

## Innovative Guilds in the Dutch Golden Age

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Guilds have long had a negative connotation in economic history. They are commonly associated with regressive economic characteristics such as protectionism and inhibiting innovation. The assumption among many historians has been that guilds represent the unnatural continuation of medieval institutions into a modernizing economic and social environment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>1</sup> The tremendous economic growth during the Dutch Golden Age provides an excellent opportunity to study guilds in a rapidly expanding economy to determine if guild officials or the members themselves held regressive economic ideas. The painters' guilds—known as St Luke guilds—provide optimal circumstances for this effort. A tremendous amount of research has been done by art historians on the membership of these guilds; this research is readily available in English language sources.

Historians have attributed similar characteristics to Dutch guilds as to guilds in other territories during the early modern period, agreeing that the guilds still maintained a significant amount of political, economic and social influence through the seventeenth century. Many guilds were successful with protectionist actions, maintaining higher prices for guild-produced goods and demonstrating their heavy influence on the urban economy, even in large trades such as the bakers.<sup>2</sup> Until recently, the power of the guilds has been portrayed as economically backward. A typical assessment of guild concerns in the aftermath of the Thirty Years' War and the economic slump in Dutch garrison towns has been that cities responded by "the traditional method of towns in decay—strengthening the guilds and guild regulations to restrict competition

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<sup>1</sup> Harald Deceulaer and Ann Diels, "Artists, Artisans, Workshop Practices and Assistants in the Low Countries" in *Invisible Hands? The Role and Status of the Painter's Journeymen in the Low Countries c. 1450-c. 1650*, Natasja Peeters, eds. (Leuven: Peeters, 2007) 13.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan I. Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall 1477-1806* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 632-633.

from outsiders and between guild members."<sup>3</sup> Mariët Westermann presents a typically traditional view of the impact of the guilds in the Netherlands, citing the need for workers outside the guilds to help keep up the pace of production to match growing demand: "In the course of the century, the protectionist guild system by and large contracted, to the benefit of more clearly market-driven production processes."<sup>4</sup> These overly general statements regarding the guilds fail to look at the conditions in the workshops and the art market that contradict these assessments.

Not only was the Dutch economy as a whole growing rapidly at the beginning of the seventeenth century, this was a period of tremendous expansion of the art market. Market forces had as big of an impact on artists and artistic production as they had on the Dutch social structure and agricultural production.<sup>5</sup> While some earlier estimates put the production of paintings at 2.5 million paintings in Holland by 1650, more comprehensive estimates radically increase this number to 5 to 10 million paintings, at least half of them completed during the seventeenth century.<sup>6</sup> The evidence of a mass market is clear in household accounts from this period; numbers of paintings in house inventories rose dramatically. In Delft as early as the 1610s the average was ten paintings per household. This rose to twenty paintings in the 1670s. The inventories of Leiden cloth dyers shows the extent of collecting among the middle class; in 1643 one dyer owned sixty-four paintings while in the 1670s two dyers' household inventories listed ninety-six and 103 paintings.<sup>7</sup>

The spectacular growth resulted in a transformation of the art market—really the creation of an entirely new market. The large numbers of paintings being produced and sold were for a new type of consumer, typically from the middle class and upper middle class but also reaching down to the level of common workers. In this new market most artists in the Dutch Republic did not work on commission but produced work to be sold on the open market.<sup>8</sup> Naturally there were wide differences in quality and price of paintings. Although the majority of the paintings

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<sup>3</sup> Israel, *Dutch Republic*, 615.

<sup>4</sup> Mariët Westermann, *A Worldly Art: The Dutch Republic 1585-1718* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996) 25.

<sup>5</sup> Michael North, *Art and Commerce in the Dutch Golden Age*, Catherine Hill, translator (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997) 132.

<sup>6</sup> Israel, *Dutch Republic*, 555; Maarten Prak, "Painters, Guilds, and the Art Market during the Dutch Golden Age" in *Guilds, Innovation and the European Economy, 1400-1800*, S. R. Epstein and Maarten Prak, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 147.

