



Upstarts and Matriarchs: Jewish-American Feminists and the Transformation of American Art

By Gail Levin

Late in the 1960s, the feminist movement began to touch women artists. Turning away from the formalism then in vogue, they began to emphasize personal experience through a variety of styles and media.¹ Newly feminist artists in the United States and elsewhere radically challenged mainstream modernist art and transformed the art world. The influence of feminist art – both its revolutionary message and its esthetic developments – continues to be important today, affecting younger contemporary artists without regard to gender.

Beyond allowing for the expression of female experience, feminist artists helped to create the postmodern appreciation of diversity. They encouraged the emergence of collaborative strategies for art-making and the return of emotional and narrative content – both personal and political – to mainstream art. Feminist artists also deserve credit for the current institutional and market validation of forms beyond “high art,” including performance art, video, and such traditional women’s crafts as quilting, embroidery, crocheting, and painting china.

Within the feminist movement of the early 1970s, the particular role of artists who were also Jewish has only recent-

ly begun to attract attention. Some of these pioneering studies have not yet achieved accuracy about who is Jewish and who not.² Why then, does it even matter? As my own research began to find that many important feminist artists were also Jewish, I began asking *why* this might be so: why were so many Jewish women artists drawn to the feminist cause? I then noticed that a number of these artists belonged to families that emigrated from Eastern Europe around the turn of the last century. I also remarked that some of their relatives, especially their fathers, were involved in radical politics. This seemed to me like a connection worth investigating.

The families of many artists in this show trace their roots to nineteenth-century Eastern Europe and to the struggles of the Jews as outsiders. The struggles took a new form in the new world, in early twentieth-century America, as the new immigrants organized for workers’ rights. Their daughters, then, and granddaughters in the 1970s took up the cause of rights for women and contributed to a defining moment in feminist art. The story of how rabbinical roots grew into political and then feminist radicalism is what



Nancy Spero, *Athena and Fertility Figure*, 1990, handprinting with printed collage
Lent by the artist and Printworks Gallery, Chicago

remains to be spelled out.

The age-long history of Jewish outsidership entered a new chapter in the Russian Empire, which from 1794 forced Jews to live along its western fringes in a restricted area known as the "Pale of Settlement." There they suffered oppressive taxation, enforced conscription of their sons, even as young as the age of twelve, and government efforts to impose Russification and conversion, thereby forcing assimilation. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the latter gave way to pogroms that inflicted mayhem and rape, compelling many Jews to flee.

From the 1880's, a growing secular enlightenment spawned a socialist movement among Jews, even as it also encouraged emigration. In September 1882 Leon Pinsker, an Odessa physician, denounced the Czarist program of Jewish assimilation. He published in Berlin a pamphlet entitled "Autoemancipation" and subtitled: "An Appeal to his Brethren by a Russian Jew."³ In the face of growing anti-Semitism, Pinsker sought to reunite the Jewish people of Russia and the diaspora of Western Europe in one place, whether in America or in Palestine. While some dreamed of a Jewish homeland, others looked to the New World as their asylum and promised land.

Followers of "secular enlightenment" or *Haskalah*, known as *maskilim*, ("enlightened ones") that believed "Jewish emancipation" and equality would result from the reconciliation of Judaism with modern western ideas and customs. This Jewish intellectual and literary movement, whose followers were often still deeply religious, but educated and middle-class, began in Germany and permeated the Russian empire, fueling the development of secular Hebrew and Yiddish literature, both of which contain numerous references to the rights of women, including the right to obtain an education and the right to choose whom to marry. While life was increasingly difficult for all Russian Jews, women were especially oppressed, exploited as both domestic and economic providers in a patriarchal society in which they held low status, moving them to cry out for relief.⁴

Increasingly intolerable conditions fueled radical politics and ultimately the immense wave of migration to America

around the turn of the century. This came at the time when some Jews altogether rejected Orthodox Judaism and sought emancipation through socialist revolution in Russia, organizing an underground Jewish labor movement that led to massive strikes. These Jewish radicals praised women as comrades and intellectual equals. By contrast the Orthodox male leadership discouraged girls from obtaining all but the most basic literacy, excluded them from the study of Talmud (the intellectual center of Jewish life), and further expected them to shoulder responsibility for the survival of their families and their communities.

