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Thinking Like an Artisan: The Ostroms' Contribution to Political Economy

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This version: March 24, 2022

Abstract: Principles of design and artisanship infuse the scholarly output of Vincent and Elinor Ostrom, informing their approach to public choice and the political analysis of institutions. Since the publication of Elinor Ostrom's 'Governing the Commons' in 1990, analysts have rightly advanced the use of Lin's design principles in innovative ways. However, the Ostroms' emphasis on principles of design and artisanship significantly pre-date Lin's Nobel Prize-winning monograph, having been previously thought through in Vincent's work on public administration and political analysis and Lin's studies of metropolitan policing. This paper relates the Ostroms' foundational work on design and artisanship through a comparative analysis of selections from their scholarly output and other artifacts, including their built environment and their Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis. It then advances the thesis that one of the Ostroms' significant contributions to public choice and political economy is their development of an alternative approach to policy analysis, their theory of artisanship, which grapples with human affairs in the context of political economy.

“Thinking Like an Artisan: The Ostroms’ Contribution to Public Choice and Political Economy”

Artisanship is a critical process to the Ostromian research agenda and one of the distinguishing factors of the Bloomington school of political economy, including its work on public choice. It is a process underpinning such important scholarly output as the Ostroms’ work on federalism, institutional analysis, polycentricity, and self-governance of the commons (McGinnis and Walker 2010; Wagner 2005). While artisanship has been acknowledged as being critical to the Ostroms’ work (Aligica 2018; Aligica and Sabetti 2014; McCay and 2014), a thorough investigation of how it is operationalized is warranted, particularly with respect to public choice.

The need to do so is perhaps highlighted by the Ostroms’ own work to align their scholarship on artisanship with the efforts of fellow public choice theorists, James Buchanan included, to combat utility maximization. References to artisanship occur throughout the Ostroms’ publications on public choice, including “The Quest for Meaning in Public Choice” (E. Ostrom and V. Ostrom 2004). Here, they prescribe artisanship as an antidote to utility maximization: “Tocqueville was convinced . . . that the exercise of self-governing capabilities would depend on the exercise of an artisanship grounded in an art and science of association. Maximizing utility without attention to the way that ideas shape deeds leads people to trample civilization underfoot” (65). There is an art and a creativity to engaging with other people to form institutions that address collective, or public choice, problems in productive ways.

Understanding the utility of Bloomington school artisanship in the context of public choice requires us to grasp three things. First is the fabric of artisanship as the Ostroms conceived of and articulated it in their scholarship, and second are the intellectual threads that they wove together to form this fabric. Third are the common patterns between the Ostroms’

scholarly artifacts and material artifacts, including things they made and things they collected.

These common patterns reveal that the Ostroms maintained the same mental frameworks in their intellectual lives and as they did in their material world, supporting the assertion that the Ostroms understood the direct correlation between ideas and the (im)material world of human experience.

These three facets of the Ostroms' work with artisanship can be turned toward the field of public choice, which they helped developed at the invitation of James Buchanan. We will see how the only serious engagement with a Bloomington notion of artisanship from the public choice tradition seems to be James Buchanan's "Natural and Artifactual Man" (Aligica 2018; Carini 2021). Artisanship develops and explains several tenets central to public choice—human agency, decision making, etc.—that simultaneously address the intellectual poverty caused by positivism (Aligica 2018; E. Ostrom). Perhaps most critically, the deep intellectual concepts informing Ostromian artisanship reinforce the assertion that institutional design and emergent or "spontaneous" order need not be mutually exclusive but can and do exist in a symbiotic relationship (Aligica 2018; Candela 2021).

A Bloomington Approach to Artisanship

The Ostroms operationalize the concept of artisanship throughout their scholarship in various ways. For instance, they use artisanship to propose an alternative approach to conducting political analysis (V. Ostrom [1976] 2012) or to encourage people to develop the art and science of association through political engagement as citizens (E. Ostrom 1990, 2005; V. Ostrom 2008). The most common references to artisanship seem to occur in the context of illustrating large-scale assertions about human affairs, for instance, how human beings act politically or associate with one another. There are those instances where Vincent, in particular, devotes several paragraphs of an article or chapter to explaining what it means to be an artisan of

political science or citizenship (V. Ostrom [1976] 2012; 1980; 1997). Other references to “artisanship” occur in shorthand, particularly when illustrating big picture ideas (V. Ostrom 1994; 2008).

