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## THE ARTISTIC LANGUAGE OF YEVHEN SVITLYCHNY'S PAINTING: INNOVATION AND EXPRESSION

*This article analyzes the visual means and artistic tools of Yevhen Svitlychny, a brilliant artist and renowned creator whose work has gained recognition not only in his homeland but also in many European countries. It examines the transformation of the master's artistic language in the context of contemporary wartime realities, the breakdown of established social structures, the disruption of everyday life, and the artist's personal emotional experience.*

*An overview of Yevhen Svitlychny's creative journey is presented, ranging from an analysis of the cultural environment in which the artist's individuality was formed, to an examination of his most significant exhibition projects. The article examines Yevhen Svitlychny's paintings, which are filled with sharp and profound contemporary artistic images that not only "document" the present of Ukraine, but are also universally understandable and culturally significant phenomena. The work demonstrates how the artist's personal experiences are sublimated into symbolism, rich in meaning, and a unique painting technique that convey the utmost emotional intensity of compositions, forms, and colors, and that is precisely why the fragments of personal experience, captured by the artist on canvas, take on the characteristics of epic events in world history and, at the same time, transform into heroic myths that are universal in the human consciousness.*

*As a result of a stylistic and interpretive analysis of Yevhen Svitlychny's numerous works, particularly his monumental pictorial "reports" from the war years, in which the artist captured his philosophical reflections, his most heartfelt feelings and strongest emotions, the characteristics of his artistic language have been revealed. They manifested themselves both as expressions of the artist's unique intuitive sense of the pulse of an anxious present and as the direct influence of the national and cultural context in which the artist's creative individuality was formed.*

*An examination of Yevhen Svitlychny's distinctive artistic tools in painting reveals that his creative method is based on a complex artistic synthesis. The artist inherited the formal explorations of early 20th-century Ukrainian avant-gardists and the extreme emotional candor of expressionism. It is precisely this symbiosis that imbues the master's creative uniqueness with profound artistic meaning and distinctiveness.*

**Key words:** artistic language, creative tools, painting, national and cultural context, nonconformism, Ukrainian avant-garde, expressionism.

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## ХУДОЖНЯ МОВА ЖИВОПИСУ ЄВГЕНА СВІТЛИЧНОГО: НОВАТОРСТВО ТА ЕКСПРЕСІЯ

*У статті аналізуються образотворчі засоби та мистецький інструментарій Євгена Світличного, яскравого художника, відомого митця, чия творчість знайшла визнання не лише на Батьківщині, а й у багатьох країнах Європи. Розглянуто трансформацію художньої мови майстра в контексті сучасних воєнних реалій, зламу установлених соціальних структур, руйнування звичного життя та особистого емоційного досвіду художника.*

*Представлено огляд творчого шляху Євгена Світличного від аналізу культурного середовища, в якому формувалася індивідуальність митця, до розбору його найбільш значущих виставкових проєктів. Досліджено живописні твори Євгена Світличного, сповнені пронизливими і глибокими сучасними художніми образами, які не лише «документують» українське сьогодення, але є загальнозрозумілими та загальнозначущими культурними явищами. В роботі показано, як особисті переживання митця сублімуються у насичену сенсами символіку та унікальну живописну техніку, що транслюють максимально напружену емоційність композицій, форм та кольорів, і саме тому фрагменти особистого досвіду, зафіксовані художником на полотнах, набувають ознак епічних подій світової історії та водночас перетворюються на героїчні міфи, які є універсальними у свідомості людей.*

*В результаті образно-стилістичного розбору численних творів Євгена Світличного, зокрема живописних монументальних «репортажів» воєнних років, в яких художник відобразив свої філософські роздуми, найбільш щирі почуття і найсильніші емоції, виявлені ознаки його художньої мови, що виявились як проявами невторного інтуїтивного відчуття митцем пульсування тривожного сьогодення, так і безпосереднім впливом національного та культурного контексту, в якому була сформована творча індивідуальність художника.*

*Дослідження особливого творчого інструментарію живопису Євгена Світличного виявляє, що в основі його творчого методу лежить складний художній синтез. Митець успадкував формальні пошуки українських авангардистів початку ХХ століття та граничну емоційну відвертість експресіонізму. Саме такий симбіоз робить творчу унікальність майстра наповненою глибоким художнім змістом і впізнаваністю.*

**Ключові слова:** художня мова, творчий інструментарій, живопис, національний та культурний контекст, нонконформізм, український авангард, експресіонізм.

