

Salaí, Leonardo da Vinci's pupil: a portrait.

An unpublished sanguine drawing.

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INTRODUCTION

We discuss an unpublished red chalk drawing representing a young boy's face in profile resembling two pen drawings of the same subject, now in the Cabinet des Dessins du Louvre, Paris, said to be copies after a lost original by the artist Leonardo da Vinci (Vinci/Italy 1452- Cloux /France 1519) (1).

HISTORICAL REMARKS

A few historical remarks may pertain to the discussion below. Leonardo da Vinci started his career in Florence, then went to Pistoia, Milan, Mantua, Padua, Venice, Rome and France (2). He had as pupils: Giovanni Giacomo di Pietro Caprotti, alias Giacomo Salaí (1485? -1524), mentioned in 1490 (3)(4)(5). Marco d'Oggiono joined him, followed the year after by Giovanni Antonio Boltraffio (6). In 1507, during his stay in Milan, he accepted Francesco da Melzi (1493-1570) (7). Other pupils were Zoroastro of Peretola, Riccio Fiorentino, Ferrando de Llanos (the Spaniard) (8), Giampetrino (9), and some others of lesser importance (10).

The haphazard and irregular life style of Leonardo precluded the existence of a large studio with promising or outstanding pupils. But because of his fame, he had already by lifetime a large school of followers and imitators. According to history, only Melzi and Salaí emerged as the most intimate assistants, broadly commented on by Giorgio Vasari, a contemporary historian (7), whom we quote: " ...A great part of these sheets with representations of the human anatomy are in the possession of a Milanese nobleman sir Francesco da Melzi, who at the time of Leonardo, who loved him very much, was a very beautiful young boy, and being now a handsome and courteous old grey-haired man, he treasures up these drawings together with a portrait of Leonardo".

And Vasari continues: "In Milan he took on the Milanese Salaí as an apprentice. This was a very attractive, charming and beautiful young boy with gorgeous curling hair locks, which enchanted Leonardo, and he taught him very much in the field of arts".

The close bond between Leonardo and these two pupils is well documented. As to the update on the gossip around their relation, we refer to the extensive comments by Nicholl (11). Only Melzi, Salaí, and a few others, were privileged to accompany Leonardo to Rome, and in 1516 to the court of the king of France, François the first, where he was appointed 'peintre du roi', and where he was very much appreciated. Three years later, on the 2nd of May 1519, Leonardo died in the manor of Cloux near Amboise (near Tours, on the Loire river). Melzi inherited most of his art works and transported them to Italy, where he kept them, probably until he died in 1570. Salaí inherited also a large part (12), drawings excluded.

MATERIALS

The sanguine drawing, we discuss, was acquired through the art market in 2005 without any other provenance and is now private property. It is drawn with red chalk on antique laid buff paper, with chain distance of 2,5 cm, and 8 laid-wires per cm. Dimensions are: 27, 9 cm x 21, 2 cm. There is no signature nor watermark. It was fully glued onto an old cardboard (contrecollé) serving as mount. On the back of the mount is an old handwritten annotation in French: "Dessin d'époque – Atelier de Leonardo" and "Portrait présumé de Solaino ou Solario élève de Leonard da Vinci (13) – Dessin ancien. Le musée du Louvre possède deux dessins à la plume de Léonard représentant le même sujet". At the bottom of this mount is an old cut off pen and ink inscription in Italian which could read as 'Ritratto di Raffaello dissegnato di... (?)'.

The drawing depicts a young boy's face turned to the left, in full profile, with a very charming, even sultry, expression, with long curling hair reaching down the shoulders, curling locks on the forehead down to the eyebrows, and contemporary cap, *berretta* or *berrettino*. In front and facing him is the outline of a somewhat deformed three-quarter face of what seems to be an older man. The drawing technique used is partly line drawing with red chalk for the left face, and partly 'sfumato' for the boy, without an underlying drawing.

For proper conservation purposes, the drawing was removed from its support, which was very much damaged and endangered the sanguine. The cardboard seems to have been made out of several sheets of old French paper glued



Fig. 1. Sanguine drawing of a young man in profile, private property ©

together. (Proper cardboard making started only in the middle of the 18th c). Once the drawing was removed a mark in the form of two written letters was found on its back: 'OV' (interlaced) and a handwritten annotation in Italian: '*Ritratto di Raffaello di Raffaellino da Regio suo scolaro*', which we translated as: '*drawing of Raffaello by Raffaellino da Regio, his pupil*'. See below.

