

Translating landscape: the Colombian Chorographic Commission

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ABSTRACT

In 1850 the Colombian government developed a project to survey the landscape of this newly formed nation. Scientists, writers, and artists were invited to make part of the project led by the Italian military, geographer and cartographer- Agustin Codazzi. After nine years and three different artists, the Commission had many watercolor drawings that portrayed a landscape, not only in its physical traits, but also in its social, economic and agricultural development. Through the lens of these artists, the drawings that concluded the survey showed a landscape that was truly original but that was also seen through the lens of a certain romantic eye inherited by a firm European legacy. As a result, these watercolors show the different regions, people, and means of transportation, crops and trades. The Colombian Chorographic Commission was an important project in the construction of the Colombian modern nation, a country that was constantly divided by federalist and centralist politics, liberal and conservative parties. An interesting union between science, politics and art, these drawings represent the process of the modernization of nineteenth-century Colombia.

I. Introduction

During the course of Colombian nineteenth-century history, three historical journeys were essential to the construction of this nation and its identity: The Botanical Expedition, Alexander von Humboldt's South American journey, and the Chorographic Commission. The first of these journeys is linked to an eighteenth-century enlightened idea of travel rather than to the more national character-constructing voyage of the nineteenth-century. This episode was called the *Royal Botanical Expedition of the New Kingdom of Granada* which at the time was still a Viceroyalty of Spain under Charles III. This expedition was created and led by the Spaniard José Celestino Mutis, the Viceroy's personal physician, who, following Carl Linnaeus' teachings had arrived in Santafé, present-day Bogotá, in 1761. Mutis, as well as the King who financed this Expedition, believed in the importance of surveying more than 20,000 new species of flora. Scientific missions of this type had already been developed in Mexico, Peru and Cuba by the Spanish monarchy, their importance resided not only in being precise journeys through the territory in order to understand new vegetation and animal life; they were also significant because they changed science, art and landscape.

Throughout the colonial period, the Colombian territory which included not only Colombia but also Ecuador, Venezuela and Panamá, had an art sphere dictated by the Catholic Church and the evangelizing iconography of saints and martyrs inherited from Spanish Counter-Reformation Baroque art. Thus, it was through the scientist's eye that actual observation was imbued in the making of the watercolors that comprised the Botanical Expedition's legacy. From 1783 till Mutis' death in 1808, and then until 1816 where the remnants of the War for Independence closed down the project, local artists were trained in a technique that mimicked that of miniature painting. This consisted of tiny dots of paint being overlapped in order for the precise modeling of the plant and all its parts to be objectively represented. Regional plants were used as natural pigments and a great amount of energy was invested in capturing each and every plant in its most natural and representative state. From this Expedition, 7,000 original watercolor drawings and four prints of each original were created; they are archived today at the *Royal Botanical Gardens* in Madrid².

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² All of the Botanical Expedition prints have been digitalized and can be viewed online at The Royal Botanical Gardens in Madrid's web page: www.rjb.csic.es/

The second scientifically based journey which also transformed Colombian art and its images was Alexander von Humboldt's voyage. From 1799 to 1804, the German naturalist travelled through Venezuela, Cuba, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Mexico. In Colombian territory, he travelled from Cartagena, through the Magdalena River, crossed the Cordillera and entered Ecuador. When he returned to Europe and arrived in Rome in 1805, he decided to get acquainted with important artists such as Gottlieb Schick, Joseph Anton Koch, William Friedrich Gmelin and Jean-Thomas Thibaut, who translated Humboldt's drawings into prints that would illustrate the German's writings. These prints, titled *Views of the Cordilleras*, became a visual statement that proved to be innovative in terms of the way the American nineteenth-century landscape was being considered. As artist and historian Beatriz González explains:

"Humboldt expresses in a sublime manner how the basic elements of nature become an object of natural science, and in what way do poetry and art take responsibility in capturing that same nature and making it aesthetically present. Humboldt believed that the painters whom he entrusted to illustrate his geography should be great academicians and classical painters because 'only great artists can see the truth in nature.'" (González, 2013)

One of the end results of these prints was a deeply rooted change in the way nature would be portrayed from then onwards. Travel accounts and scientific journeys would exemplify this change. The way the Colombian landscape was read in European circles led to a certain romantic view of this exotic land. Humboldt never imagined that his influence upon the way landscape was viewed would become a union between the new unexplored landscape, and the philosophical aesthetic of the European beholder. Snow-capped volcanoes, complex passages between the mountains of the Cordilleras and magnificent views of tropical landscapes and valleys all led to a re-enactment of a certain European taste placed on the new Latin American backdrop.

