

halloween an american holiday an american history

Halloween: An American Holiday, An American History

halloween an american holiday an american history is a fascinating story that weaves ancient traditions with the vibrant culture of the United States. Every October 31st, millions of people across America embrace the spirit of Halloween, dressing up in costumes, trick-or-treating, and decorating their homes with spooky symbols. But how did this holiday, often associated with ghosts, witches, and jack-o'-lanterns, become such an integral part of American culture? To understand Halloween's place in America today, it's important to explore its origins, evolution, and the unique ways it has been celebrated over the centuries.

The Ancient Roots of Halloween

Halloween's story begins long before it became a distinctly American holiday. Its origins trace back to the ancient Celtic festival called Samhain (pronounced "sow-in"), celebrated over 2,000 years ago primarily in what is now Ireland, Scotland, and parts of Northern Europe. Samhain marked the end of the harvest season and the beginning of winter, a time often associated with death and the supernatural.

Samhain: The Festival of the Dead

During Samhain, Celts believed that the boundary between the living and the dead grew thin, allowing spirits to roam the earth. To ward off harmful ghosts, people lit bonfires and wore costumes made of animal heads and skins. They also left offerings of food and drink outside their homes to appease wandering spirits. This ancient festival laid the groundwork for many Halloween traditions, such as dressing in costumes and lighting candles.

The Influence of All Saints' Day

As Christianity spread across Europe, the church sought to replace pagan festivals with Christian observances. Around the 8th century, Pope Gregory III designated November 1st as All Saints' Day, also known as All Hallows' Day, to honor saints and martyrs. The evening before, October 31st, became known as All Hallows' Eve, which eventually evolved into "Halloween." This merging of traditions blended ancient Celtic customs with Christian practices, creating a complex cultural tapestry that would eventually travel to America.

Halloween's Journey to America

Halloween as we know it today is deeply rooted in the immigrant experience, especially the arrival of Irish and Scottish settlers in the 19th century. When millions of Irish immigrants fled to America during the Great Famine in the 1840s, they carried their Halloween traditions with them, introducing the holiday to the New World.

Adapting Old Traditions to a New Land

In America, Halloween began as a community-centered celebration with parties, games, and folk customs meant to bring neighbors together. Early celebrations were often modest and focused on telling ghost stories, playing pranks, and sharing seasonal treats like apples and nuts. The idea of “trick-or-treating” itself has roots in both medieval European practices—such as “souling,” where poor people would go door-to-door offering prayers for the dead in exchange for food—and indigenous American fall harvest festivals.

The Rise of Trick-or-Treating and Commercialization

By the early 20th century, Halloween began to take on a more child-friendly character. Communities encouraged safe, supervised activities, and the practice of trick-or-treating became widespread by the 1920s and 1930s. It was during this period that Halloween transformed from a sometimes rowdy night of pranks into an opportunity for families to celebrate together.

The commercialization of Halloween also grew dramatically in the post-World War II era. Costume manufacturers, candy companies, and party supply stores saw Halloween as a major seasonal event, and today it is estimated to be the second-largest commercial holiday in the United States after Christmas.

Halloween Traditions Unique to America

While Halloween has ancient and European origins, American culture has added its own twists, making the holiday distinctively local in flavor.

Jack-O'-Lanterns and Pumpkin Carving

One of the most iconic symbols of Halloween is the jack-o'-lantern. The tradition of carving faces into turnips and gourds originated in Ireland and Scotland, but in America, pumpkins—native to the continent and larger in size—became the preferred canvas. Carving pumpkins and placing candles inside them became a beloved family activity, symbolizing the light that guides spirits and wards off evil.

Costumes and Community Celebrations

From superheroes and cartoon characters to classic monsters, American Halloween costumes reflect a broad range of cultural influences. Costume parties, haunted houses, and community parades are staples of the season, turning neighborhoods and towns into festive hubs of activity. Schools and churches often host Halloween events, emphasizing fun and creativity while maintaining safety.

Pop Culture and Halloween

American film, television, and literature have greatly influenced how Halloween is celebrated and perceived. Movies like “Halloween” (1978), “Hocus Pocus,” and “The Nightmare Before Christmas” have helped cement Halloween’s spooky, yet entertaining image. Annual events such as the Village Halloween Parade in New York City showcase the holiday’s mix of artistry, community, and playful spookiness.