COMPARATIVE DESCRIPTION



Fig. 2. G. Boltraffio, attributed, young man in profile, Cabinet des Dessins Louvre, Paris, inv.2558.

The old report on the back of the cardboard mount pointed to existing drawings. Indeed, the sanguine can be compared with two similar drawings of the same subject, executed in pen and brown ink, and remaining since 1671 in the royal French collections. They are now classified in the Cabinet des Dessins du Louvre, Paris, inv. nr. 2558 and 2248, as 'pseudo-Boltraffio'. Indeed, an earlier attribution of one drawing (Fig. 2) ⁽¹⁴⁾ to Leonardo's pupil Boltraffio was not withheld anymore ⁽¹⁵⁾. The second one (Fig. 3) ⁽¹⁶⁾ is of lesser quality, but more complete, and said to be an ancient copy of the first one ^(17,18). They are measuring respectively 14,4 x 11,3 cm and 17,4 x 15,4 cm. In the Boltraffio (2558), - somewhat worn -, the face is a



Fig. 3. Copy after Boltraffio, Cabinet des Dessins Louvre, Paris, inv. 2248.

little bit smaller than in the copy (2248). The shadowing in both was done with hatchings of unequal thickness and spacing, suggesting a less experienced hand. The 'Boltraffio' is cut off at the cap and at the left margin, suggesting by a few left-over lines of the chin and the shoulder, the previous existence of a face. In the copy after Boltraffio, the sketchy face of the old man to the left is fully present, but awkward and mixed up with other figures. It is presumed ⁽¹⁹⁾ that the two drawings are derived from an older complete and more original version maybe from the hand of Leonardo, version which must have disappeared before 1671, date at which the pen drawings entered the royal French collection ⁽²⁰⁾.



Fig. 4. Comparative outlines ©

To situate the sanguine drawing in relation to the Louvre works, we compared them. We used chalk paper and superimposed the main traits of the sanguine on top of the Boltraffio copy pen drawing (Fig.1 and 3) starting from the nose ⁽²¹⁾. Fig. 4 shows the differences, the sanguine being outlined in red, the pen drawing in blue. There are many large and small differences between the two. The size of the head, the position of the beretto, and the luxurious curling hair dress are obvious, but there are many small differences in the curvature of the nose, the position of the (left) eye, the mouth, the curvature of the chin, the position of the collar, and so on. A larger difference is the position of the old man's face, which is considerably higher in the sanguine. He looks now right in the eyes of the young man. All these variations result in a slightly different physiognomy. We can conclude that the two pictures are not each other's 'carbon' copies, even if they represent the same subject of about the same size. In our opinion, the sanguine drawing reflects better the charm and possibly the true nature of the person depicted.

CRITICAL AND STYLISTIC DISCUSSION

The sanguine cannot be a copy of the pen drawing once attributed to Boltraffio (Fig. 2), because the left face sketch was cut off, hence not available. It cannot be a slave copy of the '*copy after Boltraffio*' (Fig. 3) either, because of the differences in drawing outlines. In addition, the technical quality of the sanguine is undoubtedly better. This all decreases the chance that it is a later copy. We suggest that the sanguine is an original precursor of the Louvre sheets, or a third variant, and close to Leonardo. But not from his hand, as the hatchings are right handed, and Leonardo was left handed.

Leonardo's art vision.

1. The portrait of a young man.

Leonardo da Vinci developed and acquired a complete and original insight in the effects and interaction of light and shadow⁽²²⁾. He is also known for his search toward an ideal 'sfumato' technique, whereby hard contours would disappear giving a drawn/painted face more soul. He wrote his observations down in the Madrid Codices Ma II⁽²³⁾ rediscovered in 1965, and the Paris MS C⁽²⁴⁾,

The makers of the Louvre pen drawings seem to adhere less to these teachings. The execution of 'sfumato' by means of pen and ink hatchings was attempted but failed. From examining the pictures, we could not affirm neither, that the ink was washed, as stated elsewhere (see Fig. 5). Washing a pen drawing has another purpose than obtaining sfumato.



