

The Hungarian Prinner

JÚLIA CSERBA

In today's terminology, Anton Prinner was a cross-dresser: born Anna Prinner in Budapest in 1902, s/he immigrated to Paris in 1927, where s/he started to pose as a man and maintained an androgynous identity for the rest of her/his life. Through her/his way of dressing and behaving, as well as creating large statues requiring considerable physical strength, Prinner consciously conveyed a male persona and described himself as a homosexual man: 'I think, I have a certain homosexual drive in me; I had to realise that I'm attracted to men'.¹ The essay below is taken from the catalogue of a retrospective of Prinner's work held in the Ernst Museum (Budapest) in April 2007 (curated by Júlia Cserba and Gabriella Uhl). Even while Prinner was well connected to the avant-garde in Paris, he fluctuated between artistic idioms: he was one of the earliest artists of Constructivist abstraction, but later (re)turned to figurative sculpture and showed a keen interest in the occult, mysticism, and transmutation. His oeuvre might thus demonstrate how stylistic hybridity and mixing, or the inventive adaptation of styles, are not exclusive trademarks of the periphery (as it is often suggested in relation to East-Central Europe's stylistic plurality) but can well happen in the centre(s) as well. (BH)

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It is impossible to make categorical, unambiguous statements about Anton Prinner's art, personality or life. As we shall see, this complexity also extends to the artist's relationship with his homeland. The many contradictions mean that a true picture of Prinner is elusive; he had many friends, yet beyond a certain point, he was unapproachable and inscrutable. He built a protective wall around himself to deliberately mislead others, but this could only protect his inner world; in other respects he was defenceless, which is why he was often badly hurt by others. If he started telling a true story, he ended it with a made-up tale. Prinner wrote carefully-worded letters in Hungarian and French, while 'adorning' his copperplate etchings with short, primitive texts full of the most egregious spelling mistakes. He declared that he had never picked up a book, yet could recite long poems by heart. Prinner often quoted the classics at the same time as 'propagating' the claim that Goethe was Hungarian. He was always entertaining company even when he was submerged deep in thought, preoccupied with questions of this world and the next, and wracked by mental pain. As he put it: 'To appear foolish is the secret of the Wise'.² His male dress, pipe-smoking, and deliberate deep voice concealed much more than his actual sex. He only revealed his true face in his sculptures, easily recognisable for the attentive observer in the dignified *Beggar (Le mendiant)*, in whose hands Pablo Picasso often discretely left money on his frequent visits to Prinner's studio, or in the *She-Bull (Femme-taureau, 1937)*, combining male strength with gentle femininity, or in the mystical *Totem (1946)*, yet he revealed something of himself in almost all his sculptures.

At the very end of 1927, aged 25, Prinner left Hungary, never to return, except for a flying visit in 1930:

I came here in 1928 for a two-week visit and stayed, telling everyone: "Paris nailed my feet to the ground". I languished away for four years, battling with starvation, but couldn't manage to get my feet out from under the "nails", because the symbolic "nails" were all-powerful, just like a magnet...³

However, his departure from Hungary only seems to represent a total break: in Paris, he wanted to escape his limitations, but not his roots. This certainly included changing his gender. The presumption that his unconditional artistic calling might explain both his departure from Hungary and the gender shift is strongly supported by a story from Mária Peterdi. In 1943, during the first bombing of Paris, Prinner ran home at breakneck speed, and upon reaching his studio:

[he] started shouting: "My drawing! ... My drawing! I must finish my drawing!" He sat down at the table, and started drawing with clenched teeth. He did not raise his head the entire time ... How instructive it was for me to see him, someone who valued his work even more than his life.⁴



Fig. 13.1. Colomb Denise (Loeb Denise), *Portrait of Anton Prinner in his studio (Portrait d'Anton Prinner dans son atelier*, 1947). © Ministère de la Culture / Médiathèque de l'architecture et du patrimoine, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Denise Colomb; © RMN-Grand Palais - Gestion droit d'auteur; © Monique Tanazacq, Paris.