"Humboldt's voyage, his instruments and measurements allow him to make a laboratory of the mountains where there is the necessary control to place nature in order, in a two-dimensional print where nature, not only America's nature, but that of the whole world, is represented." (Díaz Ángel, Muñoz Arbeláez, & Nieto Olarte, 2010)

For Jean-Paul Duviols and Charles Minguet, following the Latin-American countries' wars for independence from Spain, a Humboldtian School of Landscape was created (Duviols & Minguet, 1994). This meant that more and more artists travelled to the exotic South American continent searching for the landscape they had seen in Humboldt's prints and drawings. The picturesque and the sublime landscapes, deeply influenced by the European aesthetic of Romantic thought, were sought-after by artists and travelers who in turn recorded their own journeys, like the German academic painter Albert von Berg, who travelled in the Nueva Granada between 1848 and 1850. Von Berg held a letter from Humboldt where the famous naturalist instructed him in ways to capture the vastness of the tropical landscape.

This informal school of landscape painting, which developed through independent artists, transmitted three visual means through which to achieve this goal. First, according to Beatriz González's studies, the use of the crown in the foreground through which vegetation encloses geographical features in the background, thus creating a sort of natural frame. The best example of this is illustrated in von Berg's *Tolima Volcano* painting (1855, Ibero-Americana Institut, Berlin).

The second visual method consists of painting man with his back towards the viewer in a contemplative attitude, a system which also works as a topographical reference, in order to understand the enormity of that which is being portrayed. (González, 2013). This system was, in turn, used by Frederic Edwin Church in his travels through Colombia and Ecuador in 1853. In the *Introduction* to his book on Church's South American expedition, Pablo NavasSanz de Santamaría explains that Church:

"...following the dictates of Humboldt, visited Nueva Granada in the mid-nineteenth century in search of the 'sublime in nature', where he traveled round, enjoyed and painted scenes of 'that beautiful and rich country situated in the heart of the Torrid Zone of South America.'" (Navas Sanz de Santamaría, 2008)

Church's use of this system is best exemplified in *South American Landscape* (1856, Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid). On the bottom, central edge of the painting there is a very small human figure that proves the landscape's enormity. The rest of the painting consists of a vast view constructed with both a strong, dark middle ground that includes a tiny church on its peak and a muted and subtle background revealing a magnificent snowy mountain. The third system recommended by Humboldt, is the representation of danger

and the abyss, both concepts that can be placed under the aesthetic of the sublime where man can appreciate the overwhelming landscape.

II. The Colombian Chorographic Commission

What is the relationship between Humboldt's studies and systems and nineteenth century Colombian art? The German naturalist's legacy resides in the relationship that he developed between observing a physical landscape and depicting it in a manner that would enhance its grandeur and enrich to its maximum capacity its visual magnificence. The three systems, which in turn were endorsed to his followers and used by French, English and German travelers to South America radically changed the way nature was seen. In the case of Colombia, these European travelers, scientists and wanderers bestowed this knowledge both in drawing and in their writings. The profound idea of landscape both with objective and subjective possibilities, led to a new way of conveying the land that had not been used in Colombia before.

Both the Botanical Expedition and Humboldt's travels through Colombian grounds, led to establish the possibility of a different kind of art that would part from the colonial religious tradition. The *Viceroyalty of Nueva Granada* became the *Gran Colombia* with the nation's newly gained independence between 1810 and 1819. By 1830, Simón Bolívar, the military and political leader who led the independence from Spain, had died and Venezuela and Ecuador had separated. Colombia and Ecuador then formed the *Republic of Nueva Granada*. This new realm developed into a federal government in 1858 under the name of the *Granadine Confederation*, and then in 1863 it was baptized again as the *United States of Colombia*. Finally, in 1886 the Republic of Colombia was born as we know it today, and in 1903 the Panamanian territory became independent. Basically, a constant change from liberal to conservative governments and between a federal and a central form of administration, kept the newly born nation under constant governmental reconstruction.

