

Setting the Scene: Opera Costumes Off-stage

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Abstract

This paper examines the curatorial strategies and interpretive challenges involved in exhibiting opera costumes outside their original theatrical context. Removed from the stage, opera costumes are stripped not only of the performing body but also of the scenographic environment that activates their full meaning. Their display in a museum context thus demands careful consideration of how to evoke the performative and spatial dynamics they once inhabited.

Through an analysis of key exhibitions, mainly those staged by the Centre National du Costume et de la Scène (Moulins), and the Victoria and Albert Museum (London), this paper explores different approaches to framing opera costumes in the absence of both the stage and the body. The V&A's Opera: Passion, Power and Politics exhibition, embraced a scenographic and immersive model to represent seven premieres in seven European cities for a total of 400 years of operatic history. By contrast, the DIVA exhibition at the same institution foregrounded the symbolic and celebrity value of certain iconic costumes, blurring the lines between opera, fashion, and popular culture.

This comparative approach enables a reflection on the motivations behind exhibiting opera costumes: whether to highlight the legacy of a specific production, performer, or designer, or to engage audiences through broader cultural narratives. Special attention will be given to the tension between theatrical ephemerality and museological permanence, and to the interpretive tools used to mediate that gap. Ultimately, the paper argues that curating opera costumes requires more than preserving garments: it involves “setting the scene” anew, translating the experiential, sonic, and visual layers of performance into a new, hybrid scenography for the museum visitors.

Keywords: Museum Exhibition; Opera Costumes; Ephemerality; Scenography; History of Exhibitions.

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The Costume's Life Beyond the Curtain Call

When the orchestra falls silent and the stage lights dim, singers, dancers, and performers step out of their elaborate costumes and return to ordinary clothes, leaving behind the characters they have inhabited for the duration of the performance. Yet the costumes themselves do not simply disappear into storage even when disused after several years. Preserved in museum collections, archived in climate-controlled vaults, and occasionally displayed behind glass, these garments become objects of scholarly fascination, historical inquiry, and cultural preservation. It should also be noted that not all preserved costumes follow the same trajectory and beyond the objects selected for display, some are subject to rigorous conservation protocols, others circulate as study pieces within the archival holdings of theatres and opera houses, remaining continuously available to scholars for whom the material object itself constitutes an irreplaceable form of primary evidence in its construction, fabric, and wear.

But what exactly happens to an opera costume when it is removed from the stage? How does its meaning shift when it no longer serves the purpose for which it was created? And what is lost, or perhaps transformed, when the ephemeral magic of live performance is translated into a temporary setting for a museum display? Addressing these questions adequately would require sustained engagement across multiple fields: material culture studies, performance theory, museology. This essay can only begin such work, exploring selected intersections while acknowledging the broader theoretical and methodological terrain that remains to be mapped.

As Pantouvaki and McNeil argue in their introduction to *Performance Costume: New Perspectives and Methods*, “costume, like fashion and dress, is now viewed as an area of dynamic social significance,”¹ no longer understood as merely “being in service of performance in a subordinate role, but rather as a central contributor to an often-renewed sense of collective practice, proposing new directions in turn, to the making of performance itself”.² In this reconceptualization, costume emerges as both catalyst and subject of study, an object that actively shapes performance, together with the creative vision of designers, the bodily presence of performers, and the interpretive frameworks of scholars and curators. Yet this recognition of costume’s centrality also highlights a fundamental paradox: the very act of preserving these objects for study often requires their removal from the contexts that gave them life and meaning. As Donatella Barbieri observes, “as museum object, the costume becomes precious, guarded and also, by necessity, removed from the notion of performance”.³ This removal is not merely physical but ontological: the costume’s status changes fundamentally when it enters the museum, becoming embedded in collective memory rather than immediate sensory experience. This transformation raises a series of interrelated questions that form the core of this article’s inquiry. First, what does it mean for a costume to become a museological object when historical or cultural relevance prevails over use and application? Second, how do we address the absence of the body for which the costume was specifically created, and how is the ephemerality of performance rendered in the temporality of exhibition? The goal of this broad analysis is not to provide definitive answers but rather to open pathways for reflection that can be addressed through the case studies of the Centre National du Costume de Scène et de la Scénographie and the Victoria and Albert Museum, and to widen the horizon of what constitutes a legitimate subject of exhibition studies.