<sup>7</sup> North 108-109.

<sup>8</sup> North 87.

were of mediocre quality, about 10 percent of pictures were high quality.<sup>9</sup> At the lower end of the market, paintings sold for as low as one-half to one guilder, the daily wage of a skilled laborer. At the upper end, one painting sold at an Amsterdam auction for over 500 guilders. Even individual artists produced works in a wide range. Jan Porcellis' studio sold works as inexpensive as four guilders and as high as 300 guilders.<sup>10</sup> Although the art market in the Dutch Republic was large compared to other parts of Europe, it did not command a significant portion of Dutch wealth. The value of the art in Dutch households rarely rose above three percent of the income of moveable goods.<sup>11</sup>

This new market also had an impact on the type of art being produced. The "middle period" of the Dutch Golden Age, from 1621 to 1645, was marked by a shift to smaller-sized canvases with subjects that contained fewer figures.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the smaller-format paintings were not typically worked on by more than one artist. For example, there is no evidence in Frans Hals' studio that multiple artists worked on a single canvas.<sup>13</sup> There is also a consensus that artists looked for ways to produce works quickly since labor was the biggest factor in the price of their works.<sup>14</sup> Landscapes and the use of a simpler color pallet contributed to streamlining the painting process.<sup>15</sup> The increasing specialization among artists also points to the growing volume of the market; in a small market based on commissions, it did not make economic sense for artists to specialize in producing artworks only within a particular genre as was becoming common early in the Golden Age.<sup>16</sup> The rise of a new genre of painting that focused on scenes of daily life is also attributed to the growth of middle class consumers. These customers typically preferred paintings that focused on contemporary life in the Netherlands and did not require a classical education to interpret. For the same reason landscapes overtook history pictures in popularity.<sup>17</sup>

As this large new market emerged in Holland, St Luke guilds were formed or reorganized in the major urban centers: Amsterdam (1579), Haarlem (reorganized in 1631), Utrecht (1611),

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<sup>9</sup> Israel, *Dutch Republic*, 555.

<sup>10</sup> Prak "Painters, Guilds" 147-149.

<sup>11</sup> North 134.

<sup>12</sup> Israel, *Dutch Republic*, 559.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher D. M. Atkins, *The Signature Style of Frans Hals: Painting, Subjectivity, and the Market in Early Modernity* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012) 168.

<sup>14</sup> Deceulaer and Diels 5.

<sup>15</sup> North 101.

<sup>16</sup> Israel, *Dutch Republic*, 556.

<sup>17</sup> North 134.

and Delft (1611) among other cities.<sup>18</sup> During this period the painters within the St Luke guilds either broke away to form their own organizations or tried to subordinate other artists, such as glassmakers or printmakers, to the painters within the St Luke guild. The founding or restructuring of these guilds should be placed in the broader political context of the truce with Spain in 1609 and artists' concerns about the reopening of the art market to competitors from the south. The city of Delft was at the forefront of this movement; it began its quest to strengthen restrictions against outsiders in 1609. When the new guild regulations were accepted, entrance dues increased five-fold and trade restrictions were tightened considerably.<sup>19</sup> The St Luke guild in Delft was able to elevate the status of the painters while still retaining other craftsmen in the guild. The guild articles from 1611 embraced as members "all those earning their living here with the art of painting, be it with fine brushes or otherwise," including artisans who worked on glass, engravers, sculptors, and booksellers.<sup>20</sup> Similar to the Delft guild, the Haarlem Guild of St Luke was reorganized by 1634 in a way that ensured the dominance of the painters within the guild.<sup>21</sup> Delft's guild was one of the better-managed guilds during the Golden Age; it succeeded in getting all artists living in the city to become members—a goal clearly stated in its regulations. Not surprisingly, guild membership increased dramatically during this period, from thirty-nine members in 1569 to ninety-two members in 1613. Forty-five members in 1613 were painters, as opposed to glassmakers, tapestry makers, wood sculptors, printers or booksellers. Extrapolating for their families, they probably comprised between one and two percent of Delft's population. Between 1613 and 1714 there are records of 640 members of all branches of the St Luke guild in Delft.<sup>22</sup>