Ever since the country gained its freedom from the Spanish monarchy, every single concept of state was in endless transformation. To develop self-sufficiency and a sovereignty that fitted a population comprised of Indigenous peoples, African slaves and Colombians with Spanish ancestry was a complex endeavor. Between the months of January 1850 and February 1859, the territory of the *Nueva Granada* was subjected for the first time to a systematic geographical study. This study lasted nine years under the command of the Italian military geographer, Colonel Agustín Codazzi. What this survey formulated was a serious registry of the geographical characteristics, the topographical uniqueness, the natural resources and the social conditions of a youthful nation. There was no official map of the land and so the need of establishing the geographical boundaries of the state, became the most important event in the history of national geography.

One of the main thoughts underlying the Botanical Expedition, Humboldt's trip and then, the Chorographic Commission, was the immense challenge that any sort of nineteenth-century Colombian excursion meant. The country's topography is complex, rugged and harsh, to say the least. Microclimates starting from low-lying plains to Snowy Mountain ranges rise up to 18,000 feet and converge in the division of the Andes Mountains that enter Colombia from the south and divide into three branches, or *Cordilleras*. Any sort of voyage through this tough and changing landscape was a great challenge. Transportation through these *Cordilleras* was mainly based on the navigation of the two main rivers that lay between the ranges, as well as on complicated mountain crossings on caravans of trained mules. To complicate matters even more, Colombia is a highly multi-ethnic country, where every region has its particular idiosyncrasy. From various indigenous groups to all sorts of *mestizo* populations and combinations of European, Indigenous and African blood, the mid-nineteenth-century observer had vast amounts of information to unravel. A scientific, artistic or political expedition was a deep confrontation of man versus nature.

For these reasons, deeply rooted in European trends into mid-century Positivism, the *Colombian Chorographic Commission* also reflected the need of organizing a country through its physical and human geography as a political means towards overseeing the rural landscape. Provinces that were isolated from the capital were reorganizing in order to build smaller independent states. Consequently, as evidence of the way science supported nineteenth-century interests of both imperialism and nation-state building, this Commission became the tool through which to acknowledge the immense diversity of peoples and places this nation had. President Mosquera, the sponsor of the Commission, was himself a military man who governed the country on three opportunities. His idea of geography as an instrument for governing and leading towards progress is best understood when he expresses:

“...the strategy of my army is not, and should not be offensive. I will design a war of positions, since I possess all the great charts that I commissioned Codazzi. Nobody knows the Republic as well as I do, my geography has been recognized and applauded by the scientific world.”(Borda, 1974)

The Colombian Chorographic Commission was a state enterprise, originally developed and financed by the government of Tomás Cipriano de Mosquera and finally undergone during the government of José Hilario López. Its nature was political, scientific and artistic. The term Chorographic comes from Ptolemy's teachings where geographic meant studying the entire world, while chorographic meant studying its smaller parts, basically, describing individual regions in all its components. A law passed through Congress on the 15th of May 1839, allowed the hiring of engineers and geographers to record a geographical chart. Due to political instability it took eleven years for this idea to be put into action. A new law, passed on the 29th of May 1849, stated that not only should this chart be erected, but a complete description of the Nueva Granada, including its products and resources should be completed. Unfortunately, this Commission was not continuous, for in 1854 a civil war broke out and José María Melo's dictatorship was unable to further financially support this enterprise.

This significant mission embraced four central aspects. First and foremost, the geographical phase where Agustín Codazzi was in charge of developing a complete description of the country, of mapping the physical geography and the chorographic aspect of each province. Second, the literary, entrusted to Manuel Ancizar who described the expeditions, customs, races and curiosities in his book *Pilgrimage of Alpha (Peregrinación de Alpha)*. Third, the graphic feature was commissioned originally to Carmelo Fernández, his role was to create images of the landscapes, caste types and genre scenes. This responsibility was later entrusted to Henry Price and then to Manuel María Paz³. Fourth and last was the botanical assignment, directed by Doctor José Geronimo Triana whose main job was to determine the medical value of newly encountered plant specimens.

