

National Art Education Association

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Source: *Studies in Art Education*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (Winter, 1999), pp. 101-113

Published by: National Art Education Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1320335>

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Chromo-Civilization and the Genteel Tradition (An Essay on the Social Value of Art Education)

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Stories from the lives of 19th century women and men demonstrate how art education contributed to their ability to find meaningful, economically viable work. The desire for genteel refinement led Caroline Negus, Eliza Starr, Mary Dana Hicks, and others to study the arts. Acquisition of drawing skills enabled them to find work as artists, as art teachers, or in new fields such as lithography and publishing. The ideology of gentility declared that refinement transcended class; however, the genteel tradition was contextually bound to middle-class formation and gender stereotypes. Participation in an industrial economy enabled members of the new middle class to become consumers, as well as producers, of popular art. Residual beliefs from the genteel tradition have both positive and negative implications for art education.

- A sex scandal about which people may “not know what to believe, but they do not want to hear any more newspaper discussion by the principal actors” (Godkin, 1895, p. 192).
- The prospect of a trial during which several people, whose truthfulness is already in question, will try to convince a jury that others are lying.
- A once-trusted public figure accused of adultery.

Although they sound like sound-bites from the evening news, these points come from “Chromo-civilization,” an 1874 essay by E. L. Godkin, editor of the *Nation*, friend of Harvard’s Charles Elliot Norton, and 19th century cultural commentator. In his essay Godkin expresses deep concerns over the decline of cultural values demonstrated by the sex scandal surrounding Rev. Henry Ward Beecher, a nationally known minister accused of adultery with a parishioner (A. Douglas, 1977; McLoughlin, 1970). Godkin believed that culture resulted from mental and moral discipline; character and ideals could only be formed through labor and self-denial. Thus, he decried the rise of easily accessible popular culture, “a smattering of all sorts of knowledge, a taste for reading and for ‘art’-that is, a desire to see and own pictures,” symbolized by the chromolithograph, an inexpensive means of reproducing paintings in color (1895, p. 201).

Although many of Godkin’s ideals resonate with what Ralph Smith (1998) identifies as the humanist tradition, Godkin wrote from a position within the genteel tradition. While humanism has had positive connotations in academic circles, references to gentility and the genteel tradition have called forth disclaimers or derision at evocations of poetry-writing in the parlor and middle-class smugness. Philosopher George Santayana (1967) denounced the genteel tradition as a hereditary spirit, looking to the past, dominated by women. Van Wyck Brooks (1915) contrasted the

¹Paper prepared for the 1998 Invited Studies in Art Education Lecture, delivered April 2, 1998, at the National Art Education Association Annual Conference, Chicago. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to the author at 5089 Kestral Parkway South, Sarasota, FL 34231-3203.

highbrow genteel tradition of Transcendentalist and aesthetic ideals with the lowbrow world of materialism and practical business. For intellectuals, like Santayana and Brooks, the genteel tradition was marked by effete refinement, the upward-looking, lily-sniffing aestheticism often caricatured in the persona of Oscar Wilde. We might think of gentility as the Victorian housewife to humanism's scholar in his study.

Vestiges of the genteel tradition appear in common sense beliefs about the value of art education. When teachers in the Los Angeles Unified School District say that children from their urban classrooms need to be exposed to fine art and museums to enrich their lives, we can hear echoes of genteel values. When museum educators and docents talk about the capacity of art to influence "people to be more moral, happier, and better citizens" (Storr, 1994, p. 3), we hear echoes of gentility. When the director of research and evaluation for a moderate-sized Southern school district, a man who is also a minister, talks about seeing *those kinds of children* bused to an opera performance and his amazement that they appeared to enjoy an art form he considers over his head, we hear the genteel tradition.

