"The Enchantment of Being What We Are" Diversity and Change in Aboriginal Art

by Margo W. Smith

The winners of the 2005 Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards (NATSIAA)[1] in each category, including bark painting, general painting, work on paper, and three-dimensional art, were all women. This marked the first time in the twenty-two-year history of the awards that the entire field of winners comprised one gender. Similarly unprecedented was the award of the top prize to a group of Ngannyatjarra women from the Papulankutja (Blackstone) community in Western Australia for their life-size spinifex sculpture of a Toyota, complete with steel tire rims and a woman behind the steering wheel (fig. 1). The creation of sculptural works from grass is a recent development in Aboriginal art. It represents both the innovative spirit that women have brought to their work and the community-based movement intended to generate independent revenue for women. Over the past two decades, women have taken a steadily increasing role in art production, often supporting their families and communities through art sales, and they have become major figures in Australia's contemporary art scene.

In 1991, when the Art Gallery of New South Wales presented the *Aboriginal Women's Exhibition*, curated by Hetti Perkins, women artists were still struggling for recognition in a field dominated by men. As Perkins noted in her introductory essay in the exhibition catalogue, the long-held identification of women's art as "craft" had diminished its value.[2] The *Aboriginal Women's Exhibition* presented paintings alongside sculpture, woven works of art, batik, photography, and fine-art prints. At that time, women comprised fifty-four percent of artists represented by community art centers, yet few of the women had exhibited their works prior to 1986. Since then, a noticeable shift has taken place within the Aboriginal art world. Individual artists, such as Emily Kame Kngwarreye, have achieved record sales and international recognition outside the commercial arena for their work. New art movements driven by women, such as the one that began in Kintore/Haasts Bluff in 1993, were welcomed for their fresh and innovative styles. Women artists began appearing more regularly in exhibitions, gallery collections, and publications. The raised status of Aboriginal women artists reflects both the social and cultural changes that have taken place within Aboriginal society, and the growing significance of Indigenous art within Australia and globally.

Fig. 1 *Tjanpi Toyota*, 2004. Desert grass, aviary wire, steel, jute twine, recycled floorboards, steering wheel, and hubcaps; life-size. This remarkable sculpture was a collaborative project made by twenty women weavers from the remote desert community of Papulankutja in Western Australia. The project was facilitated by Tjanpi Aboriginal Baskets, a social enterprise organization within the NPY Women's Council, Alice Springs.

Exhibitions of Aboriginal women's art have typically been very broad, demonstrating the impressive range of art forms produced by women. In this exhibition, the National Museum of Women in the Arts focuses on paintings by Australian Aboriginal women to reveal the variety that exists within one genre and to highlight the individual styles of major artists. The diversity found within Aboriginal women's paintings is a product of tightly interwoven cultural, historical, and personal factors. It is difficult to make generalizations about the work because different circumstances have contributed to each woman's development as an artist. Geography does not necessarily determine an artist's style, yet it is possible to see continuities in the art from each region. The artists of Arnhem Land paint with natural pigment on bark and are thus distinguished from the artists of central Australia, who work in acrylic paint on canvas. Thematically, however, they have more in common with one another than they do with artists from Queensland or the west coast of Australia.

Distinctions such as "traditional" or "urban" do not reflect the way Aboriginal artists typically conceive their work. Each artist reflects her experience as an Aboriginal woman. Some of the art in this exhibition has been inspired by gendered cultural practices regarded as "women's business." Other paintings reflect the artist's personal history or response to social and political challenges faced by Aboriginal people today. Although Aboriginality means different things to different people, it is the thread that ties these diverse artists together. Carol Dowling, the twin sister of artist Julie Dowling, remarked, "When Indigenous people are asked the meaning of being human, there are ten thousand different responses. It is in this diversity of knowledge and practice, of intuition and interpretation, of promise and hope, that we will all rediscover the enchantment of being what we are."[3]

Traditional Aboriginal cultural practices, such as ceremonial body painting and sand drawing, have inspired a variety of art forms in different locations, including contemporary bark painting from Arnhem Land and central Australian paintings in acrylic on canvas. In the Kimberley region of western Australia, Lily Karedada's paintings of spirit ancestors known as

Wandjina bear a striking resemblance to ancient rock art (fig. 2). While the influences of body paint, rock art, and sand drawing tie Aboriginal art to traditional and perhaps ancient practices, its production for a global fine-art market has profoundly influenced painting styles. The size of paintings, the materials used, the styles associated with one locality or an individual artist, and the demand for work in a specific style reflect the art market's considerable power. That is not to say that Aboriginal art has lost its authenticity; rather, complex social and cultural changes have influenced Aboriginal artists. For this reason, Aboriginal art is considered contemporary art.