The history of the St Luke guild in Leiden is particularly interesting due to the painters' struggles over the first four decades of the seventeenth century to establish a guild. The Leiden guild of St Luke formed in 1615, but glassmakers had excluded painters.<sup>23</sup> In the 1640s Philip

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<sup>18</sup> E. Taverne "Salamon de Bray and the Reorganization of the Haarlem Guild of St Luke in 1631" *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 6, no. 1 (1972-1973): 65, [www.jstor.org/stable/3780403](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3780403).

<sup>19</sup> John Michael Montias "The Guild of St Luke in 17th-century Delft and the Economic Status of Artists and Artisans" *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 10, no. 2 (1978-1979): 93, [www.jstor.org/stable/3780327](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3780327).

<sup>20</sup> North 68-69.

<sup>21</sup> Taverne 52.

<sup>22</sup> Montias "Guild" 94-95.

<sup>23</sup> North 69.

Angel, Gerrit Dou, and David Bailly were instrumental in founding a painters' guild in Leiden.<sup>24</sup> The painters' prime motivations were to protect their economic interests and enhance their status. The city council granted their request in 1642 to prohibit non-resident artists from selling works in the city. By 1644 these artists were holding regular meetings and recording sales and purchases in common—in effect acting as if they had a guild although legally one did not yet exist. Thirty-one artists can be identified in the *Schilder-Schultboeck* [painter debt book], although only sixteen of these thirty-one painters later joined the guild. As was typical in other cities in Holland, the group contained a mix of professional artists, amateurs and dealers.<sup>25</sup> Unhappy with their inability to restrict sales from outside artists completely, another formal petition was presented to the city council in 1648; this time the men won the right to establish a guild.<sup>26</sup>

The activity of the St Luke guilds in so many cities where art production was increasing shows that the guilds were interested in responding to the changing conditions within the trade during the early decades of the seventeenth century. The increasing size of the St Luke guilds and their legal and political strengthening emphasizes that they were in a position to take a prominent role in the art market during the period when the Dutch school of painting emerged.<sup>27</sup> In contrast to other types of guilds, artists' guilds did not limit membership, but instead tried to maximize membership to bring all painters under their regulations. There were approximately 650 to 750 painters in the Netherlands around 1650, with highest numbers in Amsterdam, Haarlem, Utrecht and Leiden.<sup>28</sup> The leadership of the guilds was typically in the hands of the most successful masters. Because leading painters spent a significant amount of time on guild management, it is a strong indication that they saw the guilds as important institutions for their craft.<sup>29</sup>

The main purpose of the painters' guilds was to regulate the selling of art, not its production. In fact, the guild articles rarely specified the type of training an apprentice was expected to get nor did they require the production or presentation of a masterwork in order to

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<sup>24</sup> Eric Jan Sluijter “The Painter’s Pride: The Art of Capturing Transience in Self-Portraits from Isaac van Swanenburgh to David Bailley” in *Modeling the Individual: Biography and Portrait in the Renaissance*, Karl Enekel, Betsy de Jong-Crane and Peter Liebrechts eds. (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi B. V., 1998) 187.

<sup>25</sup> Adriaan E. Waiboer, “Gabriel Metsu (1629-1667): Life and Work” (PhD diss., New York University, 2007) 49-50.

<sup>26</sup> Waiboer 51.

<sup>27</sup> Prak, “Painters, Guilds” 170.

<sup>28</sup> North 71, 79.