The Cultural Significance of Halloween in America Today

Halloween in modern America is much more than just a night of costumes and candy. It serves as a cultural touchstone that bridges generations and reflects the country’s diverse heritage.

A Celebration of Creativity and Community

For many families, Halloween is an opportunity to bond through costume-making, pumpkin carving, and neighborhood festivities. It encourages creativity, imagination, and social interaction. Communities often organize events that promote inclusivity and safe fun, reinforcing local ties and neighborhood spirit.

Exploring Themes of Life and Death

Beneath its playful surface, Halloween invites reflection on themes of mortality, the supernatural, and the unknown. This connection to ancient traditions allows people to engage with history and folklore in a way that feels both personal and communal.

Economic Impact and Sustainability

With billions of dollars spent annually on costumes, decorations, and candy, Halloween is a significant driver of the American economy. However, there is growing awareness about sustainable celebrations. Many families and communities now emphasize eco-friendly decorations, homemade costumes, and minimizing waste, blending tradition with responsibility.

Tips for Embracing Halloween's Rich Heritage

If you're looking to dive deeper into the spirit of Halloween, consider these ideas that honor both its history and its modern celebration:

- **Research Local Traditions:** Different regions in America have unique customs. Explore your local history to discover how Halloween has been celebrated in your area.
- **DIY Costumes and Decorations:** Crafting your own items can connect you to the creativity and resourcefulness at the heart of Halloween.
- **Host Storytelling Nights:** Share ghost stories and folklore from various cultures to appreciate Halloween's diverse roots.
- **Support Local Businesses:** Purchase treats, costumes, and decorations from small shops to help your community thrive during the season.

Halloween an American holiday an American history is a vibrant tapestry that continues to evolve, reflecting the changing values, creativity, and cultural influences of the United States. Whether you're carving a pumpkin, dressing up, or simply enjoying the crisp autumn air, you're participating in a tradition that spans centuries and continents—one that honors the past while celebrating the joy of community and imagination.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the origin of Halloween as an American holiday?

Halloween in America originated from European immigrant traditions, particularly Irish and Scottish settlers who brought the ancient Celtic festival of Samhain, which marked the end of the harvest season and the beginning of winter.

How did Halloween evolve into a popular American celebration?

Halloween evolved in America during the 19th century as immigrants brought their customs, which merged with Native American and colonial harvest celebrations, eventually becoming a community-centered holiday with parties, trick-or-treating, and festive activities.

Why is Halloween celebrated on October 31st?

Halloween is celebrated on October 31st because it traces back to the ancient Celtic festival of Samhain, which was observed on the night of October 31st to mark the transition between the harvest season and winter, a time when it was believed that spirits could cross into the living world.

What role did Irish immigrants play in shaping Halloween traditions in America?

Irish immigrants in the 19th century played a crucial role in popularizing Halloween in America by bringing customs such as carving pumpkins (originally turnips), dressing in costumes, and trick-or-treating, which became central features of the holiday.

How has Halloween been commercialized in American culture?

Halloween has become heavily commercialized in America with the rise of costume sales, decorations, candy, and themed events, making it a multi-billion dollar industry that influences popular culture and retail each year.

What are some traditional Halloween symbols and their historical significance?

Traditional Halloween symbols include pumpkins (jack-o'-lanterns), which were used to ward off evil spirits; costumes, which originated from disguises worn to avoid spirits; and candy, which evolved from old customs of offering food to appease wandering souls.

Additional Resources

Halloween: An American Holiday, An American History

halloween an american holiday an american history intertwines cultural evolution, immigrant traditions, and commercial innovation in a uniquely American narrative. While Halloween's origins trace back to ancient Celtic festivals and European customs, its transformation into the contemporary celebration known throughout the United States reveals a rich story of adaptation and identity. Exploring this holiday from its historical roots to its modern-day manifestations offers insight not only into the holiday itself but also into broader themes of American social history and cultural assimilation.