Upon arrival in America, immigrants who believed in social justice and political reform found such harsh working conditions that they felt compelled to continue the struggles begun in Europe. In Lithuania, Poland, and Russia, the General Jewish Workers' Union known as the *Bund*, organized an underground labor movement that led massive strikes. These Jewish socialists appear to have responded to biblical texts on social justice. They believed strongly in the moral commandments of the Torah and Talmud and the traditions of *tsedakah* or of righteousness and justice toward others, community responsibility, and mutual aid.⁵

Jews who had resisted Czarist oppression became strike leaders and union organizers in America, fighting for fair wages, better working conditions, and child labor laws. The Jewish community was shocked and outraged on March 25, 1911, when 140 workers, mostly young Jewish girls, died, trapped in a fire at the Triangle Waist factory on the top three floors of a ten-story building in Manhattan.⁶ The scale of the tragedy forced the state to investigate working conditions and mobilized the American labor movement.

Within the immigrant Jewish community, socialists became a strong political segment and began to learn how electoral politics functioned in the United States; in New York, they moved closer to the position of the Bundists, who as refugees from the 1905 Russian Revolution, attempted to link socialist politics with Yiddish culture.⁷ Led by the Latvian-born lawyer Morris Hillquit, the Jewish socialists grew stronger and

more sophisticated; they sought to unionize garment workers, where Jewish women were numerous, militant and dedicated.⁸

Radical ideas found a ready audience among immigrant Jewish women, few of whom had been given any formal education in Russia, and who particularly suffered the pains of having been dislodged from their niche in society. There, women were expected to work to support their families, especially if they were fortunate enough to be married to a religious scholar. The new world presented unanticipated demands and opportunities. Often separated from their extended families, many women had to cope with difficult economic conditions in a new and strange cultural milieu. More independent than most women, they turned to feminist causes, fighting for female suffrage, the right to birth control, and other reforms.⁹ During the Progressive Era, radical Jewish attitudes toward women's competence and intelligence were reinforced by American ideas of female emancipation that had begun in the United States in 1848 and galvanized a national, then an international feminist movement. As early as 1907, social reform activists such as Lillian Wald were recruiting East European women into the suffrage movement.¹⁰

When the Equal Suffrage Amendment failed to win approval in New York State in 1915, it also lost in Brownsville, but proportionately more people there supported the amendment, which was successfully adopted in the state in 1917.¹¹ Irving Howe has described this sup-

port for women's rights as part of a larger radical culture: "Feminism as a movement or ideology seems to have touched no more than a small number of Jewish girls, mostly those who had already been moved to rebellion by socialism."¹² More recently, others have argued that when young Jewish immigrant women worked before marriage, the experience led them to develop greater autonomy, which they maintained even after becoming homemakers.¹³

Jewish working women also joined their brothers as union activists. Often forced to curtail their education to support younger siblings, especially their brothers, Jewish women activists were instrumental in organizing

the first programs of worker education.¹⁴ In the early twentieth century, they also became union leaders and organized important strikes in the garment industry.¹⁵ In 1919, the *Jewish Daily Forward's* weekly column aimed at women urged them to campaign for a state minimum wage applicable to both sexes and sufficient to insure all workers a decent

standard of living: "Then employers will not be able to exploit women, lower the wages of men, and make trouble in general for the trade unions."¹⁶

Not only the Socialist party attracted Jews; some gravitated to the American Communist party, especially during the Great Depression. The demands of both the socialists and communists struck the ruling powers in America as unreasonable and unacceptable. During the Red Scare of the 1920s, about 10,000 "alien radicals" were arrested and about 300 of them were eventually deported. It is one of



Eleanor Antin "The Wonder of it All" from *The King of Solana Beach, 1974-75*, (6) black and white photographs on board, Lent by Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

history's ironies that the radical immigrants who fled the Russian Pale in search of a better life came to be viewed by the American establishment as "beyond the Pale."

