

This Being Human
Episode 5 Transcript – Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

My name is Abdul-Rehman Malik. I'm canvassing the world for the most interesting people — to hear about their journeys, their work, and what it means to be alive in the world today. And perhaps nobody has captured that experience — of being alive — better than the 13th-century Persian poet and Sufi mystic Jalaluddin al-Rumi, in his poem "The Guest House."

FEMALE VOICE:

*This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!*

SULTAN AL QASSEMI:

One thing that art does, Malik, is it humanizes us to each other. When we see works by people from different cultures, we can imagine the beauty that they create and not just what the news tells us about them.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

So welcome to *This Being Human*, A podcast inspired by Rumi's words and motivated by all those who carry this message forward in the world today. Today, Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Salaam, Sultan. Habib, how are you? It's so good to see you. Shall we take our shoes off at the front door?

SULTAN AL QASSEMI:

No, no, keep them on.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK NARRATION:

He has an impressive CV. He's a prominent art collector, a professor who has taught at Yale, Georgetown, and Boston College. He's also a member of the royal family of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates. And he's the founder of the Barjeel Art Foundation — which preserves and promotes modern Middle Eastern art around the world. It's his own private art collection — the biggest of its kind. But you might recognize Sultan from his Twitter feed. He came to fame in 2011, at the height of the Arab Spring.

Before the uprising, he used his Twitter account to promote his art. But suddenly Sultan al Qassemi found himself tweeting out breaking news to his growing list of followers, amplifying pro-democracy voices across the region. He became a frequent columnist and a reliable fixture on cable news. And promoting art on his Twitter feed took a back seat to the uprising. Sultan went from 7,000 followers to tens of thousands, to a stunning half a million followers today. He still uses his considerable social media platform to showcase his art. But now he has a bigger mandate: To use art to change the way the West sees the Middle East and the region. Quite simply, to make art a diplomatic agent of change.

I met Sultan Al Qassemi at his home in the final weeks of his time at Georgetown, in Washington, D.C.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

It's so good to see you.

SULTAN AL QASSEMI:

It's great to see you...

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK NARRATION:

His walls, naturally, are covered in art, literally every surface, every wall, every shelf, covered in art...

SULTAN AL QASSEMI:

...from all over the Middle East and North Africa. We have Armenian Arab. We have Jewish Arab. We have Christian Arab, we have Muslim Arab, Shiites...

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK NARRATION:

I began our wide-ranging conversation by going back a bit...to that heady time during the Arab Spring, when he came to international fame.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

I think so many people got to know you and you became such an important personality through social media, in particular through Twitter during the 2011 uprisings.

SOUND EFFECTS: [Audio from the 2011 Arab Spring protests]

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

And as the rest of us around the world were watching this thing called the Arab World change and go into upheaval, you were there helping us in a way, guiding our vision, you know, illuminating aspects of what was happening and trying to help make sense of it for us. But it was also a difficult time, wasn't it?

SULTAN AL QASSEMI:

It was quite difficult. I must say, it was an honour. It was a privilege. It was a responsibility. It was one of the most beautiful times of my life to be with people, to be part of this phenomenal change. This change that I would be forever proud of being part of, despite the revisionist history that's taking place across the region, casting the Arab Spring as something negative.

The fact is that the Arab Spring turned into a winter. It turned sour. We had a lot of deaths. We had a lot of people who were displaced. There's a lot of negativity. People died. But our culture was also affected. Our historical sites were destroyed. We had extremists who took this opportunity and started trying to influence our future; something that we wanted to influence was taken away from us. And so I feel really in two minds here. I still have the same hopes, but I recognize the difficulties. And so I just want to say that the future will be better.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK NARRATION:

Before the uprisings, Sultan used social media almost exclusively to promote and share his art — at first as a counter to the steady stream of bad news coming from the region.

Over the years his mandate has grown bigger. He's using his platform to challenge the very idea of what constitutes "great art" beyond standard Western notions.

