

Silpa Bhirasri

The Father of Contemporary Art in Thailand*

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1. The Changing Cultural Context

Thai cultural history during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is one of rapid change. One crucial factor leading to change was western colonialism, although Thailand was one of the only three countries in Asia that succeeded in maintaining their independence. In the case of Thailand, this success was achieved through both internal reform and diplomatic flexibility. It was under such prevailing internal and external conditions that adoption of western art occurred.

The reign of King Rama IV (1851-1868) already witnessed acceptance in Thai society of western-style architecture as evident in a number of new palaces, shop houses, and residential buildings. In visual arts, Khrua In Khong was the first Thai artist to adopt the West's realist style in his paintings. In creating these works, some of which depicted western townscapes, he both followed the laws of perspective and relied on modern colour and light-and-shade techniques.

The trend in this type of cultural assimilation continued into the reign of King Chulalongkorn, or Rama V, who succeeded his father in 1868. He made several trips abroad and brought back from Europe

*Translated by Theera Nuchpiam, this article was first published in Thai by Silpakorn University in *Varasarn Mahavidhyalai Silpakorn (Silpakorn University Journal)*, September 1992-February 1993.

experiences that proved useful for his modernisation effort. Many important changes took place under his reign, including administrative reform and the introduction of modern education, technology and art into Thai society. A number of throne halls, government office buildings, and residences of wealthy aristocratic families were built in western style. The interior decorations of these buildings featured western-style paintings and sculptures. These works were mostly either imported from Europe or created by European artists commissioned to work in Thailand. There were also at this time works produced by the creative talent of Thai artists who had gained opportunities to engage in western-style artistic activity.

2. Training in Thai Craftsmanship in the Past

Amidst this rapid change traditional Thai craftsmen were confronted with a formidable challenge. They ordinarily acquired training in craftsmanship either passed down from their elders or from Buddhist monks at various monasteries. There were also those formally trained in the Palace's assorted crafts department known as "Chang Sip Moo". In all cases, these craftsmen were taught Thai art and ancient traditions.

Knowledge of western art among Thai artists and craftsmen in those days was rare or virtually non-existent. Though interest in western art had grown rapidly, no formal education in this field was available.

Only towards the end of King Chulalongkorn's reign was a craft school – the Rajaburana Craft School – founded. The King nevertheless passed away in 1910, three years before the school was formally instituted as Poh Chang School (or School for Craftsmanship Development) to offer study programmes in art and crafts as well as art education.

Assimilation of western art continued, with increasing demands for western-style works, such as life-like sculptures and statues, which traditional Thai craftsmen were not professionally in the capacity to create. In an effort to meet this demand, the Thai government at that time requested its Italian counterpart to commission an Italian sculptor

to create life-like statues and sculptures in Thailand. The individual who had a crucial part in this effort to commission an Italian artist was Prince Naris.

A young sculptor from Florence, Corrado Feroci, decided to come to Thailand in 1923 to assume the sculptor's post in the Fine Arts Department. He worked with such dedication, that M C Itthitepsarn Krisdakorn, the Department's Director-General, decided to renew the employment contract for an unspecified period.



*Corrado Feroci
who later acquired
Thai nationality
and a Thai name
Silpa Bhirasri.*

Creation of life-like works was not a difficult task for the young sculptor who before his arrival in Thailand seemed assured of a promising future. His working experience in Thailand soon convinced him of a fundamental problem the country with a cultural heritage of

nearly one thousand years old was facing, that is, the need for an art institute to train new generations of artists. It was the initiative he took in establishing such an institute that was truly challenging and proved most valuable to the nation.

3. Setting up an Institution

It is difficult to ascertain how Feroci, who later adopted a Thai name *Silpa Bhirasri* (which Phrya Anumanrajathon had a part in phrasing) and acquired a professorship at Silpakorn University, came up with the idea of setting up an art school in Thailand. The author's enquiry into his life and work yielded the following account.

From the beginning of his employment at the Fine Arts Department, Professor Silpa Bhirasri saw the need for craftsmen to assist him in his creative duties. The idea was thus formed for the training of Thai craftsmen in western-style sculpting techniques. He was confident that this was not beyond their capability given their traditional expertise in creating Buddha statues which was an indigenous artistic talent going back to the Sukhothai period.