The political radicalism early in the century and the feminism of the late sixties and seventies have links to be explored here.¹⁷ We still have much to learn about the connection between Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, where the search for emancipation was urgent and women were particularly aggrieved, and radical American feminism.

Linkage between leftist politics and feminism marks the career of author and activist Betty Friedan: early in her career she worked as a labor journalist and pamphlet writer who spoke out for cause of women during the 1940s and early 1950s, although she claimed in 1973 that she "wasn't even conscious of the woman problem" until she started writing *The Feminist Mystique* (1963).¹⁸ Her father, in turn, immigrated from Eastern Europe.

Among Jewish feminist artists, two caught my attention when I discovered that both their fathers had been active in labor politics. Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro each individually had achieved a measure of success in a style that reflected the dominant male esthetic for her generation; and each decided to change her work to emphasize her perspective as a woman. In 1970 Chicago had founded a Feminist Art Program at Fresno (California) State College; and in 1971 she joined forces with Schapiro and moved it to the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia (where Schapiro's husband, Paul Brach, was Dean).

Working with their students, they created *Womanhouse*, which was a series of imagined environments and performances in an abandoned dwelling in Los Angeles.¹⁹ This project challenged gender stereotypes in spectacular fashion and provoked wide media attention and controversy, attracting more than 10,000 visitors during the month it remained open. It threatened men in the establishment, who preferred to keep things as they were. Many men saw feminists, including the instigators of the project, as unreasonable women who pressed for unwarranted societal change.

A link between feminist art, Jewish identity, and radi-

cal politics became evident to me when I discovered through my interviews with Schapiro and Chicago a previously unremarked fact. Their backgrounds were strikingly similar and both were profoundly rooted in radical politics and Jewish tradition. I learned that Schapiro's paternal grandfather had been a Talmudic scholar near Minsk (today in Belarus) in the Pale of Settlement before he emigrated. In America, her father broke away to become an artist, but also became an active Socialist politician and labor organizer in Brooklyn. Chicago's father, Arthur Cohen, was a labor organizer and, for a time, a Communist Party member in the city from which she took her professional name. Her paternal grandfather, however, was an orthodox rabbi who immigrated to America from Lithuania, which also was in the Pale. He came from a long line of rabbis that included one of the most influential leaders in modern Jewish history, the eighteenth-century Vilna Gaon ("Eminence" or "Genius" from Vilnius).

Remembering the stories of her grandmother and mother's difficult passage to America, Schapiro reflected in 1977 how she associated them with the abstract spaces she painted in the late 1960s:

"The paintings are about exotic space. My grandmother lived in Russia, in a *shtetl*. Her space was confined. Her activities were limited to the kitchen and the bedroom, the small garden where she hung her clothes to dry--except once, when she took her entire brood of children alone, and crossed the Atlantic Ocean to come to this country to join her husband. She had two spatial experiences: one limited, confined in the extreme; the other an expansive voyaging out."²⁰

The issue of Jewish identity appears in Chicago's work in 1973 in a set of drawings entitled *Compressed Women who Yearned to be Butterflies*. On one she featured *Mme. Deronda* from George Eliot's 1876 novel, *Daniel Deronda*, which is noted for its sympathetic treatment of Jews, including a crafty but generous pawnbroker named Ezra Cohen and the rest of his family, all sharing Chicago's maiden name.²¹ On her drawing, Chicago quoted and identified with *Mme. Deronda's* bitter protest: "You are not a woman. You may try--but you

can never imagine what it is to have a man's force of genius in you, and yet to suffer the slavery of being a girl. To have a pattern cut out--this is the Jewish woman! This is what you must be; this is what you are wanted for; a woman's heart must be of such a size and no larger, else it must be pressed small, like Chinese feet..."²²

Long after Chicago freed herself from the constraints of her own early work in an abstract minimalist style, she reclaimed the legacy of her own Eastern European ancestors with a major body of work, *The Holocaust Project: From Darkness into Light* (1993), on which she collaborated with her husband, photographer, Donald Woodman. Their project attempts to examine history and to educate, not just to represent the tragedy and memorialize the dead.

