

Musée d'Orsay



Splendour and Misery. Pictures of Prostitution, 1850-1910

Images of Prostitution



Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec
Portrait of Monsieur Delaporte in the Jardin de Paris
 © Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen

Prostitution in the 19th century adopted many guises: *piereuses* working illegally on wasteland in the dead of night, *filles "en carte"* (registered prostitutes) and *filles "insoumises"* (unregistered girls) soliciting in public places, *verseuses* (waitresses) employed in brasseries à femmes, brothel girls, and courtesans playing host to their admirers in luxurious townhouses.

Its ever-changing nature, which defied easy definition, was an enduring obsession among novelists, poets, playwrights, composers, painters, and sculptors. Most artists in the 19th century and first half of the 20th century addressed the splendor and misery of prostitution, which also became a favourite theme in the emerging art forms of photography and later the cinema.

It was in Paris in particular, between the Second Empire and the Belle

Epoque, that prostitution became a popular subject for works of art associated with movements as diverse as academic painting, Naturalism, Impressionism, Fauvism, and Expressionism. The city was undergoing a radical transformation. A New Babylon for some, the 'City of Light' for others, it offered artists any number of new venues (high society salons, opera boxes, licensed brothels, cafés, and boulevards) in which to observe the highly choreographed rituals of sex for sale. These often contrasting depictions offer a blend of acute observation and imagination, indiscretion and objectivity, clinical detail and unbridled fantasy. However distinctive they may be, all these perspectives on the world of prostitution were the exclusive preserve of male artists. What emerges from the depiction of pleasure and pain, meteoric social ascents and wretched lives is the burden of being a woman in modern society.

Ambiguity. Walking the streets in public spaces

In the second half of the 19th century, respectable women, occasional, illegal, and officially registered prostitutes were virtually indistinguishable from each other when they mingled in public places. An air of ambiguity prevailed during daylight hours, when all forms of overt soliciting were prohibited. This lack of differentiation made it difficult to define what constituted prostitution and to pinpoint its boundaries.

In working-class circles, women who had modest jobs – such as manual workers, milliners, florists or laundresses – were too poorly paid to afford decent accommodation or feed themselves adequately, especially if they had a family to support. Some therefore occasionally resorted to prostitution to supplement their earnings. The way in which passers-by turn to stare at Dagnan-Bouveret's *Laundress* seems to suggest that they sense the young woman's sexual availability.



James Tissot
The Shop Girl
 © Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Canada

However, streetwalkers blended into the crowd, detectable only by their words, actions (a skirt lifted to reveal a glimpse of ankle boot), contrived poses or eloquent expressions (a hint of a smile, a furtive or meaningful look) as depicted in the works of Boldini and Valtat. These fluid, intangible identities fascinated artists, who recreated the ambiguous climate of modern Paris in works where their contemporaries recognised the variously encoded allusions to the world of prostitution.

Ambiguity. Paris, Capital of Pleasure

A variety of social haunts, meeting places and entertainment venues played a part in creating Paris's reputation as the capital of pleasure. The city attracted a large number of tourists for whom specialist guides were published.

Street prostitution was largely organised



Edouard Manet
The Plum
 © Courtesy The National Gallery of Art, Washington

around cafés – establishments never frequented by respectable women without a chaperone. Café terraces were strategic positions for soliciting prostitutes, who could simultaneously be seen from the inside of the establishment and the street. At "absinthe time" in the early evening, they sat at tables with a drink and waited for customers, cigarette in hand, as depicted in works by Manet, Degas and Van Gogh.



Giovanni Boldini
Crossing the Road
 © Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, USA / Photo Michael Agee / Bridgeman Images

In the last thirty years of the 19th century, as the number of brothels decreased, more liberal licensing laws led to a proliferation of *brasseries à femmes*. The *verseuses* (waitresses) encouraged customers to drink, feigning seductive behaviour. A certain number of them were involved in illegal prostitution outside the establishment or on the premises.

Cafés-concerts and cabarets, which were proliferating steadily, were also hotbeds of prostitution, depicted by artists such as Toulouse-Lautrec and Forain. Women with a range of different talents performed a repertoire of lewd songs and dances onstage. Some establishments, such as the Moulin Rouge or the Folies-Bergère, attracted audiences made up largely of foreign tourists, who came to enjoy the show in the auditorium just as much as the opportunities to procure sexual favours in the gallery.