The Historical Roots of Halloween

Halloween's origins can be traced to the ancient Celtic festival of Samhain (pronounced "sow-in"), celebrated around November 1st to mark the end of the harvest and the beginning of winter. The Celts believed that on the night before Samhain, the boundary between the living and the dead blurred, allowing spirits to roam the earth. To ward off these supernatural entities, people lit bonfires and wore costumes. With the Roman conquest of Celtic territories, Samhain merged with Roman festivals such as Feralia, which honored the dead, and Pomona, the goddess of fruit and trees.

As Christianity spread across Europe, the Church sought to supplant pagan festivals with Christian observances. In the 8th century, Pope Gregory III designated November 1st as All Saints' Day, also

known as All Hallows' Day, to honor saints and martyrs. The evening before became All Hallows' Eve, eventually shortened to Halloween. This fusion of pagan and Christian traditions set the stage for the holiday's evolution, but it remained primarily a European phenomenon for centuries.

Halloween's Journey to America

Halloween as an American holiday emerged through the influx of European immigrants, particularly the Irish, during the 19th century. The massive waves of Irish immigrants fleeing the Great Famine (1845-1852) brought with them their Halloween customs, including "guising" (dressing in costumes) and storytelling. These traditions found fertile ground in the United States, where diverse populations and communities often blended cultural practices.

In early colonial America, Halloween was not widely celebrated. Puritanical influences in New England, for example, discouraged such festivities, viewing them as pagan or superstitious. However, in other regions, particularly the Mid-Atlantic states, Halloween customs gained popularity. Over time, these celebrations incorporated additional elements such as pumpkin carving, derived from Irish turnip lanterns, and community-centered activities.

From Folk Customs to Mass Celebration

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Halloween in America began to shift from its eerie, supernatural roots toward a more secular and community-oriented holiday. Historian Nicholas Rogers notes that Halloween evolved into an occasion for parties, parades, and games, designed to foster social cohesion and neighborhood interaction.

The commercialization of Halloween also started gaining momentum during this period. The rise of mass-produced costumes, candy, and decorations transformed Halloween into a major economic event. Today, the National Retail Federation estimates that Americans spend billions annually on Halloween-related products, making it one of the most lucrative holidays in the retail calendar.

Halloween in Contemporary American Culture

In modern America, Halloween has transcended its religious and folkloric origins to become a broadly inclusive cultural phenomenon. It embraces a variety of traditions, from trick-or-treating and haunted house attractions to horror film marathons and themed parties. This wide appeal reflects America's multicultural fabric and the holiday's ability to adapt over time.

Trick-or-Treating: The Quintessential Halloween Activity

One of the most emblematic features of Halloween in the United States is trick-or-treating, a practice where children dress in costumes and go door-to-door collecting candy. This tradition can be traced back to medieval "souling" and "guising" customs but was popularized in the U.S. during the early 20th century as a community-building activity that offered safe fun for children.

Trick-or-treating's widespread acceptance was also influenced by social concerns. In the 1950s and 1960s, communities encouraged the practice as a wholesome alternative to Halloween pranks and vandalism, effectively channeling youthful energy into a positive experience.

Halloween's Commercial Impact

The economic significance of Halloween in America cannot be overstated. According to data from the National Retail Federation, Americans spend upwards of \$10 billion annually on costumes, decorations, candy, and parties. This spending rivals other major holidays such as Easter and Valentine's Day, underscoring Halloween's entrenched place in American consumer culture.

Retailers have capitalized on this trend by expanding product offerings and marketing campaigns, catering to all age groups and interests. The holiday's commercial aspect has been both praised for stimulating the economy and critiqued as contributing to consumer excess, reflecting broader debates about the commercialization of cultural traditions.

The Social and Cultural Dimensions of Halloween

Beyond commerce and entertainment, Halloween plays a notable role in American social dynamics. It offers a platform for creative expression, community engagement, and even social commentary. Costume choices often reflect current events, popular culture, and political climates, making Halloween a mirror of contemporary society.

Inclusion and Diversity in Halloween Celebrations

Halloween's evolution in the U.S. has mirrored the country's demographic changes. The holiday increasingly incorporates diverse cultural motifs and traditions, from Mexican Day of the Dead influences to Asian ghost stories. This multicultural infusion enriches Halloween's meaning and fosters cross-cultural understanding.