Visual response to the Holocaust is admittedly challenging and such unthinkable horrific subject matter was once considered impossible to represent. Audrey Flack's canvas, *World War II (Vanitas)* of 1976-77, is an isolated, but powerful pioneering attempt to deal with this theme. Using the format of a *vanitas* still life, Flack, whose parents were Eastern European immigrants, included in her composition a Jewish star (from her own key chain) and a photo taken of Holocaust victims by photo-journalist Margaret Bourke-White, who accompanied U.S. troops when they liberated the Buchenwald Concentration Camp in 1945. The incorporated text, which Flack found in Roman Vishniac's book on

Polish Jews, refers to a "hasidic leader," Rabbi Nachman of Bratislava and to the "Gaon," Chicago's ancestor.²³

Striking workers and other social protest themes, including *War Protest March* of 1968, have been the subjects of Flack's photo-realist paintings. She recalls the family tradition that her father once spoke from a soap box in New York's Union Square. A more radical political commitment led Ruth Weisberg's maternal grandfather to leave Chicago to go to the Soviet Union in 1928 to work

with the Bolsheviks on the Moscow subway. He had previously studied Talmud in Lodz, Poland, and then engineering in Berlin, before immigrating to the United States. *Isaac's Heirs*, Weisberg's painting of 1993, refers to her grandfather, who stayed in the Soviet Union until 1934, during which time he helped to found Birobidzhan, the

homeland Stalin envisioned for the Jews. Weisberg recalls that her grandmother, his widow, used to tell her that she was a "third-generation feminist."²⁴ Weisberg's art has long contained Jewish themes, including her print suite, *The Shtetl: A Journey and a Memorial* (1971).

The heritage of Eastern European Jewry included not only political radicalism, but also work by both women and men in decorative crafts with didactic inscriptions that offer interesting analogies to art work produced by Schapiro, Chicago, Elaine Reichek, and others. Weisberg remembers



Judy Chicago and Donald Woodman, *Banality of Evil/Struthof*, 1989, sprayed acrylic, oil and photography on photo linen, Lent by Through the Flower

that her grandmother came from a family of weavers who also produced embroidery for *tallit* (prayer shawls). Eastern Europe was also where Nancy Spero's maternal grandfather designed embroidery.²⁵ There, Jewish women had traditionally presented their embroidery to the synagogue, where they received a blessing. But eventually as Jews gained access to the "sampler-making classes," women created much more than embroidered mantles for the Torah or curtains for the Ark, leading to secular as well as religious uses for embroidery.²⁶

Although often ephemeral in nature, embroidery and other crafts represent folk art traditions that often persisted unsung among many immigrants, although such crafts appear in Jewish fiction. Handcrafted dowry figures in Anzia Yezierska's 1925 immigrant novel, *Breadgivers*, where a character proudly proclaims: "All my sheets had my name embroidered with a beautiful wreath of flowers over it. All my

towels were half covered with red and blue embroidery....My curtains alone took me a whole year to knit, on sticks two yards long. But the most beautiful thing of my whole dowry was my hand-crocheted tablecloth...."²⁷ She goes on to lament: "In America, rich people can only buy, and buy things made by machines. Even Rockefeller's daughter got only store-bought, ready-made things for her dowry." Even if one's mother and grandmother did not

embroider as Schapiro's and Weisberg's did, one might have noticed a treasured cover for *challah* (sabbath ritual bread).

Nonetheless, the inspiration to create contemporary works that, like traditional Jewish textiles, combine word and image, comes from diverse sources. Reichel, for example, remembers seeing American samplers during her many childhood visits to the Brooklyn Museum. Yet she acknowledges that the legacy of her paternal grandfather, a Talmudic scholar from Eastern Europe, might be her "way of approaching information." She allows: "To understand metatext is very Talmudic."²⁸

Attachment to word and image is also notable in the work of Ida Applebroog and Nancy Spero. The latter's handprinted wall installation of 1993 dealt with Nazi victim *Masha Bruskina*, murdered in the Minsk Ghetto in 1941. Violence against women is a repeated theme in Spero's work, including her series called *The Ballad of Marie Saunders*

(1993), based on a poem by Bertolt Brecht, which tells of a gentile woman who was tortured for having had sexual relations with a Jew.