Ambiguity. Leaning on the Lamp Post

"For me, the finest thing about Paris is the boulevards. [...] When the gas lamps shine in mirrors and knives clatter on marble table tops, I stroll there at my ease, in a cloud of cigar smoke, looking right through the women passing by. This is where prostitution lays out its wares, and where eyes sparkle!" These lines written by Gustave Flaubert to



Vincent van Gogh
Agostina Segatori Sitting in the Café du Tambourin
 © Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
 (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)



Louis Anquetin
Woman at the Champs-Élysées by Night
 © Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (purchased with the support from the BankGiro Lottery and the Rembrandt Association)

Ernest Chevalier (25 June 1842) describe the spectacle of prostitution on display in a Paris transformed by the building of the boulevards and new street lighting.

Soliciting was prohibited in broad daylight, but was legal for registered girls at nightfall when the streetlamps were lit. This coincided with knocking-off time for women in the workshops in which some occasional prostitutes were employed. Prostitutes may have cultivated an air of ambiguity during the day, but their appearance gradually changed as the urban landscape, illuminated by gas lamps and later by electricity, was transformed.

Whether they were common prostitutes or prominent courtesans, the "ladies of the night" knew how to show off their assets to their best advantage by exploiting artificial light, as can be seen in works by Anquetin, Béraud and Steinlen. They deliberately chose to stand near a light source and capitalised on the "magical brightness of gas lamps" or shafts of "harsh light" which accentuated their painted features in the dark. This overt

display for the benefit of passers-by raised the profile of prostitution at night, contrasting with its discreet presence during the day. This apparent invasion of the public space is borne out by many contemporary accounts.

Ambiguity. Behind the Scenes

The Paris Opera was frequented by the upper middle classes and the aristocracy and was a venue for high-class prostitution, which assumed a number of guises.

Subscribers, who were identifiable by their black morning dress and top hats, had the privilege of accessing the Foyer de la danse, a private space which fuelled all manner of fantasies associated with life backstage. As is depicted in the works of Degas and Béraud, they could meet the opera dancers known as "rats". These girls usually came from modest backgrounds and were enrolled at the ballet school by their

mothers, who dreamt of a rosier future for them. Although young dancers' salaries were negligible, the possibility of meeting a wealthy and influential "protector" was a sufficient incentive to join the profession.



Edouard Manet

Masked Ball at the Opera

© Courtesy The National Gallery of Art, Washington



Henri Gervex

The Ball at the Paris Opera

© Photo courtesy of Galerie Jean-François Heim, Basel / cliché Julien Pépy

The auditorium of the Opera house on the Rue Le Peletier and subsequently at the Palais Garnier was particularly favourable to sexual encounters during carnival time, when the major fancy dress balls were held. The Avant Foyer was filled with men in tails rubbing shoulders with young women whose faces were concealed by masks or dominos. The masked ball theme, which facilitated romantic liaisons, inspired several artists including Giraud, Manet and Gervex.

The Paris Opera was the ultimate place to be seen and was an ideal stage for *demi-mondaines* to flaunt their success. The grand staircase which they climbed and the private boxes which they occupied provided a perfect backdrop for showing off their finest outfits and most expensive jewellery.

Brothels. From anticipation to seduction

Licensed brothels (*maisons de tolérance*) were a central feature of the regulatory system introduced under the Consulate. They were legalised in 1804

to allow effective police and medical monitoring of the girls working there, each of whom was registered in the brothel-keeper's ledger and allocated a number.

Although very diverse establishments existed from the outset, ranging from sailors' dives (*bouge à matelots*) to luxurious licensed brothels (*maisons de haute tolérance*), the rise in illegal prostitution in the late 19th century led to a steep drop in the number



Edgar Degas
Nude Woman Combing her Hair
 © Collection particulière, Chicago

d'Amboise and the Rue des Moulins. In the pictures he left behind documenting these encounters, he conveys the impression of a life which was peaceful, but deeply imbued with melancholy.