**Problem statement.** The development and transformation of the artistic language of the creative individual has always been, and remains, a central issue in art history. The origins of certain manifestations of creative individuality, the history of its formation, the sources of its inspiration, and the creative, social, and historical factors shaping it serve as constant stimuli for scientific research. Of particular interest to scholarly inquiry is the examination of the process of an artist's creative expression, which, by a twist of fate, finds itself in extreme conditions.

The iconic personality and artistic individuality of Yevhen Svitlychny evoke genuine scholarly interest, driven by the extraordinary nature of the artist's creative destiny, his creative and personal uncompromising spirit, his integrity, and his deeply rooted connection to national culture. The path of the lifelong nonconformist and innovator, who organically incorporated the aesthetics and ideology of the Ukrainian avant-garde into his artistic world, led him to create his own personal creative manifesto during the dark days of war.

The article highlights the pressing issue of the clash between the humanity of art and the utter inhumanity of war, as well as the power of the artist's creative expression, which, during times of extreme hardship, consolidated the most potent, emotionally charged, and expressive means.

**Analysis of recent studies and publications.** Currently, the creative oeuvre of artist Yevhen Svitlychny remains undeservedly understudied. Pre-war interviews in the media, of course, do not claim to provide a deep scholarly analysis of the artist's work.

Therefore, the publication by I. Bondar-Tereshchenko (Bondar-Tereshchenko, 2007), a renowned critic who analyzes the role of the artist-philosopher and lists Yevhen Svitlychny among the most radical figures in contemporary art, is of great importance for this study. No less significant is the work of art historian S. Kantsedal (Kantsedal, 2014), dedicated to the artist's biography and stylistics through the lens of the exhibition "20 Paintings." The researcher interprets the work of the Kharkiv nonconformist as phil-

sophical ontology and a means of comprehending existence. In her doctoral dissertation on the Kharkiv avant-garde of the 20th century, T. Pavlova (Pavlova, 2018), while analyzing the artistic milieu of Kharkiv in the 1980s, focuses on the figure of Yevhen Svitlychny, noting his boldness in exploring religious themes that were forbidden at the time and his inclination toward national self-expression, which constitutes a significant contribution to the article. Of particular importance is the definition, within the context of the scholarly works of I. Pavelchuk (Pavelchuk, 2013), a researcher of abstract Ukrainian art, of the synthetic nature of Yevhen Svitlychny's creative oeuvre.

The author of this work has presented papers at academic conferences dedicated to the study of Yevhen Svitlychny's work as a successor to the prominent Kharkiv avant-garde artists of the early 20th century (Ignatyeva, 2024), and the analysis of his creative and exhibition activities during the wartime events in Ukraine (Ignatyeva, 2023). The research also drew on materials found by pieces in the artist's albums and exhibition catalogs.

The analysis of the artist's work draws on the studies by N. Titarenko (Titarenko, 2023) and M. Yur (Yur, 2016) devoted to the Ukrainian avant-garde. The theoretical foundation consists of studies on nonconformism by I. Solyarska-Stolyarchuk (Solyarska-Stolyarchuk, 2023) and L. Smyrna (Smyrna, 2017), as well as works by Y. Babunich (Babunich, 2022), T. Kokhan (2002), T. Prokopovych (Prokopovych, 2015), and N. Bratyuk (Bratyuk, 2020) on the transformation of European Expressionism within the Ukrainian art scene. The search for works dedicated to Ukrainian art during the war is currently complicated by the insufficient level of art-historical analysis of this topic. In light of this, the work by V. Khizhynsky (Khizhynsky, 2025), which examines the transformation of artistic creativity in Ukraine under the influence of war, is a significant contribution to the exploration of this issue in the article.

**This article aims** to provide a comprehensive analysis of the distinctive style of the artist Yevhen Svitlychny, to identify the characteristics of his paint-

ing language, and to examine the expressive means of his artistic expression.