This essay will suggest that the genteel tradition in American middle-class culture has influenced core assumptions in art education. Within the world of genteel refinement, learning in and about visual art was one means to resolve the predicament of making a better life. Simultaneously, 19th century art educators contributed to the spread of chromo-civilization, the making of popular culture. While art education has sometimes functioned as a critique of the dominant culture—a position many advocate today—it has more often contributed to the formation and reproduction of middle-class culture in the United States.²

Drawing Toward Gentility

Drawing was an important accomplishment for antebellum New Englanders in the emerging middle class. Art education was valued in three distinct social contexts because skills in drawing opened both social and economic opportunities. First, drawing was a prerequisite for those who wanted to become artists. Second, workers needed drawing and visualization skills for use in rapidly expanding industries and manufactures. Finally, abilities to perform and appreciate the fine arts—dance, drawing, vocal and instrumental music—were cultivated as means toward genteel refinement. The story of the Negus family can help us understand the role of art education in genteel refinement.³

Joel Negus (1767-1816) was a self-taught painter of signs, coaches, and other useful or decorative objects. He also farmed, taught school, and did surveying, woodworking and other jobs necessary to support his family of 14 children. In the early 19th century subsistence living demanded a

²This essay has been developed from work toward a book examining the development of art education as a profession within the context of middle-class culture.

³The decision to treat my analysis of gentility and chromo-civilization as a series of stories is a conscious one. History is both science and art because it combines critical analysis of sources with literary tradition. Education researchers have begun using narratives to capture rich experiences and complex understandings. Some argue that storytelling is a fundamental way to structure one's life and to construct knowledge (see Carter, 1993; Casey, 1995; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; and Pradl, 1984).

range of tasks; full-time painting was a luxury in Petersham, then near the western frontier of Massachusetts. Joel's son Nathan (1801-1825) was apprenticed to a Boston artist, John Ritto Penniman (1782-1841), who had been trained as a decorative painter of clock faces, shop signs, trade cards, and Masonic regalia, but had ambitions as an easel painter, an occupation with higher social cachet (Andrews, 1981). Beginning about 1820, Nathan and his older brother Joseph (1797-1823) set out to earn their living as itinerant painters in the Southern states. Nathan painted portraits, miniatures, theater sets, and the interior of a Masonic Hall, among other works (Dods, 1959). Nathan's self-portrait, painted about 1820, shows him with a high cravat and wavy hair brushed forward in a romantic style reminiscent of Washington Alston's Roman self-portrait (*The Fullers: A Family of Artists*; Novak, 1979). The inventory of Nathan's possessions at his death suggests that he aspired to a more refined life-style than his father. Nathan possessed three times the usual number of fine shirts, an indication of fastidious personal habits appropriate to genteel life (Nicholl, 1992).

Mary Angela and Caroline Negus, the youngest children in the family, learned to draw as part of their general education. Mary Angela learned to draw, paint, and embroider at Deerfield Academy. Founded to educate "youth in the liberal arts and sciences, and all other useful learning," Deerfield was an institution of advanced learning by the standards of the day (Flynt, 1988, p. 11). About four-fifths of the students who enrolled when the school was founded in 1799 came from beyond Deerfield, coming from western Massachusetts, Vermont, and even New York State (Sheldon, 1895). Coeducational from the start, the academy offered drawing and needlework taught by a female preceptress. For female students at Deerfield, and other academies and seminaries throughout New England, completion of an embroidered picture, which sometimes combined painting with stitching, indicated readiness for graduation and acquisition of appropriate mental accomplishments (Ring, 1983). The youngest Negus child, Caroline, studied drawing at Catherine Fiske's school in Keene, New Hampshire (Negus Family Papers; Cott, 1977). A receipt dated May 1, 1833, shows that Caroline spent .16 on pencils, .24 on blank books, .06 on drawing paper, and 5.00 for 6 weeks' tuition in music; .37 was spent on use of textbooks in rhetoric, natural history, botany, and either philosophy or philology.

Following her studies with Miss Fiske, Caroline taught in a district school in Deerfield, where several of her sisters lived. Among her pupils was Eliza Allen Starr (1824-1901) who later recalled Miss Negus's emphasis on drawing from life, not from copies, a practice that Eliza herself would follow with great success as an art teacher in Chicago. Caroline moved to Boston around 1840, establishing herself as a painter of minia-

ture portraits and completing a series of botanical drawings for *The American Vegetable Practice*, published in 1841, one of the earliest and highest quality examples of color lithography in North America (*Art & Commerce*, 1978).