Anna became Anton, and although he was physically small and delicate, he managed to convince his new acquaintances and new surroundings that he was a man. For a long time, it was perhaps only his closest friend, Árpád Szenes, who knew that 'Monsieur Prinner attended the Academy with two braids'.⁵ This remark also helps us understand his 1939 wooden sculpture *The Braided Woman* (*La femme à la natte*) (Fig. 13.1).

In Hungary in the 1920s, young women and men were still taught separately at the Academy of Fine Arts, and women had no hope of being considered serious artists, even if they were exceptionally talented. Looking at the names of female students who studied at the Academy the same year as Prinner, we see that none of them became established artists; most of them have been completely forgotten. As Mária Peterdi wrote in a 1946 newspaper article: 'Prinner didn't leave Hungary eighteen years ago to make a career. He simply wanted to be able to work...'.⁶

Nor was the situation easy for women artists in France. To some extent, this is underscored by the fact that Prinner, aptly termed the George Sand of sculpture by Maurice Huleu, was not the only woman pretending being a man in Paris at the time.⁷ Perhaps the best-known example from the interwar years is the writer and photographer Claude Cahun (1894–1954), a greatly respected member of André Breton's surrealist group, whom Prinner could have known.

At the end of 1927 or in early 1928, Anton Prinner arrived in Paris empty-handed, but not without valuable spiritual provisions for the journey, partly from his family and partly from the Academy of Fine Arts. The origins of the Prinner family can be traced back to Johann Jacob

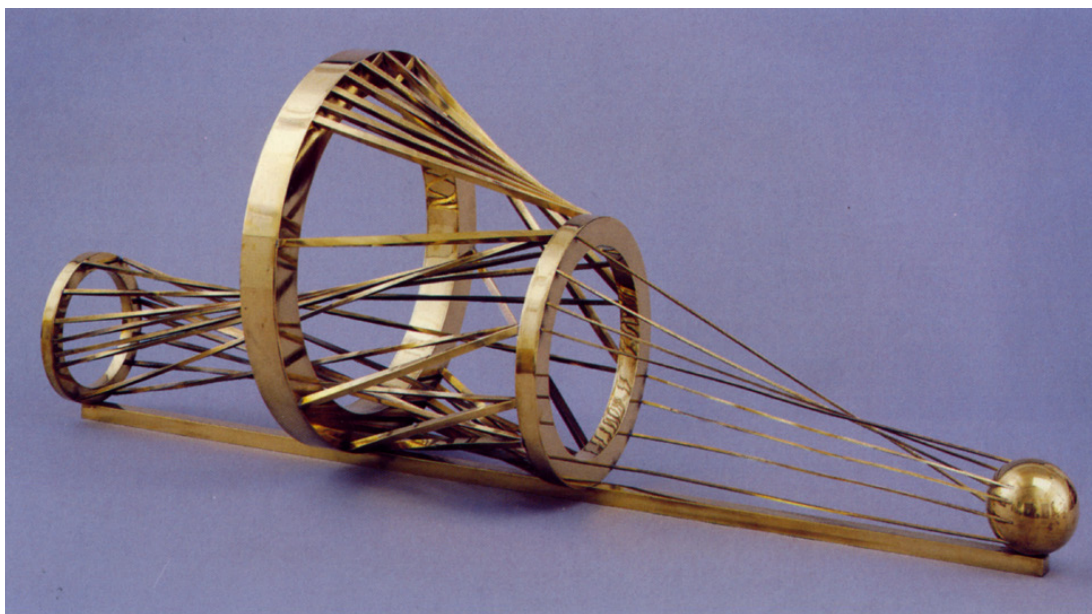


Fig. 13.2.
Anton Prinner,
*Construction in
Brass (Construction
à cuivre, 1935)*.
Brass and copper,
50 x 50 x 135 cm.
Musée de Grenoble,
Grenoble.

Prinner (1624–1694), a composer in Salzburg.⁸ His earliest known relative was also, therefore, an artist, and his more recent ancestry included several architects. Anton Prinner's mother and father were not average parents, and nor can this be said of their children.