SULTAN AL QASSEMI:

Where I come from in the Gulf art manifested itself in architecture, but also in crafts. In the women's dresses, in the boxes that were found in our houses, in the daggers, and in anything that you can imagine that was usable. Even utensils were art forms. So according to the Western view of art, they consider crafts, they consider textiles, for example, to be of a lower grade. Whereas in

the Middle East and North Africa and Africa and South Asia, this is all part of a continuity of the creation of art.

But we did have modern art. Modern art in the Middle East and South Asia also emerged in the mid-19th century. But we cannot use the same yardstick to measure Western art, where you had endowments, where you had a move towards teaching art earlier in the 19th century. Whereas in the Middle East, the introduction of art and education started in Egypt in 1906, 1907. And so there was a good 30-, 40-year difference. But that doesn't mean that the art was of lesser quality.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK NARRATION:

How to actually get people to think beyond the Western ideal of art is no small feat. For Sultan it, means overcoming the so-called 'Orientalist' stereotypes, that renders art from the Middle East and North Africa as merely exotic and inaccessible, or not as valuable as Western art.

SULTAN AL QASSEMI:

Our view is clouded by what we were told is art. And so one of the things we have to do is de-Orientalize, de-occupy our minds, free our minds of certain ideas that Eastern art is of a lesser value than Western art. Both are valuable, both are beautiful. And so you see this now happening in so many museums in the West. They've recognized their mistakes.

And it wasn't just the issue of Eastern and Western. Even internally, women had gotten the short end of the stick for too far, for centuries. Minorities were underrepresented. Museums in the West, Malik, still show 95 percent works by white, male artists. And so this is something of a process that's going to take, I think, years, and in some cases, unfortunately, it might take decades. So I realized, Malik, that one of the things that we have to do is make the art accessible and increase the opportunities to educate ourselves through publishing, through scholarship, through issues. Even tweeting, even writing a Facebook post, even sharing an image on Instagram — that allows us to accustom our eyesight to seeing such works.

DR. ULRIKE AL-KHAMIS:

Hello, I am Dr. Ulrike Al-Khamis, interim Director and CEO of the Aga Khan Museum. If you are enjoying our *This Being Human* podcast, why not visit our website at Agakhanmuseum.org? Here, you will find a treasure trove of digital collections and online resources related to the arts and achievements of the Muslim world. From historical artifacts and thought-provoking exhibitions, to a wide range of educational materials and contemporary living arts performances. All of this is made possible through the vision and dedication of Prince Aynur Aga Khan and His Highness the Aga Khan himself to encourage the appreciation of the cultural threads that bind us all together. Again, our website is Agakhanmuseum.org.

And now, back to *This Being Human*.

SULTAN AL QASSEMI:

So I started acquiring work about 18 years ago. The reason why I acquired work was very different. I acquired work that I like. I acquired works that appealed to me. Now I try to acquire responsibly. Sometimes I try to acquire works that have historical value. And I always think, will museums borrow this? Do I have a case to loan this to a museum? Does this work appeal to me visually or does it appeal to the public? Is it an important educational tool? And this is a decision I took about a decade ago. And so, yes, part of my activism in art is to make the art available, but also publish, also invest in scholarship and make the work available for people to borrow, to see, to view, whether online... and I can tell you how many ways we make it available online.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Please, please, tell me. How can we experience your art if we're not able to go to the exhibition?

SULTAN AL QASSEMI:

We have a thousand works online. It is the largest repository of art from the region on the Internet. And it's something that I'm not proud of because I want other people to beat us. I want more art to

be put from the National Museum of Egypt, the National Museum of Tunisia, the National Museum of Algeria. Of Syria, of Lebanon. Whichever other — Iraq. I want us to be amongst the last, but I will not stop. I flooded the Internet with Middle Eastern art. I'll give you an example. In one of the platforms, we have an official sort of relationship and they ask us to upload 20 images and my team and I thought, let's upload all the thousand images that we have. So we flooded that platform with Middle Eastern art. And it was our way really of trying to course-correct history. But we have so many challenges because when you search for an artist from the region, it's not enough for one or two works to come up from the collection. We need others. And this is an appeal. I'm using this podcast to appeal to people who own Middle Eastern, who own South Asian, who own North African art. Please put the works online.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

You know, when I think of you, I think of someone who bubbles with passion and energy and almost uncontrollable emotion when it comes to art. When you look at art, when you talk about art, what's going on inside, Sultan?