Brothels. Forbidden images



Anonymous
Untitled
 © Photo BnF

of brothels, but *brasseries à femmes* continued to proliferate. Only the most exclusive, lavishly decorated establishments for a prosperous clientele survived.

Brothels, which were by nature a closed environment, functioned as a sort of laboratory for artists seeking modern subjects and new approaches to the treatment of the female nude. For satirical artists such as Rops and Forain, they offered a means of revealing the underbelly of bourgeois sexuality. In the late 1880s, young avant-garde artists such as Émile Bernard and Louis Anquetin depicted the world of prostitution, from the boredom of long waiting periods to the change in behaviour when clients arrived.

Toulouse-Lautrec was unique in capturing the human face of the prostitutes of his day. He did not paint them as *femmes fatales* or victims of society, but as ordinary women going about their daily business. In 1893 and 1894, the artist shared the life of prostitutes in brothels on the Rue



Constantin Guys
Men at Table in the Company of Scantily Clad Women
 © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée d'Orsay) / Christian Jean

The birth of photography in 1839 heralded a new era in the depiction of the body and sexual consumerism. As soon as shorter exposure times enabled photographers to capture real life, they explored the representation of faces and genitalia. The high definition and subtlety of detail possible with daguerreotypes, and printing on albumen paper, reproduced the texture and transparency of skin, the sprouting of body hair and the nuances of expressions and smiles in exceptionally high quality. The colour of skin, eyes and accessories reinforced the illusion of reality. The application of stereoscopic techniques to the medium added the finishing touch to this unsettling impression of a body which could be examined and scrutinised in all its fullness with the privacy afforded by a stereoscope.

These staged scenes bore little resemblance to actual practices in brothels, and this was hardly surprising as the shots were taken in a photographer's studio! Photographers did not sign their works and the models hid their identities for fear that the photos would be seized and that they would be arrested and condemned to lengthy prison sentences. These images were sold illicitly and were the fruit of a relationship between a model, photographer and customer which reflected the triangle formed by prostitutes, pimps and clients. Just like real women exposing themselves in the salons of brothels, their

aim was to stimulate sexual excitement. By consuming the image, viewers became virtual clients.

Brothels. Genre scenes



Jean-Louis Forain
The Client

© Photo courtesy of the Dixon Gallery and Gardens, Memphis

The social taboo attached to making public what took place in brothels and the technical problems associated with this process (cumbersome equipment, emulsions with poor sensitivity requiring prolonged exposure), meant that photographers took their lead from painters and sculptors, composing living tableaux and fantasy scenes that recreated the privacy of brothels under the Second Empire in their own studios.

Salon and boudoir scenes were recreated with a wealth of detail, using simple scenery, painted backcloths and a plethora of accessories. The protagonists, who were paid

models, friends or family members, brought them to life and made them look very realistic.

These male haunts were depicted as offering the promise of initiation, sensual pleasure and transgression. A number of scenes were spiced up with a hint of eroticism to titillate the bourgeois spectator without damaging his reputation: dresses exposing the legs, partially unbuttoned bodices, young women about their toilet or dozing with languorous abandon.

The rise of photographic postcards in the early twentieth century was associated with changes in the microcosm of prostitution. Popular iconography featured new figures such as pimps, depicted in the guise of lovers and protectors, but also torturers, or *Apaches* – thugs who operated in gangs and organised the Paris underworld around swindling, physical violence and immoral earnings. Violence between the sexes was now represented in its unvarnished form.

Brothels. Scenes of Intimacy



Félix Vallotton
Women Washing

© Musée d'Orsay, dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Patrice Schmidt

Brothel girls underwent regular medical checks to avoid any risk of infecting clients with venereal diseases. Their bodies were subjected to constant and scrupulous attention and this impeccable cleanliness was believed to have a preventative effect.

Daily washing and dressing before clients arrived also provided a distraction for the brothel girls and marked the start of their preparations for the evening ahead. Some artists, such as Vallotton, depicted these periods devoted to personal care in the context of a community of women, while others represented the finishing touches (styling hair,

adjusting corsets, etc.) in the presence of a client as setting the stage for a transaction.