**Presentation of the main material.** Yevhen Svitlychny is an artist recognized both in Ukraine and internationally, a graduate of the Kyiv State Art Institute (Department of Painting). He began his artistic exploration in the 1970s, and since the 1980s he has presented over 20 solo exhibitions in Ukraine and around the world. Currently, his works are held in leading museums: the National Art Museum of Ukraine (Kyiv, Ukraine), the Kharkiv Art Museum (Kharkiv, Ukraine), the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University (New Brunswick, USA), and in renowned art collections: the Gryniov Art Collection, the Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union, and in private collections in Ukraine, the USA, Canada, Germany, Portugal, and Bolivia.

Even while at university, Svitlychny chose the path of nonconformism, disregarding the constraints of academicism. "...ukrainian nonconformism of the late 1920s – early 1990s emerged as a specific, time-bound manifestation of Ukrainian culture, a unique artistic phenomenon that revealed centuries-old traditions of protest and contributed to the preservation of national identity" (Smyrna, 2017: 36). The artist's personality is inextricably linked to the concept of intellectual freedom; within the Ukrainian artistic community, he established himself as an artist-philosopher, a thinking artist. "The artist contrasted the art of socialist realism with painterly modernism, characterized by expressive forms, vivid color choices, and metaphorical symbols" (Kantsedal, 2014). His refusal to conform to official doctrine for the sake of expediency, his devotion to his artistic principles, and his unwillingness to compromise with the system run through all of Svitlychny's work (Ignatyeva, 2023). "For an artist, disagreement with ideological prejudices is never something abstract; it is always a concrete form of resistance in a manner characteristic of that artist," notes researcher L. Smyrna (Smyrna, 2017: 33).

Svitlychny's works are sometimes classified as contemporary art. "In Kharkiv, Svitlychny's name has long been associated with contemporary art – that is, the most radical trend in modern art – so each of his projects involves a demonstration of avant-garde, progressive art..." writes I. Bondar-Tereshchenko (Bondar-Tereshchenko, 2007: 50). However, the organic fusion of the rebellious spirit of nonconformism with a leading Ukrainian theme takes the artist's work beyond the confines of purely "contemporary art." The researcher L. Smyrna asserts: "Nonconformism signified a particular form of artistic activity aimed

at the nationalization of art; it fostered a new attitude toward the human being, the individual in culture, and a new understanding of the meanings of art as such. Hence the affirmative imperative of nonconformism: the nonconformist artist sought self-realization through the mastery of national themes" (Smyrna, 2017: 35). As researcher I. Solyarska-Stolyarchuk notes: "The nonconformist artists' turn to national motifs and their creative interpretation had its own distinctive features in each individual decade, which ensured the continuity and preservation of the Ukrainian artistic tradition, formed on the basis of specific semantic structures that point to the peculiarities of worldview" (Solyarska-Stolyarchuk, 2023: 162). The deep sense of national identity that permeates the semiotic and symbolic system of Yevhen Svitlychny's work, together with his love of freedom and relevance to contemporary themes, establishes his art as part of the Ukrainian avant-garde movement, and thus places his body of work among the significant phenomena of the global avant-garde culture (Smyrna, 2017: 35).

Yevhen Svitlychny's artistic explorations are deeply rooted in the Kharkiv avant-garde – a fusion of European modernism, distinctive features of Ukrainian national culture, spirituality and rationality – which underwent a complex evolutionary journey from early 20th-century constructivism to the nonconformism of its final decades. The innovative ideas of the "first wave" avant-garde, preserved by outstanding artists and born in the 1960s within Kharkiv's artistic underground, became the impetus for the development of a mainstream, bold, and vibrant artistic direction in the 1970s and 1980s (Pavlova, 2018: 354).