SULTAN AL QASSEMI:

There is a chemical reaction in my body and my mind when I see art, but not any art. Western art does something to my mind. Eastern art does something to my heart and my soul. And when I go to museums, I almost can tell if a work is by an Eastern artist or a Western artist. And of course they're both beautiful. But each one touches me differently. And if I see works created by people of colour, if I see works created by South Asians or by Africans or by Middle Easterners or by Latinos, these artworks, I feel, touch me in a different way. I feel like they haven't had their moment under the sun, and I feel like I need to be their voice and speak up for them. And not just myself, but anybody else I can convince, anybody else I can educate, anybody else I can communicate with. And yes, it does touch me differently.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK NARRATION:

Sultan's latest passion is using his popular Instagram account to document the changing face of his hometown, the Emirate of Sharjah, in the United Arab Emirates. The account is called simply "Architecture of Sharjah." It's for a book of photography he's publishing soon.

SULTAN AL QASSEMI:

I don't only want to document buildings. I want to tell the stories of the people who live there. You get to learn so much if you just observe, if you just look at the building and appreciate it. If you think of the building where I worked for 20 years, in that building, we had families from the Arab world, families from South Asia, families from Africa, all living in the same building, all buying from the same supermarket. They met each other. Their kids played with each other. There was all these bonds that formed — even though the building now has been vacated because it's going to be demolished, unfortunately. These bonds were real. These bonds reflect a time in which the UAE was still in formation. And these stories deserve to be told. And we have a duty to document all these stories, because in 20, 30 years when the UAE is all glass towers, nobody will think of these buildings that were built by the '60s and '70s. Now, with all these what my friend calls these "cookie-cutter towers" that are designed really in an inhumane manner, the human element is missing.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

And they could almost belong anywhere.

SULTAN AL QASSEMI:

They belong anywhere. But in the 1960s and 70s, the process ... everything went slower. The building design took a few months rather than a few days. Now, it's all a matter of copy-paste. The human element is taken out, and so it's important for us to document that era.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK NARRATION:

Sultan created the Barjeel Art Foundation in 2010, which helped to foster a lively art scene in Sharjah. It became a showcase for his personal collection.

SULTAN AL QASSEMI:

The purpose was to have a space where Arab art could be seen in context with other works. So works from Lebanon and from Egypt and from Algeria and from the UAE could be seen together. We didn't have that before. The works were seen either in solo exhibitions by a certain artist or they were seen in an international context, which is very important.

But for me, I wanted to show them in an Arab context, because the story of the Arab world is a story of countries that influence each other through language and through a shared history and a shared bond. If you think of major themes that emerged in the Arab world in 1948 —that is a major theme, 1948 — the war that ensued and the displacement of Palestinians. 1967, the Gulf Wars. All of these are conflicts that created bonds between Arab artists. And I needed to show these works in unison. They had to be in conversation with each other.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Now you organize exhibitions, and I wonder what you think about when you take these works to the Tate or to London or to Toronto or to Paris, you know, when you take these works out of the Arab world and the Middle East. What are your considerations when you're putting together an exhibition?

SULTAN AL QASSEMI:

First of all, the works belong to the public. The works need to be seen. My motto was “no work in storage.” Whether they're being seen abroad or in the Middle East, for me, they're both important. But these works need to be seen in Europe. They need to be seen in Asia. The world needs to communicate, not just through Twitter and Facebook and TV and whatever, but also through music, also through painting and sculpture and art and creativity.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK NARRATION:

...and through writing and publishing. In 2018, Sultan held an event for author Saeb Eigner...

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

And he was talking about his book, *Art of the Middle East*. I think he spoke. That was the first time that an event like this happened, that his work was sort of introduced to a wider audience.

