

Globalizing French Luxury: The Comité Colbert and *L'Art de Vivre*, 1983-2025

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In 1994, the Comité Colbert, a trade association founded in 1954, commissioned a marketing study investigating what luxury meant to consumers. It concluded that luxury was “an object, or a service, plus a set of representations: images, concepts, [and] sensations that the consumer associates with it.”¹ This expansive definition was the outcome of some fifty years of transformation, during which France’s small collection of predominantly family-owned luxury houses grew into a global industry. In 2024, Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton (LVMH) reported annual exports that surpassed those of the nation’s entire agricultural sector.²

The Comité Colbert was one of the organizations that constructed France’s postwar luxury industry. Its first chairman was Jean-Jacques Guerlain, the business-savvy son of perfumier Jacques Guerlain. He named the Comité in honor of Jean-Baptiste Colbert, who promoted French manufacturing and trade under Louis XIV.³ Guerlain envisioned the association as a means to restore the prestige of France’s luxury houses in the aftermath of war and years of economic austerity. At its inception, it brought together fourteen companies, including Baccarat, Cartier, Chaumet, Christian Dior, Guerlain, and Hermès.⁴ By uniting some of the most renowned names in French fashion, perfume, tableware, and jewelry, it was able to act as a formidable advocacy group. The Comité spearheaded marketing campaigns, cultivated youth talent in the arts, and lobbied governments to pass anti-counterfeiting legislation.⁵ Like the industry itself, its membership grew to encompass a vast array of products and brands, from restaurants to cosmetics. It also welcomed the National Orchestra, Paris Opera, and Air France, among others, as associate members in the 1980s and 1990s. Currently, the Comité consists of 96 French and 6 European “maisons” as well as 18 cultural institutions.⁶ However, during this same period of commercial expansion, ownership within the luxury industry became increasingly consolidated. The 1987 merger of Louis Vuitton and Moët-Hennessy (itself the product of a merger) gave rise to LVMH, which is now one of the world’s largest multinational conglomerates, overseeing

¹ Centre d'économie Industrielle de l'École des Mines de Paris, *L'industrie du luxe*, 3.

² Klasa, “LVMH accounts for bigger share of French exports than agricultural sector.”

³ Originally named Groupement Colbert, the organization adopted the Comité moniker in 1959. “Important Dates in the Life of the Comité Colbert,” *Colbert Highlights 1995-1996* (Paris: Comité Colbert, 1996), 30. BnF, 4-WZ-11568.

⁴ “Important Dates,” 30.

⁵ “Colbert, the Watchful Eye of the Expert,” *Colbert Highlights 1995-1996* (Paris: Comité Colbert, 1996), 16-17. BnF, 4-WZ-11568.

⁶ Comité Colbert “The Voice of French Luxury.”

more than 70 brands. The financial power of conglomerates like LVMH, coupled with strategic brand licensing and product diversification, further accelerated luxury's globalization.⁷

This essay explores the evolution of the Comité Colbert's marketing strategies, exposing how its leaders deployed and reshaped the concept of the French *art de vivre*—which they associated with craftsmanship, taste, and other aesthetic values—in response to two pressing challenges that confronted the industry in the closing decades of the twentieth century. First, how could the Comité help the companies it represented maintain their association with small family firms and artisanal craft, so central to their commercial appeal, as they became increasingly mass market and multinational in character? Second, the Comité's members had recently turned their attention to emerging markets in Asia. However, the organization's founding mission—that an inherently French *art de vivre* needed to be protected and spread—posed potential marketing obstacles, particularly in China and other countries with a history of anti-imperial struggle. Initially, the Comité fully embraced the national myth of France's superior taste culture, staging a series of international exhibitions in the 1980s that instructed visitors in a uniquely French art of living. By the 1990s, however, they reframed their approach, representing the ability to appreciate and create tasteful luxury products as universal human traits enriched by cultural exchange. Yet the Comité's leaders never abandoned their emphasis on the cultural values that they originally associated with France's *art de vivre*. Instead, they repositioned the organization as a global ambassador and protector of French and local craft traditions as they strove to conquer new markets.