Fig. 2 Image of Wandjina Wojin, Wanalirri, Gibb River, northwestern Australia.

Nevertheless, a large proportion of Aboriginal art relates to traditional beliefs about the Dreaming. These stories constitute an oral history, recounting the creation of all that is and the transmission of human culture. In the Dreaming, ancestors traveled the Australian countryside, engaging in activities that formed the natural features of the land, gave birth to humans, and established the code of moral behavior known to Aboriginal people as the Law. Dreaming ancestors are often associated with a species of animal. Yet they have many human qualities, like emotions, as well as superhuman capabilities, such as the power to travel underground or transform themselves into different beings. Dreaming stories provide moral and social lessons. Ancestors who broke the Law were severely punished, and today they serve as a cautionary example for modern Aboriginal people. The stories also encode information about the landscape, such as where to find food and water. They serve as mental maps, providing hunting-and-gathering people with information on the resources available in a specific location. Tales of the Dreaming are multireferential—body paint, dance, painting, rock art, sand sculpture, and song are all used to convey the stories. Together they form some of the most fundamental and enduring expressions of Aboriginal culture.

The bark paintings made by Yolngu people from central and northeast Arnhem Land depict the ancestral stories that are owned by individual clans. Pictorial elements and design features are highly conventionalized and relate to closely held knowledge of ancestral activities that have been passed down through generations. Seventy years ago, such paintings were produced solely by initiated men in ceremonial contexts.[4]

Fig. 3 Wolpa Wanambi with Gambali Ngurruwuthun and Dundiwuy Wanambi at Yirrkala, 1996.

For the most part, these paintings were made on the bodies of initiates or on sacred objects, including barks, used in ceremonies. Women and uninitiated men were not allowed to view the paintings until they were revealed in public portions of a ceremony. During the period of increasing contact with European Australians in the early twentieth century, Yolngu artists began producing bark paintings, initially for explorers and anthropologists, and later for an outside market. From the 1930s onward, missionaries encouraged art production both to draw Aboriginal people into their settlements and to promote a work ethic among them. Bark paintings and crafts were traded for rations at the mission and later sold at church-run shops in urban centers where they raised money and support for remote missions. For the most part, paintings produced at missions had no ceremonial significance. However, on some occasions sacred works were publicly painted and displayed. For example, in 1962 a pair of large bark paintings depicting the major Yolngu clan stories of each moiety—Dhuwa and Yirritja—was commissioned by Reverand Edgar Wells for the church in Yirrkala.

Paintings of more substantive themes were created for the art market as Yolngu began to "open up" styles that were previously restricted to ceremonial contexts. At first, these paintings were produced in seclusion from women and were covered before they were taken to the mission for sale.[5] Women became involved in the process by the early 1960s, initially as apprentices to their fathers and later producing their own work. In Milingimbi, Dorothy Djukulul was taught the Ganalbingu designs related to the Flying Fox and Magpie Goose Dreamings by her father, Nhulmarmar. Daisy Manybunharrawuy learned the Wagilag Sisters creation story from her father, Dawidi, and she inherited full rights to reproduce this painting after his death.[6] Women from Yirrkala also began painting in the 1960s, most notably Banygul, Dhuwarrwarr, and Banduk Marika, who learned from their legendary father, Mawalan. Also from Yirrkala, Galuma Maymuru and Wolpa Wanambi began painting with their fathers, Narritjin and Dundiwuy, and they now produce their own works (fig. 3). According to anthropologist Howard Morphy, "the increased participation of women was viewed by Yolngu as an enrichment of community life and a recognition of the important role played by women in holding the

community together in times of social stress."[7] As Yolngu artists adjusted to the social and cultural disruptions that accompanied increased contact with Europeans, they made choices, collectively or individually, to pass on traditional bark painting to their daughters.