As he wrote in his autobiography, Prinner enjoyed maximum freedom during his childhood. Upon starting school, his father, an 'extravagant' book connoisseur who spoke four languages, taught him how to forge his signature so that he could excuse his own absences.⁹ His pianist mother, a 'strange, incorporeal abstraction', brought four children into the world.¹⁰ Of her three sons, István became a composer, Vilmos a painter and recluse, Zoltán a philosopher. (Vilmos, a hermit, only learned that the Second World War had broken out in 1943 when he left the forest in Pilis for a nearby village.) Anna was born on New Year's Eve in 1902. As the youngest and only girl child, she enjoyed an advantageous position within the family, but she also viewed her older brothers with wonder and some envy. Prinner left the loving, somewhat eccentric family nest in 1920 and entered the Academy of Fine Arts in Budapest just as the institution was starting its process of intellectual renewal. Many decades later, he remembered his alma mater and its teachers with great respect and gratitude: 'The Academy of Fine Arts in Budapest was the greatest art school in the world, and may still be today'.¹¹ Under the leadership of Károly Lyka, and in opposition to the conservative cultural policy of the government at the time, Academy art students could learn in an environment that was more modern than it had been for their predecessors: instead of copying plaster statues, they began drawing from nature, and in summer, they had the opportunity to work outdoors in artists' colonies. Some of the teaching staff, themselves practicing artists, taught in a style based on Hungarian painting traditions, but with a modern approach. Among these teachers was János Vaszary (1867–1939), who studied in Munich and then at the Académie Julian in Paris, and whose painting was permeated by the influence of Henri Matisse, Raoul Dufy, and most of all, Kees van Dongen. Vaszary directed his students' interest towards modern French painting of the first half of the twentieth century. It is mostly thanks to this focus that his painting students, including Prinner, craved to reach Paris, the capital city of the arts. Prinner's desire was all the stronger since his friend Árpád Szenes had already been living there since 1925. Alongside Vaszary, Prinner also owed much to another of his teachers, Gyula Rudnay. While Vaszary underscored artistic freedom, Rudnay's emphasis was on moral bearing, humanism, and the importance of high standards. Prinner never forgot Rudnay's teaching that 'you can only become true artists when you become real people, and not before!'¹² Throughout his life, Prinner helped countless individuals, and his doors always remained open to those in need. For example, Endre Rózsa lived in Prinner's flat for almost a year upon his arrival in Paris in 1956. As sculptor István Kilár recalls, 'He was such a good person that he even domesticated the rats in his studio'.¹³

Prinner had not even thought of becoming a sculptor in Budapest; he trained as a painter. He painted his first picture at seventeen, the *Blind Girl* (*Vak leányka*), later carving it into stone in 1944 as 'a reminiscence of the very first artistic way of seeing'.¹⁴ Sadly, few of his early works remain: we only know of *Blind Girl* from his autobiographical writings. But as his *Landscape with Dim Lights* (*Táj derengő fényekkel*) shows, with its symbols of mystery, he was already making pictures that drew on Hungarian pictorial traditions in the early 1920s.¹⁵

Paris brought about a fundamental change in Prinner's art, although he was more preoccupied with his survival during the first years of his stay. Árpád Szenes writes in his memoirs that:

my first friend here was Prinner, whom I already knew from home. We discovered Paris together. We lived a double life. By day we painted in Montparnasse and debated with our friends, and by night, we drew caricatures for money in Montmartre, made friends with boxing champions, played chess with Chinese chefs, and got to know *artistes de profil* and many other peculiar figures.¹⁶



Fig. 13.3.
Anton Prinner,
Large column
(*Grande colonne*,
1933). Wood,
paint, 149.86 x
50.17 x 50.8 cm.
Dallas Museum
of Art, Dallas.
Image courtesy
of Brad Flowers /
Dallas Museum of
Art. The Eugene
and Margaret
McDermott Art
Fund, Inc.

