

## Museums, exchanges, and their contribution to Joseph Nye's concept of 'soft power'

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the role that museums and art institutions have in recent years played in international relations, and their contribution to the concept of *soft power*, coined by Joseph Nye; referring to a country's ability to persuade rather than coerce through elements of 'hard' power such as the threat of a strong military (Nye 2004). Using as examples the exchanges of the Cyrus Cylinder between Iran and the British Museum, and the loan of Picasso's *Buste de Femme* (1943) from the Dutch Van Abbemuseum to the International Academy of Art Palestine, the paper argues that through their role as 'national expressions of identity' and 'memory institutions', museums and art institutions are able to make a positive contribution to international relations by engendering mutual respect and understanding in ways that other forms of dialogue may be unable to. As soft power is an area that still requires significant research, this paper aims to contribute observations and case studies that may affirm its influence.

**Key Words:** cultural diplomacy, museums, soft power, international relations, cultural exchange

### Introduction

Museums and art institutions have long been at the forefront of representing cultural values and morals, being utilized as sites of education for centuries (Bennett 1995). It is no wonder that in a world that is increasingly connected, these same institutions have come to play their roles on international stages, and have been employed more and more by governments in their policies around cultural diplomacy. They contribute to what Harvard professor and former Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Clinton Administration Joseph Nye terms 'soft power': the ability to persuade rather than coerce through elements of 'hard' power such as the threat of a strong military. It is made up of many different elements that, when combined effectively, can be wielded to great beneficial effect for the governments that use them.

The term soft power has a broad usage across many disciplines; for the purposes of this essay, it will be used specifically in the context of museums and institutions. Furthermore, although frequently appearing in the media as a buzzword, soft power - and cultural diplomacy more generally - is a field that still requires much in-depth research. The aim of this paper is to describe a number of observations, placed in the context of a number of current discussions around soft power. Two specific instances where cultural exchanges have impacted diplomatic relations will be described; one with indirect links, and the other with direct links to foreign policy administration, ending with a consideration of how developments in technology may impact the field in the future. Starting with examining soft power's implications on a subtle level, the *Picasso in Palestine* project will demonstrate how art can be used to cultivate a favourable image of a country on an international level, allowing for leverage in broader political discussions. Turning then to a more poignant example, Iran's loan of cultural artefacts to the British Museum presents a case study of how cultural assets are sometimes deployed to keep doors open for political negotiations. Starting with Nye's theories on soft power, further drawing in wider notions concerning cultural diplomacy as set forth by John Holden, as well as Charles Esche's envisaged possibilities for the ongoing role of museums in society, contributing

a number of observations on the role of institutions in soft power to a burgeoning field within museum studies.

### Soft Power

Before examining the case studies, some key terms must be defined. Soft power refers to 'the ability to shape the preferences of others' (Nye 2004: 5). It is the ability of a country to co-opt and persuade others instead of coercing them through purely military or economic strength; it is the capacity to *attract* relations by creating an image to which other nations can relate or give respect. In Europe, Nye highlights art, literature, design and fashion as elements that serve as assets contributing to a country's 'attractiveness', and that can be capitalized on in order to create positive images on a global scale. It is not merely a case of creating a certain image through the use of popular culture or mass media - although there are certainly instances where this has taken place, for example, in the case where the 'fast adaptation of American popular culture by many Europeans after the Second World War certainly contributed positively to the democratization of these societies' (Nye 2004: 48). In general however, neither America's Hollywood and McDonalds, nor Blair's 'Cool Britannia' alone are sufficient resources with which to persuade other nations into collaboration in a broader context. Rather, soft power predominantly relies on three resources: 'its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)' (Nye 2008: 97). To take Nye's view, a country increases its chances of developing favourable relations when it embodies and promotes values that can be universalized.

A core difficulty presented by soft power, one that is hinted at within the above description, is its rather intangible nature; how exactly can nations package up subjective assets such as culture and values in order to co-opt and attract? Culture shapes the environment for policymaking, but does so indirectly, through a process that is slow and can take years to manifest (Nye 2004, 99). It is therefore crucial for actors – individual organizations and governments alike – to create environments, physical locations and situations where culture can be exhibited as well as exchanged. Nye lists three key dimensions of importance to public diplomacy: daily communications, strategic communication, and the development of lasting relationships with 'key individuals over many years through scholarships, exchanges, training... and access to media channels' (Nye 2004: 109). It is the combination of these three dimensions that creates a favourable image of a country and subsequently allows a country to obtain the result it seeks in other areas of external relations.