“L'Art de vivre en France”

In the 1980s, the Comité launched an ambitious series of exhibitions in Europe, America, and Japan representing *L'art de vivre en France*. There were four in total, held in 1983 at the Hôtel de la Monnaie in Paris, in 1985 at the Teien Metropolitan Art Museum in Tokyo, in 1987 at the Haus der Kunst Museum in Munich, and in 1989 at the Cooper Hewitt Museum in New York, which was part of the Comité's “Year of America” celebration coinciding with the bicentennial of the French Revolution.⁸ While Western Europe and the U.S. were already well-established markets for the Comité's members, Japan was an exciting new frontier where they did not yet face cutthroat domestic competition.⁹ Their exports to Japan grew from less than 5% of their total annual sales in 1984 to 15.2% in 1994 (and to 47.3% of their total sales in Asia).¹⁰

As its members expanded their global reach, these events gave the Comité an opportunity to influence how foreign audiences perceived both luxury and Frenchness. Yet the question of how to represent French luxury remained unresolved within the Comité itself. In communications directed at members and government officials, the Comité's leaders characterized luxury

⁷ Pouillard, *Paris to New York*, 224-228.

⁸ “1989: When America Celebrates French ‘Art de Vivre’ with the Comité Colbert,” *Comité Colbert Annual Report 1988* (Paris: Comité Colbert, 1988), 24-25. BnF, 4-WZ-11568.

⁹ “La route du Pacifique,” *Lettre mensuelle du Comité Colbert*, no. 21, April-May 1980, 1-4. BnF, 4-JO-32550.

¹⁰ “Colbert Worldwide,” *Colbert Highlights 1994-1995* (Paris: Comité Colbert, 1995), 4-5. BnF, 4-WZ-11568.

production as a vital component of the nation's modern economy. In an interview published in the Comité's 1987 annual report, President and CEO Christian Blanckaert referred to members' activities as an economic "*force de frappe*," borrowing a phrase more commonly used to describe France's nuclear strike capabilities, and listed luxury among France's strategic export sectors along with aeronautics, armaments, and agriculture. He went on to explain that it was necessary for French luxury producers to diversify their product lines in order to attract consumers with varying budgets, asserting: "It is essential to be flexible, offering tradition and modernity at the same time . . . A luxury object can be very cheap. Everybody can afford a nice bottle of champagne. Jewels are not necessarily expensive, and they make beautiful gifts. A watch may be a luxury product. A bath towel also, and a fragrance . . . French luxury is available to millions."¹¹ However exaggerated Blanckaert's claims about accessibility may have been, the industry's efforts to appeal to a broader audience meant that any narrative about the distinguishing characteristics of French luxury would need to accommodate a diverse range of products and resonate across different cultural contexts.

The narrative that the Comité settled on leaned heavily on conventional national tropes, connecting the participating brands and their products to a shared heritage of superior taste and craftsmanship. Despite some differences in their design, all four exhibitions took place in museums and featured a collection of over 300 "exceptional" objects, many derived from Comité members' private archives, including jewelry worn by Empress Marie Louise, a gilded Louis XVI console table, and a crystal drinking glass created for Charles X in honor of his visit to Baccarat's atelier in 1828. They also displayed more conventional consumer goods, such as Nina Ricci perfumes and Lacoste's alligator emblazoned polos and branded cologne.¹² In Paris and Tokyo, these objects were sorted into thematic exhibits that emphasized craft, including "the crystal arts," "haute couture," and "perfume-making."¹³ One of the intentions of the New York exhibition, which traced the French art of living from 1789 to 1989, was to disabuse Americans of the notion that "French taste and craftsmanship had reached its zenith prior to the Revolution." According to David McFadden, decorative arts curator for the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, and one of the event's organizers, it aimed to demonstrate, rather, "that craftsmanship [was] still very much a part of the French decorative arts."¹⁴ While perfumes and polo shirts might not seem exceptional in isolation, their placement alongside couture garments and priceless jewelry invited visitors to contextualize them within a broader legacy of French artisanal excellence.

In addition to celebrating the craftsmanship of the objects on display, the exhibitions reinforced a less tangible vision of luxury rooted in the French *art de vivre*. In Munich, several of the exhibits were related to leisure activities, including "an evening out" and "travel." The exhibition catalogue described the French ability to transform travel into an aesthetic experience: "When we travel, surrounded by the care that the Comité Colbert's creators bring to the art of living, the

¹¹ "Christian Blanckaert interviewed by Catherine Nay," *Comité Colbert Report 1987* (Paris: Comité Colbert, 1987), 6-8. BnF, 4-WZ-11568.