Jewish identity figures in the work of Applebroog, the Bronx-born daughter of Polish immigrants, in her image of the violinist Isaac Stern performing in Israel during the Gulf War while wearing a gas mask because of a rocket attack (1992). Applebroog's Orthodox parents were Yiddish-

speaking: her father worked as a furrier and her mother as a seamstress, who, she recalls, "sewed constantly. I remember wearing outlandish costumes that she designed and sewed for me. I was desperate to wear store-bought clothes like the other kids at school."²⁹

Also Bronx-born of East European immigrants, Ann Sperry made a series of sculptures called "Remnants," inspired by the fragments of fabric that her seamstress mother bought on Hester Street on New York's Lower East Side. Sperry's father, a union member who wrote Yiddish poetry, bought her a piano when she longed for one as a child, but was obliged to pay for it over ten years, long after she had lost interest in playing. Unable to let go of that memory, she eventually turned her piano into sculpture as well.

Eastern European Jewish culture has been central in some of Eleanor Antin's work, including her 1991 film, *The Man without a World*, and her 1993 installation, *Vilna Nights*, about Yiddish silent film and the demise of the shtetl. Antin, whose mother was an actress in Yiddish theater and later operated hotels in the Catskills with programs aimed at elderly Eastern European Jews, grew up in a politically Jewish, left-wing atmosphere, which she credits with leading her to deal "with the specifics of memory and desire as they relate to my cultural past."³⁰

For Joan Semmel, also born in the Bronx of Eastern European immigrant parents, her education in abstract expressionist painting had to yield to her desire to work in a more personal style, one that was inspired by her growing consciousness as a feminist. She has focused on nude portraits and self-portraits, commenting: "My work is engaged in trying to change women's lives and how they perceive themselves. The sexual relationship of men and women tended to set the stage with male domination precluding female aspirations in other arenas."³¹ The desire to raise consciousness of male domination prompted Judith Bernstein to create a series of giant screws, metaphors of male power, which she hoped to appropriate. Such thinking can be said to have evolved logically from Eastern European Jewry, which freely recognized female sexuality instead of subscribing to the Victorian ideal that stressed women's purity and piety.³²

The impulse among Jewish women artists to improve their destiny is much more widespread than the few examples discussed in the space available here. There can be little doubt that Jewish women reacted to institutionalized patriarchy with a desire to change society and a will to act upon that goal. As artists, too, they had particular reasons to embrace feminism, to combat the virtual exclusion of women from professional notice. For example, their absence from a survey of nineteenth and twentieth century Jewish artists that appeared in 1949 in New York. The present exhibition recognizes the important changes that Jewish feminist artists set in motion in the tumultuous 1970s and that continue today.

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NOTES:

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2. For example, see Lisa Bloom, "Ethnic Notions and Feminist Strategies of the 1970s: Some Work by Judy Chicago and Eleanor Antin," in Catherine M. Soussloff, ed., *Jewish Identity in Modern Art History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), p. 136, who incorrectly lists Carolee Schneemann as a "previously neglected" Jewish artist, despite the fact that she grew up Protestant in a Quaker household.

3. S.M. Dubnow, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland, vol. II*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1918), pp. 330-31.

4. Susan A. Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl, Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 34.



Audrey Flack, *Invocation*, 1982, oil and acrylic on canvas
Lent by Louis K. Meisel Gallery, New York

5. Gerald Sorin, *The Prophetic Minority: American Jewish Immigrant Radicals, 1880-1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 3.

