, 4) Italy is light. It glows. By more intelligently constructing an image, my works became more quiet and contemplative, so that the viewer becomes more clued into each work's individual sensibility.

Multiple visual parallels between taste, smell, sound, touch and, obviously, sight, in my work, has become more than just a visual deconstruction. I use overlapping senses to develop synesthetic relationships.

I will never forget the scent of burning leaves, the cool smell of a church, the subtle scent of a local goat farm, or the aroma of pasta sauce that lured me into the dining hall where the local cooks prepared authentic Italian meals daily. I won't soon forget the echoing Italian voices rising up from the alley below. It is easy to recall the dense cold wet air that almost stopped me in my tracks, and even easier to remember the taste of wine made from locally grown grapes.

I appeal to multiple senses in my works. Tactile surfaces draw upon the overlapping sensations I experienced in *Beginnings*, approaching 1" thick paint in some areas. (Fig 15) Kandinsky claimed to hear music in color. Sometimes I listen to classical music while painting to allow the patterns and rhythms as facilitators for abstracted images.

CONCLUSION

It is my hope that these paintings exhibit multiple binaries: referential and abstract forms, line and mass, thick and thick paint application and geometric and natural forms. With my color palette and combination of synesthetic elements, I provide an atmosphere for my viewer to come to their own conclusions about Italy and art. My work represents how I view my experience of Italy, and the overlapping of visual qualities such as color, blended in synesthesia with the tactility of surface. With the use of abstract overlapping Renaissance iconography and hilltop cities contrasted against a natural Tuscan landscape, I hope to define experiences and senses clearly enough to provide visual direction, and vaguely enough to leave my viewer searching for his/her own conclusions.



Figure 1
Jamie Davis
Anywhere With You
Acrylic and pastel on panel
36"x48"
2011



Figure 2
Jamie Davis
Castiglion Fiorentino
Acrylic and pastel on paper
28"x40"
2011
13



Figure 3
Jamie Davis
Cortona
Acrylic and pastel on paper
28"x40"
2011



Figure 4
Jamie Davis
Foiano della Chiana
Acrylic and pastel on paper
28"x40"
2011



Figure 5
Jamie Davis
A Destra o Sinistra
Acrylic and pastel on panel
36"x48"
2011
16



Figure 6
Jamie Davis
Tornare
Acrylic and pastel on panel
36"x48"
2011



Figure 7
Jamie Davis
John
Acrylic and pastel on canvas
60"x48"
2011
18



Figure 8
Jamie Davis
Botticelli's Feet
Acrylic and pastel on panel
96"x96"
2012



Figure 9
Sandro Botticelli
Primavera
Tempera on panel
80"x124"
c. 1482



Figure 10
Rachel Hibbard
365 Days, Violet
Mixed media on paper
122"x83"
2009



Figure 11
Jamie Davis
Untitled
Acrylic and pastel on paper
9"x10"
2011



Figure 12
Jamie Davis
Celeste
Acrylic and pastel on canvas
28"x40"
2011
22

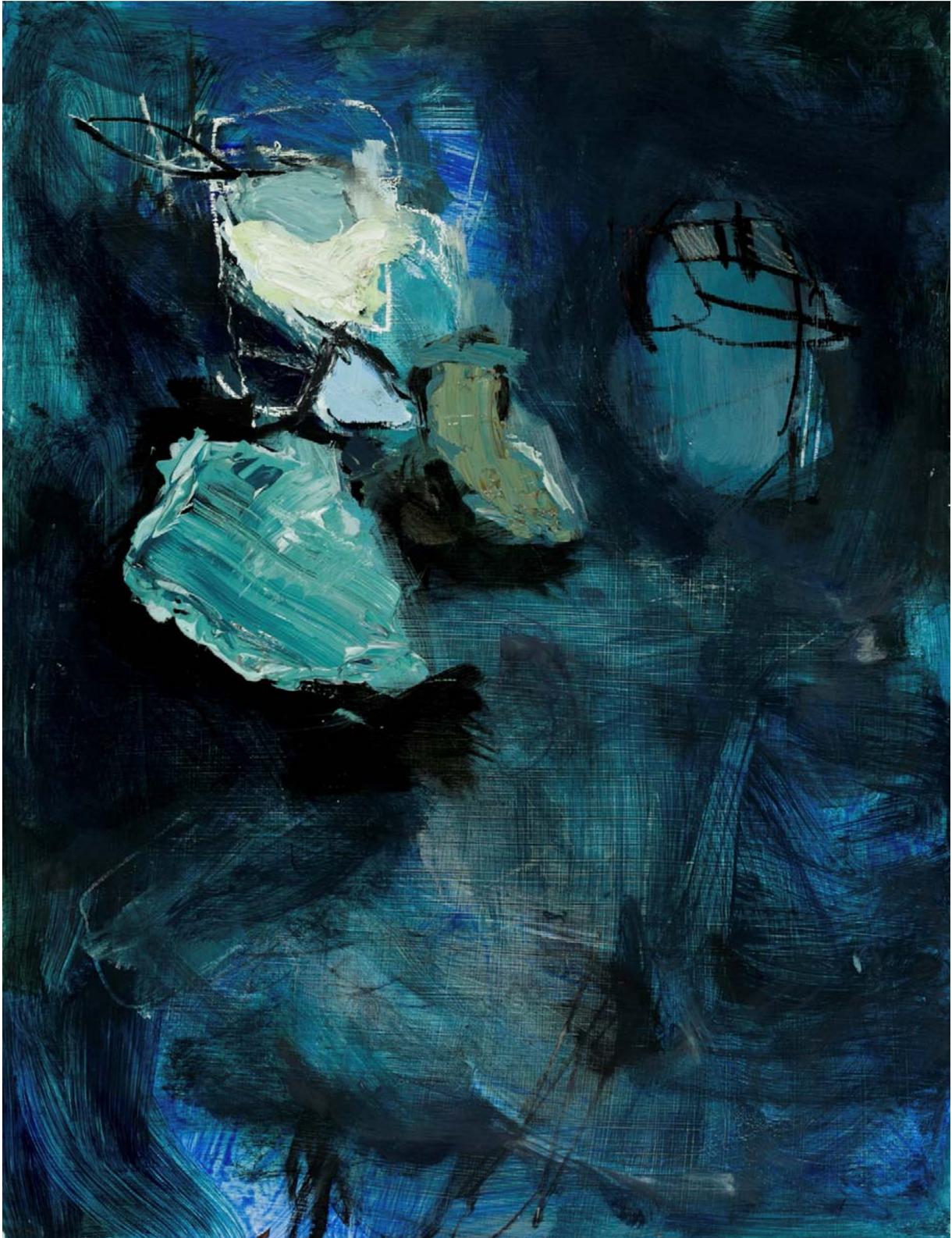


Figure 13
Jamie Davis
Montepulciano
Oil on paper
20"x28"
2011



Figure 14
Jamie Davis
Beginnings
Acrylic and pastel on canvas
39"x35"
2011



Figure 15
Beginnings, detail

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