

ISSUE 01
SUSTAINABILITY



**ON BROKEN-
NESS AND**

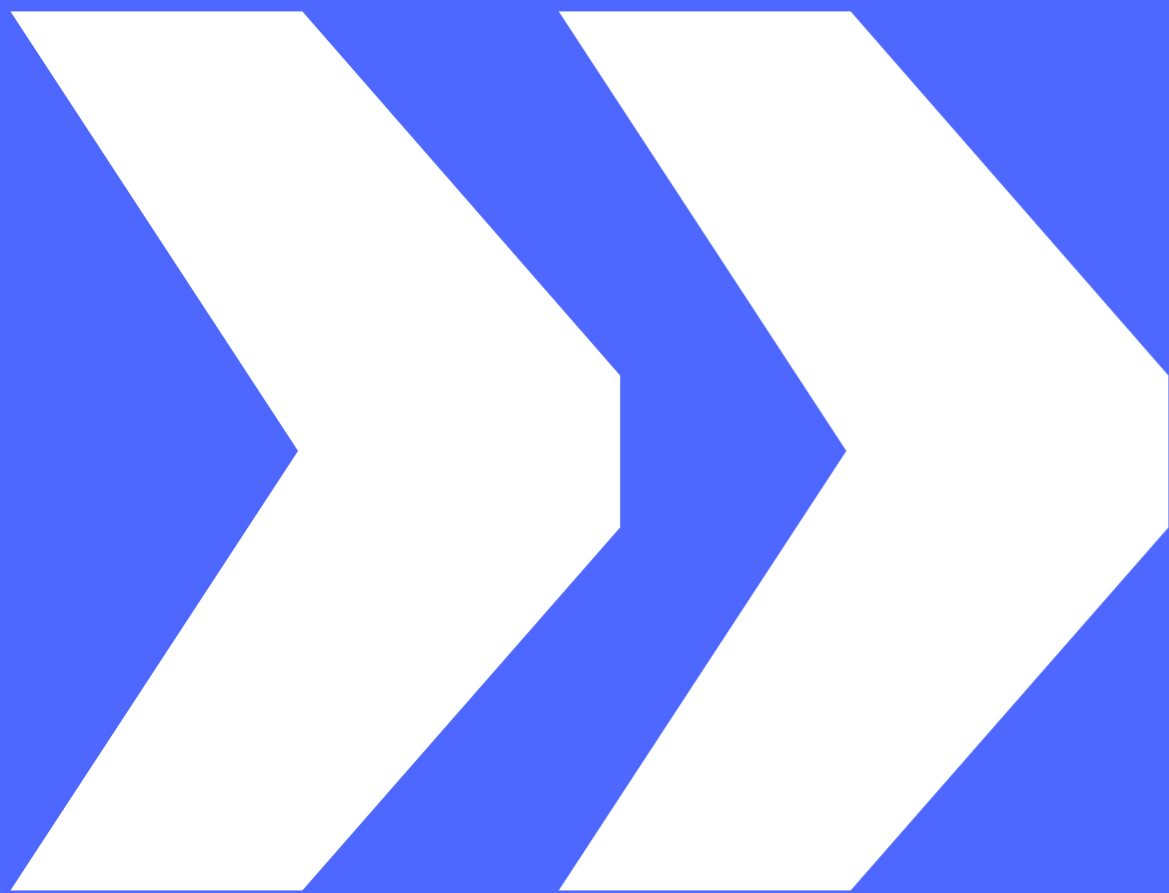
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**REPAIR IN
A MUSEUM
COLLECTION**

DURATION 22 MIN.