In addition to washing and getting dressed up, the private life of prostitutes included

their relationships with each other, which were a rich source of fantasy. Homosexual relationships within brothels were frequently described. Toulouse-Lautrec in particular depicts lesbians' relationships with their own bodies, which they reappropriated in the absence of clients, in scenes imbued with suggestive tension.

In the series of prints entitled *Elles*, Toulouse-Lautrec chronicles the domestic life of women making a living from prostitution and in the world of entertainment. These intimate scenes showing women washing and doing their hair were produced by the artist from preparatory drawings made in the brothels which he frequented.

Prostitution in the Moral and Social Order. Regulation *versus* abolition



Paul-Emile Boutigny

Dumpling

© RMN-Grand Palais / Benoît Touchard

Prostitution in the 19th century was not considered to be a crime, but rather a "necessary evil" to satisfy "men's brutal passions". Steps were taken under the Consulate to supervise and control the sale of sexual services. Wanton women were placed under the supervision of the vice squad and subjected to mandatory medical checks (1802) and brothels known as *maisons de tolérance* were legalised (1804). This regulated system, advocated by Alexandre Parent-Duchâtelet (1836), was presented as a public safety measure to fight the spread of venereal disease, and also to preserve marital harmony.

Beyond the controlled confines of brothels, street prostitution became more widespread and adopted a variety of guises. *Filles en carte* or *filles soumises* (registered prostitutes) were recorded on ledgers at the police headquarters and were subjected to regular medical examinations. *Filles "insoumises"* (unregistered prostitutes) were usually in thrall to pimps and solicited more discreetly in order to avoid raids that could culminate in dispatch to Saint-Lazare, which was both a prison and a hospital for the treatment of syphilis.

The increase in illegal prostitution (which was seven to eight times higher than legal prostitution), the growth of certain venal practices such as prostitution by women working in low-paid trades, and the rise in the number of *brasseries à femmes*, sounded the death knell for the regulatory system in the late 19th century. An abolitionist movement emerged, promoted by feminists (Joséphine Butler) and radical Republicans (Yves Guyot). The *loi Marthe Richard* bill, which ordered the closure of brothels, was passed on 13 April 1946 and can be viewed as the legacy of this trend.



Théophile Alexandre Steinlen

Streetwalker

© RMN-Grand Palais (musée d'Orsay) / Tony Querrec

The Aristocracy of Vice. The *grandes horizontales*

Kept women – *demi-mondaines*, *grandes horizontales* or *cocottes*– at the top of the prostitution pyramid were the focus of special surveillance. This is demonstrated by the



Henri Gervex

Madame Valtesse de la Bigne

© RMN-Grand Palais (musée d'Orsay) / Hervé Lewandowski

Livre des courtisanes, a register kept by the vice squad in which it carefully recorded the mercenary and illegal relationships of the "divas of up-market prostitution", including Jeanne de Tourbay, Blanche d'Antigny, Hortense Schneider, Marguerite Bellanger and Sarah Bernhardt, and their clientele.

These young women, some of whom – such as Valtesse de la Bigne – provided the inspiration for the career of Zola's *Nana*, frequently started out in the theatre playing roles that showed off their beauty to best advantage, rather than their acting or singing prowess. Their often meteoric social rise was facilitated by their high-society patrons, for whom ostentatiously keeping a *demi-mondaine* was a visible sign of wealth and virility. Skilfully exploiting the erotic and social potential of their situation, courtesans flaunted their success by manipulating their image. In the major portraits produced by official painters and exhibited at Salons, the traditional codes of the genre were subtly subverted with brazen expressions, triumphant poses and exposed legs. Photographic portraits offered not only potential for wide distribution, but also a great variety of scenarios in which to flaunt jewellery and lavish outfits.

These *demi-mondaines* were admired at the opera, observed by the press and exerted a genuine fascination. They were also trendsetters in matters of fashion and arbiters of taste.

The Aristocracy of Vice. Respectable society and the *demi-monde*

Prominent *demi-mondaines* were often experienced businesswomen and were careful to build up significant assets in the form of money and property. The pinnacle of success for them was to negotiate the gift or construction of a town house and, once they had accumulated sufficient wealth, to set their sights on a marriage which would offer them a distinguished name and new-found respectability.