At the same time, conversations about cultural appropriation and sensitivity have emerged, particularly around costume choices. These discussions highlight the balance between creative freedom and respect for cultural heritage, illustrating how Halloween remains a living tradition shaped by ongoing social dialogues.

The Pros and Cons of Halloween as a Cultural Institution

- **Pros:** Halloween promotes creativity, community bonding, and economic activity. It provides children and adults alike with opportunities for imaginative play and social interaction.
- **Cons:** Critics point to the commercialization of the holiday, potential safety concerns during trick-or-treating, and issues related to cultural insensitivity in costume selection.

These factors contribute to Halloween's complex status as both a cherished tradition and a subject of critical reflection.

Halloween's Continued Transformation

As American society evolves, so too does Halloween. The rise of digital media has introduced new ways to celebrate, from virtual costume contests to immersive online haunted experiences. Environmental awareness has also influenced trends, with more eco-friendly decorations and candy packaging gaining popularity.

Moreover, Halloween's integration into popular culture through films, literature, and television continues to shape public perceptions and practices. The holiday's adaptability ensures its relevance across generations, blending historical legacies with contemporary innovation.

In examining halloween an american holiday an american history, one observes a dynamic interplay between tradition and change. What began as an ancient ritual has grown into a multifaceted celebration reflecting the complexities of American identity, culture, and commerce—a holiday that remains deeply rooted yet constantly reinvented.

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result is the most educational and entertaining examination of Halloween, its myths, and its truths.

halloween an american holiday an american history: American Holiday Postcards, 1905-1915 Daniel Gifford, 2013-08-29 In the early 20th century, postcards were one of the most important and popular expressions of holiday sentiment in American culture. Millions of such postcards circulated among networks of community and kin as part of a larger American postcard craze. However, their uses and meanings were far from universal. This book argues that holiday postcards circulated primarily among rural and small town, Northern, white women with Anglo-Saxon and Germanic heritages. Through analysis of a broad range of sources, Daniel Gifford recreates the history of postcards to account for these specific audiences, and reconsiders the postcard phenomenon as an image-based conversation among exclusive groups of Americans. A variety of narratives are thus revealed: the debates generated by the Country Life Movement; the empowering manifestations of the New Woman; the civic privileges of whiteness; and the role of emerging technologies. From Santa Claus to Easter bunnies, flag-waving turkeys to gun-toting cupids, holiday postcards at first seem to be amusing expressions of a halcyon past. Yet with knowledge of audience and historical conflicts, this book demonstrates how the postcard images reveal deep divides at the height of the Progressive Era.

halloween an american holiday an american history: Sleepy Hollow as American Myth Steve A. Wiggins, 2025-07-17 Set near Tarrytown, New York, Washington Irving's short story *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* has become mythic in American culture. Its repeated reconceptions range from written works such as Christopher Golden and Ford Lytle Gilmore's *Horseman* (2005) and Austin Dragon's two *Hunt for the Foul Murderer of Ichabod Crane* books (2015) to film and TV adaptations such as Etienne Arnaud's *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* (1912), Edward D. Venturini's *The Headless Horseman* (1922), Disney's *The Adventures of Ichabod and Mr. Toad* (1949), Tim Burton's *Sleepy Hollow* (1999) and Fox Television's *Sleepy Hollow* (2013-17) that combined *Sleepy Hollow*'s Ichabod Crane with Irving's other creation, Rip Van Winkle. This book explores the tale's host of afterlives, tracing its path from a gothic, comic story of Crane's encounter with the ominous Headless Horseman to Halloween and horror icon and cultural landmark for generations.

