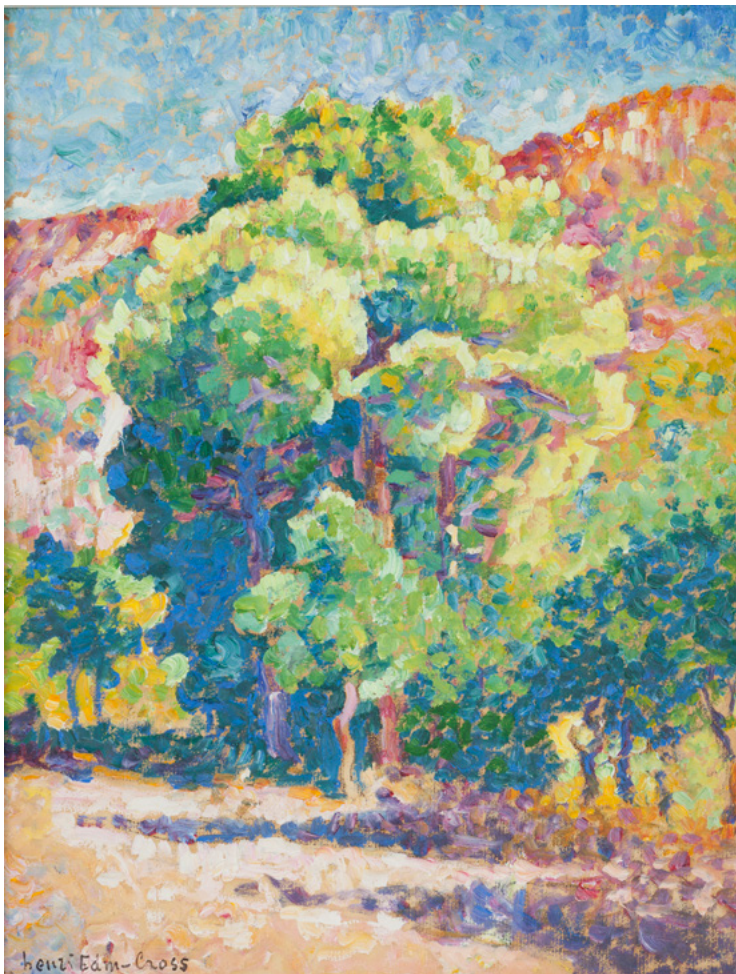


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## Lighting up Colour

Gill Crabbe, *FNG Research*

For the exhibition 'Colour & Light – The Legacy of Impressionism', now showing at the Ateneum Art Museum, the curators invited renowned authority on Impressionism Professor Anthea Callen to be senior advisor on the project. Gill Crabbe asks her about what she brought to the role