The Costume's Aura

The institutional spaces that opera costumes inhabit within museums can be highly varied. Some form part of dedicated costume or textile collections, others are grouped according to their maker or designer, while still others follow the provenance of the theatre collection to which they originally belonged (such as the Museo Teatrale alla Scala, Milan, or the Bibliothèque-Musée de l’Opéra, Paris). A rare subset ex-

1. Sofia Pantouvaki and Peter McNeil, eds., *Performance Costume: New Perspectives and Methods* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 26.
2. Pantouvaki and McNeil, 26.
3. Donatella Barbieri, “Encounters in the Archive Reflections on Costume,” *V&A Online Journal* 4 (2012): 3.

ists within museums specifically dedicated to stage costume, the focus of this analysis. In particular, this paragraph examines the Centre National du Costume de Scène et de la Scénographie (CNCS) in Moulins, France, inaugurated in 2006. This establishment is dedicated to the preservation and exhibition of stage costume, housing over 10,000 costumes from the collections of the Opéra national de Paris, the Comédie-Française, and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, along with substantial donations from designers including Christian Lacroix and Frank Sorbier. This positions the CNCS at the nexus of a curatorial choice: how to preserve and communicate the ephemeral “aura” — as per the definition borrowed from Walter Benjamin — while necessarily separating these garments from the living bodies and theatrical contexts that generated their meaning.

As Donatella Barbieri observes, “we remember performances through images of actors or dancers in costumes, but we think much less about how the costume came to be, was worn and activated performance itself”,⁴ and the museum is thus confronted with the challenge of displaying artifacts whose very essence lies in their activation through performance.

When Benjamin wrote his essay in 1935, he argues that technical reproducibility destroys the unique existence of a work of art in a particular place and time, the aura, by detaching the work from its original context and making it available everywhere, to everyone.⁵ The aura encompasses both physical and cultural dimensions; even the most perfect reproduction lacks the presence in time and space that constitutes an artwork’s unique existence at the place where it happens to be. Yet, unlike painting or sculpture, stage costume exists in a liminal zone as a simultaneously material object and performative medium. The costume’s aura operates on two interconnected registers: the traces of the wearer (the performer’s movements, bodily presence, and recognition obtained in the role) and the creative intentionality of the designer/maker (the artistic vision, craftsmanship, material choices, and interpretive decisions that translated dramatic character into three-dimensional form). Within performance and media studies, the concept of aura has been substantially reworked, for example in Auslander’s foundational argument for his book *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*⁶ he offers a crucial perspective on the current mediatized culture where the live event no longer stands as the privileged origin from which reproductions deviate. Professor Auslander’s insight allows to reframe the status of the costume in the museum because if live performance can no longer be assumed to constitute the unquestioned auratic original, then the material object or the costume bearing the physical traces of its use may paradoxically emerge as the most stable and irreducible site of presence available. Digital streaming, audiovisual documentation, and the vast online circulation of operatic performances generate new and affectively powerful forms of encounter, yet they leave the fabric untouched. It is precisely in this gap between the reproducible image and the irreplaceable object that the museum finds its specific value, constituting a form of material evidence that neither the live event nor its digital afterlife can provide.

This theoretical duality finds practical expression throughout the CNCS’s exhibition history, particularly in its sustained engagement with Christian Lacroix, who has served as the museum’s honorary president since its inception. Theatre has always been for him a fatal attraction and the realm of the ephemeral. Even though his education was oriented toward becoming a museum curator and before he fell in love with fashion design, he could see himself working with great costume designer such as Piero Tosi. While he had collaborated with theatrical institutions since the beginning of his career, it was only from 2009 that he could pursue this passion entirely, having concluded his personal involvement in his fashion house with one final haute couture collection. The CNCS has mounted three major exhibitions to this date devoted to Lacroix’s costume work, each offering distinct curatorial strategies. The first, *Christian Lacroix, costumier*, in 2007, showcased stage costumes from 1985 to 2006, establishing Lacroix’s dual identity as a haute couture designer and costumier. The second, *Christian Lacroix, La Source et le Ballet de l’Opéra de Paris*, hosted in 2012, presented the step-by-step process from creation to production of costumes for the Paris Opera’s new choreography, emphasizing the collaborative labour

4. Barbieri, “Encounters in the Archive”, 26.

5. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 217–252.

6. Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999; 2nd ed., 2008).

of costume production. The third and recent exhibition, inaugurated in 2025 and closing in January 2026, *Christian Lacroix en scène*, presents 140 costumes from productions between 2007 and 2024.

Comparing these exhibitions reveals an evolving interpretation of the costumes. *Christian Lacroix, costumier* prioritized the designer's signature aesthetic, treating costumes as extensions of Lacroix's haute couture practice and therefore emphasizing the maker's aura, as the flamboyant baroque style, colour palette, and historical references constituted his recognizable artistic style. With the second exhibition the focus was shifted to process and collaboration, documenting the journey from initial concept to realized production and highlighting the workshops and artisans involved, thereby acknowledging that costume aura derives not from a singular authorial hand but from collective labor involving designers, dyers, cutters, tailors, and performers. Lastly, *Christian Lacroix en scène* synthesizes these approaches while introducing a crucial temporal dimension. The choice of displaying the costumes based not on when his works were created but on the historical periods they represent, from Renaissance to fin-de-siècle, created a journey through fashion history. Complementary elements in exhibition design, such as deploy props, set models, and archival photographs are often used to restore the costume setting as truthful as possible, while his time, the CNCS instead foregrounds the textile itself as the primary scenographic element, allowing fabric, drapes and construction to generate atmosphere rather than re-constructing specific scenes.

Other display practices that have been pursued, considering that the main challenge is still substituting the tactile for the verbal, where suggestions of materiality are described in didactic labels, transforming three-dimensional objects behind glass into symbolic representations that communicate through visual presentation rather than physical handling.⁷ The CNCS's exhibiting tools may include the exploitation of the generous ceiling heights of the former eighteenth-century cavalry barracks to surprise visitors with a field of suspended costumes. Garments hung at varying elevations, some from the ceiling itself, invert the geometry of the theatre: rather than observing costumes from the auditorium, the visitor is surrounded by them at close range, able to examine construction, texture, and wear from angles unavailable during performance. This happened in *Christian Lacroix en scène*'s last room that culminates in a section entitled "Angels and Demons", in which winged costumes are suspended from the ceiling in near-darkness, while opposed to a darker grouping of costumes evoking menace and shadow. It can be observed another choice employed in certain exhibition that is the installation of photographs of the original productions positioned alongside the garments, restoring to the otherwise anonymous mannequin the face of the performer who inhabited the without subordinating the object to it. Furthermore, the CNCS experimented with other props and tools, as in *Christian Lacroix, costumier*, were revolving display platforms presented individual costumes in full 360-degree rotation. Lastly, interesting to consider here, where audiovisual documentation appears, it is projected onto draped textiles hanging from the walls, so that the moving image is literally filtered through fabric, evoking simultaneously the folds of a stage curtain and the plasticity of the costumes themselves, ensuring the material object retains primacy over its reproduction.

Yet these exhibitions centered on a single designer's oeuvre, necessarily privilege the maker's aura over the wearer's presence, obscuring what Barbieri identifies as costume's fundamental performative agency: "Costume has agency as intermediary between performer and the spectator, not only through a visual response, but also a sensory one, projected via surface, colour, form, textiles, movement and weight. It draws attention to the body, by what it reveals or conceals, through fit, by the way it organizes the body's composition and proportion. It can highlight or even generate gesture and movement".⁸

As presented in performance studies,⁹ liveness is no longer defined simply as bodily co-presence of actors

7. Julia Petrov, *Fashion, History, Museums: Inventing the Display of Dress* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019).