For the purpose of this essay, the most pertinent of the three mentioned elements to discuss is strategic communication, which is described by Nye as a set of themes developed in a similar way to a political campaign, planning 'symbolic events and communications over the course of a year to brand the central themes, or to advance a particular government policy' (Nye 2004, 108). Arts and cultural institutions have the capacity to communicate cultural values to the rest of the world, often facilitated through government-affiliated institutions such as the UK's British Council or France's Alliance Française - the latter having been purposely set up by the French government to repair the nation's 'shattered prestige' after defeat in the Franco-Prussian war (Nye 2008, 96). Closely intertwined however, is Nye's third element of the development of long lasting relationships; the maintenance of relationships with key individuals and institutions, developed in part through exchanges allowing the public to engage more closely with a nation's culture, which in the case of museums can be done through exhibitions focusing on certain customs and traditions, or through the facilitation of inter-museum loans.

With these definitions having been set out, we can begin to look more specifically at how museums and art institutions have developed to embody their current function within the broader realms of soft power. Over the past century their intentional use under the guise of international relations has markedly increased, with a soft power index first being established by IfG-Monocle in 2010, but it is by no means a new concept (McClory 2010). Historically, museums have occupied instrumental roles in society, initially acting as private collections aimed at the enjoyment of the elites, progressively moving into the public domain in the nineteenth century. They were ascribed the function of 'broadcasting the messages of power throughout

society' (Bennett 1995: 61). Most succinctly, by bringing together 'significant "culture objects", [museums] were readily appropriated as "national" expressions of identity' (Macdonald 2003: 3). The construction of a national identity was subsequently cemented by the 'construction of a radically different "Other"' (Bennett 1995: 79); an 'Other' which a less-travelled audience could form an understanding of in the very same museums. National museums were therefore in large part responsible for contributing to the formation of citizens' national identity, carefully selecting artefacts deemed essential to the nations' development, later to be called upon in the form of patriotism or, on a more fundamental level, as a 'moral and cultural regulation of the working classes' (Bennett, 73).

With this explanation in mind, it is possible to make the claim that museums and public art commissions embody a sizable political element. It is worthwhile to add to this the observation made by Christine Sylvester, who explains that the advancements of the role of museums in the nineteenth century caused them to increasingly embody 'internationally implicated/ socially situated social institutions', inevitably leading them to become institutions that are 'heavily political' (2009), and ultimately allowing them to serve similar purposes on a global scale. As 'memory institutions' (Holden, et al. 2007: 16) they are physical manifestations of nations' culture and heritage. Museums, alongside other cultural institutions, have the capacity to become symbols of entire cities and nations, embodying a societies' culture, values, and aspirations in a physical, tangible way.

An easily measured impact these 'physical manifestations' have on foreign relations is brand recognition, and their role within tourism. For instance, in the UK the Tate welcomes almost eight million visitors per year, three and a half million of whom are international (Tate 2014, 36), making it one of the UK's top three tourist attractions. The impressive size and shape of these institutions allow them to become iconic parts of the city, recognized well beyond the borders of their own country. These types of institutions also engage in more direct cultural exchanges through exhibitions that showcase other cultures, organize temporary loans of art pieces to other nations, sometimes setting up partner galleries or international franchises, a popular example being the Guggenheim Foundation, which has succeeded in expanding its cultural vision globally. Through internationally operating curators, biennials, and international art fairs, there are a multiplicity of opportunities for the exchange of art as well as platforms that promote discussion and the exchange of ideas.

Every year museums of all types increase their international reach through loans and exchanges. Tate, for instance, in 2015 noted a twenty-two per cent increase in loans to other institutions, over a third of which were to 121 venues across 24 countries (Tate 2015). Much of this can be attributed to easing policies around transport, import regulations, and increasingly strong personal relationships between individuals within institutions globally, and the implications of these can be far reaching; as mentioned previously, museums can occupy educational roles in society, furthermore providing platforms for provoking discussion. The British curator Charles Esche adds another layer to this, by advocating the use of art to envisage possibilities, calling for art to be 'a permissive and imaginative space for expressing individual and collective desires that could not be accommodated... within current political discourses' (Esche 2004).