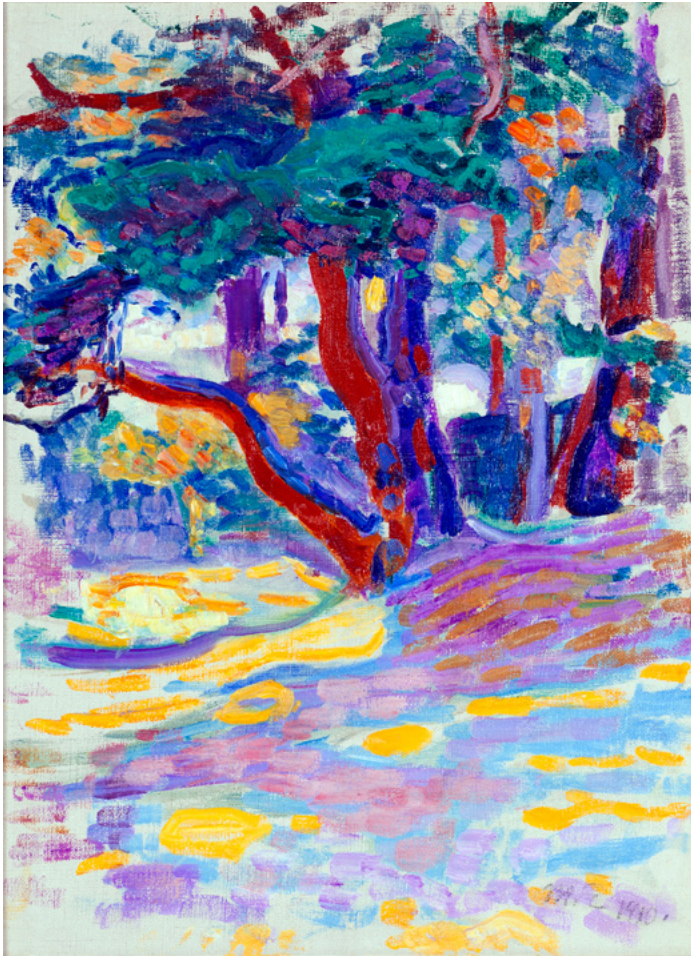


Henri-Edmond Cross, *Pine*, 1907, oil on paper, 35cm x 27cm  
Sigurd Frosterus Collection, Amos Rex, Helsinki  
Photo: Stella Ojala, Amos Rex

It is a bold museum that chooses to stage an exhibition that places celebrated works from history's most popular art movement alongside those by artists who, albeit stars in their home country, might be considered obscure or even unknown internationally. But in mounting the exhibition 'Colour & Light – The Legacy of Impressionism' the Finnish National Gallery's Ateneum Art Museum has created an opportunity for an important conversation between the Western European proponents of Impressionism and Neoimpressionism and the Finnish artists of the early 20th century. Significantly, it is a conversation that revolves around the effects of transnationalism, as well as the hybrid fusions of style and technique that can result from international influences.

Indeed 'Colour & Light' mixes a dazzling palette of artworks across every room in its show. Replacing a tired chronological approach with rooms themed according to subject matter – the garden, wintertime, rural life, the sea, the nude, urban life – one is exposed more directly to the impact of new techniques and shifts in material culture across time and space. Thus one finds Monet's wintery scene *Floating Ice on the Seine* (1880) alongside Finnish painter Pekka Halonen's brilliant sunlit snowscapes (*Rock Covered in Ice and Snow*, 1911); the *plein-air* rural scenes of Henri-Edmond Cross's *Pine* (1907), effulgent in high summer, together with Magnus Enckell's pine trees painted on his summer sojourn on an island in the Gulf of Finland in *From Suursaari* (1910) and Ellen Thesleff's *Landscape from Tuscany* (1908), palette-knifed in rich hues of violet and viridian green. And further on, we see Paul Signac's eye-popping Neoimpressionist coastal idyll *Antibes* (undated),





**Magnus Enkell, *From Suursaari*, sketch, 1910, oil, 45cm x 32.5cm**

**Sigurd Frosterus Collection, Amos Rex, Helsinki**

Photo: Stella Ojala, Amos Rex

alongside Verner Thomé's blinding *contrejour* painting *Bathing Boys* (1910).

The exhibition and accompanying scholarly publication are the result of an ambitious research project initiated by the Ateneum and aided by Professor Emeritus Anthea Callen, a world expert on Impressionism and the material culture of the period, who was invited to join the project as senior advisor. Prof Callen had been approached by Ateneum Chief Curator Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff through their mutual connection to the Association for Art History, where her presentations on vitalism and *plein-air* painting had attracted the Finnish curator's attention. Callen is author of nine books, several of which reflect her expertise in Impressionism and also in material culture – she has a PhD in 19th-century artists' materials and techniques in 19th-century France, from London's Courtauld Institute. This, in turn has afforded her a key role in several episodes of the popular British TV series *Fake or Fortune*. Significantly, she is also a trained artist, which brings additional interdisciplinary knowledge and understanding. 'Training as an artist does bring a different vision,' she says. 'You're trying to tune into the mind of the artist. As a practitioner you recognise the ideas and how they are executed are inseparable.'

The 'Colour & Light' exhibition pivots on how and to what extent Impressionist and Neoimpressionist artists influenced Finnish artists to incorporate into their practice the new methods, equipment and materials employed by these Western European artists from the 1870s on. Does this interest in material culture reflect a current trend in exhibition projects generally? 'I think the rise of critical theory in particular from the 1980s and '90s onwards was an unconscious compensation for the fact that scholars didn't understand or value material culture,' says Callen. 'My life's work is to demonstrate that the physical *matter* of art itself carries meanings both historical and socio-cultural. Material objects have intrinsic and historically specific meanings, whereas in "pure" art theory, which has now faded somewhat, the only thing that mattered was the idea, the concept; the art object itself was virtually ignored. So I think with technical art history (as it's now often called) there has been a turn.'