Among the heirs of the Kharkiv avant-garde – who created groundbreaking creative paradigms that defied the conventions of conventional Socialist Realism and carried forward the modernist tradition in art during the final third of the 20th century – was Yevhen Svitlychny. Art historian and renowned researcher T. Pavlova writes: "In the Kharkiv art scene of the 1980s, the concept of the 'possible world' developed, becoming the main alternative to the doctrine of socialist realism... In the same vein, a sacred theme developed, which Yevhen Svitlychny explored with extraordinary boldness in his large series of paintings "Neophytes" (1988). Its exhibition, organized by the "Panorama" (curator T. Pavlova) outside the sphere of influence of the Artists' Union (held in the exhibition hall of the Institute of Metrology), became the first "informal" exhibition of a personal creative project... The exhibition was closed the day after the opening. And only after the intervention of influential cultural figures was the ban lifted. This reaction was caused by the taboo "religious theme" chosen by the artist,

as well as the trident symbolism perceived in one of the paintings. The leitmotif of the boat (as interpreted by Svitlychny in the pre-passionate part of the Gospel) transforms into the sculpturesque form that runs through all the works in the series. The colors of Ukrainian folk icons (red, black, green, blue, and yellow-gold) dominate the palette of the series. The manifestation of the black square (with an associative reference to Malevich) in the painting “Crossroads” at the exhibition, with human traces disappearing within it, made a strong impression on the art community... This was one of the first overt references in the Kharkiv art scene to “iconic Suprematism” ...of Malevich and the Ukrainian avant-garde in general” (Pavlova, 2018: 361-362).

It should be noted that Yevhen Svitlychny's creative concept is devoid of formal avant-gardism. Imbued with powerful psychological depth, it is grounded in a philosophical understanding of reality (Kantsedal, 2014), which leads to a subtle, intuitive, and emotional revelation of reality in dynamic motion and reduces the universal mythological essence of the phenomena of life to almost sacred parables.

This concept permeates the artist's entire body of work. The projects «The Great Manuscript Book, Chapter One», and «The Great Manuscript Book, Chapter Two» have become emblematic of his style. As the artist defines it, his creative paradigm is “a form of visual chronicle... a kind of personal ‘pictorial diary,’ but the value of this intimate experience lies in the fact that the artist transforms deeply personal experiences into universal images, understandable to everyone through the philosophical language of his painting” (Ignatyeva, 2023: 52).

In each “chapter” of Svitlychny's graphic or pictorial “chronicles,” it is not only the artist's works that play a role, but also the space, lighting, and sound, which, through their interaction, enrich one another and reveal the essence of the artistic concept more deeply. Svitlychny considers it necessary to create a “large-scale artistic and ontological space” (Kantsedal, 2014) that he directs, and through a striking context, he forms a unique atmosphere that draws the viewer into his imaginative world.

The exhibition “20 Paintings,” which took place at the Yermilov Center in 2014, is the result of a collaboration between Yevhen Svitlychny, sculptor Ivan Svitlychny, and the art group “Sviter”. Together, they rejected the traditional exhibition format in favor of a unified art environment that organically combined painting and design. Light directed at each canvas created the effect of the paintings floating in the darkness, while music emanating from the speakers gave a sense of the integrity of a space that breathes

and changes along with the viewer's movement (Ignatyeva, 2024: 35).

Yevhen Svitlychny conceived the exhibitions “The Great Ferry” (Kyiv, Ivan Honchar Museum, 2017) and “Babayi: Mythological Motifs in Painting” (Kharkiv, YermilovCenter, 2019) as monumental, continuous pictorial panoramas. Because of the design concept of this exhibition, everyday, archaic scenes were transformed into visual parables of biblical proportions (Ignatyeva, 2024: 35).

The joint project by Yevhen Svitlychny and Volodymyr Shaposhnikov, “You Will Leave This Circle” (Kyiv, National Art Museum of Ukraine, 2020) – whose title sounds like a call to break free from the circle of artistic, political, and social constraints – was organized as a bold design event with the assistance of Ivan Svitlychny. “The paintings were ‘liberated’ from the ‘confinement’ of the exhibition space walls; they soared in the air beneath the ceiling, surrounding the viewer like living creations – strong, independent, enormous (some canvases up to 4 meters high) ancient and Christian images that had unexpectedly departed from their usual places and communicated with the viewer in tactile proximity” (Ignatyeva, 2024:35).

The artist's distinctive, recognizable style is based on the deliberate simplification of the drawing to the point of becoming almost a symbol, the flattening of space, the intentional distortion of forms, and the juxtaposition of vivid color contrasts. These techniques reveal a mental and visual connection to early Christian monumental art, while the broad, painterly strokes, “broken” forms, and complex, yet clear rhythm, which heighten the tension and passion of the images, align the master's canvases with the raw nerve of early 20th-century German Expressionism and its foreshadowing of global upheavals (Ignatyeva, 2023: 52).