Elinor does not expound upon artisanship and artisanal processes as Vincent does, at least directly. In *Understanding Institutional Diversity*, she refers to “artisanship” as a means by which individuals change their situations while elaborating upon the materials with which one works as an artisan, which here are rules:

As scholars and as policy analysts, we need to learn the artisanship of working with rules so as to improve how situations operate over time. . . . When individuals learn the artisanship of crafting rules, they can experiment and learn to create more productive outcomes (as well as participants) over time. Learning to craft rules that attract and encourage individuals who share norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness, or who learn them over time, is a fundamental skill needed in all democratic societies.” (E. Ostrom 2005, 132–33)

In *Governing the Commons*, Elinor similarly references “artisanship” one time, in the final chapter. She writes, “Analyzing the in-depth case studies can deepen one’s appreciation of human artisanship in shaping and reshaping the very situations within which individuals must make decisions and bear the consequences of actions taken on a day-to-day basis” (E. Ostrom 1990, 185). Elinor thus describes artisanship as a science of crafting and shaping rules (and design principles) rather than laws of the natural sciences (E. Ostrom [1984] 2014, 99), and she often cites V. Ostrom (1980) for its articulation of artisanship and language-based rules in the context of administration.

Vincent’s theory of artisanship is bricolage, constructed from various intellectual threads—Hobbes, Simon, Searle, and Hume—that he compiles and weaves into a coherent theory. We see this in his theory of artisanship (Ostrom [1976] 2012):

Nature and the realm of natural facts can . . . be distinguished from culture and the realm of artifacts. Artifacts are created by reference to *human knowledge and action*. They are a

combination of natural events organized in relation to conceptions held by an *artisan* and used to create some *new artificial event*. As such, they reflect *natural elements, elements of human understanding and elements of human passions, feelings or sentiments*. Natural elements are selected and combined by relying upon a knowledge of cause-and-effect relationships. But the *process* of selecting and combining natural elements is always informed by some objective or purpose where *the intention is to produce some desired effect*. The criteria or standards used in selecting from alternative possibilities may be viewed as having reference to *purposes or values* that are grounded in human passions, desires, wants, or feelings. *The nature of artifacts always entails consideration of values*. In this sense, all artifacts represent *a union of both fact and value*. Discourses about the design and performance of artifacts necessarily include reference to propositions that are joined by “ought” and “ought not” as well as “is” and “is not.” ([1976] 2012, 14; emphasis added)

From Hobbes, Vincent derives the trope of “present means” (V. Ostrom 1997, 206), and Simon ([1969] 1996) is the source for Vincent’s assertions about the “union of fact and value.” Searle (1969) provides a twentieth-century explication of the distinction between “natural fact” and “institutional fact,” while more than two hundred years earlier, Hume ([1742] 1948) portrays this distinction in terms of the “natural” and “artificial.”

In sum, Ostrom’s ([1976] 2012) artisan uses (1) “human knowledge and action” to transform (2) a “conception” into (3) “some desired effect” by working through (4) a “process” that produces (5) “value” (15). Vincent revises this theory for the context of administrations in Ostrom (1980) and provides further narrative explanation and clarification in Ostrom (1997). While Ostrom ([1976] 2012) grapples with the value-laden choices that emerge from the decision-making process of the artisan who creates artifacts, Ostrom (1980) takes a different turn by positing that an administration can be considered an artifact comprised of people are themselves both artisans and artifacts. As artisans, people use language to craft and change the rules with which they construct the organization. As artifacts, people are themselves shaped by the rules that govern the organization.