Living in Boston, Caroline Negus was able to take German lessons from a Madame Hening and to attend Margaret Fuller's "Conversations." Fuller (1810-1850), a member of the Transcendentalist circle, had received the classical education usually reserved for men. She used her knowledge and charisma to give other women opportunities to think systematically about the best ways to build a "life of thought upon the life of action" (Capper, 1987, p. 513). In Boston, Caroline Negus became friends with the artist Washington Alston and his wife. She painted portraits of Ralph Waldo Emerson and John Greenleaf Whittier. In 1844, Caroline married Richard Hildreth, a historian and philosopher whose father had been one of the first teachers at Deerfield Academy. Her painting commissions supported them while he continued writing. After Richard was appointed consul to Trieste, the couple lived abroad with their sons.

The stories of Joel, Nathan, Mary Angela, and Caroline Negus illustrate dramatic early 19th century social changes. Joel Negus recorded his knowledge of drawing and diverse subjects in two hand-written notebooks, creating his own art education text. He used his abilities as a decorative painter in conjunction with a range of other skills to support his family. Much of his painted work may have been bartered for goods that his family needed. In their rural community, Joel and his family lived on the fringes of capitalist production (Sellers, 1991). Joel's son Nathan had the advantage of a formal apprenticeship. He was taught to paint decorative objects, genre subjects, and portraits on commission by an artist whose abilities were recognized by Gilbert Stuart. In his linen shirts, Nathan aspired to emulate the gentlemen whose fine homes his work adorned.

Mary Angela and Caroline learned drawing as part of a general education. Women in the emerging middle class were expected to cultivate artistic accomplishments as part of formal schooling and as a demonstration of fitness for marriage. Mary Angela seems to have stopped creative work after completing her schoolgirl art; Caroline, on the other hand, used her art for financial support and as an entree to better social and intellectual circles in Boston. When Eliza Starr moved from Deerfield to Boston in 1845, she lived and studied drawing with Mrs. Hildreth, attended art exhibits at the Atheneum, and made formal social calls. Through these experiences, Eliza polished her artistic and social skills, just

as Caroline had a few years earlier, observing and emulating the manners of urbane ladies and gentlemen (McGovern, 1905).⁴

Vernacular Gentility

A combination of community wants and individual needs contributed to changes from self-taught artistry to learning through apprenticeship to learning art as part of education for middle-class life. As the 18th century turned into the 19th, residents of rural communities, like Deerfield and Petersham, sought to remodel small, dark houses into stately Georgian homes. The single rooms in which a family cooked, ate, and slept around the open fireplace were replaced by separate kitchens, dining rooms, second-floor bedrooms, and formal drawing rooms for entertaining. Newly refurbished houses demanded new furniture and new standards of behavior. Everyone who aspired to simple respectability had to demonstrate the characteristics Bushman (1992) has identified with vernacular gentility:

- the display of polite manners in self-aware social performances;
- an emphasis on self-improvement and self-discipline through acquisition of knowledge, most often from books;
- the ability to make critical judgments of one's own performance and those of others based on standards of good taste derived from aristocratic models;
- a beautification campaign to make churches, houses, barns, village streets, and everything in between, picturesque;
- standards for excluding vulgar persons from genteel society that confirmed emerging class divisions and affirmed the genteel person's sense of superiority.

Farmers, shopkeepers, and mechanics, both skilled artisans and entrepreneurs who no longer worked with their hands, emulated the behavior of coastal merchants who, in turn, had modeled their homes and manners on those of British aristocracy. Although the spread of vernacular gentility coincided with middle-class formation in the United States, genteel culture was not supposed to be confined to any one class. The ideology of gentility asserted:

that *gentility* is independent of birth, wealth, or condition, but is derived from that cultivation of mind which imparts elevation to sentiment and refinement to manners in whatever situations of life they may be found; knowledge acting upon character, as fire upon gold, purifying it from any base or gross admixture. (Smith, 1828, p. 3, italics in original)

⁴ The work of Eliza Starr's niece, Ellen Gates Starr, would bring this model of art educational change nearly full circle. Ellen, co-founder of Chicago's Hull House with Jane Addams, studied bookbinding in England as part of the Arts and Crafts Movement's revival of skills nearly lost through industrialization. She taught art and art history at Hull House as a way to bring genteel values to the immigrant poor. Ellen transmitted her bookbinding skills through apprenticeships, teaching these skills to youths aspiring to find meaningful careers.