halloween an american holiday an american history: Encyclopedia of American Folklore Linda Watts, 2020-07-01 Folklore has been described as the unwritten literature of a culture: its songs, stories, sayings, games, rituals, beliefs, and ways of life. *Encyclopedia of American Folklore* helps readers explore topics, terms, themes, figures, and issues related to this popular subject. This comprehensive reference guide addresses the needs of multiple audiences, including high school, college, and public libraries, archive and museum collections, storytellers, and independent researchers. Its content and organization correspond to the ways educators integrate folklore within literacy and wider learning objectives for language arts and cultural studies at the secondary level. This well-rounded resource connects United States folk forms with their cultural origin, historical context, and social function. Appendixes include a bibliography, a category index, and a discussion of starting points for researching American folklore. References and bibliographic material throughout the text highlight recently published and commonly available materials for further study. Coverage includes: Folk heroes and legendary figures, including Paul Bunyan and Yankee Doodle Fables, fairy tales, and myths often featured in American folklore, including Little Red Riding Hood and The Princess and the Pea American authors who have added to or modified folklore traditions, including Washington Irving Historical events that gave rise to folklore, including the civil rights movement and the Revolutionary War Terms in folklore studies, such as fieldwork and the folklife movement Holidays and observances, such as Christmas and Kwanzaa Topics related to folklore in everyday life, such as sports folklore and courtship/dating folklore Folklore related to cultural groups, such as Appalachian folklore and African-American folklore and more.

halloween an american holiday an american history: Halloween Nation Lesley Pratt Bannatyne, 2011-04-05 America's leading authority on Halloween presents interviews with spooky rock groups, amateur vampires, haunted house creators, champion pumpkin carvers, and more, all in the quest of explaining the nation's unique love affair with this holiday. The collection of essays

and interviews explores the pop culture phenomenon that is Halloween, and why we celebrate it the way we do today.

halloween an american holiday an american history: Encyclopedia of American Folklife Simon J Bronner, 2015-03-04 American folklife is steeped in world cultures, or invented as new culture, always evolving, yet often practiced as it was created many years or even centuries ago. This fascinating encyclopedia explores the rich and varied cultural traditions of folklife in America - from barn raisings to the Internet, tattoos, and Zydeco - through expressions that include ritual, custom, crafts, architecture, food, clothing, and art. Featuring more than 350 A-Z entries, Encyclopedia of American Folklife is wide-ranging and inclusive. Entries cover major cities and urban centers; new and established immigrant groups as well as native Americans; American territories, such as Guam and Samoa; major issues, such as education and intellectual property; and expressions of material culture, such as homes, dress, food, and crafts. This encyclopedia covers notable folklife areas as well as general regional categories. It addresses religious groups (reflecting diversity within groups such as the Amish and the Jews), age groups (both old age and youth gangs), and contemporary folk groups (skateboarders and psychobillies) - placing all of them in the vivid tapestry of folklife in America. In addition, this resource offers useful insights on folklife concepts through entries such as community and group and tradition and culture. The set also features complete indexes in each volume, as well as a bibliography for further research.

halloween an american holiday an american history: The Oxford Encyclopedia of Food and Drink in America Andrew Smith, 2013-01-31 Home cooks and gourmets, chefs and restaurateurs, epicures, and simple food lovers of all stripes will delight in this smorgasbord of the history and culture of food and drink. Professor of Culinary History Andrew Smith and nearly 200 authors bring together in 770 entries the scholarship on wide-ranging topics from airline and funeral food to fad diets and fast food; drinks like lemonade, Kool-Aid, and Tang; foodstuffs like Jell-O, Twinkies, and Spam; and Dagwood, hoagie, and Sloppy Joe sandwiches.

halloween an american holiday an american history: A Storm of Witchcraft Emerson W. Baker, 2015 This fascinating account of the Salem Witch Trials explores their religious, social, and political dimensions, their origins, their critics, and their aftermath, as well as their influence on the American cultural imagination to the present day.

halloween an american holiday an american history: Halloween and Other Festivals of Death and Life Jack Santino, 2025-03-14 Why do we celebrate Halloween? No one gets the day off, and unlike all other major holidays it has no religious or governmental affiliation. A survivor of our pre-Christian, agrarian roots, it has become one of the most popular and widely celebrated festivals on the contemporary American calendar. Jack Santino has put together the first collection of essays to examine the evolution of Halloween from its Celtic origins through its adaptation into modern culture. Using a wide variety of perspectives and approaches, the thirteen essayists examine customs, communities, and material culture to reveal how Halloween has manifested itself throughout all aspects of our society to become not just a marginal survivor of a dying tradition but a thriving, contemporary, post-industrial festival. Its steadily increasing popularity, despite overcommercialization and criticism, is attributed to its powerful symbolism that employs both pre-Christian images and concepts from popular culture to appeal to groups of all ages, orientations, and backgrounds. However, the essays in this volume also suggest that there is something ironic and unsettling about the immense popularity of a holiday whose main images are of death, evil, and the grotesque. Halloween and other Festivals of Death and Life is a unique contribution that questions our concepts of religiosity and spirituality while contributing to our understanding of Halloween as a rich and diverse reflection of our society's past, present, and future identity.