Ostromian Artisanry in Scholarship and Material Culture: A Tale of Two Workshops

As is well known, the Ostroms drew close connections between their work in an actual workshop, where they handcrafted much of their own furniture, and the work that they undertook at the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis, which they founded in 1973 at Indiana University Bloomington. The Ostroms have explained that their practices of artisanry influenced their formation of the Workshop (Allen, 2012). Elinor Ostrom relates:

One of the reasons we called this place a workshop instead of a center was because of working with Paul [Goodman] and understanding what artisanry was. You might be working on something like a cabinet and thinking about the design of it, and thinking this idea versus that idea, and then Paul could pick up a board and say, oh, you shouldn't use this one because it will split. He could see things in wood that we couldn't. So the whole idea of artisans and apprentices and the structure of a good workshop really made an impression on us. ("What a Prize," *Hoosier Times*, December 5, 2009)

The Workshop thus was named in part after the Ostroms' experience with learning to become wood workers by apprenticing in Paul Goodman's workshop near Lake Lemon, just outside of Bloomington.¹

There was another reason why the Ostroms called their research initiative something other than an "institute" or "center," per typical university procedures for interdisciplinary institutions. Vincent explains, "The Workshop was an idea for a kind of laboratory. We wanted something that would be a name that would be distinct and, therefore, rules and regulations in the university would not apply, and we would have a chance to work out arrangements that we would find most productive" (Allen, 2012). Vincent's description of the Workshop reveals his entrepreneurial and political initiative (what we might call academic entrepreneurialism) at the constitutional level. Indeed, the Workshop functioned as a "self-governing institution" that was

¹ The recently retired curator of campus art at Indiana University Bloomington informally relayed to me (in December 2021) that the Ostroms went to Goodman's workshop on Thursdays and Sundays and kept to this schedule religiously.

produced and sustained by rules, which enabled knowledge transfer from master to student to occur through collaboration “in productive research efforts” (Jagger 2009, 1). The Workshop was also influenced by other academic programs at various universities, including those at University of Chicago, with a workshop focused on federalism, and UCLA, which offered an interdisciplinary colloquium on mathematics in the behavioral sciences that both Ostroms attended (Jagger 2009).

Vincent believed that a distinctive name would allow him and Elinor to maximize creative license over the rules for engagement and, thus, achieve flexibility in undertaking a value-laden approach to political science that investigated changeable rules rather than immutable natural laws (E. Ostrom [1984] 2014). This distinctive name, “Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis,” emphasizes the dual approach to solving collective problems that the Ostroms and their colleagues and students undertook in their research agenda by using theory as a tool of analysis in tandem with empirical research and applied public policy.

The Ostroms integrated theory, practice, and ecology into their material artifacts, including the many pieces of furniture they constructed. One piece of furniture is a coffee table created for their home, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Vincent and Elinor Ostrom's coffee table (top view).



Photograph by Jaime Carini (October 27, 2020).

The coffee table retains distinctive elements of its original ecology, with one side of the table following the grain of the wood (a pattern, or “natural fact,” formed by the annual cycle of rainfall). The other three edges of the coffee table reveal the influence of the artisan upon the wood, particularly the application of a technological tool, like a hand saw or table saw, to change the wood natural curves of the wood into straight edges. Vincent Ostrom (1997) writes how he (and Elinor) constructed this coffee table:

Building a coffee table with a cabinetmaker involved the use of present means to achieve some future apparent good that began as a concept—fiction of the mind—and was

worked through using two odd boards cut from black walnut trees. The cut edge of one, a piece of slab wood, became the surface of the table. A konky knot had to be removed and filled with a wedged replacement. Another gnarled and splintered board was used to construct a set of legs. The curves used to shape the legs were later used to construct a lamp from blond-colored gumwood, which is now located in a corner opposite the coffee table. Principles of heterogeneity and complementarity were used to put together pieces of furniture that serve both utilitarian [useful] and aesthetic purposes in the ecology and economy of a household. (206)

Woven into this description of the process of turning “two odd boards” into a coffee table are various references to political analysis. We see, for instance, a Hobbesian reference—“use of present means”—and a nod to Lachmann’s “principle of heterogeneity.” Finally, “utilitarian [useful] and aesthetic purposes” reflects Simon’s ([1969] 1996) “union of fact and value” (V. Ostrom 1997, 206). There also seems to be a bubbling up of thinking on complex systems, perhaps even social-ecological systems, in Vincent’s acknowledgement that a household has its own “ecology and economy.”