With this formative idea, Professor Bhirasri submitted his proposal for the establishment of an art school to the Fine Arts Department. The proposal gained support from several government officials including M C Samaichalerm Krisdakorn, Phra Saroj Rattananimman, Phra Prompichit, and M C Yajai Jitrapongse. These people were instrumental in its success and a modern art school thus took shape.

The school was formally established in 1934 as the School of Fine Arts. It was the second major art institute in the country, after Poh Chang School which had been founded 24 years earlier. According to the original plan, the school was to offer three programmes of study – fine arts, architecture and music. However, with the sudden death of one of its ardent supporters Phra Saroj Rattananimman, only the programme in fine arts was opened.

The school's syllabus featured two types of subjects – one theoretical, the other practical. Theoretical subjects provided students

with the same grounding as those at art institutes in Europe. These included colour theory, perspective theory, anatomy and art history. Among the practical subjects were composition, drawing, painting and sculpture. The school's syllabus stressed intensive practical work in both western and Thai art, such that the graduates were equipped with sufficient knowledge and skills to professionally engage in both areas.

The syllabus was a five-year study programme. All students undertook the same coursework during the first three years, and opted for a painting or sculpture major in the final two years.

A major transformation took place nine years after the school had come into existence. Field Marshal Pibul Songkram, the Prime Minister, wanted to develop the school into Thailand's first art institute at the tertiary educational level. A plan was worked out by Professor Bhirasri in 1941-42 for the establishment of a national academy of art. The plan did not materialise, largely because no legal framework existed whereby this plan could formally be implemented. The government thus decided in 1943 to set up Silpakorn University (whose official English name at the time was "University of Fine Arts") in place of the School of Fine Arts.

4. Professor Silpa Bhirasri's Philosophy on Teaching and Learning

It is evident from various accounts on Professor Bhirasri as a teacher that he believed in the development of both intellectual and practical capacities. Given proper guidance and sufficient training, students would be able to fully develop their potentials to become professional artists.

The syllabus he developed in accordance with this guiding principle consisted of both western and traditional Thai art in theory as well as practice. The theoretical coursework in western art comprised fundamental subjects such as anatomy and art history, while its practical training stressed studio work, in both painting and sculpture, based on real-life objects and models. In Thai art, the theoretical coursework covered, among other subject-areas, history of Thai art and the research

method in this field while the practical side focused on intensive exercises in drawing Thai art motifs and in creating traditional Thai paintings. In Professor Bhirasri's belief, training in western realist art must be undertaken together with the fostering of a sense and understanding of traditional Thai art which was part of the students' cultural roots. The two traditions must be merged in a way that enabled Thai artists to create unique contemporary works.

From the author's study based on documentary research and interviews, Professor Bhirasri's philosophy and method of teaching may be summarised as follows:

- 1) *It was important to widen the students' worldviews to enable them to clearly appreciate both aesthetic principles and naturalistic systems. The students must be tolerant about the aesthetic characteristics and traditions of different cultures or of different periods. For him there were no fixed aesthetic norms of universal application.*
- 2) *Theoretical study in such subjects as art history, anatomy and perspective theory was intended to broaden the students' thinking and to enhance their ability to explore new possibilities in their creative processes.*
- 3) *Studio work in painting, sculpture and print-making would enable the students to master the media and techniques and translate their creative concepts and imagination into concrete form of art works as desired.*
- 4) *For him, education from a broader point of view could be divided into two parts. The first part was that undertaken in an educational institution under teacher supervision; the second part consisted in self-training following graduation. Artists must be prepared to accept new knowledge and ideas, and to make use of criticisms by others in further refining their artistic work through which they should ultimately aim to leave a cultural heritage to mankind.*

In his writings, Professor Bhirasri did not explicitly say what his teaching philosophy was. They nevertheless clearly reflect his ideas and beliefs about art and contain suggestions on what attitude artists should adopt and how they should lead their lives in society. The artists must work within the cultural context of society that nevertheless provides them with full freedom to create what they like from their own belief and conceptualisation.

In an article entitled "*What is art?*", Professor Bhirasri made this observation about art,

"It is not easy for me to say what is art. It is not easy to explain because it involves revealing some kind of secret force that inspires man to create art".