One of the key changes in the past 20–30 years is that art historians now take conservation science much more seriously, Callen points out. 'To some extent this material shift is also market driven, by the demand for



**Ellen Thesleff, *Landscape from Tuscany*, 1908, oil on canvas, 40.5cm x 40.5cm**

**Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum**

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Pakarinen

authentication in the global art market. Before the 1990s there wasn't the present extensive range of scientific technologies and equipment available to aid conservators' knowledge of an artefact before they began conserving it. Notably since c. 2000 masters programmes and PhDs in technical art history have flourished. It is a major shift and some outstanding work has come out of it, bringing new insights into the physical nature of objects.'

Callen's interest in this area is aptly demonstrated in her essay in the *Colour & Light* catalogue, in which she sets the scene for the exhibition by outlining the conditions that led to the flowering of Impressionism and Neoimpressionism among Western European artists. This introduction leaves space for Finnish art historians to focus on the impact this had on the Finnish artists. Thus Callen highlights in particular the French, Belgian and British artists' development of *plein-air* painting, 'working "on the motif" to record their visual sensations of ephemeral light effects (*effet*) in nature using a limited palette of bright colours and close tonal values, bold broken brushwork and a direct immediacy of paint handling'. Her essay includes details of the development of individual brushstrokes of colour (*taches*) that treat the landscape and its light effects as a coloristic whole; the evolution of pointillist techniques and the shift from tonal colour to prismatic; the use of square-format canvases and the selection of radical new viewpoints that flattened perspectival recession in order to emphasise the picture plane and surface paint handling.

How did Professor Callen's contribution as senior advisor unfold in the development of the exhibition project? 'My main creative role was in providing a backdrop to the concept of *plein-air* painting and how *plein air* as a practice took off in the Nordic countries, becoming throughout Europe part of a broader cultural phenomenon alongside vitalism and new modernist trends like Fauvism after 1900,' says Callen. 'The rise of Nordic "colour and light" painting coincided with the rise of vitalism in Finland, whereas in Western Europe – Belgium and France particularly – the spread of *plein-air* landscape painting and the idea of celebrating the outdoors had begun at least 30 years earlier. So it's interesting to consider why colour and light painting came so much later to the Nordic countries.'

The project was not without its challenges and blind alleys, however, especially during the initial research phase. There were practical limitations, not least those imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. 'Many of the key Impressionist works are now in the US and there were considerable logistical and financial constraints in what we could borrow, as well as the potential problem of Covid for transportation,' Callen explains. Then came the outbreak of the Ukraine war. 'Sadly, all the Russian works that had been earmarked for the show had to be foregone and I had to look for alternatives.' But the team were able skilfully to navigate these various obstacles through creative and strategic thinking; the resulting show includes important loans from the Clark Institute, Williamstown, the Musée d'Orsay in Paris and the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm. Callen had been contracted to write the letters to non-Finnish museums and galleries, setting out the importance of their loans to the exhibition: 'I used my networks and professional standing where appropriate,' she adds.

Prof Callen had monthly discussions via Zoom with the 'Colour & Light' curators, von Bonsdorff and Ateneum Museum Director Marja Sakari, and together over a period of four years they shared image spreadsheets on the content, balance and themes of the exhibition. Early brainstorming sessions centred around the key exhibition of French and Belgian art held in 1904 at the Ateneum. It showcased Impressionist artists who were connected to the Parisian dealer and collector Paul Durand-Ruel. He had taken on artists including Monet, Pissarro and Renoir in their early days, thus playing a pivotal role in the emergence of the Impressionist movement. 'I spent a lot of my early time researching what had been shown in Helsinki in 1904 to get a real idea of what the artists and the audiences in Finland had been exposed to,' she explains. 'I had become very familiar with the Durand-Ruel Archive when I was researching my masters. Its records date to before 1870, when the company stopped trading in artists' materials and began specialising exclusively in picture dealing. In the 19th century it was common for colour merchants to take paintings from struggling artists in exchange for art materials, which often created a longstanding intimacy between them.'