Running parallel to developments in telecommunications, technology, and trade in globalization, the art world has become increasingly integrated as artists 'lived in one country, worked in a second, and exhibited in yet another' (Bydler 2010, 381). These developments can be viewed both positively and negatively by focussing on increased global participation, and by considering the argument of increased homogenization respectively. For the purpose of this paper, the most important observation to draw out from these global shifts is that where art institutions are increasingly representative of their geographic location they are also ever more operative on transnational levels, allowing them to occupy key positions in politics, sending messages that trade figures and military forces are not able to (McClory, 2010: 2).

### **The Picasso in Palestine Project**

A project that brings Nye's notion of co-opting together with that of imagining alternate possibilities is the *Picasso in Palestine* project. The exchange took place in late June 2011, when the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, loaned Picasso's *Buste de Femme* (1943),

valued at \$7 million, the most valuable piece to ever be shown in Palestine, to the International Academy of Art Palestine (IAAP). This was the first time an original Picasso was displayed there. It was selected by school's students in conjunction with the director, Khalid Hourani, and forms the centrepiece for the *Picasso in Palestine* exhibit in Palestine, which aimed to introduce western art to Palestinians. The work is described in the Van Abbemuseum's press release as being one of the most pronounced examples of Picasso's expressionist period, painted during the time in which he spoke against Spain's Civil War; while not explicitly discussed, the choice of painting itself sends a strong political message. The exchange was initially a 'simple' loan request: however, bureaucratic and security issues caused the negotiations to take two years before an arrangement could be made, with all those involved having to go through 'all the political complications' (Daraghmeh 2011). Legal, artistic and official procedures for international art transport all had to be reviewed before the exchange finally took place.

Given Palestine's position in global politics, the fact that the exchange occurred successfully is, in itself, a sign of favourable diplomatic relations between Palestine and the Netherlands, as well as with Israel. Hourani hoped that the success of this project would 'create a sense of "normality"' (Bouadi 2011); if a Picasso were able to go to Palestine, it would signify acknowledgement of the region as a modern society, and could implicitly place the region on the international art map. Underpinning this thought, Van Abbemuseum's press release suggests that through this work, we might be able to 'talk about and imagine conditions in relation to cultural rights and struggles in other places and times too' (Van Abbemuseum 2011). Esche stated that *Picasso in Palestine* 'is part of a wider development in which a typical modern art collection tries to come to terms with the social and cultural changes taking place around us' (Van Abbemuseum 2011). He points towards European art playing a 'meaningful role in helping to understand our global condition with all its internal contradictions'. To emphasize this point, the opening of the exhibition was marked with talks with international speakers who were asked to respond to the artistic, political and social implications of both the exhibition itself, as well as the painting's journey to Ramallah. Hourani states that by overcoming the obstacles, the project brings attention to the current situation in Palestine, and 'gives the art project the power of the impossible'.

The symbolic importance of the exchange was apparent to the organizers themselves as well as some of the exhibition's visitors; in a video report by the Al Arabiya News Channel, a woman interviewed mentioned that while it was not the first time she had seen a Picasso, it was 'of course' the first time in Palestine (Faraj 2011). It becomes apparent that message of the project did not end with the exhibition itself. In its physical displacement, the artwork acquired a new history, taking on extra meaning, 'constructing new histories... as well as preserving old ones' (Van Abbemuseum).