Galuma Maymuru's 1996 painting *Djarrakpi Landscape* (fig. 4, also cat. 59) depicts ancestral stories associated with Djarrakpi (Cape Shield) and contains many of the same elements found in her father's paintings. The composition comprises three horizontal panels. In the top section, two ancestral men are shown with their canoe. In this particular Dreaming, they went out to fish, and one man was swept overboard. His body later washed up on shore. The central canoe-shaped motif represents a *yingapungapu*, which is a ground sculpture made of earth and used in Manggalili clan mortuary ceremonies. Relatives of the deceased who have been "contaminated" through contact with the body must eat their meals within the *yingapungapu*. The ancestor who initiated this practice buried pieces of fish in the sculpture. The food became infested with maggots, indicated by the hatch marks in the *yingapungapu*, and a crab later dug up the pieces and scurried away with them.

In the central panel, an ancestral woman known as Nyapililngu travels up and down the sand hills making string from possum fur and fashioning it into a decorative breast girdle, indicated by the X on her torso. This symbol is reiterated in the triangular border of this

Fig. 4 Galuma Maymuru, *Djarrakpi Landscape (Manggalili Dhawu)*, 1996. Natural pigment on eucalyptus bark; 116 1/4 x 30 1/4 in. (295.3 x 76.9 cm). Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection, University of Virginia, Charlottesville. Cat. 59.

panel, and in the anvil-shaped clouds in the upper panel. Featured twice, Nyapililngu balances a dish on her head and carries a digging stick in one hand. In the lower panel, an emu attempts to dig for fresh water in the dry lake bed. Finding only salt water, he flings his spear into the sea, hitting a sacred rock and causing fresh water to spew forth.

Many of the referents in this painting relate to actual landscape features.[8] The Manggalili clan design of wavy rectangular lines filled with cross-hatching represents the marks left by the ebb and flow of the tide on the beach at Djarrakpi. The painting acts as a map of the Manggalili homelands and contains key symbols that serve as a kind of mnemonic for the detailed ancestral stories associated with this specific area. Although the figurative elements in Galuma Maymuru's painting are Manggalili clan designs also found in works by her father, uncle, and brother, no two paintings of Djarrakpi appear exactly alike (compare fig. 4 and fig. 5). Each artist exercises quite a bit of freedom in the design and execution of circumscribed elements.

Despite tremendous social and cultural changes that have affected their production and use, Yolngu bark paintings maintain a great deal of cultural continuity. In comparison, the style of painting that sprang up in the 1970s in central Australia represents innovation in media and technique. Traditional forms of art in the desert region, such as body painting, ground design, and sand drawing, were mostly ephemeral. After their use, they were rubbed off of the body or wiped away from the surface of the sand. When these traditional designs were applied to two-dimensional surfaces in a settlement called Papunya in 1971, the Western Desert art movement was born.

Other painting styles had originated in desert communities prior to this time, most notably the watercolor landscapes produced at the Hermannsburg mission in the 1930s and 1940s. Although very few women took up the Hermannsburg style, which was based on European models, Cordula Ebatarinja (1919–1973) achieved some success as a painter. At the Ernabella mission in the 1950s, women were encouraged to draw or paint decorative abstract designs on paper. These designs stimulated craft production in other media, including hooked rugs made with wool from the mission and later batik. Interestingly, batik was taken up by women in other desert communities, such as Utopia, where it served as a precursor to acrylic painting.

The history of the Western Desert art movement is well documented.[9] The first Papunya painters were initiated men from the Pintupi, Warlpiri, and Luritja language groups. Their paintings replicate some aspects of ritual life, where men and women operate in separate spheres. Like the Yolngu bark painters, men worked together in secluded locations, where they could discuss and sing the stories associated with their work without being overheard by women or uninitiated men. Completed paintings were hidden under sheets of corrugated iron and revealed

to the art advisor and other men in the same manner that one would present sacred objects. Even so, Papunya paintings were intended for sale and were well received by the art market, initially in Alice Springs and later in urban centers throughout Australia and abroad. The success of the Papunya art movement encouraged similar enterprises in other desert communities such as Yuendumu, where women constituted the majority of artists.