Vincent goes on to nest this description within references to Ibn Khaldûn’s monolithic work on culture and the scholarship of other political scientists: “I presume that such activities are expressive of what Ibn Khaldûn meant by culture; and my reflection on that experience in light of concepts advanced by Hobbes and Lachmann is an effort to use a science of culture to understand how the phenomena inherent in artisanship-artifact relationships might function in democratic self-governing societies” (p. 206). Though this is but one example of how Vincent operationalizes artisanship to advance large-scale ideas about civilization and culture, it is possibly the most exemplary, for here Vincent provides us with a case study—the construction of his coffee table—that he deems illustrative of a Tocquevillian art and science of association. Ostrom thus shows us how material artifacts are microcosms of the same principles that one finds in self-governing societies.

Like Vincent, Lin's rendition of how she and Vincent constructed their coffee table shifts between descriptions of the mental processes involved in the artisanal process (which involved contestation) and references to the processes involved in sorting out puzzles critical to political economy. In this interview with Barbara Allen (2012), Lin correlates designing the legs for the coffee table (see Figure 2), with the process of working out polycentricity. I have bolded text that could also refer to political economic processes:

Lin: "That was our first table that we ever made."

Vincent: "And we had a **long, long argument** about how to make the legs for the table.

Lin: (laughs)

Vincent: "And **we finally worked out that**. And after we worked out that, as the basis of making the legs, we used the same design to make the lamp over in the corner."

Lin: "The square versus circle argument. I don't know which one of us wanted square legs and which wanted round, but **we kept, back and forth**, and so we have square with round inside." (chuckles)

Vincent: "And flat pieces of wood."

Lin: "**So, it's a little like polycentricity that we are able to get some things on the outside and other things on the inside.**" (chuckles) "So, we're kind of pleased with those legs."

Figure 2

Vincent and Elinor Ostrom's coffee table. Ostrom Workshop, Indiana University Bloomington.



Photograph by Jaime Carini (December 13, 2021).

The coffee table legs closest to the viewer are square (or have a straight edge) on the outside and curved on the inside, just as Elinor articulated. Also notice that the legs placed further away from the viewer have been inverted, with the square edge placed inside and the curved edge placed outside. What might look like creative variety to us, alternating the placement of square and curved edges, could very well be additional outcomes of the contestation that went into the formation of these legs.

Why would scholars of political theory and policy analysis take the time to describe the material artifacts they constructed in Paul Goodman's shop? Perhaps it is because they were themselves concerned with what it means to analyze and understand an artifact. V. Ostrom (1982) writes: "Are artifacts created by design to be studied as though they were natural phenomena? Or, does the study of artifacts require that the intentions, conceptions, and calculations of the designers be taken into account in understanding the nature of an artifact. These questions pose important theoretical and methodological problems for political scientists" (238).

Three final points remain about the correlation between the Ostroms' material artifacts and scholarly output. These are identifying patterns (and deviations from patterns), considering ecology, and embracing eclecticism. First, artifacts created by people reveal patterns that can become predictable. An example of one pattern in the Ostroms' material artifacts is the privileging of the "natural fact" of the wood by retaining the live edge and displaying the grain of the wood (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Vincent and Elinor Ostrom's dining table. Ostrom Room, Hamilton Lugar School of Global and International Studies, Indiana University Bloomington.



Photograph by Jaime Carini (December 16, 2021).

Like the coffee table, the dining table has a live edge and has been cut so that the tabletop features the beauty of the grain of the wood. It too was constructed for utility and aesthetic purposes in the Ostroms' Bloomington home. However, presumably because the function of the dining table slightly differs from that of a coffee table, the top of the dining table has been protected with polyurethane or some similar coating.

Second, it is important to consider the ecology for which an artifact is created. Tables that the Ostroms constructed for the Workshop's Tocqueville room (see Figure 4) deviate from the

pattern of privileging the live edge and wood grain tabletop. They are less fancy and more utilitarian to better serve their purpose of facilitating discussions over intellectual puzzles and to fit into the ecology of the academic building.

Figure 4

Vincent and Elinor Ostrom's tables. Tocqueville room, Ostrom Workshop, Indiana University Bloomington.



Photograph by Jaime Carini (August 26, 2021).