His idea was actually in agreement with aesthetics scholar Morris Weitz, who said that art is too broad a subject to define. That is, if the author may venture to elaborate, art has not only appeared in many forms but also sprung from many different inspirational sources. Prehistoric men painted on cave walls presumably from a mystic belief that the paintings would give them power over animals, while people like Monet, Gauguin, and Van Gogh were inspired by what they perceived in nature. But whatever their inspirations were, or in whatever form they expressed their beliefs and impressions, both prehistoric men and great artists could be said to be under a certain "secret force" to create art.

Artists are not learned men or philosophers. To know why they produce their works is not an important question. In the same article, Professor Bhirasri explained,

"We are not interested in philosophical contemplation. As artists we look at the universe from an aesthetic point of view. We see that all things under the laws of nature exist in an appropriate order and display a beautiful harmony".

It is therefore important, for artists as well as art students, to cultivate a habit and disposition to discern in nature natural and aesthetic laws displaying such a harmony.

This does not imply that the law of natural harmony is the only aesthetic law. Realist and semi-abstract art, for example, each follows its different set of norms. Professor Bhirasri further elaborated,

“When Picasso painted the picture of *Guernica*, a small Spanish town bombed to pieces by the Nazis...he intentionally painted distorted figures of men and animals to stress the cruel and destructive effects of war”.

It is thus crucial to understand the different aesthetic norms under which artists in different cultures or periods express themselves. Such understanding depends, in turn, on the cultivation of tolerance towards different aesthetic expressions. Without prior development of tolerance, teaching and learning art amounts to nothing.

Adoption of the West's educational aim of broadening worldviews as well as developing wisdom and cognitive knowledge was inevitable in view of the prior acceptance of various aspects of western culture, particularly its administrative and educational systems. In his article on “*Contemporary art in Thailand*”, Professor Bhirasri noted the impact of modern education on the attitude and outlook of the new generation of Thais:

“Adoption of the West's educational system...has brought about a profound change in the attitude of the Thai people. With regard to art, modern education has freed artists from creating works with narrative themes from ancient literature”.

Professor Bhirasri's use of Italian-academy style education in teaching Thai students was fully acceptable to the latter. This was largely because before his arrival in Thailand, the country had for nearly half a

century been under the influence of the educational system of the West at both primary and secondary levels. He identified in his writings the following crucial differences between traditional and western-style Thai artists:

1. *The new generation of Thai artists had an opportunity to gain knowledge in western art in general and in specific subjects such as anatomy, together with the study of Thai art.*
2. *Artists of this generation were not required to produce works with thematic contents and styles directed by their benefactors, such as traditional mural paintings.*
3. *Compared with traditional Thai artists, those of the newer generation enjoyed greater freedom to reflect their own personality – to choose a style, concepts or themes, or to create whatever work they liked, to express their individuality.*

As in Renaissance philosophy, expression of individualistic traits in original works became an important norm. In an article entitled “*East and West*”, Professor Bhirasri stressed to Thai artists the importance of not being intellectual imitators. For him imitations were worthless. Men have different views and inclinations; works that genuinely reflect unique ideas and spirits are valuable pieces.

Among Asian nations, Thailand, in Professor Bhirasri’s view, was still trailing behind India and Japan in its support for contemporary art. He called on art critics and members of the interested public to give greater support to Thai artists in their production of contemporary works. Eastern critics should be open to new ideas and at the same time must be swayed towards the western style of thinking.

The connection between the birth of contemporary art and art critics on the one hand, and an art institute’s pedagogical philosophy on the other, might not be immediately apparent. The connection nevertheless subtly reflects the overall picture of Professor Bhirasri’s

philosophy of art education. For him art education in its overall perspective was not simply concerned with the practical training for artists but also incorporated its theoretical side. Those targeted for such overall study and training included:

1. *Prospective artists, architects and designers*
2. *Art teachers*
3. *People in other professions who deeply appreciate art.*

This clearly reflects his belief that for art in Thailand to make further progress, art education must not be confined to artists but must be accessible to researchers, critics and the general public. To support this argument, the author wishes to offer further observations.

During his life-time, Professor Bhirasri devoted himself totally to teaching his students. These included both prospective professional artists (painters, architects, and designers) and those in other fields, such as liberal arts students, who took courses in art appreciation.