The team decided to focus on those Impressionists and Neoimpressionists who were included in the 1904 exhibition. 'There were many we excluded because they didn't appear in

the 1904 show, even though they were key players in France and Belgium,' says Callen, 'which meant for example no Cézanne, no Berthe Morisot, no Mary Cassatt.'

This concept provided a template for structuring an exhibition that would look back and then forward from 1904, and in the process explore the networks that developed into a specific art market. 'It became our focal point, from which to look out to the impact of that show,' Callen explains. 'The 1904 show was a wonderful example of how artworks circulated and how a national movement became an international phenomenon; Durand-Ruel had already begun showing his artists' work in affluent New York in 1886, almost 20 years before the Impressionists made a big impact in Finland. This approach helps you reconstruct how the market worked and how ideas and styles spread.'

Thanks to the detailed stock records in the Durand-Ruel Archive, Prof Callen was able to trace the paintings shipped from his Paris gallery via his outpost in Berlin, through to Helsinki for the 1904 exhibition. 'We were able to identify about 12 of the Impressionist works. Along with the extant 1904 exhibition catalogue held at the FNG Library and contemporary reviews of the exhibition unearthed by Marja Sakari, this information was hugely important in reconstructing how that exhibition might have looked,' she explains. The logical next step of course was to locate some of these works and if possible secure loans. However, this proved difficult because 'after the Durand-Ruel loans left Helsinki in 1904, they were toured to exhibitions in other European cities, and were never returned to Durand-Ruel in Paris,' Callen says. 'During the First World War many of these paintings were looted, disappearing into the murky wartime underworld and thence into obscure private collections.'

Callen knew that, from c. 1890 on, all works passing through Durand-Ruel's hands were documented photographically. 'Durand-Ruel made glass-plate photographs of all his paintings, many of which now appear in the modern *catalogue raisonnés* of the artists involved, but either their whereabouts are unknown, or their locations are outdated,' says Callen. Instead, the photographic plates enabled the team to identify comparable works that could be sought. For example, the large Monet in the Winter-themed room in 'Colour & Light', *Floating Ice on the Seine* (1880), is from the same series as the one that was shown in 1904. Such works then set the scene for researching their influence on Finnish artists.

While Prof Callen was not involved in the detailed curation of the Finnish art works in the show, regular discussions were held with the Finnish team to select which works would be shown. In the spring of 2022 she made a five-day trip to Finland to see the key public collections of Finnish modernist art. 'We viewed and chose Finnish paintings (and others held in Finnish collections) in Helsinki and Turku to be included (or excluded); I toured the empty Ateneum galleries with the Finnish curatorial team to discuss how we would organise the hang and best use the various spaces, including the timeline in the first room; I also suggested an introductory video.' On her visit Callen also met museum conservators to discuss the treatment of Finnish modernist paintings, among others, and gave a lecture on French Impressionist *plein-air* methods and materials to Ateneum staff.

The resulting 'Colour & Light' exhibition juxtaposes paintings by artists shown in the 1904 exhibition with works by Finnish modernists that reveal the rich legacy of the Impressionists and Neoimpressionists, not only in terms of artistic influence but also in stimulating new directions for Finnish artists. Thus in the Winter room, in addition to *Floating Ice on the Seine*, we find Monet's *plein-air* Norwegian *Winter Landscape, Sandvika* (1895), now at the Latvian National Museum of Art, and Sisley's stunning *Snow at Louveciennes* (1878) 'in conversation' with Pekka Halonen's iconic Finnish snowscapes.