A synthesis of Expressionist form and color creation, the Ukrainian spiritual code, and powerful contemporary exhibition design – which has enabled the profound tragedy of the war in Ukraine to be powerfully revealed to European audiences – is embodied in Yevhen Svitlychny's art series, created in 2022–2023 in Ireland (“Barren – Ukrainian Chronicles 2022,” “Barren – Ukrainian Chronicles. Part II,” “Barren – Ukrainian Chronicles. Part III,” “Continuum. Bestiary”).

The series “Barren – Ukrainian Chronicles 2022,” “Barren – Ukrainian Chronicles. Part II” (Image 1), “Barren – Ukrainian Chronicles. Part III” (Image 2) is a monumental series of canvases painted in acrylic (the artist's favorite medium), the density and vibrancy of color in which organically blend with the power of plastic movement and a strong rhythm (26 paintings, about 2 by 2 meters), and a series of graphic works (14 pieces, 1x0.8 meters).

The fourth exhibition, “Continuum. Bestiary” (Image 3), presents a striking visual encounter between creatures of the human and animal worlds, rendered in colored pencils, charcoal, and sanguine (14 works, about 2 by 2 meters). “Continuum. Bestiary” is a “chronicle” of human suffering and struggle, harking back to the epic, in which the tradition of Christian monumental painting – plastic generalization, clearly structured composition, and the symbolism of color – is combined with the tragedy of multifaceted myth-making, heightened expressiveness, expressionist energy” (Ignatyeva, 2023: 52).

V. Khyzhynsky, a researcher of the impact of war-time events on the work of contemporary Ukrain-

ian artists, writes: “The context of war has inevitably influenced the thematic content, compositional choices, and emotional resonance of the works,” and notes that “art becomes a form of chronicle,” seeking new artistic means and new metaphors “that embody the experience of pain and resistance” (Khyzhynsky, 2025: 43). In Svitlychny’s Irish projects, the plastic and pictorial language of Expressionism has become the dominant visual means of interpreting the events of the war years.

In late 2024, the Lviv gallery “Dzyga” presented an exhibition of Yevhen Svitlychny’s works brought from Ireland; the project combined three conceptual parts: “Chronicles,” “Bestiary,” and “Ladder,” which



Image 1. Works from the exhibition “Barren – Ukrainian Chronicles. Part II”. Chronicles. (2022. Paper, acrylic. 5.60x2 m.)



Image 2. Works from the exhibition “Barren – Ukrainian Chronicles. Part III”. Chronicles. Triptych. (2022. Paper, acrylic. 4.90x2 m.)

the artist created over a 22- to 24-year period while living abroad. This project was conceived as a fundamental cycle, a core concept that the artist plans to continue in Ukraine.

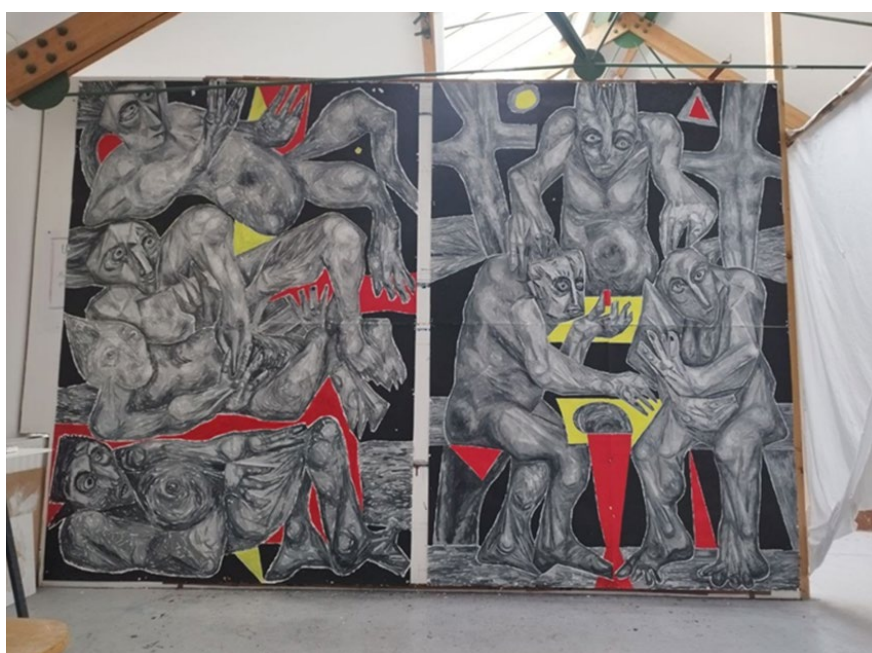
The artist's visual "tools" include the generalization and flattening of volumes, the grotesque distortion of forms and silhouettes, a flawlessly pulsating rhythm, a nervous, tremulous line, contrasting scales, and a palette of fiery colors. Through the intricacy of complex interrelationships between strokes, lines, and outlines, the artist conveys a wide spectrum of emotions – from reflection to heroic tragedy. Calling himself a "chronicler" (Interview with Yevhen Svitlychny, 2023), Yevhen Svitlychny creates a pictorial world far removed from a mirror image, a world that is not a

