Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Economies Project

Understanding buyer behaviour in the primary market for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art

Summary of key findings from Masters by Research

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Background

This thesis summary is an output of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Economies Project (AEP), conducted through the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation (CRC-REP). The CRC-REP aims to deliver solutions to the economic challenges facing remote Australia (Ninti One Limited 2013). The AEP is documenting and analysing the complex supply chain connecting producers, agents[1] and consumers of remote area Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art, with the goals of improving opportunities for artists to participate within that supply chain, and increasing its resilience.

This summary presents key findings from a two-year AEP study involving buyers and sellers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art. The study documents:

1. the profiles and purchase preferences of buyers in the lower and middle price tiers (defined by the AEP as products sold for between $500 and $5,000) of the primary market – the market into which an artwork is sold for the first time
2. dominant purchase criteria among those buyers
3. their awareness levels and perceptions of a range of industry issues, particularly those relating to provenance and supply chain transparency.

This summary is intended as a resource for project stakeholders, including artists, agents, government bodies and buyers themselves.

Industry and research context

Primary and secondary sales of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art have contracted over a number of years (Woodhead & Acker 2014)[2] after reaching a peak in 2007 (Commonwealth of Australia 2012). Despite this downturn, production has actually increased across remote Australia. As the *AEP Value Chain Report: Production – Artist and Art Centre* reveals, between 2003 and 2007 nearly 91,000 art products were produced through Art Centres across remote Australia; between 2008 and 2012, this figure increased to over 131,000 (Woodhead & Acker 2014). Further, the mean sale price of art products decreased over the same period[3], meaning that more products are being made, and they are being sold for less. The value and number of stock items

[1] An agent is defined in this summary as any party that sells art to consumers, on behalf of artists. An agent could be a retailer (exhibiting and non-exhibiting galleries or shops, physical or online), a wholesaler (such as independent dealers who on-sell to retailers or consumers; these dealers usually sell the work of individual artists working outside of Art Centres) or an Art Centre. Art Centres are Aboriginal-owned organisations, usually in remote communities, in which art production, marketing and sales take place. Art Centres sell both directly to buyers and sell/consign to retailers.

[2] AEP data show that Art Centre sales, despite a 'market bubble' around the 2007 peak, have seen a long-term decline, which accelerated following the global financial crisis (Woodhead & Acker 2014). Falls in the secondary market have all occurred following the crisis. Both the primary and secondary markets for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art have shown signs of recovery, with stabilising sales and modest growth in some areas.

[3] The mean decreased from $513 (2003–07) to $400 (2008–12) (Woodhead & Acker 2014).

held at Art Centres also increased significantly between 2003 and 2012 (Woodhead & Acker 2014). This has resulted in oversupply, particularly in the lower and middle markets, and attendant quality control issues (Bendor et al. 2013). It is often assumed that this oversupply, combined with the market downturn and persistent 'bad news' stories about the market in the mainstream media[4], has affected consumer confidence (Boland 2011a, 2011b, Liston 2011, Wilson-Anastasios 2009). However, little research exists on buyers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art (Acker et al. 2012).

Existing research on buying Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art focuses on the secondary market, examining price formation in auction contexts (Coate 2009, Lim et al. 2008, Wilson-Anastasios 2009) and art as investment (Taylor & Coleman 2011). The activities of high-end collectors are visible through touring exhibitions and publications of their private collections (Laverty 2008, Raffan 2012), though these buyers make up a small component of the primary market. The *AEP Value Chain Report: Production – Artist and Art Centre* found that between 2003 and 2012, products sold by Art Centres for more than $5,000 represented 1.1% of all products sold (by volume)[5], and that almost 80% of products (by value) and 96% (by volume) were sold for under $5,000 (Woodhead & Acker 2014). These figures demonstrate the vital importance of understanding consumption in the lower and middle price tiers, yet they remain under-researched. Understanding consumers is fundamental to any functioning market (Calder 2001), yet in the price tiers of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art market in which most products are bought, this understanding is ad hoc and anecdotal, with stakeholders operating according to widely held but unproven assumptions.