In the meantime, they both attended the Académie de la Grande-Chauière, and in 1932, turning towards abstraction, Prinner made his first Constructivist works. He gained serious recognition with his wooden carved reliefs, ‘statue pictures’, and copper compositions (Fig. 13.2). Newspapers started writing about his art, and he was invited to take part in important exhibitions. In 1936, Károly Sirató Tamkó included Prinner’s spatial constructions in his plan for the first international Dimensionist exhibition, alongside works by Pablo Picasso, László Moholy-Nagy, Joan Miro, Alexander Calder, Marcel Duchamp, and Max Ernst.¹⁷ (Sadly, as is well known, the exhibition never took place.) Prinner later claimed he had no idea what Constructivism was at the time, that he had never heard of it nor seen any similar works, but this claim is probably one of his many contradictory statements mentioned earlier. What is the reason for doubting the truth of this statement? As a result of 1920s conservative cultural policy, the nascent avant-garde remained isolated outside the walls of the Hungarian Academy; most of its representatives had fled the country after the collapse of the Republic of Councils. The centre of the Hungarian avant-garde movement moved to Vienna, but journals, albums, and books published by Lajos Kassák and his circle nevertheless reached Budapest, frequently featuring works such as Kassák’s image architectures, Sándor Bortnyik’s geometric compositions, or László Péri’s Constructivist concrete reliefs. Prinner was still living in Hungary when Kassák, who played such a significant role in the revitalisation of artistic life at the time, returned from his Austrian exile. It is difficult to imagine that the young painting student would not have heard about Kassák from his circle of friends interested in the avant-garde. Yet in his memoirs, Prinner wrote that in the early 1930s, when he himself was making Constructivist-style works, he first heard about the concept of Constructivism from his friend Gábor Peterdi: ‘I was happy that what I was doing actually had a name’ (Fig. 13.3).¹⁸ Whereas we cannot say for sure what sort of prior knowledge of Constructivism Prinner had at the time when he made his reliefs and engravings, we do know how he became immersed in the study of Egyptian art and culture.

To restore the antecedents, we need to go back to 1932. On Gyula Rudnay’s encouragement, Gábor Peterdi, a student of painting, arrived in Paris at the age of seventeen, and rented a studio, either coincidentally or on someone’s recommendation, in the same building as Prinner’s. They became inseparable friends: Prinner cooked for them both, usually Hungarian food, while Peterdi was in charge of shopping, mostly on credit. ‘If one earned money, neither went without. They’d walk across hot coals for one another. The enormous Peterdi and the tiny Prinner were known in Montparnasse, and if someone dared make an insulting remark about Mafu [Prinner’s nickname], they’d have a problem with “Monsieur Gros”’.¹⁹ Together, they visited the Closerie des Lilas, the Dôme, and many coffee houses popular with local artists. They studied at Stanley William Hayter’s studio, Atelier 17, where they mastered graphic reproduction procedures, especially the various techniques of copperplate engraving. These were later applied by Prinner in his *Bible*-series and the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* (*Le Livre des Morts des anciens Egyptiens* (Fig. 13.4), while Peterdi used them in his 1938 etching album, the *Black Bull*, and his 1959 book *Printmaking: Methods Old and New*.²⁰ Five years after Peterdi arrived, his younger sister Mária also moved to Paris to continue her studies in Egyptology at the Sorbonne. From that point on, Prinner and Mária shared a flat together. This was shortly after Prinner, in complete opposition to the dominant trends of the time, made a radical break with Constructivism and turned towards figurative depiction with his *She-Bull* (*Femme-taureau / Bikaasszony*) and *Double Personage* (*Kettős alak*) sculptures. If we compare these works to *Woman with Braids* (*La Femme à la natte / Copfos nő*) from two years later, we see a fundamental change in the conspicuous influence of Egyptian depictive art. The explanation for this is obvious: Prinner’s prior interest in ancient Egyptian culture was deepened while living with Mária Peterdi, as her studies brought all the beauty and secrets of this art even closer to Prinner.