DIALOGUES ABOUT
DESIGN

KATE IRVIN



Around the globe in these first decades of our fraught 21st century, we are confronted with widespread social, environmental, economic, and political crises. We live in worlds full of risk and uncertainty; unprecedented growth and rapid decay; fragmentation, dissolution, and breakdown – a dire set of circumstances that is ripe with opportunity for creating new relationships, new ways of making, behaving, and consuming. This essay posits that by focusing on brokenness and repair, in both theory and practice, it becomes possible to reconsider the value of the crack, fissure – the wound – as providing an opening and invitation for redress, for engaging with, tending to, and caring for on an individual personal level, as well as in our civic and collective arenas.¹

»WE LIVE IN
WORLDS FULL
OF RISK AND
UNCERTAINTY«

The entangled concepts of brokenness and repair were investigated in successive projects over the past five years at the RISD Museum, an integral part of the Rhode Island School of Design in the United States: *Repair and Design Futures* (October 5, 2018 – June 30, 2019) and *Inherent Vice* (January 29, 2022 – January 15, 2023).² These multifaceted, sprawling, collaborative projects encompassed exhibitions, university courses, and a variety of public programming as they sought to re-engage various audiences with sensory relationships to objects. Such reconnection was prompted by considering instances of material and metaphorical brokenness and repair via a range of cultural belongings, designs, and utilitarian objects in the collections of the RISD Museum.

¹ See Markus Berger and Kate Irvin (eds.), *Repair: Sustainable Design Futures* (London: Routledge, 2023) for more on this general topic of repair and design futures.

² For more on the exhibition *Repair and Design Futures* and related programming, see: risdmuseum.org/exhibitions-events/exhibitions/repair-and-design-futures; on *Inherent Vice*, see: risdmuseum.org/exhibitions-events/exhibitions/inherent-vice; and *Inherent Vice: Hidden Narratives*, see: risdmuseum.org/exhibitions-events/exhibitions/inherent-vice-0.

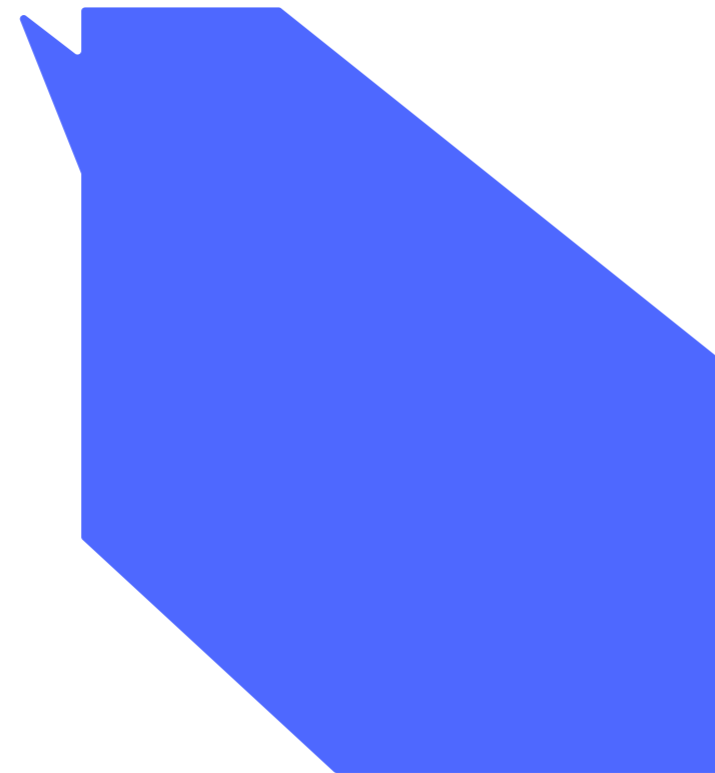
At the core of the work presented here is a suggestion for sustainable design futures, as well as a reflection on brokenness and repair embedded in the structures and systems of the museum itself. Building on this premise, the latter half of this essay offers some particular ways the department of Costume and Textiles at the RISD Museum has sought to make the museum and its ecosystem more malleable or even metabolic, as the museum academic Clémentine Deliss proposes, more like a living organism than an impenetrable catacomb.³ Thus, we move from an appreciation of the value (and messiness) of mended clothing and textiles in museum collections to considering pieces that are beyond repair, which opens us up to facing outdated notions of preservation in perpetuity and, accordingly, brings us back to repair; reuse, and circularity.

³ Clémentine Deliss, *The Metabolic Museum* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz/KW Institute for Contemporary Art, 2020).