8. Barbieri, "Encounters in the Archive", 10.

9. See Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), for an interpretation of the performative act as defined by ephemerality and non-reproducibility; on the other hand, see Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999; 2nd ed., 2008), for a perspective that accounts for the mediatized forms of performance. A guide to these two theoretical perspectives and their ongoing reassessment is Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe, "Liveness: Phelan, Auslander, and After," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 29, no. 2 (2015): 69–79.

and spectators but with historical specificity in mind, recognizing that costume museums produce historically specific modes of encounter that generate new forms of material knowledge and archival presence unavailable during the costume's original performative activation. The CNCS thus confronts us with a productive reformulation of Benjamin's problematic as historical engagement with material culture extend his original concern with art's social function. By making visible the collaborative labour of costume production, the workshops, artisans, and material processes, exhibitions like *Christian Lacroix, La Source et le Ballet de l'Opéra de Paris* democratize authorship and challenge the cult of designer genius. Nevertheless, the maintained focus on the designer's creative persona: a curatorial strategy that aligns costume more closely with fashion (where designer authority dominates) than with performance (where the actor's body and interpretation are paramount).

In conclusion, the CNCS's dual focus on designers and performers serves not to privilege one form of aura over another but to insist that costume's meaning emerges from their dialectical relationship – the ongoing negotiation between maker's vision and wearer's interpretation, between designed object and performed identity, between material artifact and ephemeral event.



Figure 1: Exhibition view of *Christian Lacroix, costumier*, 2007, at Centre National du Costume de Scène et de la Scénographie



Figure 2: Exhibition view of *Christian Lacroix, La Source et le Ballet de l'Opéra de Paris*, 2012, at Centre National du Costume de Scène et de la Scénographie



Figure 3: Exhibition view of *Christian Lacroix en scène, 2025-26*, at Centre National du Costume de Scène et de la Scénographie

Scenography as Mediation

A successful museological display of opera costumes should transcend the mere exhibition of garments as static artifacts, addressing instead the fundamental challenge of translating ephemeral performance into permanent display. In order to do so, two complementary strategies can address this: first, composing a “scenographic discourse”¹⁰ — the assemblage of spatial, material, and atmospheric elements that orient visitors toward theatrical experience — and second, cultivating what Gaynor Kavanagh identifies as the “Dream Space,”¹¹ the reflective encounter in which visitors’ inner memories and outer museum experiences meld into singular imaginative engagement. Where Hann’s scenographic approach operates through the strategic deployment of lighting, spatial arrangement, sound, and material culture to evoke the conditions of theatrical presentation, Kavanagh’s Dream Space emphasizes the psychological and phenomenological dimension of museum visitation, the moment when memory and present fuse, and visitors encounter themselves through objects. These strategies together, they transform costume exhibitions from a mere object display into “acts of worlding,”¹² creating conditions where visitors not only observe historical garments but imaginatively inhabit the theatrical worlds these costumes once activated.

As a practice concerned with the crafting of staged atmospheres and spatial orientation, scenography addresses spatial and experiential concerns that intersect productively with the academic fields of architecture, museography, and exhibition design, disciplines that have long grappled with the paradox of presenting performative objects whose meaning is inextricably bound to their use, movement, and temporal unfolding.¹³ It is precisely here that museographic intervention becomes essential as a mode of mediation between the costume’s original function and its contemporary museum existence. Contemporary exhibitions enact hybrid strategies of display and design to create spatial drama, shifting from object-centered displays toward an emphasis on relational experiences.¹⁴ The multisensorial experience of opera and its costumes can be powerfully conveyed through surrounding space, as demonstrated by the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2017 with the exhibition *Opera: Passion, Power and Politics*. This

10. Rachel Hann, *Beyond Scenography* (London: Routledge, 2019), 17.

11. Gaynor Kavanagh, *Dream Spaces. Memory and the Museum* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2000).

12. Gaynor Kavanagh, *Dream Spaces*.

13. See Arnold Aronson’s seminal work *Looking into the Abyss: Essays on Scenography* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2005) and Pamela Howard’s foundational text *What is Scenography?* (London: Routledge, 2002).