The artistic goal of this journey, bequeathed many beautiful watercolors which in turn also became prints, as was the case of the Botanical Expedition and of von Humboldt's travels. Carmelo Fernández, the first painter in charge of the visual phase of the project, was born in Venezuela. He was in the army as well as being a draftsman, a painter, a printer and an engineer. Nephew of Venezuela's President José Antonio Páez, he met Bolívar and travelled extensively through Colombian territory during the different Independence military campaigns. He arrived in Colombia in 1849 and signed a contract with the Commission on the 10th of December 1850. Fernández captured the images that correspond to the Commissions first and second expeditions. His original duty was to illustrate Ancizar's descriptions, but this idea never took place. Carmelo Fernández's work for this enterprise is best described by Beatriz González:

“Fernández's work for the Commission is part of the binomial of art-science. He shows his capacity for observation, of he who feels things simply but at the same time can bind them into the truth of the scientific order. The truth which binds art and science can only be offered by a good artist, as was acclaimed by Humboldt. The real merit lies in the trespassing of the documentary barrier and converting it into art.”(González, 2013)

Fernández painted many watercolors of which only 29 remain at the National Library archives in Bogotá. These include landscapes, natural phenomena, and places of historical and archeological value, while also incorporating races, types and customs. He basically travelled the north-eastern region of the country known today as the territories of Boyacá, Santander and Northern Santander. His settings, those that support the notions of landscape as a means of building a national identity, involve the inevitable eye influenced by the Romantic viewer. In the *Field of the Battle of Boyacá (Terreno de la Batalla de Boyacá)*, Fernández places the spectator on a high point from where he can observe two men on the foreground with their back towards the eyewitness. He also softly records a hillside background of where the famous final battle for Independence against the Spanish was fought. The position in which the viewer finds himself observing the observers, recalls Caspar David Friedrich's works where the sublimity of the landscape overwhelms the onlooker who can only project that immensity towards himself. In *Wanderer above the sea of fog* (1818, Kunsthalle, Hamburg), Friedrich positions the viewer behind this bystander so as to

³ All of the Chorographic Commission watercolors can be seen as high resolution images at:
<http://www.bibliotecanacional.gov.co/content/1%C3%A1minas-de-la-comisi%C3%B3n-corogr%C3%A1fica>

contemplate contemplation. The wanderer perceives the landscape in a taciturn manner in which not only clouds and mountains are being considered, but life in itself has become that object of contemplation.



Carmelo Fernández. *Territory of the Battle of Boyacá*. 1851. Watercolor on paper. Biblioteca Nacional de Colombia

Something formally similar occurs in *View of the Nevado de Chita (Vista del Nevado de Chita)* where again Fernández places two small peasants dressed in their typical attire on the left hand corner of the foreground. The two figures with their small dog, meet around a bonfire which in turn reflects the coldness of the environment when sitting on the hills of the Chita Sierra Nevada at 19,000 feet above sea level. The different planes that organize this image remind the observer of the laws of composition taught in academic circles where a reference to atmospheric perspective lingers.



Carmelo Fernández. *View of the Nevado de Chita*. 1851. Watercolor on paper. Biblioteca Nacional de Colombia

In *The Passageways of Ocaña (Callejones de Ocaña)*, Fernández portrays the cliff-like paths that the traveler must surpass on his mule. The visual construction of this image again recalls the proper compositional rules developed and imported by Humboldt through one of his systems, in this case, a variation of the visual crown arrangement. First, a dark U-shaped picture plane that contrasts with the deepness of the mountain, second, the downhill precipice that must be followed in order to access the foreground path, and third, in the distant background, the suggestion that the landscape continues further into the receding distance. The three riders depicted here must challenge themselves and their animals to cross this complicated route.