Provenance is 'the place of origin or earliest known history of something' (Oxford English Dictionary 2013) – in the context of art, it refers to an artwork's source. Provenance is multidimensional and is used in various markets as a selling tool, conferring authenticity, heritage or quality upon products (Smith Maguire 2013). Provenance is valued in all fine art markets (Fritzke 2008) but is particularly important in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art market which, 'like all raw, rough markets … has been plagued by problems, authenticity and provenance to the fore' (Rothwell 2009). In particular, the ethical dimensions of provenance are foregrounded by sellers in this market. Proclamations of ethical dealing and watertight provenance are central to the marketing strategies of many agents, suggesting they assume buyers are concerned with the provenance of artworks they buy. Certainly in the higher price tiers of primary and secondary markets this is true (Gennochio 2008, Taylor & Coleman 2011, Wilson-Anastasios 2009), but prior to this study there was little evidence that lower- and middle-market buyers value provenance.

It is widely accepted that in aesthetic product markets, taste plays a role in judgement and decision-making (Bourdieu 1984, Holbrook 2005, Hoyer & Stokburger-Sauer 2012). Consumers also use quality cues to make purchase decisions (Teas & Agarwal 2000, Verbeke & Ward 2006, Zeithaml 1988), and make 'trade-offs' between desirable product attributes (Johnson 1974). Research on ethical consumption tells us there is often a gap between the attitudes a buyer holds and their purchase behaviour (Ajzen & Fishbein 1977, Auger & Devinney 2007, Sharp 1997). Therefore, buyers may think it important to purchase according to ethical standards but, faced with a range of competing requirements – such as an artwork's visual appeal, size and price – may ultimately choose a piece with dubious or unknown provenance.

[4] For example, see Boland (2010); Boland (2011b); Perkin (2006); Rothwell (2006); Rothwell (2010); Wilson (2010).

[5] By value, these sales made up 21.5% of total sales (Woodhead & Acker 2014).

Research also shows that consumers have a tendency to assume the worst where only imperfect product information is available, making negative inferences in place of missing information (Jacoby et al. 1977, Johnson & Levin 1985, Shapiro 1982). Despite this, consumers generally do not work hard to seek out product information (Sharp & Romaniuk 2004). This means that purchase choices are often based upon superficial judgements, which assuage any concerns arising from missing information and create an overall perception that the product or the person selling it 'will do' (Crozier & McLean 1997). The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art market has long attempted to better inform consumers about their purchase choices. Despite the challenges posed by these patterns of buyer behaviour, which demonstrate that buyers naturally make only minimal attempts to obtain relevant product information, emphasis must remain on empowering buyers to make better choices, through both information provision and targeted consumer education campaigns (Consumer Affairs Victoria 2006).

A further complexity is that the supply chain connecting artists, agents and consumers is increasingly diverse. While commercial agents have traditionally been the mediators between artists, Art Centres and the market – they have the resources and social and geographic proximity to buyers (Wilson-Anastasios 2011) – some Art Centres now occupy this space too, developing direct relationships with collectors and staging their own national and international exhibitions. Further, a variety of private art businesses operate physical and online galleries. The range of purchasing avenues available can be confusing to buyers, particularly inexperienced ones, and especially when product information, such as an artwork's provenance, is missing or unverifiable at the point of purchase. This means that inexperienced buyers are susceptible to making poor purchase choices, which can, in turn, reduce a market's resilience. Where consumers are poorly informed about products, sellers can exploit this lack of knowledge by charging monopoly prices or offering low quality products. Further, normal market forces, whereby inefficient operators are pushed out of the market, do not work effectively because inexperienced consumers have difficulty distinguishing between good and bad sellers (Consumer Affairs Victoria 2006). The Indigenous Art Code ('the Code'), a voluntary code open to all sellers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art, is one means by which the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art market has attempted to empower consumers to make informed purchase choices.