While not directly linked, it is interesting to note that the exchange occurred at a time that, Palestine's position in the world was under great scrutiny, taking place just two months before the UN's General Assembly in September 2011, where Palestine was due to request admittance as a member state (BBC 2011). At the time, The Netherlands did not recognise Palestine as an independent state, with the Dutch minister for foreign affairs confirming that The Netherlands would not support a Palestinian statehood, calling instead for a return to negotiation. Despite this stance, Mahmoud Abbas, Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, responded to this by stating that the Netherlands' close links with Israel 'doesn't disturb [Palestine] at all', citing the Palestinians' appreciation for their help (EUBusiness 2011). It could therefore be suggested that although The Netherlands at the time could not formally recognize the state of Palestine, they were supportive of the area from a humanitarian and civic perspective. While it would be unsubstantiated to assert the project directly influenced relations at a higher level, it forms a small piece in a larger puzzle contributing to the development of lasting relationships, adding to the Netherlands' soft power an open-minded nation, and making Hourani's statement that the loan would 'create a sense of normality' (Bouadi 2011), ever more admissible. It reminds us again of the relevance of Christine Sylvester's suggestion that museums are 'internationally implicated' and 'socially situated social institutions' and thereby heavily political (Sylvester, 2009: 3).

It is important to also recognize the project's potential to add to Palestine's soft power. In Hourani's wish for the painting to create a sense of 'normality', there is an implied aspiration

to demonstrate that Palestine has the potential to exist as a stable nation, the exchange representing, in Esche's words, a 'testing ground for the future' (Esche 2004). The exchange allows Palestine to present itself as a 'modern' nation where there is an appreciation for modern and contemporary art; thereby promoting values that can be universalized and understood globally. Through initiatives such as these, Palestine was able to subtly leverage its image internationally, gaining respect and understanding through means other than economic or military powers.

### Iran and the British Museum

The impact of international exchanges can be more pronounced when the objects involved are strongly linked to issues of nationhood and heritage, and can demonstrate how 'at times of political difficulty... culture can keep doors open until relations improve' (Holden, et al., 2007: 54). Culture can provide a positive or neutral environment in which political statements can be made. For instance, Ai Wei Wei's several successful international shows directly challenge the government of his native China, in themselves perhaps worthy of examination in the context of cultural diplomacy (McMahon 2015). A powerful example of when the exchange of heritage objects was seemingly able to overcome fraught diplomatic relations, in this case between the UK and Iran, centred around the 2005 British Museum exhibition *Forgotten Empire: the world of Ancient Persia*.

It is important here to first briefly make a note of the historical significance of the British Museum, by its own account the oldest national public museum in the world, granting 'free admission to all studious and curious persons' since the mid-eighteenth century (The British Museum 2011). As a longstanding institution with one of the world's largest collections of artefacts it is a relevant example of one of Holden's 'memory institutions'; this allows it to have become a tool of great political and diplomatic weight, an asset of large value to British cultural diplomacy. The museum has, from as early as the nineteenth 'imperial' century, been involved with excavations, including many in the Middle East. During these excavations a wealth of discoveries were made which have resulted in vast collections, one of which is the Assyrian collection, which has been instrumental to the understanding of 'cuneiform'. In recognition of its importance, the British Museum has dedicated 16 out of 85 rooms entirely to Islamic and Middle Eastern art in order to showcase these to the world. The implications of hosting an exhibition of this nature are twofold; on the one hand, to use Bennett's phrase, it broadcasts a message of power to society through the sheer impressiveness and wealth of the exhibition that is visited by a very international public, while on the other hand also operates as a manifestation of an implied national appreciation for foreign art, demonstrating both a cultural value that is likely to be welcomed by foreign countries.

At the same time, the exhibition represents contestation. The British Museum has often been involved with arguments involving other countries' national heritage - the most well known instance being that of the Elgin Marbles (Beard 2011). In addition to their permanent Assyrian collection, the aforementioned *Forgotten Empire* exhibition included art loaned by a number of foreign museums including Paris' Musée du Louvre, and two Iranian museums, the National Museum in Tehran, and the Persepolis Museum. The stated aim of the British Museum for the exhibition was to showcase one of the earliest empires that had been largely forgotten in the Western world (another reminder of the pedagogical function of museums as discussed by Bennett). The exhibition, which later travelled to Barcelona and Japan, took place at a time during which there was much international tension surrounding Iran's nuclear program, with the newly installed Ahmadinejad pledging an 'irreversible resumption of [uranium] enrichment' (BBC 2005). There was an underlying political significance as the exhibition concerned pre-Islamic art and covered a geographical area that was under international scrutiny. This was not lost on Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum, who, in the foreword of the exhibition catalogue, noted that 'In its acknowledgement of cultural differences within one coherent and effective state, it is perhaps more than ever a proper object of admiration and study' (Seymour 2006), demonstrating his awareness of political parallels that could be drawn in the exchange, and making direct references to tensions both within the UK as well as internationally.