REPAIR AND DESIGN FUTURES: AN EXHIBITION AND CALL TO ACTION



In her book *The Impulse to Restore in a Fragile World*, Elizabeth Spelman reminds us that humans have repaired since the beginning of their existence, fixing things, relationships, and ideas: »The homo sapiens is also homo reparans.«⁴ The history of human-made objects attests to this impulse. From the very first tools to the programming of artificial intelligence, ongoing adjustments have been required to aid in longevity and to further development. Even though objects, beings, systems, and ideas require continuous maintenance and repair as they break, decay, or fall into pieces, repair has been largely overlooked as an ontological and speculative topic outside of Spelman's study. The act of repair is most often presented as a mundane task performed in the household or by the car mechanic, the shoe mender, or building maintenance person. In this context, repair is not seen as a creative and generative act but rather as a relief to a particular problem and as a way to keep going in the same vein, meaning life as usual.



As a curator at a comprehensive museum connected to an art and design university, where we frequently teach with collection objects, I've noticed that looking closely at examples of darned and patched garments and textiles with art and design students moves them in profound ways and inspires them to find meaning and profound beauty in the imprints left by multiple wearers and the passage of time. See, for example, a Japanese laborer's coat (noragi) held together by sensitively sewn patches, an

⁴ Elizabeth V. Spelman, *Repair: The Impulse to Restore in a Fragile World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), p. 1.

aesthetic now referred to as boro (translated literally as »ragged«) (Fig. 1). Made to work and to last, boro items like this one show darns that animate them—have kept them alive and working—reveal their labored history, and thus bind them to us with memory and feeling. They motivate us to consider materiality, loss, hardship, and, most important, resilience. They also make us rethink that which has traditionally been promoted as worthy of our care and attention in both the museum context and in global cultures.



Figure 1 Unknown Japanese, maker, Shonai (present-day Yamagata) prefecture. Work Coat (Noragi), late 1800s–mid-1900s. Cotton plain weave, indigo dyed; patched and mended. Elizabeth T. and Dorothy N. Casey Fund 2012.21.1. RISD Museum.

»BUT WHAT IF THESE GARMENTS COULD HAVE A NEW LIFE BEYOND TRADITIONAL MUSEUM FUTURES?«

The exhibition *Repair and Design Futures* responded to such interactions between repaired objects and emerging artists and designers by broadly presenting mending as material intervention, metaphor, and a call to action. In this context, repair was framed as a useful exercise applied to beloved textiles and as a global, socially engaged practice within contemporary art and design culture, addressing environmental and sociopolitical ruptures. The gallery space was designed as a multi-use environment, accommodating the display of costume

and textile objects from the collections of the RISD Museum and Brown University's Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology, within an integrated, flexible programming and gathering space. In this gallery, focus moved from historic objects, the maker's hand, and the care taken in the creation and life extension of singular, meaningfully crafted functional objects to overarching concerns of environmental, industrial, and societal repair.



Figure 2 Unknown Italian maker, Procida. Woman's Shift or Underdress, 1875 – 1920. Hand-spun, hand-woven linen plain weave with cotton embroidery and cotton lace; pieced and mended. Gift of Falcone Previti Family 2014.57.5. RISD Museum.

The material focus of the exhibition rested in textile practices, with thread presented as an elemental binding unit and sewing as a literal and metaphorical method of suturing, as the connective and restorative tissue linking past to present and future. Criss-crossing the world and the centuries, the museum collection items on view ranged from the aforementioned boro noragi to an unassuming late 19th-century women's shift (**Fig. 2**) – hand-woven, worn, repaired, and re-made on an island off the

coast of Naples, Italy, by Libera Lubrano Lavadera – an heirloom cherished and saved not for its perfection but rather because it stood for and withstood hard work, agency, and action. Kept alive and active through reinforced shoulders and seams, alterations made for a growing and aging body, and mended holes, garments like this remind us that everything we wear and use is in the process of becoming and is imbued with a living history that, if given the chance, may even continue well beyond our time.

An overarching goal of the project was to expand the concept of literal, specific repair to encompass the scale and vision of repairing one's world as a daily practice and intention.⁵ In its presentation and in its integration into diverse academic and studio classes, the exhibition posed more questions than answers, including: How can historic mends in textiles and clothing – in their variety and, often, disorderliness – inform reparative thinking and design practices today and how might looking through the lens of repair aid in conceptualizing and designing our collective futures? One answer to this question might be found in the example of Kuba raffia skirts with applique designs (**Fig. 3**): The layout of the design is largely determined by weak and ruptured areas caused by the pounding of the stiff woven fabric to make it soft and pliable; patches are added on to stabilize holes, with others added

⁵ See Kate Irvin and Brian Goldberg (eds.), *Manual. A Journal about Art and its Making* 11, special issue on »Repair« (Fall 2018).

to aesthetically balance the design.