Business and industries develop codes of conduct with the aim of influencing the practices of supply chain actors, providing a baseline of expected standards for buyers and sellers (Mamic 2005). Where codes have the ability to enforce compliance they can be effective in dictating behaviour, though this is often not the case (Awaysheh & Klassen 2010, Emmelhainz & Adams 1999). The Indigenous Art Code was implemented in 2010 in response to the activities of a small number of dealers whose alleged unethical treatment of artists ranged from misleading through to illegal and was blamed for creating consumer mistrust in the market (Commonwealth of Australia 2007, De Marchi & Wilson-Anastasios 2009). The Code was designed, in part, to help consumers make informed purchase choices (Australia Council for the Arts 2009, Raffan 2013), but has limited enforcement ability, a fact that its Chairman, Ron Merkel QC, has described as 'a structural flaw' (Raffan 2013, p. 61). Further, for the Code to be effective consumers need to be aware of it, and use it to guide their purchase choices. Prior to this study little was known of how consumers perceive this regulatory measure, if they do at all; this is vital information given that the Code's efficacy in 'creat[ing] customer demand for high ethical standards' (Haider, in Raffan 2013 p. 60) is under scrutiny by the industry.

In light of the above, this research focused on gaining some broad understanding of buyer behaviour in the lower and middle price tiers of the primary market. Specifically, it documented and analysed the profiles and purchase preferences of buyers in these price tiers, the dominant purchase criteria among those buyers and their awareness levels and perceptions of a range of industry issues relating to provenance and supply chain transparency.

Research design

A two-tiered mixed methods study was designed and carried out by the author: 874 consumer surveys were conducted at three annual art-buying events in 2012: Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair (DAAF), Cairns Indigenous Art Fair (CIAF) and Desert Mob. Akin to trade fairs, these events are important sales and market development opportunities for remote area artists, and offer a range of products in the lower and middle price tiers. DAAF and Desert Mob are Art Centre-only events, whereas CIAF is also open to some commercial galleries. Surveys were used to map basic demographic and purchase preference data among visitors to these three events. To complement the surveys, in 2013, 20 in-depth interviews were conducted with primary market buyers and sellers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art. These interviews further explored consumer profiles, purchase preferences and perceptions of industry issues, based on attitudinal and behavioural measures.

Geographic scope

This study is concerned only with visual art produced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists in remote Australia, in keeping with the CRC-REP's focus on improved livelihoods for people living in remote areas of Australia (Ninti One Limited 2013). Further, the distance (both geographical and cultural) between producer and consumer is greatest between remote area artists and largely metropolitan consumers. Therefore, this is the part of the market where the supply chain linking producers and consumers is most complex and where there is the most risk of fragility, confusion and mistrust (De Marchi & Wilson-Anastasios 2009).

Price tiers and market segment

This study focused on art products sold for more than $500 but less than $5,000, broadly termed the lower and middle price tiers. These tiers were selected because, as previously noted, they are where the majority of transactions occur yet are poorly understood. This study was also limited to the primary market, because in this market artists directly benefit from sales of their work, whereas in the secondary market products are sold between third parties.

Key findings

Consumer profiles and purchase characteristics

Survey data found that while buyers do not conform to any particular demographic profile, there are some commonalities. Further, some dominant purchase behaviours were revealed. In summary:

- 75% of all respondents were female. The gender distributions across the three fairs were closely aligned, revealing strong female representation at each
- The highest percentage of respondents was aged 51–65 (38%), followed by those aged 36–50 (30%)

- 93% of respondents lived in Australia and there was a strong local contingent at each fair; approximately one-third were from the city in which each fair was held
- Around 80% of all respondents had purchased Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander art before, and the vast majority had made their last purchase between 2010 and 2012
- 70% had spent $500 or less on that purchase; only 8% had spent more than $2,000
- The majority had purchased from Art Centres, commercial galleries or art fairs, and were polygamous (Sharp 2010), buying from a range of different agent types
- Acrylic paintings on canvas or linen were by far the most common medium purchased[6]
- Less than 5% of respondents had purchased Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander art online, indicating that the global trend towards online consumption has not infiltrated this market.