The greatest implications however are linked not with what the exhibition symbolizes,

but rather the museum's collaboration with the Iranian government to allow the exhibition to occur in the first place. This was the first time many of the artefacts had travelled outside Iran (Seymour 2006), illustrative of the unique relations that the British Museum had managed to secure with their Iranian counterparts; relations that were underpinned by the museum's promise to, in return, loan the Cyrus Cylinder to Iran. Illustrative of the positive influence of this exchange, was the fact that on the opening night of the exhibition, the Iranian vice president was able to share the stage with then British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Jack Straw, 'something that would have been unthinkable in any other forum' (Holden, et al., 2007: 55). In reference to this exchange, Holden notes that 'our cultural institutions appear to generate more trust on the part of Iran than does the BBC' (Ibid.). It demonstrates how culture 'can be used as a forum for unofficial political relationship-building' (Ibid.), and forms a clear example of a positive contribution by a museum in the development of the UK's soft power.

Nevertheless, the exchange also demonstrates the fragility of these personal relations and of soft power more generally. This became evident when the British Museum seemingly grew hesitant about their promise to loan the Cyrus Cylinder in return. According to the deal, the cylinder was supposed to arrive in Iran in September 2009; at the time, however, there was a large amount of civil unrest related to recent elections, with many protesters out on the streets. In the eyes of the British Museum, this created an unsafe environment for the exchange, leading them to issue a statement saying they were monitoring the Iranian political situation 'to make sure the loan was made in the best possible conditions' (Sheikholeslami 2009). This perceived hesitation triggered the Iranian government to threaten to 'sever all cultural relations', accusing MacGregor of 'wasting time' and 'making excuses' (Wilson 2010). Relations were strained even further when the loan was delayed again after two clay fragments apparently related to the cylinder were discovered, requiring at least six months more time to be studied in the UK. The tension that this put on the relationship between the two countries was especially serious, as by that point MacGregor had become 'the sole conduit of bilateral exchange' (Wilson 2010). The fact that the museum was the only remaining avenue for diplomatic relations highlights the power an institution of this stature can have; when the Cyrus Cylinder finally was loaned to Iran, it provided an impetus to slowly resume other discussions, supporting Holden's statement that culture can keep doors open when diplomats are unable to sit around a negotiating table. Baroness Helena Kennedy, trustee of the British Museum, added to this that 'to present this particular temporary gift to the people of Iran at this particular time is an act of faith which will have profound meaning and value' (Black and Dehghan 2010). The loan is a reminder that the power of the UK's display of respect and engagement with Iran's culture cannot be dismissed, whether or not the decision to go through with the loan was intentionally part of the UK's strategic communication policies. It furthermore forms an excellent example of the implicit role museums are able to play in international relations; the 'act of faith' affects the UK's power to co-opt, thereby enhancing the nation's soft power.

### **Cultural exchange in a digital age**

The examples of cultural exchanges so far discussed have concerned instances where an audience was required to physically visit the exhibition in order to view them. The increasing use and reach of the Internet provides new ways for nations to promote their cultures to those who are not able to travel and view exhibitions in person, for instance through the digitization of museum collections and archives, the proliferation of social media, and the Web 2.0 in general. The use or impact of these new tools in soft power and cultural diplomacy have to date not been researched in great depth. Researcher Natalia Grincheva puts forward a number of observations that touch on the idea that, through social media and the Internet, the public are much more able to participate in the exchange of ideas, rather than simply being the receivers of a particular message (2013). A result of this is that we now see 'Many-to-many cultural exchange is now very fast moving and capable of profound effect, both laterally and upwardly' (Holden, et al. 2007, 16). Grincheva points at a shift in institutions from being the 'authoritative content supplier' to the 'facilitator of cross-cultural experiences', through connecting different cultural audiences to each other and to the cultural content of museums, as well as by responding to issues and concerns to a farther-reaching extent, pointing out that

'the social power of an online community brings a lot of hope to the new cultural diplomacy that now can target larger populations and facilitate a wider scope of direct contact between ordinary people from various countries' (Grincheva, 45).