Third is embracing eclecticism, which we can see from the initial example of the Ostroms' coffee table and also from some of the artifacts that the Ostroms purchased from various tribes in the American Southwest, Pacific Northwest, and Manitoulin Island (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Some of the Ostroms' artifacts from the "common" people. Ostrom Room, Hamilton Lugar School of Global and International Studies, Indiana University Bloomington.



Photograph by Jaime Carini (December 16, 2021).

Eclecticism in the Ostroms' collection of artifacts manifests as various objects, ranging from baskets to sculptures of fish to pieces of visual art (not pictured). Yet, this eclecticism is tied together by the color palette, which I had noticed as being neutral, earthy colors, or what the retiring curator of campus art for all of Indiana University's campuses described to me as "the colors of the common people." The Ostroms' academic scholarship likewise is permeated with their eclecticism: institutional, methodological (including their academic sources), and political (Craiuu 2021). Identifying patterns and deviations from these patterns, considering ecology, and

embracing eclecticism can enable social science practitioners, political analysts, and even citizens to create rules with which to shape their circumstances.

The Artisanry of Crafting and Executing Research Agendas

[In this section, my intent is to work out an idea from my Ostrom Workshop advisor, which is to “read” Vincent and Lin’s coffee table as an example of how one might consider a research agenda or read a research paper and to apply the process of making a coffee table to the process of creating a theory/research agenda/research paper. Vincent’s contribution to a section of the constitution of Alaska is one example to which I will devote a subsection, because Vincent talks significantly about the meaning of words.

Hoelscher (2021), a book on art as information ecology, will inform this section. Also, I want to emphasize how the artist has to make choices, linking this to V. Ostrom’s and Buchanan’s concern for individual choice over utility maximization. I also intend to argue that the element of choice is partially responsible for shaping complex adaptive systems, drawing upon Anthony Giddens’ (1979) *Central Problems in Social Theory*, which Elinor Ostrom includes in the references of *Governing the Commons* (1990) but does not engage with directly in the text of her book. These links allow me to lead into the next section with a claim that public choice is ultimately a study of complex, adaptive systems and orders.]

Bloomington Artisanry and Public Choice

A Bloomington approach to artisanry emphasizes four key tenets of public choice: personal agency, a rational individual who makes decisions, an approach to decision-making that encompasses both fact and value, and a reunion of “art and science” that rejects positivism. This scholarly position stems from the very foundation of the Workshop, as Vincent Ostrom’s (1973, p. 1) proposal for the Workshop reveals in Figure 6:

Figure 6

Excerpt from Vincent Ostrom’s proposal and information statement for the Workshop.

The primary focus of the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis is the development of political theory as an analytical tool to be used in the design and conduct of empirical research and in the study of public policy problems. An inability to "see the whole picture"

V. Ostrom (1973) explains that the proposed Workshop unites two intellectual thrusts, public choice and organization theory, in a research agenda that integrates “political theory, empirical research and policy analysis . . . to advance knowledge by the essential connections of theory with research and policy analysis” (3–4). This research agenda extends the Ostroms’ recent advocacy for applying public choice theory to studies of public administration in an article published in *Public Administration Review* (V. Ostrom & E. Ostrom 1971). They maintained this scholarly position and investigated this line of inquiry throughout their careers.

An Ostromian engagement with artisanship at the nexus of public administration and public choice contributes to both fields, which share research interests in decision-making processes that occur in non-market situations. Artisanship is itself a process of choice by which an artisan makes decisions about techniques and outcomes. [further develop this paragraph]

Moreover, the Ostroms also worked to import public administration into public choice. Vincent, in particular, was willing to challenge certain aspects of public choice at the core, as Aligica (2015) explains, leading to the opinion that innovations in public choice lay at the margins rather than the core (V. Ostrom 1993). V. Ostrom (1993) presents examples of topics enabling these marginal innovations, ranging from errors in information sharing to the importance of ideas, institutions, and norms. Among these topics is “Jim Buchanan’s (1979) emphasis upon the artifactual character of human individuality” (V. Ostrom 1993, 163), which applies Ostromian artisanship to an individual person (Carini 2021).