Overall, the exhibition and related programming were conceived and designed to speak to and inspire makers and thinkers across a range of disciplines. Textiles are tactile, familiar, accessible, and sometimes quite humble, but they are also poetic, complex, and inherently flexible both practically and metaphorically. The Latin root of the word »textile,« *texere*, means to join or intertwine, while the Old French root of *mend*, *amender*, signifies putting right, regaining health. In this arena the concept and practice of repair functioned at the intersection of these definitions, as an invitation to a renewed form of social exchange and an alternative, holistic way of facing environmental and social breakdown.

INHERENT VICE AND BROKEN WORLD THINKING⁶

The paradox of emerging artists and designers finding inspiration in old, used, broken, and repaired garments and textiles brings to the forefront the question of what it means to be a maker in a world in which we already have too many things. This is a crucial question that points the way to information scientist Steven J. Jackson's polemic for »broken world thinking,« which he describes as »filling in the moment of hope and fear in which bridges from old worlds to new worlds are built, and the continuity of order, value, and meaning gets woven.«⁷ Jackson's musings on »broken world thinking« seemed particularly relevant as we came back to the university campus in person in 2021. After a pandemic-imposed halt to the museum's exhibition schedule mandated time to pause and reflect, we

discussed ways to make our curatorial and conservation work in collections transparent and accessible. It felt imperative to bring people into »behind the scenes« work without presenting preservation and curatorial work as adhering to and presenting a single, objective truth.

In the summer of 2021, we started thinking about what to do with 31 very degraded garments from the late 1800s and early 1900s, garments worn during America's so-called Gilded Age. Out of the hundreds of garments in the collection dating to this period, these represent inherent vice⁸ in its most extreme state – shattered silk, dry-rotted



Figure 3

Unknown Kuba maker and wearer, Democratic Republic of Congo. Front and back details of Woman's Ceremonial Skirt, before 1950. Raffia plain weave with raffia embroidery and applique. Mary B. Jackson Fund 2003.70.2. RISD Museum.

⁶ For more details on the *Inherent Vice* project, see the case study co-written with RISD Museum textiles conservators Jessica Urick and Anna Rose Keefe: »Inherent Vice, or: How I learned to stop worrying and love shattered silk,« in *Textile Conservation: Advances in Practice*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

⁷ Steven J. Jackson, »Rethinking Repair,« in Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo Boczkowski, and Kirsten Foot (eds.), *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society* (Boston: MIT Press, 2014).

⁸ In conservation, »inherent vice« refers to »the tendency in an object or material to deteriorate or self-destruct because of its intrinsic 'internal characteristics,' including weak construction, 'poor quality or unstable materials,' and 'incompatibility of different materials within an object.« For more information, see: S. Morgan, *Inherent Vice*. [online] AIC Wiki (2014). Available at: [conservation-wiki.com](https://www.conservation-wiki.com)



Figure 4
Inherent Vice: Part 1 on display in the Donghia Gallery, RISD Museum, March 2022. Photo credit: Erik Gould for RISD Museum.

cotton, embrittled silk net, and cracking, leaching beads – all beyond repair. These pieces brought us to a an ideological and logistical crossroads: they could remain in storage, too fragile to teach with or exhibit; they could become a resource vacuum, requiring years of conservation treatment; or they could be deaccessioned, too damaged for an institutional transfer, quietly shuffled off to auction or marked for disposal.