In reality, however, genteel values were increasingly associated with the middle class home. Self-discipline and the work ethic necessary to rise from the working class coexisted with a desire for material comforts, for leisure devoted to mental and aesthetic self-improvement, and for a modest amount of social display. As Bushman (1992) points out, “capitalism and gentility were allies in forming the modern economy” (p. xvii). Although perceived as coarse and threatening, commercialism was necessary to the spread of the genteel way of life.

Gentility and Art Education

The ideology of gentility was disseminated through advice books and novels, especially those directed to female readers. Women were expected to exemplify refined behavior and to transmit genteel values to their children, but their very refinement placed them outside the masculine worlds of capitalism, commerce, and politics. In an 1819 address to the public, particularly legislators, Emma Willard argued that drawing and painting, elegant penmanship, music, and dancing should be taught to assist formation of female character. Although young women were unlikely to devote the time necessary to achieve any degree of perfection in music or visual arts, it was thought that they should practice these ornamental subjects to develop personal refinement, harmony of soul, and taste for the beauties of nature (Willard, 1974). The plot of Margaret Bayard Smith’s novel, *What Is Gentility?* (1828), demonstrated that studying drawing, literature and music could refine the children of illiterate, vulgar parents. In this novel, young Charles McCarty demonstrates his refinement and good taste by refusing to live beyond his means even after returning from a successful term as American consul at a Mediterranean port where he and his wife were accepted in the highest social circles due to their gentility. The resonance between parts of this story and the life of Caroline Negus Hildreth suggests the pervasiveness of genteel values.

In her *Letters to Young Ladies* (1838), popular writer Lydia Sigourney (1791-1865) argued that women needed formal education to help them better mold and nurture their children. She also argued that women were natural teachers who deserved high honors as allies of legislators in keeping the nation pure and healthful. Sigourney had experience as a teacher, having successfully established two girls’ schools before her marriage. After marriage, she sold poems, stories, and essays to new periodicals for women. In her advice book, she located arts education among the manners and accomplishments to be acquired after more necessary and useful knowledge and skills. She wrote that drawing should be taught to heighten admiration of nature, to expand the germs of taste, and to provide high intellectual pleasure. In October 1839, Henry Barnard invited Mrs.

Sigourney to address the Connecticut Common School Convention where she advocated expanding common school education to develop perception of the beautiful in nature and art. She recommended beautifying schoolhouses, landscaping schoolgrounds, and decorating classrooms with flowers, engravings, and busts of famous men. "Why should not the interior of our schoolhouses aim at somewhat of the taste and elegance of a parlor?" she asked her listeners (Sigourney, 1840, p. 84). Sigourney provides a clear link between vernacular gentility, the feminization of American culture (Douglas, 1977), and art education.

This genteel tradition for arts education pre-existed the 1870 Massachusetts Drawing Act, the importation of Walter Smith and his adaptation of the South Kensington system of art education.⁵ Strong reactions by supporters of industrial drawing against *pretty pictures* testify to the pervasiveness of the genteel tradition in mid-19th century education. Even though they protested against the subjects and styles of drawing typical of genteel education, advocates of industrial drawing continued to use genteel rationales for developing taste and character through art education. While the majority of public advocates for industrial drawing were men, most public school art teachers were female. Many of the young women who constituted the majority of students at Smith's Massachusetts Normal Art School had probably grown up within the genteel tradition, first learning how to draw as an accomplishment, a cultivated skill.

From Gentility to Chromos

Mary Dana Hicks Prang (1836-1927) provides a human bridge between the genteel tradition in art education and the emergence of popular culture or "chromo-civilization." The daughter of a prosperous merchant, Mary Dana attended a private school near her home in Syracuse, New York, then studied mathematics, languages, history and science at Mary B. Allen's Female Seminary in Rochester. She received private instruction in piano, singing and German, and studio instruction in drawing and painting (Prang Papers). The years of Mary's formal education, approximately 1838-1852, coincide with the era of vernacular gentility. Her schooling probably had much in common with Willard's and Sigourney's visions for female education. At the age of 20, she married a Syracuse lawyer who drowned just two years later.