Albert-Ernest Carrier-Belleuse, Aimé Jules Dalou, Pierre Manguin
Console for the Grand Salon in the Hôtel de Paiva

© RMN-Grand Palais (Musée d'Orsay) / René-Gabriel Ojéda



Reutlinger

La Belle Otéro

© Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris

When it came to decor and furnishings, there was scarcely any difference between respectable society and the *demi-monde*. La Paiva's furniture, for example, displayed a taste for highly traditional luxury and elegance, with designs and materials reminiscent of Ancien Régime styles.

The overlap of worlds and the impossibility of distinguishing between a respectable



Henri Gervex

Rolla

© RMN-Grand Palais / A. Danvers

woman and a woman of easy virtue was a source of fascination to artists and men of letters alike. "The aristocracy of vice" denounced by Zola operated largely outside the regulatory system. This is revealed in an analysis produced by Parent-Duchâtelet, who stated: "nobody can deny that [...] these women are actually prostitutes; they ply their trade; they are the prime source of the spread of serious diseases and premature illness; they destroy wealth and health alike, and can be considered the most dangerous beings in society."

Prostitution and the Imagination. Fantasy and allegory



Gustav-Adolf Mossa

She

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Prostitutes, who were key figures in literature, the arts and the press in the 19th century, provided a vehicle to express male fantasies and desires, often through the contrivance of historical and geographical settings. The East, Greece and Rome were frequently used as backdrops for naked bodies in lascivious poses.

In allegorical terms, women who sell their bodies epitomise the shortcomings of a society as a whole. St John's *Apocalypse* describes the corrupting and threatening figure of the Great Whore, an image which resurfaced in the 19th century when Paris was dubbed "the New Babylon". References to prostitution informed criticism of different political regimes. Thomas Couture denounced the moral decline of the July Monarchy in *Romans during the Decadence* and Zola depicts *Nana* as a poisonous Venus, bearing within her the seed of the decline of Second Empire society.

Prostitution was a vehicle for expressing confused angst and a wide variety of attitudes towards women in general. Whereas the Romantic period placed great emphasis on fallen heroines transfigured by heartfelt love who, like Mary Magdalene, offered a path to redemption (*The Lady of the Camellias*), the fin-de-siècle period experienced a proliferation of powerful, cruel, hieratic idol figures endowed with a voracious sexuality.

Prostitution and Modernity. The spectacle of prostitution

Olympia, which was presented at the Salon in 1865, caused a huge scandal on account of both its subject matter – a naked prostitute depicted in a monumental format – and Manet's free brushwork. He was probably attempting to be the "painter of modern life" called upon by Baudelaire to capture "the protean image of wanton beauty" in the "underworld" of cities.

In the late 19th century, prostitution established itself as a modern subject worthy of painters' attention. Toulouse-Lautrec set the tone for painters who visited or settled in the French capital. His motifs inspired by Paris nightlife were adopted by many of them, including Picasso, Kupka, Van Dongen and Sluijters. These painters sought the aesthetic

equivalents of the sensations experienced in venues where the crowds, din and movement were amplified by the presence of mirrors and artificial lighting. The "girls" themselves played an active role in the spectacle of prostitution by opting for showy looks. Extravagant make-up, deliberately contrived poses and ostentatious outfits all became motifs which contributed to the revitalisation of the aesthetic.



Jean Béraud

St. Mary Magdalene in the House of Simon the Pharisee

© RMN-Grand Palais (musée d'Orsay) / Hervé

Lewandowski

Prostitution and Modernity. The studio, a theatre for fantasies and obsessions

In a century in which prudishness was



Henri Evenepoel

At the Café Harcourt in Paris

© Städel Museum – U. Edelmann – ARTOTHEK

at its peak, prostitutes and models made ideal partners. They were the only women willing to show their genitals and allow their bodies to be used in physical experiments and visual narratives. Codes of decency did not countenance total female nudity in broad daylight.

The advent of silver gelatin-bromide emulsions, the development of cameras which were easier to use and the possibility of making one's own prints meant that photography seemed to offer a large number of painters, sculptors, writers and photographers a new medium for exploring



Anonymous

Nude Studies, woman standing on a chair, viewed from behind

© RMN-Grand Palais (musée d'Orsay) / Béatrice Hatala

female sexuality. Women were transformed into objects which could be studied, scrutinised, distorted – in short, controlled.