Carmelo Fernandez. *The Passageways of Ocaña*. 1851. Water color on paper.
Biblioteca Nacional de Colombia

A parallel of these tropical images could lay in the Romantic portrayal of the Mount Saint Bernard Pass in the Italian Alps or the Saint Gothard Pass in the Swiss Alps. As part of the journey to Italy, the French artist Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg, painted *Avalanche in the Alps* (1803, Tate Gallery London), standing for the category of the sublime. That same category that proved the enlightened man that his rational power could not outsmart nature's strength and that not even man could control the wild and the infernal. According to Ricardo Rivadeneira:

"The prints of the Chorographic Commission are inspired in the romantic tradition inherited from European Neoclassicism, the same tradition that was witness to the feeling of the sublime in the frame of the aesthetic experience of the end of the eighteenth-century. For these romantic travelers, the descriptive nature of natural and cultural events, established the deep, transcendent meaning of their intellectual voyage. Thus drawing and painting landscapes became an activity that merged both practical and scientific aspirations as well as sensitive elements of daily life." (Rivadeneira)

The second painter of the Chorographic Commission who was in charge of the third journey of the Commission was the Englishman Henry Price. He was a musician, a teacher, a draftsman, a miniaturist and a photographer. After growing up in London and New York, he married the daughter of a Colombian businessman and moved to Bogotá. Carmelo Fernandez and Codazzi had distanced from each other, until Fernandez simply quit his participation with the enterprise. The truth behind Price's involvement in the Commission is not clear due to the fact that at the time he was the Director of the Philharmonic Orchestra in the capital, so he may have been invited to replace Fernandez because of his father-in-law's relationship with Codazzi or because of his teachings in the art of landscape at the School of the *Espíritu Santo*. (González, 2013). His journey comprised the current territories of Tolima, Antioquia and Caldas. The approximate 80 watercolors⁴ illustrate difficult passages, ethnical groups, the mining trade and the archeological richness. Unfortunately, during his travels he became ill and had to abandon the task. Price honors the very idea of the sensibility of the nineteenth-century traveler as explained by Esteban Rozo:

⁴ 25 watercolors are kept at the Biblioteca Nacional de Colombia (National Library) Archives and 55 at the Banco de la Republica (Bank of the Republic Art Collection) in Bogotá.

“To begin, we could state that the traveler’s sensibility needs to resolve contradictions and questions that result inevitable to the ‘civilizing mission’. How to dominate a nature where the figure of man practically disappears, even when it is not manifesting itself in its extreme smallness before its extreme greatness? Is it possible to colonize a disproportionate, threatening nature whose power and risks are much greater than human strength? Precisely, these paradoxes tend to resolve themselves initially by transforming nature into an object of aesthetic enjoyment, meaning, that it is recognized and developed as a source of emotions and sensations. The other side of this recognition is the sensibility that the traveler constructs and through which he can access the feelings that nature transmits to him.” (Roza, 1999)

In *The Guadalupe Waterfall* (*La cascada de Guadalupe, Provincia de Medellín*), the sublimity of the cascade owes itself not only to its physical strength and features, but to the four tiny men who sit below it. They are not the modern traveler, quite the opposite; they have been placed by Price as part of the landscape. The artist painted them at a very small scale so that by contrast, they give the waterfall its greatness. They dwell on the bottom part of the image, whereas on the top the landscape crawls away into the remote space that is delicately traced behind the chain of mountains. In *The Guatapé Peak* (*El Peñol de Guatapé*) and *The Entreríos Peak* (*El Peñol de Entreríos*), the two natural peaks work in the same manner as the waterfall. The element of the huge rock is exalted by the tiny figurines, which, unlike the artist, either watch it or walk by it without being too emotionally disturbed by its presence.



Henry Price. *The Guadalupe Waterfall*. 1852. Water color on paper. Biblioteca Nacional de Colombia



Henry Price. *The Guatapé Peak*. 1852. Water color on paper. Biblioteca Nacional de Colombia



Henry Price. *The Entreríos Peak*. 1852. Water color on paper. Biblioteca Nacional de Colombia

Unlike these last images, in *Junction of the Grande River and the Chicol River (Confluencia de Río Grande y de Río Chico)*, the loneliness of the landscape is evident. Only the artist-viewer seems to be able to enjoy this setting. Again, Price proves to be a master of atmospheric perspective where the sharpness of the foreground gives a presence of being and existing as well as working as an assessment of the type of plants and grasses that may be found in the Province of Antioquia. The fairness of the background and the way in which the mountain has been centered in the image, recollects the fact that this frame is being studied, viewed and enjoyed by an eye trained in the European tradition of dominating and constructing the natural landscape.