SULTAN AL QASSEMI:

Saeb Eigner is a very sort of important person in the sense that he published what is, until today, one of the most important books on Middle Eastern art, showing art both from the Arab world and Iran, including all the minorities. And it's beautiful, beautifully done and produced. And Saeb, there's no on-the-record interview with him. So all these issues, all these interviews, all this data that needs to be gathered and preserved today before, you know, before it's too late.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK NARRATION:

The cover of Saeb's book featured an artist's rendering of Umm Kulthum, a beloved Egyptian singer and song writer — who, in her lifetime, sold more than 80 million records.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

And when I think about Umm Kulthum and when Umm Kulthum released a new album, it was like a phenomenon, wasn't it? It was like, not just Egypt, but like, the whole region came alive because everyone wanted to hear that album, hear those songs, connect to the force of this incredible art. And I kind of wonder out loud with you, what are some of those artistic and cultural products today that in the Middle East and the Arab world inspire the same kind of excitement or devotion?

SULTAN AL QASSEMI:

So I want to make a point about Umm Kulthum image on the Saeb Eigner book. I'm glad you brought it up. The artist who created this work passed away a few months ago, and there isn't a single interview with him online. There isn't a single video interview. There's no recording of him speaking. And it's a great loss to us. He wasn't that old. I believe he was in his early 60s. And so

we might think that we have time to document and archive. Every single young boy and young girl can make a difference in documenting our artists.

The second thing I would say is, yes, there continues to be a great deal of creativity. If you think just a few years ago with Zaha Hadid, whenever Zaha designed a new building, everybody in the world knew about it. It wasn't just the Middle East. We were all proud of her.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK NARRATION:

Zaha Hadid, the Iraqi-British architect, designed some of the most intensely futuristic buildings in the world. In 2004, she was the first woman to be awarded the Pritzker Prize, one of the most prestigious accolades in the world of architecture.

SULTAN AL QASSEMI:

At the time when Iraq saw some of its darkest days, Zaha produced some of her most beautiful work. And not just Zaha, there's so many other — there's many examples about musicians. Of course, there's this young Lebanese band now called Mashrou' Leila.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK NARRATION:

Sultan hosted the band at his home in Georgetown during one of his famous salons — or as he calls them, his 'Cultural Majlis.' People from all walks of life gather together to hear music and talk about art and ideas—

SULTAN AL QASSEMI:

Every single they release is just consumed by all these youngsters. It is quite the phenomenon. When I hosted them here and the Cultural Majlis I had to keep people at bay. It had to happen secretly because I didn't want my house to be invaded by hordes of young, you know, young fans of theirs. I just couldn't host too many people. And so, yes, we have our own cultural phenomenons. Now you have comedians. Now you have social media stars, so-called influencers. The art and cultural scene has morphed.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

One of the things that I so closely associate with you is this Cultural Majlis space. I remember when I first heard about it, it was when you were living between New Haven and New York City last year and you started hosting these gatherings, almost like a modern-day salon. It reminded me of stories of intellectuals and artists gathering and in Damascus or in Zamalek or in Fez or Marrakech, and sitting, you know, in their riads or in their havelis or in their homes and discussing and talking about matters of artistic and cultural and intellectual importance.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

In fact, we're sitting in your living room right now, and in a few hours, there will be another Cultural Majlis where dozens and dozens of people will gather, many whom you don't know, to listen and to talk and to and to experience not only your beautiful home and the art on the walls, but also topics of interesting conversation. Tell me the genesis of the Cultural Majlis.

SULTAN AL QASSEMI:

So as far back as the mid-1990s, I had a Majlis salon where I had my friends come over. Of course, we had electronic games, we had books and magazines, but we had electronic games mostly. We had Nintendo, Sega, Megadrive, so people would come and hang out. My house was always open. There was always food in the house. And it is something I grew up with. In the past few years, I've hosted a number of intellectuals and collectors to come and speak in my house in Dubai. But these were mostly by inviting people on WhatsApp or on online, by e-mail. And then I decided when I moved to the US to open it up, because I felt like we Middle Easterners, North Africans and South Asians, we need a space where we can gather, talk about things that are important to us. And I also didn't want it to be political. Hence the idea of the Cultural Majlis....