Aligica (2018) engages with this concept of the “artifactual,” as developed by both Buchanan and V. Ostrom, and articulates how the two scholars worked to form a coherent “system of ideas” unified by this key concept:

The particular nature of the Buchanan–Ostrom approach is fully revealed only if we focus on one key concept, which despite its lack of salience in the Public Choice theory

and the intellectual histories of the field, captures best the gist of their core insights and attitudes: The concept of “artefactual” and through it, an entire cluster of related notions such as “artefact,” “constructivism” and “artisanship.” (p. 1107)

Aligica (2018) also details how an epistemological perspective—“constructivism of the artefactual”—that emerges from considerations of artisanship enabled V. Ostrom and Buchanan to offer an alternative order of knowledge, which differed from the scientism that had dominated intellectual pursuits since the nineteenth century. E. Ostrom ([1982] 2014) similarly rejects positivism for contributing to the creation of an academic climate that valued methodology to the exclusion of theory.

Positivistic-influenced methodologies deal with what are called the facts of the natural sciences while deeming other ways of knowing the world and other types of fact as unscientific. The Ostroms and Buchanan are not the only scholars who rejected the binary between “science” and “not science” created by positivism; others include Anthony Giddens (1979), F. A. Hayek (1988), John R. Searle (1969), and Herbert Simon ([1969] 1996). Searle (1969), for instance, articulated how people communicate about the world in terms of “institutional fact” that contain more information than mere data about the physical world, which he terms “brute fact.” Simon ([1969] 1996), writing about organizational development in the context of studying artificial intelligence, made the important distinction between “fact” and “value” that the Ostroms incorporated into their own work.

Decisions based on “fact” and “value” are often made in complex systems where the boundaries between the natural and institutional worlds are not always clear-cut. V. Ostrom (1982) writes: “Knowledge, both of techniques and design criteria, is thus essential to the conduct of the American experiments in constitutional rule” (251). An epistemology that acknowledges the importance of (1) fact and value and (2) techniques and design criteria

The literature detailing art as a complex system highlights the distinctions between the simple, closed systems of the physical sciences that create an ecology in which equilibrium can be achieved and the open systems that foster an ecology which enables feedback, learning, and connectivity between the artifact, the artisan, and the social-ecological system in which the artifact resides. *Governing the Commons* describes numerous cases along these lines, using them to extrapolate “design principles” (E. Ostrom 1990). This book has been described as a piece of scholarship that contributes to the field of new institutionalism, but it can also be thought of as a work describing people and people groups as artisans of their own political situations working things out in non-market arenas. In this sense, *Governing the Commons* is infused with public choice theory, one of the fundamental intellectual thrusts of the Ostrom Workshop, and it contributes to public choice literature the perspective of practitioners conducting policy analysis of administrative techniques that have developed within the localized system itself, rather than being imposed upon by external, monolithic powers who stand outside the system.

Conclusion

Mitchell’s (1988) assessment of the Bloomington School aligns the work of Vincent and Elinor Ostrom with that of James Buchanan, with later assessments fleshing out the contributions of what Mitchell (1988) dubbed the Bloomington School of Public Choice. [add more about these assessments, particularly how artisanship/artifact has not been accounted for in these assessments; this supports Aligica (2018)’s claim about its lack of salience]

My initial forays into this examination of artisanship as a theory of complex systems and emergent orders, following Aligica (2018), is most likely the beginning of a longer-term project to trace some of the intellectual threads that the Ostroms wove together throughout their scholarship into distinguishable tropes. Beyond Aligica (2018), taking Bloomington artisanship

seriously requires us to acknowledge that artisanship touches upon every facet of Ostromian scholarship, starting with public choice and including commons governance, institutional analysis, polycentricity, and social ecological systems. The Ostroms joined scholars who worked to reject some of the lingering ideas from the nineteenth century that continued to exert a negative impact upon disciplinary epistemologies in the twentieth century. The Ostroms' construction of a Workshop, for instance, challenges the reader to look beyond the nineteenth and twentieth century vision of the artist as a rogue professional and individualistic hero who critiqued society. Their vision of a Workshop prompts us to look towards the eighteenth century, when positivism had not yet taken hold, and perhaps even farther back to the Renaissance, where arts and crafts activities were conducted in workshops where people with heterogenous skill sets worked together. The Ostroms' vision of artisanship may yield a productive research agenda at the margins of public choice, but this vision continues to challenge the core of public choice scholarship.

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