<sup>29</sup> Prak, “Painters, Guilds” 170.

obtain guild membership.<sup>30</sup> None of the St Luke's guilds were able to control the market for paintings completely, but the guilds in some cities were able to corner a significant portion of the market.<sup>31</sup> The typical ways for artists to sell their work were for clients to visit the studio and purchase directly from the artist, or through guild exhibitions, lotteries, and auctions. In addition, it was common for artists to trade works to settle private debts to creditors, usually tavern keepers, grocers, or the like. Painters did not typically keep sales records, so historians have relied on customer records and inventories.<sup>32</sup> While older studies emphasized the guilds' inability to restrict the market to local artists, particularly in Amsterdam with its thriving, international art market, more recent studies have come to a much different conclusion, noting that the high percentage of paintings from local, guild-registered artists in inventories demonstrate that the guilds were able to dominate the art market.<sup>33</sup> Prak notes that the percentage of paintings of local origin in Delft was 66% and in Haarlem 79%. Even in Amsterdam, which was seen by the painters as unique for the lack of guild influence over sales, 50% of the paintings in the city originated in local artists' studios. In cities with major art markets, it is clear that the guilds were able to dominate the majority of the art market during this very vibrant period, especially for the most lucrative types of works at the upper end of the market.<sup>34</sup> However, this type of control required a great deal of effort. The Haarlem guild spent over six months trying to stop Willem Swinderswijck, a Haarlem resident but a non-guild artist, from selling his works in the city. Swinderswijck ignored the guild summons for six months as the fines the guild levied grew from three to nine guilders. In September 1642 he gave in when the guild offered to compromise; Swinderswijck joined guild and paid his dues in return for the guild dropping the earlier fines.<sup>35</sup> The guild was thus able to accomplish its primary goal of coercing resident artists to join the guild.

Guild influence over the local market also helped to promote artistic localism. Local artists sold their works with ease, but a type of civic patriotism for prominent resident artists developed within these cities, raising demand and thus prices for those works.<sup>36</sup> Art dealers, too,

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<sup>30</sup> North 67.

<sup>31</sup> Prak, "Painters, Guilds" 170.

<sup>32</sup> North 87.

<sup>33</sup> North 133.

<sup>34</sup> Prak, "Moral Order in the World of Work: Social Control and the Guilds of Europe" in *Social Control in Europe 1500-1800*, Vol. I, Hermann Rodenburg and Pieter Spierenburg, eds. (Columbus: Ohio State University, 2004) 185.

<sup>35</sup> Prak, "Moral Order" 184.

<sup>36</sup> Israel, *Dutch Republic*, 876.

were encouraged or required to become guild members, particularly during the 1630s and 1640s, the high point of the art market. In fact, it was common to have crossover between artists and dealers. Some of the prominent dealers of the period had begun their careers as artists, but had been unsuccessful. In the Vermeer family in Delft, two previous generations dealt in pictures before Johannes Vermeer supported himself as an artist and a dealer.<sup>37</sup> Registered art dealers were still able to sell works imported from other locations, so the guild's impact was to limit sales by foreign dealers rather than limiting works by non-local artists.<sup>38</sup> Yearly fairs were the only way for non-guild artisans to sell their work legally within a city, and second hand dealers preferred these fairs because they had a better change of selling their goods and selling works by non-guild artists.<sup>39</sup>

Auctions and lotteries were also a major concern for the guilds because they could be used to sell large numbers of works by non-guild members quickly. Guild officials blamed lotteries for lowering prices and harming the business of the guild masters; prospective art buyers might prefer the chance to win an expensive painting, often in the range of 100 to 200 guilders, for the price of a lottery ticket of perhaps five to ten guilders, rather than paying full price. While some guilds tried to outlaw lotteries, usually they were only successful in regulating them.<sup>40</sup> The concern over auctions increased when the truce with Spain was signed in the early seventeenth century. Dutch painters feared that the ending of trade restrictions would mean their market would be flooded by works coming from Antwerp, a complaint voiced by the Amsterdam guild in 1608. Their concern was repeated in 1613, but with the additional claim that artists from Antwerp were using Amsterdam citizens as straw sellers to get around city regulations. Finally in 1626 the guild complained that the officials of the Amsterdam orphanage were using their own homes as venues for illegal sales.<sup>41</sup> Auctions were also of concern because the guilds and artists feared that they depressed prices, particularly in the case of Dutch-style auctions that worked on a model of descending prices. The Haarlem guild articles mentioned both types of auctions, with ascending and descending prices, indicating that both were used, perhaps for different sectors of the market—ascending auctions for high end works and descending auctions

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<sup>37</sup> North 94.