Although some Papunya women showed an early interest in acrylic painting, the budding art movement did not support their efforts. It was feared that the resources would be spread too thin if they were shared among men and women. Painters like Pansy Napangati thus worked independently, selling their work to galleries in Alice Springs. In Yuendumu, a very different situation developed. Françoise Dussart, a French anthropologist working in the community in the early 1980s, encouraged art production among Warlpiri women by providing crucial logistical support. What began as a project to raise money to purchase a Toyota so that the women could visit their sacred sites evolved into one of the most successful community-run art centers in central Australia.

Although it was the promise of commercial success that caused many desert communities to develop their own painting programs, art production has strengthened Aboriginal society by providing a focal point for cultural reproduction. Both the content of the art and its execution conform to traditional Aboriginal law.

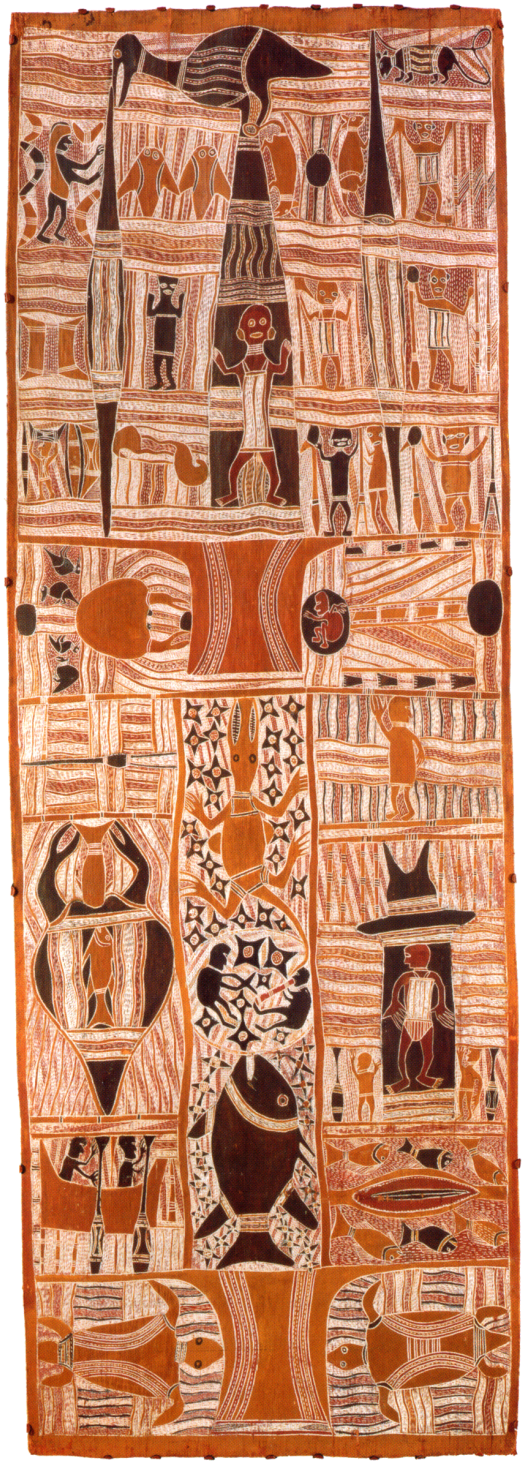

Fig. 5 Narritjin Maymuru, *Creation Stories of the Manggalili Clan*, c. 1965. Natural pigment on eucalyptus bark; 88 1/5 x 30 in. (224 x 77.5 cm). National Museum of Australia, Canberra.

Fig. 6 Women painting *Karrku Jukurrpa* canvas commissioned by John W. Kluge in 1996 at Warlukurlangu Artists Aboriginal Association in Yuendumu, North Australia.