Fig. 5. 'Pseudo-Boltraffio' – close-up.

In the sanguine we discover the essentials of Leonardo's art, the light and shadow, the sfumato, and both combined, giving the work a third dimension.

First the light. The light source is above the head, at an angle of about 70 degrees from a horizontal line. In sagittal view (vertical line), the light source is also off centre to the left of the face. This is the illumination favoured by Leonardo. It offers the best opportunity to enhance light and shadow thus obtaining more three dimensionality effect on a flat surface, be it canvas or paper. In the sanguine we can see, that the light follows the Leonardo canon: the left part of the *beretta* is most illuminated, the cheek somewhat less, and the chin even lesser. The light falls only on the hair locks which protrude somewhat at the height of the ears and also at the shoulders leaving the other curls in the shadow. Such a position of the light source produces prominent shadows under the eye, the nose and the chin, increasing plasticity, and is Leonardo's favourite technique and his trade mark.

Secondly, the 'sfumato'. Chalk is a very appropriate medium for this technique, as is oil paint (in a special form, searched after by Leonardo). In the sanguine, the technique is applied into perfection. There is no hard lining of the contour of the boy's profile⁽²⁵⁾. Apparently, the 'sfumato' effect was obtained by means of very fine and very close hatchings of varying intensity, and different directions, delicately rubbed out when appropriate. The hair however did not require this technique. Here, the varying intensity of the lines and the quick oblique hatchings at some distance from each other sufficed.

2. As to the figure opposite the boy: **the old man.**

Now that a third example is at hand, we can make more accurate statements. This sanguine face, in three quarter profile is only sketchily drawn, with a somewhat distorted outlining imitating a trembling hand. We would call this an artistic accentuation of reality. The Boltraffio copyist had turned it into an ugly grimace. We are convinced that the main traits of da Vinci's late self-portrait (1512-1515) from the Biblioteca Reale of Torino (not to compare with his portrait, attributed to Francesco Melzi, now in the Royal Collection of Windsor Castle) return in the sanguine. Specifically, there is the distorted line of his right eye wall, as if it were the result of a scar, the accentuated right eye angle, the few hairs sticking out at the left temple, the two forehead wrinkles, the somewhat protruding supra-orbital region, with the dropped eyebrow's overhanging the eye socket, the accentuated short nose, and a grim mouth. We consider this sketch a distorted 'ritratto' of Leonardo himself, but without beard or moustache, hence before 1505 when he is reported with beard at the age of 53⁽²⁶⁾. The eye to eye contact with the young boy may have been meaningful to and intended by the original artist. In our interpretation the sketchy face reflects a deeper inner condition of despair or impotence of an aging man against the beauty, the charm, the youth, and the boyishness of his model. If so, it would suggest his entourage as the source of the picture. We do not believe it is a self-portrait. It could as well be a sarcastic studio 'ricordi' by the maker of the portrait: a slightly caricaturized souvenir of an eccentric and demanding teacher nearing the fifties. Another thesis would be, that the artist reflected what he had observed in the studio, namely some predilection of the master for his pupil. The face seems indeed to be added onto a fully finished and well centred portrait.

The artist

The sanguine seems very close to Leonardo, but from another hand. As the drawing was fully glued on a cardboard possibly at least since the 18th c. nobody had access to the annotation on its backside since. There are many annotations on drawings by collectors who 'invent' the presumed author. But this text is so specific as to demand some further research. It is said that old allegations are sometimes more truthful than recent ones. We interpret: "*Ritratto di Raffaello di Raffaellino da Regio suo scolaro*" as: "portrait of Raphael (Raffaello Santi d'Urbino, 1483 – 1520?) by Raffaellino da Reggio (Raffaello Motta, 1550-1578, Rome), his apprentice". The latter was a minor painter working in Rome⁽²⁷⁾. *Rafaellino* is a diminutive often used to designate the pupil of a master, in casu Raffaello. *Ritratto* is Italian for: '*figura umana presa dal vero*', but also: '*copia ricavata da un originale*'⁽²⁸⁾. Translated: '*human figure taken from life*' or '*copy obtained from an original*'.

It would then implicate that originally Sanzio Raphael had drawn the portrait, copy from an original or not.

Historically, the collector's note on the backside of the drawing does not fit.