<sup>38</sup> North 72.

<sup>39</sup> Westermann, *Worldly Art*, 39; North 95.

<sup>40</sup> Atkins 123.

<sup>41</sup> Neil De Marchi and Hans J. Van Miegroet "Art, Value and Market Prices in the Netherlands in the Seventeenth Century" *The Art Bulletin* 71, no. 3 (Sep. 1994): 452-453, [www.jstor.org/stable/3046038](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3046038).

to quickly sell a large number of inferior-quality pictures. The guilds' primary concerns about Dutch auctions may reveal a heightened priority with protecting higher quality works and more established artists.<sup>42</sup>

Guild masters were known for bending the regulations to suit their particular needs. Guilds kept a close eye on actions by artists who claimed to be moving out of the city and closing down their studios, and thus needed to auction off their inventories. Sometimes those artists would reopen their shops after a few months, a clear violation of the guild regulations. Other illegal practices included selling more works at an auction than the guild had granted permission for. The guild in The Hague brought a complaint against Dirck Dalens who received permission to auction eighty pictures, and then sold 100. Dalens was forced to honor the previous agreement with the guild, and he had to wait to receive special permission from the guild in order to return to The Hague from Leiden and reopen his workshop.<sup>43</sup> Frans Hals bent the rules when he lured away an apprentice from Judith Leyster's studio. Leyster brought a complaint to the Leiden guild; the guild backed her, forcing Hals to pay Leyster as well as prohibiting him from keeping the young man as an apprentice.<sup>44</sup>

Given the fact that guild membership was not capped demonstrates an optimistic approach to the market, dispelling the stereotypical guild concerns over having too many masters for the size of the market. In fact, most complaints about the market focus on "inferior" works from outsiders being sold illegally. There is a significant amount of evidence that painters worried about the effects of works by foreign, non-guild artists on the art market within their own cities. The lack of a painters' guild in Leiden before 1648, combined with this persistent fear of foreign works diluting the market, resulted in some artists leaving Leiden in order to work in cities that had guild protections. In a similar vein, The Hague guild in 1632 complained that foreign artists continued to weaken the local art market, maintaining that non-guild artists "deceitfully sell art to a lot of people, cheating them with works that are often copies and rubbish, but selling these as excellent art."<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> De Marchi and Van Miegroet 453.

<sup>43</sup> North 91.

<sup>44</sup> Frima Fox Hofrichter, *Judith Leyster: A Woman Painter in Holland's Golden Age* (Doornspijk, Netherlands, Davaco Publishers, 1989) 15-16.

<sup>45</sup> Sluijter, "Determining Value on the Art Market in the Golden Age: An Introduction" in *Art Market and Connoisseurship: A Closer Look at Paintings by Rembrandt, Rubens and their Contemporaries*, Anna Tummers and Koenraad Jonckheere eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) 21.



One way to prevent consumers from being taken advantage of was through transparency of sales and attracting new customers into the art market. The most innovative qualities of the guilds' actions appear in their attempts to increase the size of their market by educating the public about the art market and providing a safe environment to encourage first-time buyers. The St Luke's guilds allowed art lovers to register with the guild and participate in social events and lectures as a way to increase contact between artists and the public. In 1641 the Leiden artists organized a public lecture on the glories of painting, not only as a way to attract interest in buying paintings and thereby encourage the public to share in this elevated culture, but also as a way to emphasize to the city officials that Leiden needed a guild to cultivate the work of its painters.<sup>46</sup> This lecture was part of the successful campaign that resulted in the Leiden painters' guild. Guild officials were also called on to act as mediators in disputes between members and their clients, often siding with the clients to enforce a contract the artist had signed. In one case from 1653, Rembrandt agreed to allow the guild to decide whether a portrait he had painted had a close enough likeness to the sitter.<sup>47</sup>