Moreover, in his article "*Comments on the National Art Exhibition*", he stressed that Thailand should have a national art gallery. Such an institution would benefit the nation in various ways. It would boost national image and prestige. It would also create an incentive to competition among contemporary artists. And though he did not directly mention the educational benefits of a national art gallery, it is clear that as a venue for exhibition of contemporary art, it would provide the people with a significant opportunity to be regularly informed of progress of the artistic circle and activities. Art galleries are not schools but they are important to the development of artistic outlook and taste of both the young and people of older generations.

5. Works of Art by Professor Bhirasri and His Students

It was eleven full years from the time Professor Bhirasri set foot in Thailand before he succeeded in founding the School of Fine Arts; and another nine years had lapsed before the inaugural faculty of Silpakorn University, the Faculty of Painting and Sculpture, came into

being. This meant two decades of total devotion, but it was an achievement that has brought incomparable benefits to the people of this county, especially its younger generations.

“A cultural choice” was the term Professor Bhirasri used in his *“Notes on the Establishment of the University of Fine Arts”* to characterise the choice Thailand had to make. He referred to two options open to the nation at that time: one was to leave forever the task of artistic creation to foreign artists, and the other was to set up an art institute to educate Thai artists. He eventually chose the second option.

Once an art institute as he had envisaged it came into being, its products – its graduates and their works – followed. We cannot go into much detail about his works and those of his students; instead, only a few of their selected pieces will be highlighted here.

Professor Bhirasri has, among other major works, the statues of four great Thai kings to his credit. They are the statue of King Rama I (1929), the statue of King Rama VI (1941), King Taksin the Great monument (1954), and King Naresuan monument (1956). These works are distinguished by the different postures taken by the four royal figures.

The monument of King Taksin the Great was cast in an equestrian composition, with the king wielding a sword over his head. The sculptor opted for the king-on-horse-back style of Renaissance art. However, specific details were incorporated in the work which not only distinguished it from its European proto-types but also most suitably characterised the King who had restored the nation’s independence. Cast in a seated posture, the statue of King Rama I symbolised the King’s firm occupation of his throne and consolidation of his newly established Chakri Dynasty. The statue of King Rama VI was modeled in a standing posture, with his eyes cast over the distant future to symbolise his far-sightedness. Finally, the monument of King Naresuan the Great represented the King riding an elephant for a fight with the enemy. All these monuments were created to match the characteristic events and developments that had occurred under their respective reigns.

In addition to statues honouring great kings, there are also those erected to commemorate female historic figures. The statue of Tao

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Suranari (1934), who led local troops to fend off invading Lao army during the reign of King Rama III, was erected in a standing posture. Her left foot was placed slightly forward and the sword in her right hand was slanted towards the ground. The posture was reminiscent of Michelangelo's David, but Professor Bhirasri who created this statue, most gracefully merged two somewhat conflicting attributes of Thai women – calmness and modesty on the one hand, and heroic bravery on the other – in the same piece of work.



*King Taksin the Great
Monument, 1954*



*King Naresuan the Great
Monument, 1954*



*Tao Suranari
Monument, 1954*



*King Rama VI
Monument, 1954*

His students also created many outstanding *avant-garde* works. One of them, Sithidej Saenghiran, proved highly capable of applying his knowledge of western art, particularly in anatomy, in combination with traditional Thai art to produce uniquely graceful pieces of sculpture. A work of modern style, his *Kaki Riding a Garuda* (1949) relied on a theme from ancient Thai literature and distinctively embodied eastern values, spirits and thoughts. Capturing the truthful state of a skinny old man, *The Last Quest* (1950) clearly shows the sculptor's ample knowledge of western art, especially works of Rodin. Using themes from familiar Thai life, *Thai Boxer* (1951) and *The Hoop* (1953) also represent his solid grounding in western art, as evident in the boxer's muscular figure and the highly life-like figure of a child with traditional hair style for children playing with a hoop.