The first Warlpiri painters from Yuendumu were women who, in that particular community, had considerable knowledge and ritual power.[10] They directed younger artists and ensured that the designs were executed properly. Painting, like ritual, provided an occasion to discuss and transmit cultural knowledge. Furthermore, art production echoed the traditional pattern of responsibilities for land involving ritual "owners," who inherit rights to the Dreaming stories through their father's line, and "managers," whose rights are matrilineal. Members of these groups enact complementary roles in Warlpiri rituals, in order to preserve the integrity of the land and the Dreaming. Artistic collaborations between "owners" and "managers" also reinforce the link between art production and ritual life. Yuendumu artists have taken collaboration to an extreme level, developing a form of large, communally produced painting that may involve over thirty artists (fig. 6).

Such projects begin with a bush trip to the site that is the focus of the work. After spending days there singing and dancing the major stories associated with the site, the artists return to Yuendumu to begin work on a large canvas stretched out behind the art center. Dussart has reported that the complex negotiations characteristic of Warlpiri ritual production play an important role in the execution of such paintings.[11]

Gender played a large role in the development of central Australian Aboriginal painting. Although Warlpiri women initiated the production of art in Yuendumu, they were soon joined by the men, who gained equal recognition as artists. The historical circumstances in each community dictated whether men or women became painters. In some areas, such as the Balgo community in the Kimberley region, the women's art movement developed after the men had been painting for some time. Women appealed to the men for permission to paint and to use the dot motifs that were associated with men's ceremonies.[12] Although the desert art movement began with Pintupi men, their female counterparts were among the last desert women to take up the painting program in the 1990s. These senior women, many of whom had been married to the original Papunya painters, introduced a fresh, spontaneous style that diverged significantly from men's art.

The seemingly abstract symbols used in central Australian painting originated in sand drawing and other traditional art forms. Anthropologist Nancy Munn

began studying these symbols in the 1950s, and they have remained consistent except for the addition of several representational icons in recent years. Concentric circles denote named places or sites created by ancestral beings. Often these places are waterholes, hills, or rocks. U shapes indicate ancestors who are seated or camped at sites, where they may be engaged in daily activities, such as hunting and gathering bush foods, or enacting a ceremony. Lines connecting concentric circles can represent the ancestral paths linking sites, while animal tracks or human footprints indicate the presence of ancestral beings who assumed different forms in the Dreaming. Although early desert painters used dots of color sparingly to outline important symbols, later desert paintings display a wealth of colorful dots, which often fill entire canvases.

In some desert art, symbols can be read as a narrative or mythical map relating to a particular Dreaming story. Bessie Nakamarra Sims' 1996 painting *Yarla Jukurrpa* (*Bush Potato Dreaming*) (cat. 9) depicts the story associated with a site called Yumurrpa, northwest of Yuendumu. Women of the Nakamarra and Napurrula skin groups, who traveled around the area looking for *yarla*, are indicated by U-shaped symbols. Desert iconography is multivalent; each symbol refers to many things. The circles in the center of the canvas represent both the site itself and the *yarla* plant, while the lines between them indicate both the ancestors' paths and the roots of the plant. While desert paintings appear to share many qualities with Western maps, they are not strictly topographical. The relationships between places refer more to their associations in Dreaming stories than to their physical placement on the landscape.

As the painting movement grew throughout central Australia, artists developed local and personal styles. Variations in palette, dotting techniques, the use of symbols, and themes served to distinguish the art produced in different communities. Paintings from Balgo, for example, contain bold colors and dots so closely applied that they form bands or solid fields of color, as is demonstrated in the work of Eubena Nampitjin and Lucy Yukenbarri Napanangka. Utopia artists such as Kathleen Petyarre eschewed the traditional desert symbols, using only dots and lines to convey ancestral landscapes. This gives their paintings a more abstract appearance, although they still refer to Dreaming stories. Individual artists also developed signature styles that are easily identifiable. Utopia artist Emily Kame Kngwarreye is known for her underlying networks of lines covered with splotchy dots in soft, complementary colors. Kngwarreye's style has many of the qualities of modernist painting. Her amazing success as an artist is most likely attributed to the dual appeal of her work as both traditional Aboriginal art and contemporary painting.

While most desert artists continue to paint Dreaming stories, Linda Syddick (Tjungkaya Napaltjarri) is considered the first Pintupi modernist painter.[13] Syddick was taught to paint by her father, Shorty Lungkarta, who was one of the early Papunya painters.