A relevant initiative to touch on is the 'Museum with No Frontiers' (MWNF), a 'trans-national museum' on the Internet. It was formed in 1995 with the aim of creating a formal partnership between the European Union and its Mediterranean neighbours. MWNF aims to promote

a new, inclusive vision of history that highlights and celebrates the interconnections, cross-fertilisations, exchanges and cooperation between cultures in areas as diverse as archaeology, [and] art and culture... MWNF projects demonstrate the far-reaching potential of cultural heritage in building intercultural bridges... (MWNF 2016).

To achieve this, it brings together experts from a variety of fields, from academia to tourism, as well as a number of organizations, including globally recognized UK and European museums. MWNF takes advantage of the advancement in information technology to combine collections without physically having to move any works of art, creating a virtual museum where visitors are able to view related artwork in other museums.

A particularly relevant strand of work by this organization is entitled *Discover Islamic Art*, aiming to allow people to experience the wealth of art originating from the Arab world, an endeavour that would be near impossible in 'real life' because of how far and wide the culture has spread - a particularly poignant piece of work at the time of writing, given the precarious position much of these historical assets now find themselves. The Internet allows different regions and time periods to be easily accessed and related to. The initiative could also prove to be a useful tool in Esche's suggestion that museums should increasingly take on the role of presenting, provoking, or challenging visitors with a particular idea, and to take on the role of promoting cooperation in the future. Nye supports this strand of thought, noting that although face-to-face communications remain the most effective, they can be 'supplemented and reinforced by the Internet' (Nye 2008, 104). The MWNF therefore provides an example of how individual nations can employ the Internet to enhance their position globally, and could thus, thinking back to the Picasso Project, be of interest to countries such as the UK and Palestine alike.

## Conclusion

*Soft power*, as we have seen, has the ability to shape and affect global politics; from facilitating discussions at precarious times in relation to Iran's nuclear program, to making small steps towards enhancing Palestine's position in its bid for statehood. Whether the loans on the part of either museum were influenced or encouraged by governments is not made explicit, although it is certain that favourable exchange policies instituted by the individual governments were of great importance. It is therefore understandable that Holden argues that 'in an increasingly connected world, we should no longer think of culture as *subordinate* to politics' (Holden, et al., 2007: 20), and instead think of it as providing the context for politics. Because exchanges allow for the chance to better understand the thoughts of others and to see first hand what values separate nations share, 'exchanges are often more effective than mere broadcasting' (Nye 2008, 103). Both the British Museum and the Van Abbemuseum played instrumental roles in communicating their governments' attractive elements of native culture, demonstrated inherent political values, and displayed the favourable elements of their foreign policies; the three resources which Nye deems essential for *soft power*.

It is important to also keep in mind examples of how museums and art institutions can hamper relations, as was the case with the Cyrus Cylinder. Art, culture, and heritage are all perceived subjectively; their often very emotive connection to societies means it's not always possible or even advisable to make use of them within a political context.

We should therefore question the emphasis that is placed on soft power, the extent to which it should be utilized as a primary tool in international relations and how much effect it really has. Nye does not suggest that soft power alone is the solution, instead proposing an appropriate balance of hard and soft power: 'smart power' (Nye, *Soft Power* 2004, 32). Further

theoretical and empirical research is needed to further evidence some of the suggestions made. For instance, it should be questioned whether increased audiences necessarily implies reaching *new* audiences, or more effectively reaching existing audiences who would have engaged with cultural exchanges anyway. Furthermore, as has been mentioned, reception of art is subjective and it may take years to perceive change; the IfG-Monocle soft power index could over time provide a useful tool for analyzing this, and should therefore be considered in future research.

In the meantime, however, institutions' shifting position in society – both online and in their physical manifestations – and their role in the development of soft power, should not be underplayed. Their value is perhaps best encapsulated by a quote from Nick Aikens in a blog entry for *frieze*. While on his way back to the UK, he was stopped by security and questioned about his visit, and had trouble convincing the guards of his intentions. When he explained his story to a more senior security guard his answer was 'Ah', he said, 'the famous Picasso that went to Ramallah. I saw it on TV' (Aikens 2011), and with that Aikens was free to continue his journey.

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