The Hoop, 1953
Bronze 60 X 70

*Winning Silver
Medal for
Sculpture at the
Fourth National
Art Exhibition*

*Property of
Silpakorn
University*

Khien Yimsiri, another sculptor who had studied under Professor Bhirasri, broke a new ground in contemporary sculpture in Thailand. Instead of the realist style highlighting details of the muscular and bone structures of the human figure adopted in Sithidej's works, he most skillfully produced, in his original style, graceful configurations that are reminiscent of Buddha images of the Sukhothai period. He most suitably incorporated such traditional traits in non-religious works, as evident in his best known piece, *Magic Flute* (1949), a sculpture of a Thai musician playing flute. All parts of the musician's body, from head down through the neck and body to the limbs, appear most gracefully in harmony with one another. As an expression of traditional Thai aesthetic values, the figure seems alive with magical power. The same attribute can be found in his other works, such as *The Land of Smile*, the figure of a young dancer in a dancing posture demonstrating the graceful harmony of the arms, body and hips.



Magic Flute, 1949
Bronze 38 X 45

*Winning Gold
Medal for
Sculpture at the
First National
Exhibition of Art*

*Property of the
National Gallery*

Themes relating to people was very popular among modern sculptors of this generation. Historic figures were commemorated in statues, and literary themes were translated into sculptures portraying imaginary figures in those stories. However, unlike most artists of his generation, Paitoon Muangsomboon was fascinated with another aspect of nature – that is, the world of animals' offspring such as colts and kids. As a result of careful study of animal anatomies and behaviour, the sculptor was able to create works, such as *Colt* (1950), that portray a truly fascinating life of these growing offspring. Two other outstanding sculptors of his generation are Sanan Silakorn and Pimarn Moonpramook.



Colt, 1950

Plaster 100 X 72

Winning Gold Medal at the 2nd National Art Exhibition

Property of the artist

Apart from sculptors, many of Professor Bhirasri's students are distinguished painters. One of the very few female artists of the early generations of his students, Misiem Yipintsoi produced many outstanding works. *Dreamer's Avenue* (1949) depicts a deserted narrow

street with rows of trees on both sides leading to the picture's focal point. In this painting, the artist relied on swift brush strokes instead of capturing much detail as in the works of Dutch or Flemish artists like Hobbema or Ruisdael. The artist nevertheless succeeded in conveying to the viewers the mysteriousness of the deserted place by creating an atmosphere that was to become characteristic of her works.

Another distinctive style of contemporary art developed at this time, resulting from the attempts of some artists to merge their own cultural and artistic roots with the knowledge of western art they had acquired at the art institute set up by Professor Bhirasri. What they produced represented a unique strain of modern or contemporary art that at the same time embodied past traditions. Works of this type were those created by Sanit Dispan and Prasong Padamanuj, among others.

Sanit's early works adhered to the western realist style. But in his *Boat Race* the configurations of the human figures and the curved rear part of the boat evidently reflected traditional Thai artistic traditions in combination with clever application of western art composition techniques. Prasong followed a similar development in his creative activity. His early *Thai History* series relied on western naturalism, but in his *Apsara* (or *Angels of Angkor Wat*) and *Moonlight* (1959), among others, he changed his artistic style. The paintings were ancient in form but apparently modern in spirit. The works may indeed be said to have revived the spirit of traditional Thai art giving it new life in a modern style. Thai artists who followed this creative path include most notably Chalood Nimsamer and Chamlerng Wichiankhet.

Among the artists belonging to the first generation of Professor Bhirasri's students who could be regarded as *avant-gardes* were Fua Haripitak and Sawasdi Tantisuk. The starting point of Fua's artistic development was his burgeoning interest in Impressionism which he detected in his teachers' works at Poh Chang School. His own painting *Prakaipetch*, a portrait of Madame Chit Rienpracha for which he won a gold medal at the second National Art Exhibition in 1950, was an experiment with the effect of light on portraits in ways that were different from his fellow artists' styles. His experience in Europe led to