6. The anti-union factory owners were also Jewish. David Von Drehle, *Triangle Fire; The Fire that Changed America* (New York: Grove/Atlantic 2000) gives a list of known victims, now available at <http://www.groveatlantic.com/grove/wc.dll?groveproc-misc-2620>, which allows an estimate of the number of Jewish victims based on their names and the names of those who claimed the dead. Italians represented the largest number of victims after the Jews. See also Leon Stein, *The Triangle Fire* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1962).

7. Irving Howe, *Socialism and America* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), p. 8.

8. Norma Fain Pratt, "Culture and Radical Politics: Yiddish Women Writers in America, 1890-1940," in Judith R. Baskin, *Women of the Word: Jewish Women and Jewish Writing* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), p. 114.

9. Alter F. Landesman, (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1971), p. 103.

10. Linda Gordon Kuzmack, *The Jewish Women's Movement in England and the United States, 1881-1933* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1990), p. 151.

11. Landesman, Brownsville, p. 295.

12. Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), p. 267.

13. Paula E. Hyman, "Gender and the Immigrant Jewish Experience in the United States," in Judith R. Baskin, *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1991), p. 228.

14. Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl*, pp. 218-220.

15. Hyman, "Immigrant Jewish Experience," p. 229.

16. Notes from the "Women's World," *Jewish Daily Forward*, May 17, 1919, translated by Maxine S. Seller, in "World of Our Mothers: The Women's Page of the Jewish Daily Forward," in *Journal of Ethnic Studies*, vol. 16, no. 2, 1988, p. 100.

17. An important ground-breaking study is Kate Weigand, *Red Feminism American Communism and the Making of Women's Liberation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), but feminist artists do not figure in this book.

18. See Daniel Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the Making of The Feminine Mystique* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), especially pp. 121-152.

19. Soon after Womanhouse, Schapiro and Chicago co-authored "Female Imagery" (*Womanspace Journal*, 1973), in

which they posited a formal organization in women's art that featured "central core" imagery as a metaphor for a woman's anatomy. Controversy followed among both feminist critics and artists over the issue of essentialism, which many felt would lead to the conclusion that women were "naturally" inferior.

20. Sara Daniels and Pamela Ruddick, *Working It Out, 23 Women Writers, Artists, Scientists, and Scholars Talk About Their Lives and Work* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), p. 292.

21. Bloom, "Ethnic Notions and Feminist Strategies," p. 138-148, suggests that Chicago changed her name to "the ethnically neutral Chicago" in order "to disassociate herself from the stereotype of women in traditional Jewish culture." It seems unlikely that Chicago would have cited a novel sympathetic to Jews if she had been seeking to suppress her Jewish identity.

22. George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, as quoted by Judy Chicago on her drawing in the series *Compressed Women who Yearned to be Butterflies*, 1973.

23. Roman Vishniac, *Polish Jews, A Pictorial Record* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975). Based on author's interview with Audrey Flack, November 11, 2004.

24. Author's interview with Ruth Weisberg, November 15, 2004.

25. Author's interview with Nancy Spero, November 11, 2004.

26. See Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch* (London: The Women's Press, Ltd., 1984), p. 164 and Ita Aber, *The Art of Judaic Needlework* (London: Bell and Hyman, 1979).

27. Anzia Yeziarska, *Breadgivers* (New York, 1925, reprinted Persea Books, 1999), p. 32.

28. Author's interview with Elaine Reichek, October 30, 2004.

29. See "Chronology," in Ida Applebroog: *Nothing Personal, Paintings 1987-1997* (Washington, D.C., Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1998), p. 91.

30. Eleanor Antin, statement to the Jewish Museum, September 1992, as quoted in *From the Inside Out: Eight Contemporary Artists* (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1993), p. 24.

31. Author's interview with Joan Semmel, November 29, 2004.

32. Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl*, pp. 10-11.

33. Karl Schwarz, *Jewish Artists of the 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: The Philosophical Library Inc., 1949). Omitted are artists, then prominent, such as Sonia Delaunay, Theresa Bernstein, and Louise Nevelson.



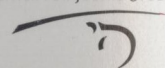


Susan Bee, *Amor Perdido*, 2002, mixed media and collage on linen, Lent by the artist

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