¹² Hayot and Comité Colbert, eds., *Arts de Vivre en France*, 36-37, 161. Carlson, "French New York," 3-4.

¹³ Cardot and Comité Colbert, eds., *Ils perpétuent Colbert*. Carlson, 3-4; "Colbert Orient-Expo," *Lettre du Comité Colbert*, no.37, February 1985. BnF, 4-JO-32550.

¹⁴ Carlson, 3-4.

journey is elegant, calm, cheerful, full of refined pleasures. A passenger on the Normandie ocean liner, looking ravishing in an outfit made to enhance her beauty, does not want to arrive quickly at the port. The journey counts as much as destination.”¹⁵ Both the Munich and Tokyo exhibitions included a section devoted to celebrities that recognized Coco Chanel, Salvador Dali, Grace Kelly, and Princess Diana, among others, as tastemakers and international trendsetters through their collaboration with and patronage of the “houses of Colbert.”¹⁶ The ultimate goal of the New York exhibition, according to the Comité’s 1987 annual report, was to “describe two centuries of French elegance, taste, and savoir-faire” as an answer to the question: “how can one be French?”¹⁷

As the definition of luxury became an increasingly diffuse product of marketing, the Comité anchored its associated brands and products to a historical legacy of French craftsmanship, taste, and savoir-faire stretching back to the eighteenth century, believing that this strategy would be as effective in Tokyo as it was in New York. Blanckaert underscored his confidence in this strategy in the same 1987 interview in which he had encouraged luxury producers to both modernize and remain true to their traditions. When asked “what image should a luxury product convey?” he responded, “French culture, French life, art de vivre.” Replying to the interviewer’s pointed follow up—“have you ever been obliged to create a certain French snobbery in order to open up abroad?”—he averred, “being French is something particular, is that necessarily snobbish? In any case, the French have a magnificent cultural heritage. In the eyes of the Japanese, France is a bit like the cultural legion of honor.”¹⁸ Rejecting the interviewer’s implication that the Comité’s representation of Frenchness might come across as chauvinistic, Blanckaert reasserted his firm belief in the universal appeal of the French art of living.

“*Le métissage des créativités*”

Jean-Louis Dumas, the chairman and creative director of Hermès, replaced Guerlain as the Comité’s chairman in 1988. Although his tenure was short, lasting only until 1991, he initiated an enduring shift in the organization’s mission that was realized in 1994 as part of a new strategic plan. Rejecting the “old model”—described as the “*hégémonie de l’art de vivre français*”—the new plan encouraged the Comité to instead promote “*le métissage des créativités*.”¹⁹ Illustrating that creativity arose from “French luxury encountering the luxury of other nations” would also require shifting the focus of the Comité’s marketing, from centering French history and culture to cultivating humanity’s innate appreciation for luxury:

¹⁵ Hayot et. al., eds., 51.

¹⁶ Hayot et. al., eds., 20-22; “Arts de vivre en France,” *Lettre du Comité Colbert*, no.37, February 1985. BnF, 4-JO-32550.

¹⁷ “1989: L’Amérique célèbre avec le Comité Colbert ‘The French Art de Vivre’,” *Report annuel 1987* (Paris: Comité Colbert, 1987), 24-25. BnF, 4-WZ-11568.

¹⁸ “Entretien Christian Blanckaert,” *Report annuel 1987* (Paris: Comité Colbert, 1987), 8. BnF, 4-WZ-11568. Notably, the sentence “La France pour la Japonais, c’est un peu la légion d’honneur culturelle,” was cut from the interview text included in the English version of the Comité’s 1987 report.

¹⁹ Pierre Louis Desprez, Jean-François Marechal, and Gilbert Moulinier, “Comité Colbert: Étude Stratégique Synthèse,” April 1994, 8-9. Archives nationales (Pierrefitte), 20170161/22.