Guilds regulations from the Golden Age were crafted to allow for faster production of art—as long as it was produced in a workshop of a registered guild member. Anyone who had completed training as an apprentice was permitted to work as a kind of wage laborer in a master's studio. This practice encouraged a greater division of labor and the swifter production of works—what some historians have referred to as "mass production."<sup>48</sup> When Jan Steen first moved to The Hague he kept his membership in the Leiden guild rather than registering as a master with the guild in The Hague, an indication that he was most likely working as an assistant in the workshop of another master as a way to establish himself in the city.<sup>49</sup> In The Hague, Michiel van Miereveld's studio produced a large number of portraits for the Court of Orange, usually painted by the journeymen in his employ. When Miereveld himself painted a portrait, he included a statement that it had been painted by his own hand with his signature to distinguish it

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<sup>46</sup> Prak "Painters, Guilds" 164, 163.

<sup>47</sup> Prak "Painters, Guilds" 164.

<sup>48</sup> North 67.

<sup>49</sup> Westermann, *The Amusements of Jan Steen: Comic Painting in the Seventeenth Century* (Zwolle: Waanders Publishers, 1997) 52.

from the other works.<sup>50</sup> Rembrandt was also well-known for using assistants to increase the volume of production of his studio.<sup>51</sup>

The most obvious example of innovative guild painters comes from the Haarlem guild in 1642. The guild officials had presented a petition to the city government to reorganize the guild and to tighten regulations to stop outsiders from selling their work within the city. A group of five prominent artists, including Salomon van Ruisdael and Frans Hals, sent their own lengthy petition to the city government asking that open sales be allowed and accusing the guild officials (*vinders*) of not having the best interests of all of the members in view.<sup>52</sup> They pointed to other cities where open sales were more frequent, such as The Hague and Delft, but they were not willing to embrace the openness of Amsterdam, which they termed a "merchants' city." These five guild painters argued that open markets were better to attract new customers and turn them into *liefhebbers*, art lovers, who would continue to buy more paintings after their first dip into the art market. They also wanted to make it easier for customers to resell paintings, allowing owners to "trade up" to higher-quality, and more expensive, works of art.<sup>53</sup> It is clear that within the Haarlem guild there was a division between the leadership and some of the well-established masters about how to approach the market. The Haarlem burgomasters eventually split the difference. After first acquiescing to the guild officials, they later amended their decision and allowed for an additional two public sales per year, following the more permissive rules in Leiden and The Hague.<sup>54</sup> The change in the regulations in Haarlem, as well as the fact that Haarlem guild artists pointed to cities where the guilds embraced more opportunities for open sales, reveals at least a segment of the guild membership that espoused more free-market principles.

Should the artists' guilds be seen as inhibiting or enhancing the market forces within the art market of the Dutch Golden Age during the first half of the seventeenth century? It is clear that while the guilds maintained "traditional" concerns about policing the local market, they were innovative and flexible in their approach to this growing market and embracing new methods in trying to achieve that goal, such as enlisting art dealers and overseeing lotteries and auctions. Because the art market was expanding so quickly in the early decades of the seventeenth century,

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<sup>50</sup> North 67-68.

<sup>51</sup> Atkins 178-180.

<sup>52</sup> De Marchi and Van Miegroet 458.

<sup>53</sup> De Marchi and Van Miegroet 458.

<sup>54</sup> De Marchi and Van Miegroet 458-459.

the guilds were at the forefront of attempts to educate the public about art and raise the quality of the art being produced. The most important evidence comes from the painters themselves, who played a significant role in the creation and maintenance of guilds during this period and who at times embraced the view of a dynamic market place. For this reason, the painters in the St Luke guilds can be seen as fitting Jan de Vries' view of the early modern Dutch economy as the first modern economy, not just in terms of the numbers of artists and paintings, but also more significantly in terms of their cultural outlook and experience in experimenting with new methods of production and new approaches to the market.

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