[CLIP — MAJLIS CON'T]

SULTAN AL QASSEMI:

So this is a very popular cause because again, we have 85 people registered and there's a few who are coming who are not registered. So we have to make as much room as possible. And also, I know all the youngsters will offer their seats.

SULTAN AL QASSEMI:

People don't check their phones in the Majlis, unless they're posting. Because they're interested to be there. I noticed this. I see it. People actually are engaged. The questions are very deep. And we have no one here who comes with an idea to disrupt because they're here to learn. And it's open to everybody. We've had Jewish speakers, Muslim speakers, Christian speakers. We've had Hindu presenters. We've had people talk about South Asia, North Africa, the Middle East. As long as it's cultural, as long as it's not political, as long as it's not divisive, everybody's welcome.

FEMALE VOICE:

Sultan is my professor at Georgetown. And so from the beginning of the semester is hosting news. And so we've been — Mohan and I — have been coming from the beginning so it's been fabulous, having both in- and out-of-classroom experiences as very, very much experiential learning. I don't think I've ever had a professor that enacts that value as much as he does. And also in terms of the Majlises, it feels very reminiscent of growing up and, like, being in an Arab community. And everyone like sitting around and storytelling.

MALE VOICE:

It's a very different experience than the stuff that would otherwise be offered or at Georgetown. I mean, the ability to come into somebody's house and experience the academic comfort of being in somebody's space, it changes the dynamic of the conversation.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Sultan, where is home now for you? You are from Sharjah, but you are at home in London or in Paris or in Berlin. You have family history in the subcontinent. Now sure, if Sultan Al Qassemi was in Mumbai, you would feel comfortable in Mumbai as well. Where is home for you now?

SULTAN AL QASSEMI:

I think at the risk of sounding corny, I would say home is where the art is.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

[Laughter] Tell me about that. Explain that. Explain that.

SULTAN AL QASSEMI:

Well, well, home is whatever you want it to be, whatever you make it to be. But really, home is where I feel like I can make a difference. Home for me is Georgetown amongst my students. Home was for me Yale, where my students are, continues to be Yale. Home really is where I can touch people's minds and their hearts and their souls.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

We've talked a lot about the way in which you vision the art going outside of the region. And I'm wondering about your work and the power of this art to be almost — the artistic diplomacy, that in a time where the Middle East, the Muslim world is so... the discourse around it is so messy, often filled with stereotypes and hatreds, often categorized by easy simplifications. What's the power of this art to create conversation about the Middle East, to create that common space where we can where we can talk with civility and curiosity?

SULTAN AL QASSEMI:

So art as a diplomatic agent is something that has occurred over the past century, not just between the West and other countries in the West. Whether it's, you know, we've heard of sports diplomacy, we've heard of music diplomacy, jazz diplomacy, but also between the West and the Arab world, the West, and the Middle East and South Asia as well. You've had American collectors like Abby

Weed Grey. The person who the NYU Grey Art Gallery is named after. That lady played a major role in trying to showcase American art in the West and Eastern art in the U.S.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK NARRATION:

Abby Weed Grey was a giant in the New York Art scene. She founded the Grey Art Gallery in the 1950s to showcase more than 800 works of contemporary art she collected on her travels throughout Asia and the Middle East. It's now permanently housed at New York University, on Washington Square Park.

SULTAN AL QASSEMI:

There's many examples of the U.S. sending Louis Armstrong, sending Dizzy...

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Gillespie?

SULTAN AL QASSEMI:

Gillespie. Sending so many musicians, ballerinas and so many others to do diplomacy — cultural diplomacy — on their behalf. But also, we've had a history of Arab artists going to the West and showing their art in Russia, in Europe and America from Salah Taher of Egypt to Jewad Selim of Iraq and so many others. Hundreds of artists went from Syria, from Iraq and Algeria and Palestine to Russia, for example. So this is something that continues today.