mere illustration. His canvases capture flashes of emotion in which color, brushstroke, and space synthesize into a panorama of extraordinary emotional tension that powerfully unfolds before the viewer.

Currently, the artist is forced to remain far from his homeland; he is working on a project with the evocative title "This Insane World" (Image 4), conceived as a kind of "endless film" – an undivided, monumental "strip" of works that "flow" into one another without pause, continuously, much like the rapid chaos of our present day. The artist merges with the rhythm of the modern world, transforming it into his own self-portrait, and conversely – through his ambiguous, "uncomfortable," uncompromising inner world – he unfolds a chronicle of the present: aggressive, tragic, yet full of hope.



**Image 3. Works from the exhibition "Continuum. Bestiary" (2023. Paper, colored pencils, charcoal, sanguine. 2.80x2 m.)**



**Image 4. Preparatory work for the exhibition "This Insane World" (2025–2026. Paper, acrylic. 2.40x1.68 m.)**

**Conclusions.** The visual language of the artist Yevhen Svitlychny – dynamic, powerful, and expressive – constitutes an exceptionally timely artistic statement during these difficult times for our country. This language, which requires no translation or unnecessary explanation, is filled with sincerity and symbolism that resonates deeply with the human heart.

The characteristic features of Yevhen Svitlychny's artistic language include the emotional structure of dynamic compositions, universal spiritual depth, the polysemantic nature of meanings and sacred symbols, the originality and uniqueness of images, and expressive candor. The mysterious world of Yevhen Svitlychny's painting, filled with sharp, jagged silhouettes, the sometimes frightening, jumbled faces of people and animals, the frenzied rhythms of bodies, arms, and legs, bold colors, and images of ancient magic, illuminated by the highly spiritual symbolism of Christianity, demonstrates the depth of the artist's inner drama, of humanity, and of the world, captivating the viewer with the spiritual energy created by the master's hand, his feelings, and his thoughts. As the heir to the Ukrainian avant-garde artists of the "first wave" and a representative of the Kharkiv school, Yevhen Svitlychny has remained faithful to his avant-

garde artistic explorations since the 1970s, intensifying them with the powerful drama of expressionism. In her research work devoted to the worldview and aesthetic formation of abstract painting in Ukraine during the 1980s – 2000s, researcher I. Pavelchuk characterizes Yevhen Svitlychny's creative style as "...the psychological dimension of expressionism, the fairy-tale quality of surrealism, and the rebellious spirit of the avant-garde..." (Pavelchuk: 2013: 104).

Svitlychny rarely limits himself to creating individual canvases; his artistic projects are large-scale series, "pictorial books," and "graphic epics," imbued with an overarching theme aimed at evoking a profound emotion and an unforgettable impression. The artist masterfully combines space, light, sound, and the expression of form and color into a single artistic "fabric," transforming the exhibition into a cohesive context in which every detail contributes to the grand vision.

The artist's creative language transcends individual techniques and genres of artistic expression; it is synthetic: in it, the expression of dramatic theatricality, the innovative explorations of the avant-garde, the power of monumentality, and the mystery of sacred symbolism are organically fused into that very unique alloy that is the hallmark of true art.

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