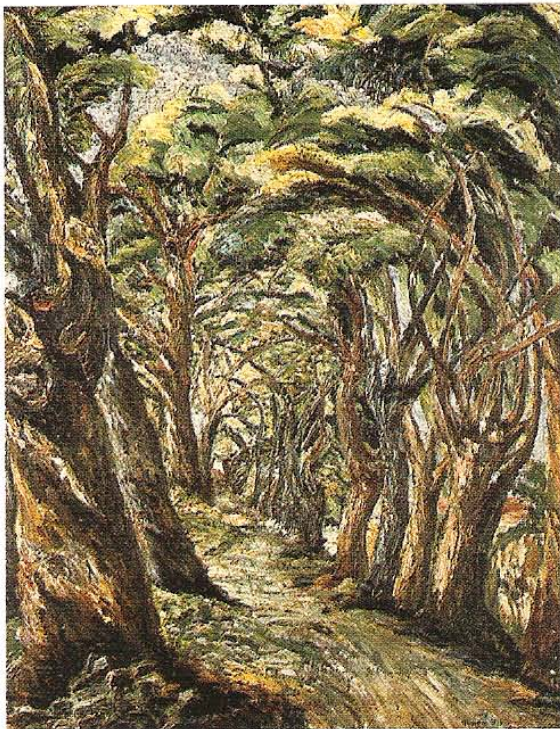


*Lotus,
1956*

*Oil on
wood
120 X 181*

*Winning
Gold
Medal at
the 7th
National
Exhibition
of Art*

*Property
of the
National
Gallery*



Dreamer's Avenue, 1949, oil on canvas 90 X 114

*Winning Gold Medal at the First National Exhibition of Art
Property of Misiem Yipintsoi Garden*



Prakaipetch, 1950

*Oil on canvas
70 X 91*

*Winning Gold
Medal at the 2nd
National
Exhibition
Of Art*

*Property of
Mr Kajorn
Rienpracha*



*Apsara,
Or Angle of
Angkor Wat,
1951*

Tempera

*Winnining
Gold Medal
at the 3rd
National
Exhibition
of Art*

*No record of
the work's
whereabouts*

experiments in semi-abstract portraits, such as those in Cubist and other styles. Sawasdi started with experiments in free configurations taking shape on the canvas. His experience in Italy led to a further search for semi-abstract forms. A unique characteristic he discovered in such forms was a triangle or quadrangle painted in light and shade, as in the work of Fernand Leger. The focal point Sawasdi wanted to express in many of his in many of his works was to be found in motions such as a flying bird or a sea breeze.

Both Fua and Sawasdi were Thailand's *avant-gardes* who led the way for many more artists of later generations to follow. These include Damrong Wong-Uparaj, Manit Poo-Aree, Pichai Niran and Anant Panin.

A development going beyond abstract expressionism was surrealism. The new trend was discernible in the works Tawee Nandakwang. The artist did not resort to a theme of strange objects suspended in the air, which was characteristic of the works of Salvador Dali. But the unique atmosphere created with gray colour, or a mysteriously looking dull sky, gave the viewers an impression of wonder and uncertainty as to whether they were of this world or some other mysterious place. His *Lotus* (1956) was a picture of wrapped bundles of lotuses placed on a stand. Painted in dull sky blue, the surrounding background yielded a sense of mysteriousness. The flowers seemed to have been left in a dark room, and the viewers were also in the dark, unable to tell if it was day or night, or give any narrative of the painting. Again with a dull blue colour tone, his *Temple* (1958) gave a similar surrealistic effect.

With Tawee's pioneering effort, several other artists developed similar styles. Some followed a distinctly surrealist direction; others came up with more individualistic concepts and philosophies. In *The End* (1960), Pichai Nirand reinterpreted traditional Thai art in a modern form using various symbolic features. Tawan Datchanee interpreted the idea inherent in his complicated renditions of people and animals in terms of a spiritual pursuit of eastern values and meanings.

If Professor Bhirasri had not founded an art institute nearly seventy years ago, Thailand would not have been given this pride in the modern artistic heritage left by these pioneering artists. Art galleries and art collectors inside as well as outside the country would have been deprived of possessing works belonging to this heritage.

Professor Bhirasri was also instrumental in establishing the University's Faculty of Decorative Arts. The idea was for this type of 'refreshing' creative works to serve as a *bridge* through which the public could appreciate fine arts. The Faculty admitted its first class of students in 1956, and now it is Thailand's most prestigious school of decorative design.

If Corrado Feroci had come to Thailand simply to create works of art, his task would have been much easier. But he came to assume a far more important mission – to create an art institute to develop the nation's artistic resources into a new sense or vitality that now characterises its contemporary art. It is a most valuable cultural inheritance to later generations of Thai artists.

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