And I think that one thing that art does, Malik, is it humanizes us to each other. When we see works by people from different cultures, we can imagine the beauty that they create and not just what the news tells us about them. When we see works by the great masters of a certain culture, we understand their fears. We see where they're coming from. We see beauty rather than news. And that is something that we have to keep pressing on. It is more important today than it was 50 years ago.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK NARRATION:

And while Sultan's relationship to social media has evolved over the years, he still believes it's a medium for change — good change.

SULTAN AL QASSEMI:

I am hopeful that that illiteracy will be eliminated thanks to the Internet. I am hopeful that people will make opportunities rather than wait for governments to make opportunities for them. I might be over...

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Over-optimistic?

SULTAN AL QASSEMI:

Over-optimistic. But I really feel like I need to keep this optimism. I would say that I moved away from social media because I felt that social media was corrupted and co-opted by individuals that I can't deal with. And I decided to engage more in art and culture and architecture where I can make a difference rather than continue to fight with people who are just aggressive, who are negative, who are confrontational. And I really think that social media companies, Twitter and Facebook, need to take a look at individuals who have created a toxic environment for everybody else. And that's not what I want.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

The title of this podcast is *This Being Human*, and it takes, it takes that title from the translation of a poem by Mawlānā Jalaluddin Rumi, where he speaks about this whole idea of "being human" and the complexity and the brokenness and the difficulties that we have. But how this humanness is such an incredible gift and how being human is like a house in which all kinds of incredible people

and emotions enter. And we haven't really talked about spirituality or faith. And yet I won't lie, when I'm in this space with you, I feel like I'm in a spiritual space. Do you feel it's profoundly spiritual?

SULTAN AL QASSEMI:

I certainly do. I feel like my relationship with some of the artworks — I wouldn't say all of them, but some of them — is very deep. I feel like it's meditative. I feel like it touches my soul in the same way that religion and faith touches people's soul. I feel like I have a friendship with some of these works. I feel, I worry about these works. I hide them from the sun. I think about whether the, whether people are touching them. I fear for them. I think about them before I sleep. I look at these artworks. I genuinely think about them. And sometimes I can't wait to wake up in the morning to go to the museum and see certain works. In some instances, when I fly back from America to Sharjah to the UAE, I can't wait to land. So I go straight to the museum and see these artworks because I feel like I have a strong bond with them. And this is a bond that was nurtured not just through time, but through... through emotions. Through a visual relationship, a spiritual relationship, a relationship in which you get to know each other. I'm not saying that these works know who I am, but I'm saying that I know who they are. And sometimes, sometimes this touches me so deeply and it's so emotional for me. I wish I could share these emotions with people. These artworks are a responsibility. They don't belong to me. I never say these works belong to me. I am somewhat their guardian. I keep them for a certain period of time, and then I hand them over to someone else. Some of these works are from the early 20th-century and this is decades before I was born, and they hopefully will be there for centuries after I am no longer there. These works represent my history, our region's history, but also our future.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Sultan, what is this being human to you?

SULTAN AL QASSEMI:

This being human to me is to have compassion. This being human for me. I think is embodied in something that my background of having my father grow up in South Asia. See how grown men approach their mothers and kneel to the floor and touch their feet. And whenever I see this, it touches me so deep inside that my eyes start tearing up. And that, I think, is one of the embodiments of being a human being.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Sultan it's been a pleasure having you on *This Being Human*. Thank you so much.

SULTAN AL QASSEMI:

Thank you, dear Abdul-Rehman. It's such an honour to have you here, to have, you know, your presence in this house. I feel like the house is finally a blessed room.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Thank you.

CREDITS:

The senior producer of *This Being Human* is Pacinthe Mattar. Production and sound design by Mitch Stuart. Research by Alexis Green. The music is by Boombox Sound. The executive producers are Kathleen Goldhar and Lisa Gabriele. And Stuart Coxe is the president of Antica Productions.

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