Alongside Gábor Peterdi and Árpád Szenes, Prinner was also close friends with the painter Zsigmond Kolozsvári and his wife, the artist Aurélia Val, as well as the pioneer of photo-reporting, Robert Capa. Capa often used Prinner and Mária Peterdi’s bathroom as a laboratory; it was here that he developed his Spanish Civil War photos. (In 1937, Jeanne Bucher organised an exhibition to support Spanish children, to which many Hungarian artists offered their works: Béla Czóbel,



Fig. 13.4. Etched engraved plate by Anton Prinner, illustration to *Egyptian Book of the Dead* (*Le Livre des morts des anciens Egyptiens*, 1948, Paris: Robert J. Godet), 36 x 22 cm.

Étienne Hajdú, Zsigmond Kolozsvári, Árpád Szenes, Gábor Peterdi, Géza Szóbel, and naturally Anton Prinner too.)

When the war reached Paris, many of Prinner's friends of Jewish origin had to flee. Mária Peterdi, the painter Endre Rozsda, and the sculptor Lajos Barta arrived in Budapest on the last train out, while Zsigmond Kolozsvári and Aurélia Val were caught and arrested at the Swiss border and interned in Gurs. Árpád Szenes and his wife Vieira da Silva had already been living in Brazil for some time. Robert Capa and Gábor Peterdi settled permanently in the USA, but despite the great distance between them, the fraternal bond between Prinner and Peterdi remained fast. For many years, 'Monsieur Gros' regularly provided 'Mafu' with much-needed material support: he was covering Prinner's rent even into the early 1970s.²¹

Of course, there were others who could not or did not want to leave Paris, among them the Hungarian painter Sándor Heimovits.²² In German-occupied Paris, during the most difficult and dangerous period, Prinner did not hesitate for a second to help Heimovits, hiding the painter and his children in his flat for a time. Earlier, in a similar gesture of friendship and humanity, he had taken in a refugee, someone seriously injured in the Spanish Civil War; we could list further generous deeds, about which he never spoke. His discreetly-concealed humanism was also embodied in his art.

As some of his friends who survived the war returned to Paris, Prinner was once again surrounded by Hungarians, whose circle was now greatly expanded with émigrés fleeing the Communist dictatorship. In 1947, one of the Hungarians' favourite meeting places was the Select

café, which Prinner visited frequently. The regulars at his table were István Beöthy, Anna Beöthy-Steiner (a particularly close friend of Prinner's),²³ the photographers André Rogi and Ergy Landau, the sculptor József Csáky, the painter György Csató, Misztrik de Monda and Lancelot Ney, as well as recent arrivals from the younger generation, Pál Kallós, Vera Molnár, and her husband Ferenc Molnár.²⁴ But Prinner's favourite spot was La Coupole, where Hungarians gathered around his table every evening, and the new arrivals could listen intently to his enthralling stories that the old hands already knew by heart. He often told personal stories as if they had happened to his imaginary sister. Prinner loved speaking Hungarian so much that he often used Hungarian phrases while speaking to French people. (Even today, his French friends like to cite 'barbarian' words they learned from him.) According to the recollections of István Kilar, a sculptor who lived in Paris from 1956, Prinner was particularly fond of citing long passages from the epic poem 'Toldi'. Perhaps the last great friendship of his life was with the painter Béla Birkás, whom he got to know relatively late, in the early 1960s. After Birkás's sudden death in 1973, Prinner was so shaken that he never regained his earlier all-pervasive good mood and buoyancy.

If we examine the group exhibitions held in Hungary of artists based in France, we see that although Prinner never personally attended these events, he was always happy for his works to be included. In 1936, at the exhibition organised for representatives of the Musicalist movement at the National Salon, three Prinner cuts were on display (*Composition*, *Incubus*, and *Flirt*), while in 1938, two of his Constructivist works, *Plastic Spirals* and *Black and White Triangles* were exhibited at the *Parisian-Hungarian Artists (Párizsi magyar művészek)* show at the Tamás Gallery.²⁵ This latter show, the very first group exhibition of abstract art in Hungary, was a milestone in the history of modern Hungarian art, later influencing the work of many Hungarian artists. Ferenc Martyn, an active member of the Abstraction-Création group in Paris, began working as early as 1935 on an exhibition in Budapest of Hungarian abstract painters and sculptors working at home and abroad.²⁶ His plan, which was worked out together with István Beöthy and Jenő Gadány, was realised in January 1938.