Left a widow with a young child, Mary Dana Hicks began teaching drawing and other subjects in her home (Stankiewicz, 1992). By 1868, she was teaching drawing in the Syracuse public schools. The following year she established a teachers' training course in drawing at the high school. Seventy students enrolled in her normal art class in 1874 and the Syracuse schools adopted the Walter Smith system of drawing.⁶ Mary traveled to Boston to enroll in a summer course at the new Massachusetts

⁵In May, 1870, the Massachusetts legislature enacted the first law requiring drawing to be taught in public schools and requiring cities of more than 10,000 to offer free industrial and mechanical drawing instruction to persons over age 15 (Bolin, 1986). The following year, Walter Smith, an English art master trained at the National Art Training School in South Kensington, was hired as state agent for industrial drawing and director of drawing in the Boston public schools. Smith established the Massachusetts Normal Art School to prepare art teachers and developed a series of drawing manuals adapted from the British approach.

⁶Smith's drawing manuals were adopted by many North American schools. His advice on art education was eagerly sought and he lectured widely. Mary Hicks was not alone in turning to Smith as the chief expert on industrial drawing.

Normal Art School. By this time, Louis Prang was publishing Smith's *American Text-books of Art Education*. We don't know how Mrs. Hicks met Mr. Prang, but he offered her a position as a writer and editor. In 1879, Mary Dana Hicks moved to Boston where she participated in revisions to Smith's drawing series, wrote art education texts for primary and elementary schools, directed Prang's correspondence school for teaching art, and became recognized as a leading late 19th century art educator (Stankiewicz, 1985).

Chromo-civilization

Louis Prang was the successful Boston lithographer who coined the term "chromo" to describe his multi-stone, colored lithographs. Some chromos were embossed with a canvas-like texture then varnished to create facsimiles of oil paintings; others imitated the fluidity of watercolor. Chromos put visual art within reach of those who had not acquired artistic skills themselves. For many who aspired to the finer things in life, a Prang Christmas card was a treasured possession to be carefully displayed year-round (Hollingsworth, 1884/1941). Prang marketed his chromos for their high quality and good taste. Art critics, however, decried the popularity of chromos and the lack of discipline and self-restraint that Godkin, among others, associated with them.

Clarence Cook (1866), critic for the *New York Daily Tribune*, objected to the fact that chromos were copies of paintings instead of original works. Prang countered by comparing the lithographic process to the printing press that put identical copies of great literary works into hundreds of homes. Buying and displaying chromos gave aspirants to gentility the opportunity to purchase pictures like those found in wealthy, upper-class homes. In the *Atlantic Monthly*, James Parton (1869) argued that mass possession of chromos would increase, not lessen, the distinction of owning original works of art. Parton predicted that American artists would become wealthy selling the rights to reproduce their works. He argued that chromos allowed everyone to own the best works of art, without having to settle for inferior products from painting factories housed in city garrets.⁷ Nonetheless, Cook and other critics declared that chromolithographed facsimiles were only appropriate for children and members of the immigrant or lower classes to whom the bright colors would appeal (Stankiewicz, 1986).

Prang paid attention to popular taste in developing his lithography business; he found his first success printing maps of Civil War battle sites and portraits of generals. When a series of Cuban scenes failed to attract buyers, Prang tried landscapes (Parton, 1869). A chromo of chickens by Arthur Tait successfully appealed to popular taste. Designs for the famous

⁷In order to meet the demand for images for middle-class homes, paintings were manufactured in an assembly-line fashion: skies might be painted first on a series of canvases, next middle-ground mountains, finally the foreground landscape. Similar painting factories existed in Maine in the 1980s producing seascapes for the tourist market.

Christmas cards were selected by an expert jury and also by popular vote. Dora Wheeler and Rosina Emmet shared prizes for Christmas card designs with Elihu Vedder and Charles C. Coleman. Fidelity Bridges, Ellen T. Fisher, Annie C. Nowell, and Matilda Brown were among the many women artists whose flower paintings became popular chromos (Prang Papers).

Likewise, the Prang Educational Company utilized the advice of experienced art teachers (mostly female) in developing curriculum materials, textbooks, and other instructional resources for art education. The preface to the 1898 Teacher's Manual for *The Prang Elementary Course* listed 28 art educators and artists who provided "valuable counsel" to the authors (Clark, Hicks, & Perry, 1898, p. iv). Twenty-five of the 28 were women.