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multidisciplinary and international contributions and perspectives - organizes, defines and clarifies more than 300 death-related concepts.

halloween an american holiday an american history: A Halloween How-To Lesley Pratt Bannatyne, 2001-07-31 This "entertaining" guide features "Halloween trends past and present...costumes, recipes, movies, parties, myths and expeditions" (Publishers Weekly). What is the difference between a goblin and a ghoul? What's the recipe for pumpkin soup? Where can you see the oldest Halloween parade in the United States? Have you ever wondered how to keep your carved pumpkin from decaying too quickly? If you're looking for information and instructions about every aspect of Halloween, you've come to the right place. A Halloween How-To is packed with ideas for October 31. There are fifty great costumes you can make yourself, recipes for everything from fake blood to pumpkin soup, and lists of great movies, CDs, and spooky books. Author Lesley Bannatyne has even assembled a number of games drawn from early twentieth-century Halloween celebrations and includes sample text for party invitations. "This how-to offers everything anyone would ever want to know about All Hallows Eve. . . . A useful reference for both the growing population of adults who revel in Halloween and folks who seek to make the trick-or-treat experience a little more harrowing for unsuspecting children in costume." —Booklist

halloween an american holiday an american history: Halloween Murray Leeder, 2015-02-17 The 1970s represented an unusually productive and innovative period for the horror film, and John Carpenter's Halloween (1978) is the film that capped that golden age - and some say ruined it, by ushering in the era of the slasher film. Considered a paradigm of low-budget ingenuity, its story of a seemingly unremarkable middle-American town becoming the site of violence on October 31 struck a chord within audiences. The film became a surprise hit that gave rise to a lucrative franchise, and it remains a perennial favourite. Much of its success stems from the simple but strong constructions of its three central characters: brainy, introverted teenager Laurie Strode, a late bloomer compared to her more outgoing friends, Dr. Loomis, the driven, obsessive psychiatrist, and Michael Myers, the inexplicable, ghostlike masked killer. Film scholar Murray Leeder offers a bold and provocative study of Carpenter's film, which hopes to expose qualities that are sometime effaced by its sequels and remakes. It explores Halloween as an unexpected ghost film, and examines such subjects as its construction of the teenager, and the relationship of Halloween the film to Halloween the holiday, and Michael Myers's brand of pure evil. It is a fascinating read for scholars and fans alike.

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Richard T. Stanley, 2013-10-30 Many of America's favorite holidays, including Christmas, Easter, Halloween, and Valentines Day, originated far beyond our shores and long before our Founding Fathers were born. Some holidays, including Thanksgiving Day, the Fourth of July, Flag Day, Labor Day, Lincolns Birthday, Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, Memorial Day, Presidents Day, Veterans Day, and Washingtons Birthday, were uniquely grounded in Americas past. New Years Day has become a feast of college football bowl games. Still others, such as Cinco de Mayo, Columbus Day, and St. Patricks Day, are largely the products of Americas rich ethnic and cultural diversity over time. And some have a very personal and specific purpose, such as Mother's Day and Father's Day. Americas favorite holidays provide us with much more than opportunities to simply goof-off or spend money. Celebration, commemoration, contemplation, and remembrance are powerful forces that stimulate us to become better people, to enjoy life more, and to be more productive over time. Therefore, Happy Holidays!, everyone.

halloween an american holiday an american history: America's Favorite Holidays Bruce David Forbes, 2015-10-27 Explores how five of America's culturally dominant holidays--Christmas, Valentine's Day, Easter, Halloween, and Thanksgiving--came to be what they are today: combinations of seasonal and religious celebrations heavily influenced by modern popular culture ... The book offers a comprehensive look at the Christian origins of these holidays and also touches on Passover, the religions of ancient Rome, Celtic practices, Mexico's Day of the Dead, and American civil religion--Provided by publisher.

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