14. See Lucy Thornett and Greer Crawley, “Staged: Scenographic Strategies in Contemporary Exhibition Design.” *Theatre and Performance Design* Vol. 8 No. 1-2 (2022), 3-6.

exhibition marked the new opening of the Sainsbury Gallery, below the courtyard and new extension on Exhibition Road, and was organised in collaboration with the Royal Opera House. It opened on the 30th of September 2017 and was closed on the 25th of February 2018. The ambitious curatorial project aimed at covering nearly four hundred years through seven premieres in seven European cities.¹⁵ In particular, focusing here on the museographical choices made by the team, surely one of the most impressive ones is the recreation of an eighteenth-century mechanical theatre for the exhibition.



Figure 4: The eighteenth-century mechanical theatre created for the exhibition *Opera: Passion, Power and Politics*

Exhibition designer Patrick Burnier and theatre historian Christopher Baugh led a team in reconstructing this spectacular theatre, complete with a galleon adrift in a storm, rolling waves, and mermaids.¹⁶ Professor Baugh noted that the majority of technicians who worked in historical theatres came from the Navy, utilizing the same technology as merchant trading ships: “large sheets of canvas supported on timber batten with spars, cranks, pulleys, counterweights”¹⁷ creating “a technology of tricks and devices to enable scenes to be changed almost miraculously”.¹⁸ This reconstruction was unprecedented, with nothing of this scale surviving from the eighteenth century, the V&A team relied on archival drawings, textual descriptions, and technical treatises to reimagine the sophisticated machinery that enabled the spectacle on stage at the time, for the entire five months of the exhibition being opened and running every six minutes. Thus, it can be understood that the mechanical theatre at the V&A plays not merely an illustrative role but a constitutive one in reconstructing the spatial, temporal, and sensory frameworks in which opera costumes originally functioned as signs in the first place. In experiencing these costumes in the exhibition space, the viewer does not encounter them as a dehistoricized sign but as a constituent part in a complex system of technology and artistry that provides a deep understanding of the complex sociality of opera production itself. As a central concern in the principles of scenography, the exhibi-

15. In detail, the seven cities and seven premieres are: Venice with Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea* in 1642, London with Handel's *Rinaldo* in 1711, Vienna with Mozart's *Figaro* in 1786, Milan with Verdi's *Nabucco* in 1842, Paris with Wagner's *Tannhäuser* in 1861, Dresden with Strauss's *Salome* in 1905 and St Petersburg with Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* in 1934.

16. The experience has been described in this webpage of the V&A Museum and related YouTube video “18th-century mechanical theatre” where the theatre historian, Professor Christopher Baugh and scenic designer, Simon Bayer intervened. Accessed January 1, 2026, <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/kinetic-theatre>.

17. Ivi.

18. Ivi.

tion's strategy focuses on the receptive aspect of the viewer's experience not merely in sensory but also in cognitive ways. As stated by Hedvig Mårdh, in fact, "museum exhibitions as well as theatre productions are expressions of choices made, related to functional assessment and aesthetic considerations, and the design can be studied as the result of artistic, scenographic, and curatorial intent".¹⁹ This intervention and the whole design chosen for the exhibition exemplify how museums can productively activate opera ephemera, from mechanical stage machinery, librettos, to costumes, in order to reconstruct not merely the visual appearance but the experiential sense of operatic performance. Marco Pecorari argues that ephemera possess a "tripartite nature"²⁰ that includes embodied and performative forms of knowledge, as opposed to knowledge that relies solely on representation.²¹ Applied to opera, this framework suggests that invitations, programs, set sketches, and technical specifications are not merely ancillary materials but constitute vital epistemological objects that perform specific sensibilities about the art form itself. Furthermore, the incorporation of opera ephemera extends beyond physical reconstruction to encompass the documentation and material traces that constitute what Pierre Saurisse, in his study of performance in museums, identifies as the "multiple material traces"²² left by ephemeral art forms. The V&A's *Opera: Passion, Power and Politics* exhibition displayed set models, costume designs, paintings depicting opera personalities and moments, autograph scores, librettos, and stage directions, creating a richly textured documentary field that supplements and contextualizes the exhibited costumes. These para-textual materials function as scenographic elements in themselves, orienting visitors toward the creative processes and technical innovations that shaped operatic production across centuries.