Prang supported art education for two reasons. Like other Massachusetts manufacturers, he imported skilled workers. Having native workers develop necessary skills prior to hiring would reduce his manufacturing costs. Prang also wanted to sell more of his better quality (i.e., larger and more expensive) lithographs; higher consumer aspirations and better taste could enlarge his market. Prang claimed to support art education out of the goodness of his heart and at a loss to himself (Prang, 1882). This was probably partly true, but Prang was a well-respected, savvy businessman who kept the educational company separate from his lithography business.⁸

Legacies from the Genteel Tradition

The point of these stories is to remind us that art education has developed in social contexts, in response to community wants, with attention to community aspirations, and as a means to achieve individual needs for agency and a better life. Prang's chromos made genteel art into a commodity, just as steam-powered presses and periodicals made genteel literature commercially viable. Prang provided employment for genteel women, giving them the chance to participate in the industrial economy. In 19th-century social contexts, art education facilitated the formation and growth of the middle-class and disseminated upper-middle-class expectations regarding good taste. At the same time, in spite of genteel middle-class rhetoric that set the world of arts and high culture apart from the world of materialism and commercialism, art educators participated in the formation of popular culture—chromo-civilization—by dis-

⁸Bolin's (1986) analysis of the petitioners who requested the 1870 Massachusetts Drawing Act suggests the importance of recognizing that advocates for art education, today as in the past, often combine self-interest with altruism.

seminating skills in the visual arts formerly reserved to artists and their aristocratic patrons.

These developments have contributed to a tension in art education between belief in the specialness of art and the belief that the mission of art education is to help everyone understand and appreciate art—between elitism and social reconstruction. These beliefs have both positive and negative implications for late 20th century art education. On the plus side, the legacy from the genteel tradition asserts that:

- Everyone has latent artistic abilities and potential good taste that can be developed through disciplined work in the arts.
- The arts play an important role in forming character and refining the human spirit.
- Creation and appreciation of the arts can be learned; artistic accomplishment requires hard work over an extended period of time.
- We can improve ourselves and our lives by emulating positive qualities in others.
- Self-discipline, restraint, modesty, civility and polite manners are positive qualities that enable one to function effectively in society.
- Involvement in the arts and access to arts education should not be limited by social class or economic status.

On the other hand, the genteel tradition has also left us beliefs that:

- The arts are especially—and often wholly—suited to the education of girls and women.
- A primary locus for artistic activity is the home; the arts are irrelevant to business and politics.
- Art is chiefly about beauty; making things look nice—picturesque—is enough.
- Those who develop their aesthetic sensibilities become superior to others who fail to do so.
- Persons with superior aesthetic taste have the responsibility to set standards for those who lack such taste.
- One way to judge the worth and taste of a person is by the material goods they possess; objects are the means to a higher existence.
- Hierarchies of value exist; they should be preserved and transmitted to the next generation.
- The arts are primarily leisure activities; art objects are decorative and useless for purposes of production.

In his analysis of the positive and negative aspects of vernacular gentility, Bushman (1992) identified the desire for social control as the fatal

flaw of gentility. Participants in the genteel tradition, like Godkin, wanted to close their eyes to ugliness and hide whatever was considered vulgar. Thus, genteel reforms improved the appearance of communities but ignored or increased social inequities. While seeming to place women on a pedestal of refined sensibility, genteel men sought to limit women's sphere of action to hearth and home. Nonetheless, at least some women—like Caroline Negus, Eliza Starr, Lydia Sigourney, and Mary Hicks—used their accomplishments to create independent lives. By the last decade of the 19th century, many men disowned participation in genteel refinement in favor of a new, masculine ethos of rugged naturalism, athletic virility, martial nationalism, and strenuous experience (Higham, 1965). The feminizing of education, the arts, and culture was perceived negatively by Santayana (1967) in 1911, but, the following year, Earl Barnes (1912) acknowledged that women's influences had popularized, humanized, and democratized American culture. Both the genteel tradition and chromo-civilization have left their marks on American values and culture. The challenge we face is to use the visual arts to improve lives while avoiding the insular elitism that characterized genteel refinement.

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