Each of these traditional avenues felt stifling. Denying the physical realities of these garments, or pouring resources into their conservation at the expense of other parts of the collection, felt like an exercise in hubris. But what if these garments could have a new life beyond traditional museum futures? We began brainstorming through a lens of embra-

cing brokenness and envisioning new avenues of interpretation that ruptures invite. As internal discussions with faculty and students gained momentum, the idea emerged of deaccessioning the damaged garments and transferring them to students for creative use. Buoyed by these initial conversations with a growing community on campus, we launched the project with a small exhibition of eight deteriorating dresses entitled *Inherent Vice* (Fig. 4). The deteriorated dresses highlighted complexities in how museum staff think about collecting, ethics, value, and what it means to care for something historic. Because these garments were made during America’s so-called Gilded Age, their physical deterioration also served as an inroad to talking about socio-political-environmental issues that very much respond to discussions on campus and in our world today. An era

of wealth and opulence, the Gilded Age was a time of enormous economic growth across the United States. At the same time, inherent vice at a meta level was rampant during this time, including toxic materialism, gross economic disparities, corrupt politics, and white-supremacist social and racial hierarchies. As historian Nell Irvin Painter has explained in regard to this period: »‘Gilded’ is not golden. ‘Gilded’ has the sense of a patina covering something else. It’s the shiny exterior and the rot underneath.«⁹

These ideas were explored in two RISD classes: one co-taught by museum conservation and curatorial staff and artist Becci Davis, whose work interrogates monuments and archives; and the other, a studio class taught by Lisa Z. Morgan, Associate Professor and head of RISD’s Apparel Design department. In both instances, we explored topics ranging from the lives of objects in museums to methods for challenging and expanding canonical narratives of interpretation and care. The students’ projects investigated the museum as a place with many inherent flaws and with equal potential for transformation



⁹ Nell Irvin Painter in *The Gilded Age*, PBS American Experience documentary, 2022.

Figure 5 „Walking Suit,» 1913, D61.012.1.B, reworked by students in Spring 2022 Studio Class. From left to right, scans by Silviya Meixner, photograph by Christopher Pak, lampshade Emma Naughton, dress by Christopher Pak, and hand-made paper by Madi Hough.



and imagination. The physical tears in the garments provided opportunities for new understanding and untold narratives to enter the archive and take root.

In the studio class taught by Lisa Morgan, the students brainstormed alternate futures for the garments through discussion and hands-on experimentation. The dresses passed through multiple hands and took new forms as students used deaccessioned material in their photography, videography, apparel, textiles, bookmaking, and performance practices. For example, one student scanned and documented a 1913 silk walking suit to record its original form. A second student received and reworked the tattered underdress into a new garment, which they wore to explore Victorian tensions about the body in a series of photographs. A third student turned the jacket's

remains into a lampshade, transforming a once-untouchable museum artifact into mundane domestic furnishing. Lastly, the remaining fragments that fell off the garments during earlier stages were turned into paper, becoming a blank canvas for something new. (Fig. 5) In the end, an otherwise routine assessment of deteriorated Gilded Age garments in the collection morphed into a collaborative, creative, open-ended investigation of museums, collections care, and textile preservation, thus creating fertile ground that promoted creative growth out of irreparable decay. In discussing how bewilderment and disorder make room for us to think otherwise, Columbia Professor Jack Halberstam uses the example of mushrooms that rise out of decay in forests, providing the groundwork for new ecosystems to flourish as they simultaneously nourish other life forms. Thinking of the degraded dresses as the trees in a forest, Halberstam's thoughts on unbuilding and healing resonate: »The language of repair suggests it's the broken piece that's the problem, not the method of repair. In a sense, we're trying to sit with the brokenness here and reveal the brokenness in order for there to be other possibilities of seeing.«¹⁰

¹⁰ Jack Halberstam, »Pluriversal, Bewildered, or Otherwise Lecture | Jack Halberstam on Unworlding,« Youtube, Digital Lecture