A continuum of knowledge exists among buyers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art. Results from the interview phase established two broad consumer profiles: 'decorators' and 'collectors', with the former having little knowledge of, or involvement with, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander art and purchasing art predominantly as home decoration, and the latter having specific tastes guided by higher involvement and knowledge levels and an ability to perceive product quality arising from their level of experience (Zeithaml 1988).

These results contribute important baseline data for the sector, especially for participants, organisers and funders of art fairs, but also for producers and sellers more broadly. They will enable art fair participants to refine their approach to future fairs. For example, mediums and price points of works exhibited could be tailored to reflect dominant purchase preferences. The spending behaviours documented confirmed that the overwhelming majority of buyers had purchased most recently in the lower price tiers and that most purchase infrequently at best. It is reasonable to assume these results are indicative of wider purchasing habits, with implications for economic returns to artists and their agents.

Aesthetics guide purchase choices

Aesthetic appeal was central to the purchase choices of most buyers. This held across price tiers, mediums and demographic groups. It is not a surprising finding, as art has always been appreciated for aesthetic reasons (Hirschman 1983, Hoyer & Stokburger-Sauer 2012, Lagier & Godey 2007). Nevertheless, different buyers understand aesthetic appeal differently. For some, it combines an appreciation of the formal qualities of an artwork with a somewhat intangible emotional response. For others, an artwork's decorative qualities are foremost, and must align with their home's interior decoration. Some agents lament this focus on the decorative; one respondent said: 'The market is geared towards people who want something that looks good over their sofa and under their air conditioner'.

A range of secondary criteria also influence purchase choices. Across the three art fairs 'craftsmanship', 'price' and 'Indigenous issues' were the most important secondary purchase criteria, though none were considered as important as aesthetics. During interviews, where respondents could articulate purchase criteria in their own words, aesthetics was again dominant. The idea of supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through the purchase of art was also prominent, as was the emotional connection felt by those who had purchased directly

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[6] This result is similar to that reported by the *AEP Value Chain Trading Practices Report: Public and Private Art Businesses* (Woodhead & Acker 2013), in which agents reported that acrylic paintings made up 75% of total art sales in 2011–12, and the *AEP Value Chain Report: Production – Artist and Art Centre*, in which paintings made up 64% of all products created between 2003 and 2012, 88% of all products sold (2003-07) and 91% of all sold between 2008-12 (Woodhead & Acker 2014).

from an artist or community. This suggests an altruistic element to purchase choices, though may reflect the influence of social desirability bias, wherein people respond in way they know will be perceived as ‘good’ or ‘worthy’ (Bruner & King 2000, Ewert & Galloway 2009). Altruism should not be overemphasised as a determinant of purchase choice: aesthetic appeal drives buyers.

These findings have important implications for artists, who likely value their artwork according to different criteria from those buying it. Artists, therefore, require a good understanding of the purchase preferences and motivations of buyers in order to navigate the cross-cultural market in which they participate. These results provide Art Centres and agents with an opportunity to communicate this to artists they work with. Similarly, educating buyers about the motivations of artists in creating their art will increase the capacity of buyers to appreciate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art from multiple perspectives.

Provenance, consumer agency and seller reputation

When asked if the artwork’s source had been important to their most recent purchase choice, over 70% of survey respondents claimed it was. The reasons for this interest in provenance varied, and a relationship existed between a buyer’s level of experience and their perceptions of provenance. Results suggest inexperienced buyers see provenance as a sign of the sound ethics of an agent, but can be unsure how to ascertain it and often purchase without being satisfied of the veracity of agent claims. These buyers question the worth of certificates of authenticity, given the great variation in documentation provided by different agents and Art Centres, and many expressed generalised suspicion of commercial agents, without really being able to articulate why. This supports the idea that without good information, consumers tend to assume the worst (Johnson & Levin 1985). Experienced buyers also gain pleasure from hearing or telling stories relating to the source of an artwork (such as learning from a gallery owner about the cultural background of the producer, or recounting memories of visiting a remote Art Centre). These provenance ‘stories’ are key to their purchase satisfaction. These buyers also hold more pragmatic views and are less concerned about fair dealing. For them, provenance is assured due to their established repertoire of trusted agents (Ehrenberg et al. 1995, Sharp 2010).