Today, the Comité Colbert has the opportunity to undergo a true Copernican revolution: from placing itself at the center and, at times, judging its surroundings harshly (“pretentious luxury”), it is now entering an era of relativity, embracing adaptation to different environments while still upholding key standards (craftsmanship, expertise, heritage, and quality). At the same time, it seeks to recognize and celebrate other forms of luxury around the world. Its new mission should make it more outward-looking: educating tastes and enhancing the appreciation of the “senses.”²⁰

France was not at the center of the luxury universe, this new metaphor suggested, but was rather one planet among many, revolving around, if not a sun, exactly, then a constellation of embodied senses that universally led people to create and desire luxury goods. Nevertheless, this spirit of creativity still required nurturing. It was to this end the Comité should continue to “educate taste,” not as a civilizer, but as a steward.

One of the Comité’s earliest efforts to implement this revised mission was the 1998 exhibition *Theater of the Senses*, held at the Palais de la Découverte, a science museum located within Paris’s Grand Palais. Spanish physicist Jorge Wagensberg designed the opening section, which explained how the five senses helped humans “to communicate, to create, and to feel pleasure.”²¹ Visitors looked through windows that mimicked other species’ sight, ran their fingers over textured materials (including a desiccated sponge), and listened to lullabies sung in different languages.²² In the remaining exhibits—the “Theater of Jewels,” “Theater of Adornment,” “Theater of Perfume,” and “Theater of the Feast”—Comité members showcased their products, which were illuminated and amplified through artfully positioned mirrors and video projections.²³ In the “Theater of Adornment,” guests were encouraged to touch couture and ready-to-wear gowns made by Chanel, Hermès, and Dior. They could then step behind the display and poke their heads through a hole positioned above the garments.²⁴ The overarching purpose of the exhibition, the visitor’s guide explained, was “to demonstrate just how important luxury is to the pleasures of the senses, as it brings beauty, creativity, and sensuality into our everyday lives.”²⁵ Comité President and CEO Alain Teitelbaum further elaborated that the experience aimed to “remind everyone that luxury, much more than a question of resources, is all

²⁰ Le Comité Colbert rencontre aujourd'hui l'opportunité de faire sa révolution copernicienne: d'une position centrale jugeant son environnement parfois avec dureté (“le luxe arrogant”), il entre dans l'ère de la relativité, en acceptant de s'adapter à ses différents environnements, de rester garant d'un certain nombre de critères (métiers, savoir-faire, historicité, qualité) tout en valorisant les autres luxes existant au monde. Sa nouvelle mission devrait l'ouvrir davantage vers l'extérieur: éduquer les goûts et valoriser les “sens.” Desprez et. al., 1.

²¹ “Le Comité Colbert présente: exposition théâtres des sens, Palais de la Découverte, 15 mai-3 janvier,” Visitor’s Guide/Map. BnF, 4-WZ-10561.

²² “Paris shows off its style,” *The Paris Free Voice*, July/August 1998.

²³ “Le Comité Colbert présente: exposition théâtres des sens.”

²⁴ Menkes, “Sensing Is Believing.”

²⁵ “Le Comité Colbert présente: exposition théâtres des sens.”

about feelings.”²⁶ In other words, income or nationality was not the limiting factor in learning how to appreciate luxury, but rather being out of tune with one’s own senses. The exhibition represented the products on display as a conduit for self-realization, and used a scientific framing to naturalize the desires that its organizers hoped to stimulate. It was also one of the few events organized by the Comité Colbert that did not place a strong emphasis on craftsmanship, instead distinguishing a luxury item through its ability to provoke a strong sensory reaction.

At the same time that it was striving to create a more inclusive conception of luxury in France, the Comité Colbert was also searching for new ways to communicate the value of its brands in a wider variety of foreign markets. An optimistic 1995 report on global trends observed an upswing in members’ sales in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and Korea, and urged readers to “note too, the progress of China, a market still in its infancy but already promising.” By that year, 74% of Comité members’ sales were outside of France, and exports to China accounted for 6.6% of that total.²⁷ To further stimulate market growth in China and better address rising concerns about counterfeiting, the Comité opened a permanent office in Beijing in 1994 (its only other foreign office was in New York) and commissioned a special working group.²⁸ However, penetrating the Chinese market posed unique challenges. Chinese boycotts of foreign products began in the early-twentieth century as a form of anti-imperial protest, and later solidified into a potent expression of economic nationalism, often erupting after a perceived political provocation. Cultural sensitivities were particularly high in the years leading up to and following China’s entry into the WTO in 2001.²⁹