Raphael's workshop started in Rome after about 1510. The only Raffaellino mentioned as his collaborator is Raffaellino del Colle (end 15th c. – 1566)⁽²⁹⁾. No other Raffaellino is mentioned around his studio. The statement '*suo scolaro*' (scolaro) may possibly still stand up, indicating he was a 'studio' pupil (vide infra). But then the dates do not fit in. Hence, the collector's statement must be considered as an error.

But the reference to – or the hint to - Sanzio Raphael was welcome. Sanzio's possible contribution was certainly worth considering. Sanzio left his master Perugino (1450-1523), who had been a fellow apprentice of Leonardo in the workshop of master Verrocchio, at around 1496. Introduced by a letter from Giovanna da Montefeltre⁽³⁰⁾ Sanzio went to Florence in 1504 and stayed there for four years, although he had planned to stay only for four months. Leonardo had returned to Florence in 1503, where he started the preparative work for the fresco 'the battle of Anghiari'



Fig. 6. Raphael, *head of Warrior*, detail, after Leonardo da Vinci, Oxford, Ashmolean Museum.

and stayed there until 1506⁽³¹⁾. Sanzio must have had contacts with Leonardo and his workshop even before 1504^(32, 33). Sanzio himself at the time was a very charming and graceful young boy, already fully educated in the art of painting, but still very eager to absorb the new trends of art developing in the Medici city. Even without being listed as Leonardo's pupil, he copied his drawings eagerly. His 'head of a warrior' (Fig.6, 7), and also his 'Leda with the swan', as well as a sketch of the 'Battle of Anghiari', proved that he had access to Leonardo's workshop and was interested in Leonardo's new techniques. Raphael is considered the closest to the 'Leonardesque' painting of the time. We find Leonardo's canons of sfumato technique and illumination back in Raphael's beautiful 'Study of Heads for a Madonna and Child' in the British Museum, London. The broad oblique hatching in order to obtain shadow is a 'Raphaelesque' constant. However, the sfumato technique, which is tedious



Fig. 7. Leonardo da Vinci, 'Head of Warrior', detail, British Museum.

and time consuming, is not suitable for daily use in preparative sketch work, but still of practical value to a painter of portraits, in which Raphael excelled, or for sale purposes. Raphael might have drawn this sanguine portrait (in the studio) in Florence after an original and taken it with him when he left for Rome in 1508. He could do so, as he was not employed by Leonardo, and the drawing would be his property. After Sanzio's early death in 1520, it got dispersed in Rome, and handed over with oral attributions, whereby the name of the sitter and/or the artist often got mixed up. Note that even up until the 19th c. the name Salai was confused with 'Solario (Antonio), or Salaino (Andrea), contemporary artists (see the text on the mounting board). The technical quality of the sanguine precludes the hand of a mediocre artist. But the possibility of another artist from the circle of Leonardo remains open. However, da Melzi would have been too young. His first dated drawing dates from 1510. Marco d'Oggiono is another of the few contemporary possibilities.

The sitter

As to the identity of the model: although Leonardo was very much preoccupied with all forms of physiognomy⁽³⁴⁾, this drawing seems to be an accomplished portrait of someone. A young boy's profile spooked in his head for a long time, as did the old 'warrior's' profile. They are encountered in different of his sheets. If we accept a (lost) original from his hand, then it must have been executed with great care. The specific technical aspects of the artwork were primordial to him even when the model was gorgeously attractive. Leonardo made a portrait only when it was really worthwhile to him. In the case of the 'pseudo-Boltraffio's', it has been suggested (Möller and Hind) that the typical profile represents Leonardo's pupil Salai⁽³⁵⁾. Long hair under a *berretta* for men was fashionable around 1500 in Italy. But Salai's hair must have been exceptional for Vasari to comment on it. This also fascinated Leonardo, who made studies on hair curling⁽³⁶⁾. The curling hair locks in the sanguine are indeed very beautiful. And Salai had become an attractive young man of around 20 years of age, at the time the portrait may have been executed i.e. around 1500- 1504, when Leonardo had turned 50. We follow these hypothetical views and hence label the sanguine as a possible portrait of Salai.