Henry Price. *Junction of the River Grande and the River Chico*. 1852. Water color on paper. Biblioteca Nacional de Colombia

The third and last artist was Coronel Manuel María Paz who joined the Commission after Price's sick-leave. Paz had been Codazzi's disciple and friend at the Military Academy and so was chosen by the Italian over other candidates. Manuel María Paz worked during the last seven journeys of the Commission. The 96 watercolors that have been attributed to Paz seem less artistically significant. Not only were they retouched at later stages, but there has been an ongoing debate on the lack of homogenous quality that exists in Paz's strokes in the works that have been attributed to his name. (Rivadeneira). He paints the multiple ways of life, objects and scenery but in a more simple and schematized manner. According to Beatriz González, one of the other main problems with Paz's images is the fact that he used photographic processes, such as painting from daguerreotypes. (González, 2013). For example, in the *Salto del Tequendama* watercolor of 1855 he used a daguerreotype of the same place by George Crowther (1854, Private Collection, USA) who at the time was located in Colombia.



Manuel María Paz. **The Tequendama Falls**. 1855. Watercolor on paper. Biblioteca Nacional de Colombia

In *Vista de Sierra Nevada de Chita*, Paz portrays the same snow-capped mountain range that Carmelo Fernandez had already depicted but as seen from the other side of the *Cordillera*, from the Eastern plains. Images like these capture the vastness of the Colombian panorama but do not seem to be able to communicate the greatness, the magnitude and the feeling. The Cordillera water colors appear simpler and more schematic than those of Fernandez and Price. The main interest appears to be the population and their daily activities rather than the splendor of the mountains. The men do not seem physically overwhelmed by the size of the backdrop, they go about with their cattle and their grazing, and the *Chita Sierra Nevada* simply acts as the setting that gives the watercolor a placement. In fact, Manuel Maria Paz's artistic strength remains in his watercolors of the rural population and their activities. One example of this is *Men of the prairies shoeing their cattle and cutting their ears off* (*Llanerossherrando Ganado y recortándoleslasorejas*). The inhabitants of places like the Eastern plains are captured in their spirit, with their typical clothes and gestures representing the activity that stands for their land and tradition.



Manuel María Paz. **Men of the prairies shoeing their cattle and cutting their ears off**. 1855-1859. Watercolor on paper. Biblioteca Nacional de Colombia

Something similar occurs visually with the *View of the Huila Volcano taken from the town of San Agustín* (*Vista del Nevadodel Huila, tomadadesde el pueblo de San Agustín*). The idea of distance is captured, but not the feeling of sumptuousness and grandeur that the previous artists had managed to develop. The town seems to be here at a safe distance from Colombia's highest volcano (17, 602 ft.). The two small houses as well as the man and his animals may look small, but not threatened by nature's possible explosive power. The way Paz has illustrated the landscape does not use the visual methods applied by the previous artists of the Commission to portray the sense of remoteness and vastness. His composition is very simple and plain

and does not seem to give the sense of space an individuality and uniqueness beyond that of representing places. Paz's depiction of peoples definitely seems to be his strength.



Manuel María Paz. *View of the Huila Volcano taken from the town of San Agustín*. 1855-1859. Watercolor on paper. Biblioteca Nacional de Colombia

III. Conclusion

Understanding the Chorographic Commission from an artistic point of view seems complex and dangerous. At no time should a generalization about European direct influence be made. For example, neither Fernandez nor Paz traveled to Europe or studied directly with painters from abroad. In their case, they were both members of the army who were basically self-taught. Their value appears precisely in the way in which they were able to portray a land and a population that had not been represented before. The nineteenth-century man appears before this expedition as a representative of a complete education, political, musical, military, photographic and engineering amongst some areas of instruction. They embody the idea of the citizen that makes part of the group of people who construct a nation's identity with each and every one of the areas of knowledge they have at hand.

A key event in Colombian geography, politics, history and art, this Commission proves to be an effort created by a group of people who believed in the importance of organizing, studying and classifying. The legacy also stands by a heritage that developed an enterprise secured under the branches of science, art and literature. A means for the second-half of the century to have a sense of belonging and of adaptation to a land which was now theirs and which had to be appropriated and grasped as their own. A country that would constantly be divided, politically, ideologically and geographically and whose merit lies in maintaining its physical, democratic and idiosyncratic unity for the next 150 years.

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