By placing costumes within detailed scenographic frameworks, museums bridge the gap between the garment's original purpose in performance and its current role as a heritage item. This scenographic method counters the tendency of traditional museum displays, which can turn lively performance pieces into lifeless objects removed from their vibrant contexts. Instead, it embraces Hann's idea that scenography focuses not just on making images for audiences, but on encouraging audience interaction and involvement through both sensory and intellectual experiences. An exhibition designed with scenography in mind becomes a kind of performance itself. It creates a carefully arranged spatial and temporal experience. While it differs from the original operatic event, it still communicates something crucial about the multifaceted nature of opera and its reliance on combining various artistic and technical elements. In this way, scenography acts as an important framework for museums to showcase opera costumes not just as historical items or aesthetic pieces, but as evidence of performance's collaborative, physical, and atmospheric qualities, what Pecorari might call performance's "material and immaterial knowledge," made real through thoughtful scenographic reconstruction and temporary documentation.

Lastly, all exhibition design choices converged to reflect opera as a Gesamtkunstwerk, Wagner's conception of the "total work of art, encouraging visitors to experience this synthesis while navigating the exhibition space. For instance, an immersive soundscape delivered through headphones guided visitors with location-triggered audio that responded to their movement through the galleries, and the seven-stage sets were created in collaboration with artistic director Robert Carson, alongside a juxtaposition of costumes, props, and ephemera to reconstruct the layered materiality of the Opera."²³

19. Mårdh, Hedvig. 2021. "The Artist/Scenographer and the Museum Exhibition." *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift/Journal of Art History*, Vol. 90 no.2, 115–38.

20. Marco Pecorari, *Fashion Remains: Rethinking Ephemera in the Archive* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 45.

21. O'Connell, Mark. 2022. "Fashion Remains: Rethinking Fashion Ephemera in the Archive: By Marco Pecorari (New York: Bloomsbury 2021)." *Fashion Theory*, Vol. 26, no. 3, 442–51.

22. Pierre Saurisse, *Performance in the Museum* (London: Lund Humphries Publishers Ltd, 2025), 3.

23. As explained by the curator Kate Bailey in the audio feature "Introduction and description of the exhibition" produced and narrated by Jon Tolansky for the Hampson Foundation. Accessed January 11, 2026, <https://hampsonfoundation.org/resource/opera-passion-power-and-politics-special-feature/>.

Conclusions

The trajectory traced in this essay, from the CNCS's meditation on designer authorship to the V&A's scenographic reconstruction of operatic totality, reveals costume museums as sites of productive paradox. They preserve what was meant to be ephemeral, display what was designed for movement, and invite contemplation of what demanded immediate sensory immersion. By deploying scenographic principles to reconstitute theatrical atmospheres and by situating costumes within comprehensive documentary fields, museums generate encounters that communicate essential dimensions of opera's collaborative artistry while making visible knowledge unavailable during performance itself: the sophistication of machinery, the collective labour of workshops, the material intelligence embedded in fabric and construction. As stated by Bill Hillier and Kali Tzortzi, "the museum/gallery constitutes a more or less well-defined spatial type, with varied potentials to act both as a pedagogical device for communicating knowledge and narrative, and for transmitting a non-narrative meaning in the form of an embodied spatial and social experience".²⁴ Yet these observations merely begin to map a rapidly evolving field. To conclude, the aim for further development in research is to investigate how museum costume possesses its own distinct aura: not performance's disappeared liveness but material culture's persistent evidence, bearing witness to opera's history through the irreducible materiality (the fabric, weight, stain, and form) that performance inevitably leaves behind.

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24. Bill Hillier and Kali Tzortzi, "Space Syntax: The Language of Museum Space", in Macdonald, Sharon (ed.), *A Companion to Museum Studies* (Wiley-Blackwell: Malden, MA, 2011) 282.

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