DISCUSSION

What is the place of this sanguine in drawing art history? Obviously, even not being part of a royal, noble, or museal collection, it survived the many hazards of time and nature, such as water damage, chemical degradation, or war related destructions. The drawing is well centred on a large sheet of paper. This indicates it was conceived as a portrait. Serving as a preparative model for a painting is not excluded, but no such work came to us. The very elaborate and tedious drawing technique suggests that it served as a studio exercise. Indeed, according to Leonardo, good drawing starts by copying the master. In this case, Leonardo possibly performed the 'master drawing', as suggested already by others. The pupils then could demonstrate their skills by copying. Here they had the advantage that the sitter was always around. Considering all our above statements, we propose the sanguine to be a studio exercise where the artist followed the da Vinci drawing canons, eventually by copying a (lost) 'master' example. This original would of course not show a caricaturized grim self-portrait. Hence we suggest that a work, such as the sanguine we discussed, served as an intermediary example f.i. for the 'pseudo-Boltraffio's to copy. But nothing is known about these artists, nor about the provenance of their pictures which entered the E. Jabach collection in the 16th/ 17th century.

CONCLUSION

We discussed an unpublished sanguine drawing of the head of a young man in full profile, accompanied by a three-quarter face. We propose it to be a precursor of two similar Louvre pen and ink drawings, known as the "pseudo-Boltraffio", rather than a copy of them, because of its higher technical quality and completeness. We suggest that it could be a studio copy/exercise from a lost original by Leonardo da Vinci by someone close-to him. Conjectural arguments for the possible contribution of Sanzio Raffaello Santi d'Urbino are put forward. We propose again Leonardo's cherished

pupil Salai as sitter, because of the beautiful hair locks, and the charming expression, historically confirmed. In the adjacent face we detect the features of Leonardo. As a real portrait, the drawing goes beyond the allegoric representations of a young boy and an old man, frequently encountered in Leonardo da Vinci's oeuvre, but the undertone remains.

We hope that this paper may contribute to further da Vinci studies.

We wish to thank the 'Cabinet des Dessins du Louvre' for their kindness.

¹ VIATTE, Françoise, *Léonard de Vinci*, (Ed.) Musée du Louvre, Paris, 2005, p. 68. (ISBN 2-35031-9)

² GOLDSCHNEIDER, Ludwig, *Leonardo, Paintings and Drawing*, Phaidon Press, London, 1967: gives a summary of the life of Leonardo da Vinci, together with the translation of Leonardo's biography by the contemporary Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) – see f.n. 7.

³ GOLDSCHNEIDER, L., p. 40: "22 July, 1490 – Salai, a boy of ten, joins Leonardo as a servant and pupil; he remains with him for twenty eight years."

⁴ SHELL, Janice and SIRONI, Grazioso, *Salai and Leonardo's legacy*, Burlington Magazine 1991, p. 91. The real name of Giacomo Salai is 'Giovanni Giacomo di Pietro Caprotti' (see also Nicholl, f.n. 11, p. 269), originating from Oreno, hence called by SHELL, 'Giacomo Caprotti di Oreno'.

⁵ NICHOLL, C. (see f.n.11 p. 215) states that 'Salai' means 'little devil', *Salaino* in diminutive, and that Leonardo used it as a nickname for the naughty Giacomo Caprotti. Hence the confusing name of 'Andrea Salai/ Salaino' in earlier literature, f.i. E. Müntz, *Léonard de Vinci*, 1899, p. 496.

⁶ GOLDSCHNEIDER, L., p. 40: "2 april, 1491 – Boltraffio is mentioned in Leonardo's studio". He was born appr. in 1467, and died in 1516 at the age of 48 years (Müntz, p. 498)

⁷ VASARI, Giorgio, *Le Vite de piú eccelenti Pittori, Scultori ed Architettori*. There is a first edition of 1550 and one of 1568. The translations are in Goldscheider (f.n. 2).

⁸ GADDIANO Anonimo (Anonimo Magliabecchiano) in his "*Leonardo da Vinci*" translated see f.n. 2, p 31.

⁹ Mentioned by E. Müntz, p.495.

¹⁰ GIOVIO, Paolo (Como 1483 – Florence 1552), *the life of Leonardo da Vinci*, as translated in Goldscheider (f.n. 2, p. 29) : "He (*L.d.V.*) died in France at the age of 67 to the grief of his friends which loss was all the greater for among the great crowd of young men who contributed to the success of his studio; he left no disciple of outstanding fame".