Seller reputation is one key means by which buyers establish a repertoire of trusted agents. This study found that new and inexperienced buyers often make face-value judgements about agents based upon how they present, or on ‘gut feelings’, supporting the findings of Crozier and McLean (1997). These buyers rely on agents to convince them of their reputation and therefore the quality of their products and service (Delmastro & Castriota 2012, Shapiro 1982). Without doing their own research, the buyer is ‘at the whim’ of a good salesperson. Similarly, reputable agents have few additional means of convincing an uninformed buyer of their ethics.

Consumers who ask relevant questions at the point of sale and base their purchase choices upon the sellers’ compliance with a range of principles and standards are a powerful force in any market (Acker 2009). Conversely, the more uncertainties a consumer has about a product, the less certainty they will have about choosing it (Sharp & Romaniuk 2004). Somewhat perversely, however, people often do not try hard to access all available information about a product they seek to purchase, as previously mentioned. Some agents interviewed for this study claimed that buyers were minimally interested in provenance – they just want the best deal. Others felt buyers are happy with a certificate; one agent interviewed said ‘any certificate would do’; by requesting one, buyers feel they are performing due diligence.

These findings demonstrate that, for a range of reasons, the majority of buyers claim to be interested in provenance. Further, where provenance or other product information is missing, negative product attributes are inferred. Despite this, the extent to which buyers seek out information that would increase their knowledge and buying confidence varies considerably. These findings also suggest that many buyers do not know how to ascertain good provenance and that simply providing them with information – though vital – is not on its own effective in supporting informed purchase choices. Both Art Centres and commercial agents are well placed to educate buyers about the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art market, and to establish trust in reputable purchase avenues. By discussing with buyers the principles and indicators of provenance, it is possible that levels of buyer agency will increase and poor purchase choices will be made less frequently.

The importance of consistent provenance information

Interviews established that broadly, buyer interest in provenance depends on an artwork's cost: the lower the cost, the lower the interest. When making more significant purchases (over $1,000) buyers do value provenance, as discussed in the previous section. The *AEP Value Chain Report: Production – Artist and Art Centre* shows that between 2003 and 2012 over 40% of products (by value) sold through Art Centres were priced between $1,000 and $4,999 (Woodhead & Acker 2014) – the middle price tiers. Together, these findings demonstrate that in the middle market – the largest price tier, by value – there is strong interest in provenance. However, looking at the volume of products sold over the same period, 87% were $1,000 or under[7], yet 40% of agents reported that they do not 'always' provide provenance documentation for sales under $1,000 (Woodhead 2013). This indicates that in the price tiers with the highest volume of transactions, provenance documentation is inconsistently provided. Although information provision is not all that is required, it is logical that greater consistency of information could strengthen consumer interest in provenance at this lower end of the market. Without it, consumer confidence is likely to be weakened further by inconsistent, even contradictory, provenance messages.

Findings relating to Art Centre versus non-Art Centre provenance further illustrate this point. Nearly 70% of survey respondents felt that having Art Centre provenance would be 'very' or 'quite' important to their purchase choice. This was reiterated during interviews, with buyers emphasising the ethical dimensions of provenance. Many claimed they purchased through Art Centres because of the direct economic return to artists and communities; commercial agents were sometimes described as 'middle men', unnecessary and self-serving. However, one agent relayed the following question, asked of him by a client: 'If a painting is not from an Art Centre, is it a fake painting?' It demonstrates that the supply chain connecting artists to the market can confuse inexperienced buyers and that without consistent provenance and authenticity information, misperceptions can develop.

While a variety of commercial relationships exist between agents and artists working outside of Art Centres, some of which are exploitative (Stefanoff 2012), it is a problematic assumption that artwork sourced from outside the Art Centre system is inauthentic. Art Centres and commercial agents who act with integrity are vitally important actors in the supply chain, with complementary roles. This needs to be recognised and communicated to buyers in order to ensure both sustainable market development and consumer confidence. Provenance information for buyers should be

[7] By value, products in these price tiers made up 37% of total products between 2003 and 2012 (Woodhead & Acker 2014).

accessible and consistent and should avoid contradictory messages that ultimately damage the brand of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art and the livelihoods of artists.