'I think the Monet from Riga is a key painting in this room, even though it's perhaps the least obvious,' says Callen. 'It shows Monet so curious to experience Nordic snow that he travelled to Norway in March 1895 to paint it; yet compared to *Floating Ice on the Seine* or Halonen's large canvases, it's such a small, unassuming work – perhaps because *plein-air* painted in harsh Nordic conditions. Indeed the smaller scale of the French works allows Halonen's massive snow paintings ample space to breathe. Monet painted *Floating Ice* in January 1880 when he, like many of his *plein-airist* colleagues, was at a turning point. Expanding his ambitions, he withdrew that year from exhibiting with the Impressionists and attempted instead to show at the Paris Salon, the first time in 10 years. In fact *Floating Ice* served as a study for Monet's larger canvas *The Ice Floes* (March 1880, now in Shelburne





**Claude Monet: *Winter Landscape (Sandvika)*, 1895, oil on cardboard, 37cm x 52.5cm**  
Latvian National Museum of Art, Riga

Photo: Latvian National Museum of Art, Riga



**Pekka Halonen, *Rock Covered in Ice and Snow*, 1911, oil on canvas, 96.5cm x 155.5cm**  
Antell Collections, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Aleks Talve







**Alfred William Finch, *The Cliffs of Dover*, 1892, oil on canvas, 66.5cm x 80.5cm**  
**Ahlström Collection, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum**

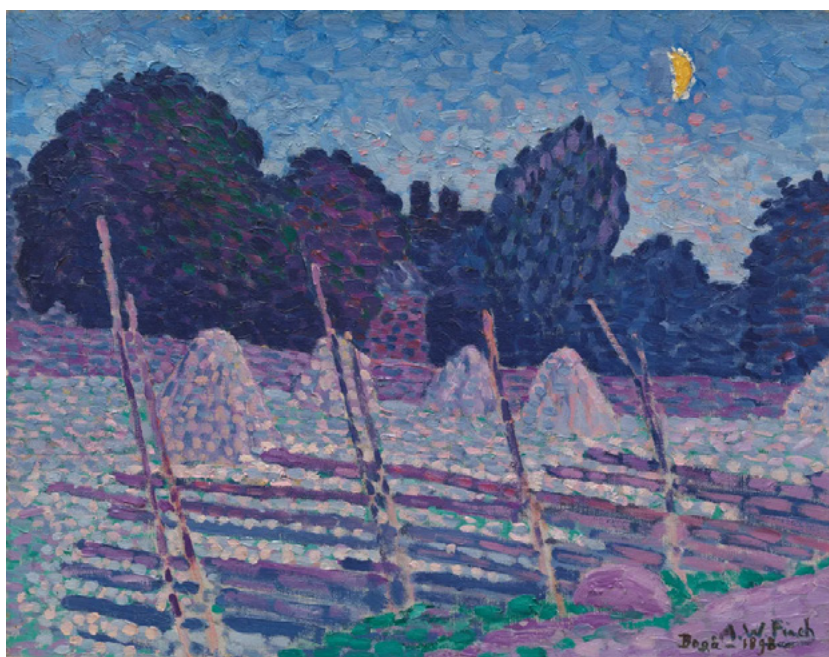
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Aleks Talve



Museum, Vermont), painted in his studio and submitted to the Salon Jury. It marks a major shift in method and scale – and him thinking in series – giving you a sense of what is to come with his water lilies.’

Alongside the Monets, Pekka Halonen’s masterful snow scenes reveal the intensity of the Nordic light flooding his canvases. ‘You can see that he is painting “*en plein air*” in the single-canvas works and then moving on to this extraordinary diptych, *Rock Covered in Ice and Snow* (1911), which is almost Symbolist in feel – an animistic landscape with icicles like gaping shark jaws – giving a sense of the spirits of the North.’

‘Also what Halonen does which Monet does not, here at least in this Winter room, is to exclude the sky; in pushing the sky beyond the top of the painting he pushes his composition closer towards abstraction.’ In contrast, Monet’s *Floating Ice* is divided almost equally in two, with the horizon acting as a hinge: the lower half echoes the upper half as if mirroring it. Whether using a central horizon or a view that eliminates the sky, the resulting flatness emphasises the physical two-dimensionality of the painted surface.