These images, produced in the privacy of a confined space (a workshop, studio, or room), were designed for secret, solitary contemplation. Photo albums were the quintessential objects of delight in these small private theatres.



Edvard Munch

Christmas in the Brothel

© Munch-museet/Munch -Ellingsen Gruppen/Bono

Prostitution and Modernity. Pleasurable pursuits for amateurs

At the turn of the twentieth century, wider access to photographic techniques facilitated the practice of amateur photography as a leisure pursuit. Cameras could be slipped into a leather case, worn over the shoulder, and used without a stand. Users, who were neither professional photographers nor experts, could "point and click" free from the constraints of the studio, making it possible to depict private hideaways and "secret gardens" of pleasure, such as salons, rooms in houses of assignation or bedsits.

Despite the unusual subject matter, this iconography shared features with family

portraits, except that the families in question were anonymous and the names of their members (prostitutes, madams, pimps and clients) have not survived. The range of themes was limited, framing was clumsy, and blurring was frequent, as what counted for users with scant regard for technique was the subject matter. Photographs gave concrete form to the memory of a place, face, body or feeling. They were mementos of libertine adventures.

The act of recording a scene itself belongs to the realm of the senses. The camera is in fact an extension of the eye and this erogenous organ was studied by Sigmund Freud, who suggested in his *hree Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) that "the manner in which the libidinous excitement is frequently awakened is by the optical impression". Taking a shot is a component of sexual pleasure.

Prostitution and Modernity. A riot of form and colour



André Derain
Woman in a Chemise or Dancer
© Adagp, Paris, 2015 - SMK Photo

geometrical. This radicalisation of the treatment of forms divested images of prostitution of their documentary, moral and allegorical content.

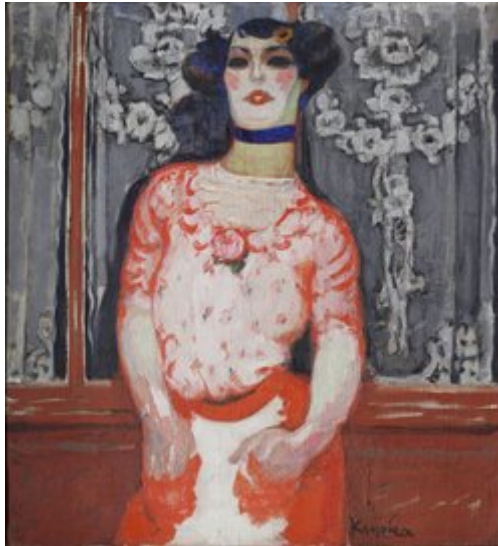
Picasso provides an example of the variety of possible approaches to the subject. Although he initially represented prostitutes using a caricatured and colourful treatment reminiscent of Toulouse-Lautrec, during his blue period he attributed a deeper and more symbolic importance to this same theme. His painting depicting an inmate of Saint-Lazare by moonlight conveys empathy for his model's melancholy and resembles a psychological portrait. Several years later, he eliminated the anecdotal element entirely in *Les Femmes d'Alger*, focusing instead on extremely brutal expressiveness, which opened up a new field for modern art.



Anonymous
*Nude Studies, seated woman
with arms folded*
© Musée d'Orsay, Dist.
RMN-Grand Palais / Alexis
Brandt

The verb "to prostitute oneself" literally means "to display or to expose oneself publicly" so it is hardly surprising to see that the worlds of art and prostitution are conflated in the 19th and early 20th century imagination. The metamorphosis of the body of the prostitute – "an object of public pleasure" – into a work of art to be viewed by all was effected through the artifices of seduction. Studied poses revitalised the repertoire of traditionally accepted forms in the academic register, and make-up (also described as 'face paint') and coloured stockings were an excuse for a riot of colours in the paintings of Kupka, Derain, Van Dongen, Rouault and Picasso.

Faces, which were often painted with naive vulgarity, became akin to masks and the identity of the models, who were increasingly depicted alone, seemed to dissolve, superseded by a search for form which accentuated their features and rendered them



František Kupka

The Gallien Girl

© Adagp, Paris, 2015 - Národní Galerie, Prague, Czech Republic

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