OPENING UP THE SEAMS

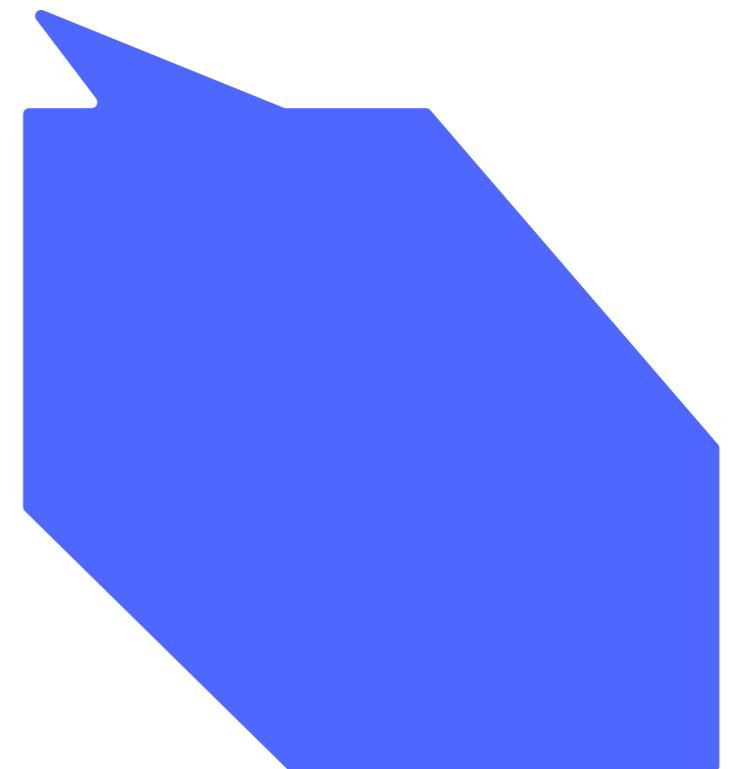
The tendency to conceal the inexorable march of time and its aging effects within the walls of the museum is one way in which we have been culturally trained to avert our eyes from recognizing the many ways that museums hold brokenness. And if we don't acknowledge the brokenness, we also lose sight of the manifold expressions of repair and care also evident therein. As discussed above, repair manifests in the objects themselves, hints at their varied and sometimes multiple lives before entering the museum, as well as in conservators' and other caretakers' efforts to maintain and preserve their current states as far into the future as can be imagined. These are tangible, material, and often-small repairs that can tell expansive stories with the potential to change overarching narratives.

As applied in curricula on an art and design campus today, this reframing of repair and brokenness holds

¹¹ Tristan Schultz, *Design's Role in Transitioning to Futures of Cultures of Repair*, in A. Chakrabarti and D. Chakrabarti (eds.), *Research into Design for Communities, Volume 2, Smart Innovation, Systems and Technologies* 66 (2017), p. 225.

¹² Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018).

the potential to point the way toward decolonial praxis in numerous disciplines. By prioritizing constant and iterative adaptation and ongoingness, as well as foregrounding local and traditional knowledge, everyday repair practices around the world have the potential – as an action and as metaphor – to »break the mold of a colonial matrix of power,« according to Gamilaraay designer Tristan Schultz.¹¹ Schultz and his peers in the decolonizing design movement contend that the embodied action and objects of hands-on repair provide a tool for contemporary designers to effectively take part in mending the world. By »opening up controversial things« and effectively turning traditional boundaries and systemic »seams« inside out, we open ourselves up to a pluriversal world, a patchwork, a world in which many worlds fit.¹²



Studying the mended, the imperfect, the overlooked, and the broken beyond repair in a museum collection not only sidesteps the canon, but it also prompts us to think about repair in a broader mindset: as a socio-political lens through which we can re-envision our relationship to objects and the world around us. Anthropologist and cultural critic Rosalind C. Morris has stated that leading people via material culture toward relations with others is perhaps the most optimistic expectation of what a museum can accomplish via objects, especially those extracted from their home contexts and residing in foreign museums.¹³

Given the material examples described above, might the ways that they stimulate intimate study and emotional responses be viewed as instances of newly forged relationships that instigate a wide range of actions for repairing brokenness? Thinking with repair and brokenness challenges and expands our work as designers, artists, students, teachers, museum staff, and arts practitioners to re-think the values that we have inherited and follow blindly, and that continue to guide us. Repair is a creative disruption, as is sitting with brokenness. These are acts and concepts that provide insight in far less intrusive ways than traditional modes of making, building, purchasing, processing, and discarding. They allow us not only to tackle problems creatively, critically, directly, and minimally, but also to embrace diversity and inclusivity in every respect.

KATE IRVIN



¹³ Rosalind C. Morris, keynote and panel discussion, »Extraction«, Caring Matters conference, 23 September 2021, Research Center for Material Culture, Leiden, The Netherlands.

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