**Alfred William Finch, *An August Night*, 1898, oil on canvas, 35cm x 45.5cm**  
**Gift from Arvid Sourander, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum**

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Aaltonen



As the exhibition progresses, further juxtapositions reveal the impact of Neoimpressionism on Finnish artists. ‘The most powerful influence was Alfred William Finch, not just technically but in terms of providing an umbilical cord to other European tendencies,’ says Callen. Finch had moved to Finland in 1897 to take up a position at the Iris ceramic factory in Porvoo, bringing with him his painting practice as a pointillist (*An August Night*, 1898). In the room dedicated to seaside paintings, an exquisite line-up along one wall shows Théo van Rysselberghe’s *Dunes at Cadzand (View of the Scheldt)*, from 1893, Paul Signac’s *Cassis, Cap Lombard, Opus 196* (1889), and Finch’s *The Cliffs of Dover* (1892), while on the wall opposite is a conversation between Magnus Enckell’s *Boys on the Shore*, Signac’s *Antibes* and Verner Thomé’s *Bathing Boys*. ‘Finch’s work, not only through his contacts with French, British and Belgian artists, was important in increasing a sense of belonging to a wider European tradition but also in offering the Finnish artists a whole range of possibilities for where they might take their own work,’ Callen points out.





Verner Thomé, *Bathing Boys*, 1910, oil on canvas, 108.5cm x 130cm  
 Hoving Collection,  
 Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum  
 Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Aleks Talve



Yrjö Ollila, *Pines on the Shore*, 1912, oil on canvas, 94cm x 76.5cm  
 Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum  
 Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Kirsi Halkola



Indeed, in her essay for the catalogue Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff writes that ‘the Finnish artists were not faithful to theories, instead they were modifying their paintings using a variety of techniques, the unifying factors being bright colours and the depiction of light rather than a programmatic Neoimpressionism.’ Prof Callen agrees. ‘Some of these artists, such as Verner Thomé, in work like *Bathing Boys*, follow Finch in terms of Neoimpressionist paint application, but Thomé takes it in his own direction, both in terms of subject matter and also in the way he is using light,’ Callen points out. ‘Very few paintings deploy *contrejour* with the full sun behind the figures because it’s blinding, making it almost impossible to paint “*en plein air*”. I’m sure *Bathing Boys* would have been painted in the studio as it is such a large work; the figures were probably based on sketches or life studies. You can imagine the difficulties in persuading a group of boys to pose! It would be fascinating to examine further the relationship between “preparatory” drawings and “spontaneous” *plein-air* paintings among the colourists in Finland.’ Here and in the following rooms, with the vitalist themes that were the subjects of the Nordic exploration of nature, nakedness, and the sun as life-force, it is the Finnish artists who predominate, heading off in their own direction in explosions of vibrant, almost Fauve colour (Yrjö Ollila, *Pines on the Shore*, 1912) and intense Nordic summer light (Santeri Salokivi, *Girls on the Shore*, 1916).

‘Colour & Light’ offers a rare chance to trace the international connections and influences of Impressionism and Neoimpressionism in Finnish art in thought-provoking and innovative ways. Where might it sit in the pantheon of worldwide exhibitions on these groundbreaking movements? ‘I think this exhibition’s originality lies in its contextualisation of Western European modernist developments in *plein-air* painting within Finnish colouristic





Santeri Salokivi, *Girls on the Shore*, 1916, oil, 93cm x 149cm  
 Nordea Art Foundation Finland

Photo: Museokuva: Matti Huuhka & Co

modernism around 1900–20,' says Callen. 'Asking, for example, why these developments arrived so much later in Finland than in France and Belgium, the exhibition traces the networks of artistic influence, exhibition and dealing that resulted in this Finnish modernist flowering. Most revealing for me in the exhibition is just how easily the work of Finnish colourists sits alongside their French and Belgian modernist counterparts.' For Callen herself, it has been a big learning curve, as she had not previously encountered many of the Finnish artists. 'It has been such a great pleasure working on this show,' she says, 'and the museum staff have been fabulous.'

Clearly, this exhibition demonstrates that bold ambition and curatorial vision have been repaid in manifold ways, not only showing how the Finnish artists of the early 20th century were open to the influence of the Western European avant-garde, but also how they could apply its principles to the cultural specifics of Nordic conditions, its nature, its light, and through their independent spirit, develop new ways of expressing the Finnish sensibility.

**'Colour & Light – The Legacy of Impressionism', until 25 February 2024, Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki**

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