¹¹ NICHOLL, Charles, *Leonardo da Vinci. The Hights of the Mind*, Penguin Books, 2005, p. 114 a.f.

¹² SHELL (f.n. 4)

¹³ This text confirms the confusion of the ancient collectors. Salai was previously wrongly called Andrea SALAINO, and confused with Andrea SOLARIO, a contemporary artist borrowing from Leonardo. See also footnote 1 in Shell, (f.n. 4). The real identity of Salai was established only in 1919 by G. CALVI.

¹⁴ VIATTE, F., (f.n. 1) Fig. 26. Not mentioned in Müntz's 'Catalogue Musée du Louvre, p. 519-520.

¹⁵ VIATTE, F., (f.n. 1).

¹⁶ VIATTE, F., Fig. 27: the size of the reproduction is slightly smaller than the original. Computer enlarged for study purposes. Now published by Viatte as 'copy after Boltraffio'.

¹⁷ VIATTE, F.

¹⁸ MÜNTZ, Eugène : *Léonard de Vinci, l'artiste, le penseur, le savant*, Hachette, Paris, 1899, p.520, XXI, describes this drawing as 'Etude d'adolescent' and considers this a 'superbe dessin' by Léonardo, adding that M. Morelli thinks it is false.

¹⁹ VIATTE, F., p. 68.

²⁰ Before, they were in the E. Jabach collection (born 1610), a collector's family, whose father had first hand opportunity to acquire 16th c. drawings (Burlington Magazine, 1951, p.16)

²¹ We used a computer picture as intermediary, which gives small differences, without influence on the results. The marks on the left side are cm gradations.

²² SNOW-SMITH, J., *The Salvator Mundi of Leonardo da Vinci*, University of Washington, Seattle, 1982, p. 45 a.f., The author fully discussed this with reference to the Madrid Codices (Ma II) in the Biblioteca Nacional of Madrid, but also in Paris MS C.

²³ As in f.n. 20.

²⁴ NICHOLL, f.n. 11, p. 264 a.f.

²⁵ Several of Leonardo's original drawings were 'retouched' by followers with hard outlining of the contours, thus depriving the pictures of their intended softness and hindering their correct reading.

²⁶ NICHOLL., f.n. 11, p. 399.

²⁷ *Encyclopedia of Italian Renaissance and Mannerist Art, vol. II*, Jane Turner, Editor, London: Macmillan, 2000, p. 1330. Raffaello Motta alias Raffaellino da Reggio, 1550-1578 Rome. Probably trained under Lelio Orsi, and was an assistant to Frederico Zuccaro and other painters working in Rome.

²⁸ ZINGARELLI, Nicola, *Vocabulario della lingua italiana*, 7th edit., Bologna, 1950.

²⁹ SALMI, Mario, a.o., *The complete work of Raphael*, Harrison House, N-Y, 1969, p. 300.

³⁰ HÖPER, Corinna, *Raffael und die Folgen*, Staats galerie Stuttgart, 2001, p. 23. Translating the letter : 'The messenger of this letter is the painter Raphael d'Urbino, who in his endeavours has demonstrated a good talent, and who is determined to stay in Florence for a while in order to learn' etc.

³¹ VIATTE,F., see f.n. 1, p.16-17.

³² BECHERUCCI, Luisa, *Raphael and Painting*, in: *The complete work of Raphael*, Harrison House, Publishers, New York, 1969, p. 13-15.

³³ TEMPESTI, Anna Forlani, *The drawings*, in: *The complete work of Raphael*, Harrison House, Publishers, New York, 1969, p. 332-333.

³⁴ KWAKKELSTEIN, Michael, *Leonardo da Vinci as a physiognomist Theory and drawing practice*, Primavera Press Leiden 1994.

³⁵ NICHOLL, C., f.n. 11, p. 273. He publishes a portrait of a head of a young boy with curled short hair, turned to the left, from the Royal Library at Windsor, and calls it 'the Salai look'. Müntz p.272 publishes a similar face turned to the right, which he calls 'tête inspirée de l'Antique'. These pictures have about the same profile, but at a younger age.

³⁶ SNOW-SMITH, f.n. 21.

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