The Comité’s initial attempts to court Chinese consumers reflected their recognition that the same strategies that were successful in the U.S. and Japan were unlikely to work in China. Between 2003 to 2005, the Chinese and French governments developed a series of projects and cultural exchanges related to the arts, education, technology, and tourism. These festivities, held in both China and France, gave the Comité an occasion to organize the “Comité Colbert Fête la Chine” in October 2003. Departing from their typical focus on French culture alone, this collective marketing endeavor instead aimed to highlight how China served “as both a source of inspiration and a showcase for French excellence.”³⁰ The participating companies selected objects from their archives or commissioned new pieces inspired by Chinese culture and displayed them inside their individual Parisian boutiques for the duration of the event. Customers would need to visit each store to view the entire collection, which included a leather-bound Mahjong set by Louis Vuitton, a silver goat created by Baccarat to recognize the year’s Chinese zodiac animal, and a handbag painted with lotus flowers by the artist Fanfan Li for Céline. Boucheron chose a pair of elaborate Art Nouveau vases created in 1880 by founder Frédéric

²⁶ “An interview with Comité president Alain Teitelbaum by Guillemette de Sairigné,” *Colbert Highlights 1995-1996* (Paris: Comité Colbert, 1996), 4-5. BnF, 4-WZ-11568.

²⁷ “Spectacular Growth,” *Colbert Highlights 1994-1995* (Paris: Comité Colbert, 1995), 4-5.

²⁸ “No Borders for the Comité Colbert,” *Colbert Highlights 1994-1995*, 10. BnF, 4-WZ-11568.

²⁹ Gerth, “Consumption and Nationalism,” 424. French producers experienced this first hand in 2008, when Chinese consumers boycotted French brands, including Carrefour, in response to pro-Tibetan protesters interrupting the Parisian leg of the Olympic torch procession, as well as Nicolas Sarkozy’s decision to meet with the Dhali Lama later that year.

³⁰ McConnico, *Comité Colbert fête la Chine*, 2.

Boucheron. Their dragon and serpent engravings were inspired by the designer's "admiration of Chinese art and fascination with mythological animals."³¹ The same objects voyaged to Shanghai in 2005, where the Chinese public could view the collection on display inside Plaza 66, an upscale shopping mall in the Bund.³²

The materials used to promote these two events further exposed the Comité's attempt to retool its messaging in order to be culturally inclusive without relinquishing their tried-and-true emphasis on the French art of living. The artist Hilton McConnico designed the commemorative booklet and catalogue, including the cover, which combined the Comité's sun emblem (a reference to Louis XIV) with the five stars of the Chinese flag.³³ In a similar synthesis of French and Chinese cultural signifiers, François Cheng, the Chinese-born French academic and writer, created a piece of calligraphy that translated six adjectives he associated with French luxury—"élégant," "raffiné," "excellent," "merveilleux," "créatif," "modern"—into equivalent Chinese characters. Through the composition of his piece, he intended "to evoke harmony, measure, balance, characteristics of the French genius." He also expressed his hope that the exhibit would help to reawaken Chinese appreciation of their own artistic traditions: "The notion of 'art de vivre,' so long lost to the Chinese, can bring France closer to China because the latter is nostalgic for those distant centuries when it also achieved a kind of excellence."³⁴

Emphasizing cultural affinities and highlighting local artistic traditions became a repeated formula applied to each new country the Comité targeted. In the 2000s to 2010s, these countries included India, Russia, Turkey, Bahrain, Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates, and Brazil. President and CEO Élisabeth Ponsolle des Portes explained how the Comité adapted its "cultural mission" to correspond to these different national contexts:

The challenge for the Comité Colbert is to find adequate ways of cultivating these affinities and points of convergence that transcend clichés. We chose the theme of modernity for our event in Turkey, because of its avant-garde contemporary art scene. For Arab countries, we opted to concentrate on language—the words of luxury—with the collaboration of linguist Alain Rey and the Syrian poet Adonis. When we headed to Brazil, the spotlight was on design: the 2012 Colbert Award for Creation and Culture was presented to the Campana brothers.³⁵

In each of these locations, Comité leaders identified a theme that they believed would align well with one of their own organizational values and used it to promote both their own brands and local creators like the Campana brothers, who founded a furniture design studio in São Paulo in 1984. In doing so, the Comité positioned itself as a global ambassador of craftsmanship, protecting local traditions against intensifying international competition while simultaneously seeking to raise the profile of their members' brands abroad. They also began to explicitly

³¹ McConnico, 22, 32, 40, 102.