Misalignment between product quality and pricing

Buyers in the lower and middle markets are often inexperienced or purchase rarely, and therefore have limited market knowledge and difficulty assessing quality. Pricing disparities and variations in product quality (Zeithaml 1988) compound this issue. Agents who sell works below (or above) market value undermine an artist's reputation and create mistrust in the minds of these consumers who wonder why they should pay a higher price through one agent, when they see similar products for lower prices elsewhere. This creates low price anchors (Ariely 2008) in the minds of consumers and a perception that Aboriginal art is, and should be, cheap, which leads to further poor purchase choices.

Misalignment between product price and quality is a major barrier to market entry for new buyers, and is a deterrent for buyers overall. In addition, the oversupply described earlier is apparent to buyers; this was raised repeatedly during interviews. As one respondent put it: 'I wonder how much art the market can sustain?'. Some agents concurred that oversupply was affecting consumer interest: 'It just gets to a point where [people] don't want to look at it anymore'. Whether Art Centres and other agents have a greater responsibility to restrict the supply of works entering the market to preserve the rarity value of fine art, or to provide income for artists, often living in poverty, is a complex issue, and one that needs to be addressed by the sector.

Awareness and perceptions of the Indigenous Art Code

The Indigenous Art Code was introduced to regulate the behaviour of agents and to help consumers make informed purchase choices. This research found that most buyers either do not know the Code exists or, if they do, do not use it when making purchase choices. Just over half those surveyed had heard of the Code; less than a quarter had ever enquired about it at a gallery; and only 7% listed the Code as an information source they use. None of the buyers interviewed had ever enquired about the Code when purchasing art.

The Code's efficacy is under scrutiny from the sector (Raffan 2013), particularly regarding a proposed move to mandatory compliance.[8] Given these findings, this study suggests the Code has so far been ineffective in assisting consumers to make informed purchase choices. Regardless of whether the Code becomes mandatory, it has the potential to effectively promote consistent provenance messaging. This would require increased marketing and promotion, given the Code's apparent obscurity in the minds of consumers. Further, the Code's current focus on compliance continues to divide industry stakeholders, making any united action unlikely. However, if sellers did invest in promoting the Code, and used it as an educative tool in their discussions with buyers, increased awareness of its principles may well contribute to improved consumer confidence.

Conclusion

By identifying the profiles and purchase characteristics of, and criteria used by, consumers in the lower and middle price tiers of the primary market, this study contributes unique baseline data that allow artists, Art Centres and agents to better understand their target audience in a competitive and changing marketplace. This summary has highlighted the importance for both artists and buyers of

[8] At the time of writing, the most effective role to be played by the Code was under discussion among industry stakeholders, after the Australian Government rejected a proposal by the Indigenous Art Code's Chair, Ron Merkel QC, that the Code become mandatory for all sellers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art.

understanding the cross-cultural marketplace in which remote area art is made and sold. In addition, the new knowledge regarding consumer awareness and perceptions of a range of industry issues will help decision-makers understand how existing policies and industry norms are understood and utilised in the marketplace.

This research demonstrates that while some buyers are interested in the ethical dimensions of provenance, other criteria – such as aesthetic appeal or price – often win out at the point of purchase. Despite the efforts of industry, improved and consistent messaging regarding provenance and ethical dealing is required. Because consumers generally do not seek out extensive information about potential purchases, ongoing education – as well as information provision – is necessary, especially in the lower price tiers. Buyers are aware of oversupply in the primary market, and in some cases this has affected consumer confidence. Misalignment between price and quality compounds this issue.

Buyers are minimally aware of the Indigenous Art Code, and do not utilise it when making purchase choices. This finding has implications for ongoing discussions regarding mandatory compliance and the most effective role to be played by such an organisation.

This summary has presented a range of potential opportunities for industry stakeholders, intended as catalysts for further discussion among the sector about the complex task of understanding and educating buyers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art, who are integral to the continuing sustainability of the commercial market.

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