Fig. 7 Julie Dowling, *Didn't you know you were Aboriginal?*, 2004. Acrylic and red ochre on canvas; 47 1/5 x 59 in. (120 x 150 cm). Collection National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

Inspired by Steven Spielberg's film *ET*, Syddick produced a series of paintings depicting the alien whose primary desire was to return home. Syddick's work reflects her personal story of loss, estrangement, and alienation.[14] While she incorporates the iconography of Western Desert paintings, her themes relate to place in a substantially different way compared to other desert artists who express their connection to the land and knowledge of the Dreaming stories.

Personal and historical themes also dominate the work of Western Australian artist Julie Dowling. Dowling is best known for her portraiture, although she embellishes figurative work with hidden symbols, Christian iconography, and jewel-like sequins. Dowling has drawn on her family history as the basis for much of her work, which also addresses political and social themes, such as the dispossession of traditional country

and the separation of Aboriginal children from their parents. As a fair-skinned Aboriginal woman, Dowling has experienced both the historical processes aimed at destroying Aboriginal people and the incredible resilience of family and culture.

While her identity as an Indigenous woman is foremost in her work, Dowling has struggled with feeling like an outsider in both Aboriginal and white societies.[15] A poignant work from her exhibition *Warridah Sovereignty* entitled *Didn't you know you were Aboriginal?* (2004; fig. 7) refers to Dowling's first realization at age four that her family was different from others. In *Self-portrait: in our country* (2002; cat. 77) Dowling grapples with the loss of her traditional lands and her aspirations to regain access to her country through a Native Title claim. Her body encompasses her female ancestor, as if she is propelled forward by the woman's spirit within her. Like the other artists in the exhibition, Dowling focuses on land as a source of inspiration and identity.

As a genre of Aboriginal art, women's painting includes many varied styles that reflect Aboriginal cultural diversity, historical processes and the changes they effected within Aboriginal cultures, and personal visions that inspire individual artists. Through their art, Aboriginal women express their relationships to their country, their understandings of the world and how it came into being, and their responsibilities for maintaining and reproducing their culture.

Notes

[1] Sometimes called the Telstra awards, the NATSIAA are held annually in Darwin, NT, at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory.

[2] Hetti Perkins, *Aboriginal Women's Exhibition*, exh. cat. (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1991), p. 7.

[3] Carol Moorditj Djurapin Dowling, "Strong Love," in *Winyarn Budjarri (Sorry Birth): Birth's End*, exh. cat. (Perth: Artplace, 2005), p. 3.

[4] Howard Morphy, *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 185.

[5] Ibid., p. 201.

[6] Wally Caruana, Djon Mundine, and Nigel Lendon, *The Wagilag Sisters Story*, exh. cat. (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 1998), p. 28.

[7] Howard Morphy, *Aboriginal Art* (London: Phaidon, 1998), p. 252.

[8] Morphy (note 4), p. 223.

[9] See Geoffrey Bardon, *Papunya: A Place Made after the Story: Beginnings of the Western Desert Painting Movement* (Carlton, Vic.: Miegunyah Press, 2004); and Hetti Perkins, *Papunya: Genesis and Genius*, exh. cat. (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2000).

[10] Françoise Dussart, "Women's Acrylic Paintings from Yuendumu," in *The Inspired Dream: Life as Art in Aboriginal Australia*, ed. Margie K. C. West, exh. cat. (South Brisbane: The Gallery, 1988), p. 37.

[11] Françoise Dussart, "What an Acrylic Can Mean: On the Meta-ritualistic Resonances of a Central Desert Painting," in *Art From the Land: Dialogues with the Kluge-Ruhe Collection of Australian Aboriginal Art*, eds. Howard Morphy and Margo Smith Boles (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1999), p. 212.

[12] Christine Watson, *Piercing the Ground: Balgo Women's Image Making and Relationships to Country* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2003), p. 149.

[13] Fred Myers, *Painting Culture: The Making of an Aboriginal High Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 304.

[14] Ibid., p. 309.

[15] Julie Dowling, "Moorditj Marbarn (Strong Magic)," in *Colour Power: Aboriginal Art Post 1984*, ed. Judith Ryan, exh. cat. (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 2004), p. 137.

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