³² Comité Colbert, *La lux français*, 1.

³³ McConnico, 2.

³⁴ McConnico, 10-11.

³⁵ "Entretien avec Élisabeth Ponsolle des Portes," *The Comité Colbert in 2014* (Paris: Comité Colbert, 2014), 57.

describe their activities as diplomatic, such as in a 2012 editorial that characterized the Comité as a body “united in promoting shared values that characterize the unique identity of French luxury, whose 75 full members (luxury houses) and 13 associate members (cultural institutions) are serving as diplomats, helping build the influence of French style worldwide.”³⁶

Nowhere has the Comité emphasized its diplomatic role more than in China, where its members have achieved remarkable success since their initial entry in the early 2000s. By 2014, Ponsolle des Portes observed that “France [was] represented [in China] by one embassy, six consulates and one thousand six hundred Colbert sales outlets.”³⁷ The Comité’s most ambitious Chinese publicity campaign in recent years, *Jeux de Mains*, took place in Shanghai in November 2024. Advertised as “a dialogue of savoir-faire between French artisans from the houses of the Comité Colbert and exceptional Chinese artisans,” it featured the products of seventeen Comité members, including Guerlain, Hermès, Longchamp, and Chanel. During the event, Chinese and French artisans shared workbenches and tools to demonstrate painting, embroidery, sewing, and other artistic techniques related to the products on display.³⁸ The exhibition’s curator was Jiang Qion’er, a Chinese artist and entrepreneur who founded Shang Xia, a home décor and lifestyle brand created in partnership with Hermès in 2010 and with the stated intention to “revive Chinese and Asian culture and handicrafts.”³⁹ Although only 10,000 people attended the week-long event in person, through promotional tie-ins, including videos played on billboards, livestreaming on Chinese social media platforms, and in-flight programming on Air France and Air China, the Comité estimated that its campaign reached an audience of 23 million.⁴⁰

In the 1980s, the Comité strove to associate its members and their products with an *art de vivre* unique to France. It has continued to deploy similar language in recent marketing campaigns. Current President and CEO Bénédicte Epinay explained in a 2025 interview that “the desire to promote French luxury and the art of living is at the forefront of the Comité’s missions, along with the preservation of expertise.” She emphasized, further, that “from 2010 onwards, [our] focus expanded to additional destinations . . . Each time, the Comité Colbert relied on time-tested elements from the past to offer demonstrations by artisans, dialogues of expertise, conferences, and exhibitions. These exchanges highlight the sector’s interest in the diversity and richness of cultural dialogue.”⁴¹ Her remarks expose how the Comité has in fact substantially adapted its marketing strategies in order to help its members penetrate the global marketplace. In the early 2000s, the Comité reimagined its mission abroad as one centered on cultural exchange and acknowledged that the art of living that it valued and perpetuated was also the product of such exchanges. Nevertheless, it has continued to represent itself and its members as tastemakers, not by virtue of a superior ability to determine what is tasteful, but instead through a unique cultural

³⁶ Elisabeth Ponsolle des Portes, “Editorial,” *The Comité Colbert in 2012* (Paris: Comité Colbert, 2012), 4.

³⁷ “Entretien avec Élisabeth Ponsolle des Portes,” 57. For more on how the Comité Colbert viewed its soft power influence on China, also see Ponsolle des Portes, “La Chine, nouvelle Terre,” 22-24.

³⁸ Comité Colbert. “Le Comité Colbert expose à Shanghai.”

³⁹ Shang Xia, “Our Collection.”

⁴⁰ Comité Colbert, “Rayonnement International,” *Comité Colbert Annual Report 2024*, 57-59.

⁴¹ Université de la Terre, “Entre culture, luxe et responsabilité.”

imperative to defend craft traditions. In this way, the Comité has continued to promote a version of French exceptionalism, helping its members distinguish their brands in foreign markets while avoiding controversy.

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