In between these two Budapest exhibitions, Hungarian artists in Paris, including Prinner, enjoyed one further significant appearance. The Rainbow (*Arc-en-Ciel* (Rainbow)) theatre company, founded by Géza Blattner, produced Imre Madách's 1861 play *The Tragedy of Man (Az ember tragédiája)* for the 1937 International Exposition of Art and Technology in Modern Life, Paris. The sets and puppets were designed and operated by, among others, István Beöthy, József Csáky, Zsigmond Kolozsvári, and Árpád Szenes, while Anton Prinner helped build the set for the final dream scene, set in a future ice age. The performance was a massive success, garnering praise from both audience and jury and winning the gold medal in the theatre section.

At the 1970 *Les Hongrois de Paris (The Hungarians of Paris)* exhibition in the Galerie Zunini, Prinner was among the forty-three artists on show; his works were also included the same year in a major exhibition of *Twentieth-Century Artists of Hungarian Origin Abroad* at the Budapest Kunsthalle, organised and curated by Krisztina Passuth. This was the first time after the war that a large group of artists of Hungarian origin living in the West could be exhibited in their home country. According to the exhibition catalogue, a significant number of Prinner's works were on show from five different periods of his life: a bronze statue; the *Sunflower Woman (Napraforgónő)* carved out of wood; his Picasso plaquettes made for the *Monnaie de Paris*; and the *Book of the Dead* copperplate etchings. Although he donated works to the Fine Arts Museum, Prinner did not visit Budapest for this occasion either.

It is probably not inaccurate to compare Prinner's relationship to Hungary to the kind of bond connecting him with his close friends, among them Picasso and Victor Brauner: a mixture of sincere affection and diffident circumspection. Yet it may be taken as a fact that neither his personality nor his art can truly be understood without taking into account his Hungarian origins, his experiences and the knowledge gained during his youth in his home country.

Translated by Gwen Jones

- 1 Quoted in Hedvig Turai, 'Hiányzó történetek: Vajda Júlia, Anna Margit, Vaszkó Erzsébet', in Katalin Keserü (ed.), *Modern magyar nőművészettörténet. Tanulmányok* (Budapest: Kijárat, 2000), p. 48.
- 2 Anton Prinner, typed autobiography, written in Paris after 1965 (exact year unknown), unpublished. Private collection.
- 3 Anton Prinner, letter to his cousin Mrs. Ilonka Hársi, December 1967 (signed 'your brother Tóni').
- 4 Zseni Várnai and Mária Peterdi, *Mint viharban a falevél* (Budapest: self-published, 1944).
- 5 Endre Rozsda (1913–1999), painter and mutual friend of Szenes and Prinner, in personal communication with the author, c. 1995.
- 6 Mária Peterdi, 'Párizs legfrissebb szenzációja: A. Prinner, a nagy magyar szobrász', *Szívárvány* (9 November 1946): 13.
- 7 Maurice Huleu, 'L'autre gloire de Vallauris: Anton Prinner', *Nice-Matin* (4 October 1981).
- 8 Ernő Prinner and his family, in personal communication with the author, 2006.
- 9 Prinner, autobiography, unpaginated.
- 10 Prinner, autobiography, unpaginated.
- 11 Prinner, autobiography, unpaginated.
- 12 *Prinner 1965 parle de Prinner 1935*, exhibition catalogue, Galerie Yvon Lambert (Paris, 1965).
- 13 Kilar is referring here to the unpleasant environment in which Prinner worked in his damp basement studio.
- 14 Prinner, autobiography, unpaginated.
- 15 Tamás Kieselbach (ed.), *Modern Magyar Festészet 1919–1964* (Budapest: Tamás Kieselbach, 2004).
- 16 Árpád Szenes, untitled, *Bulletin* (the Hungarian-language publication of the Democratic Association of Hungarians in France) (April 1949): unpaginated.
- 17 The poet Károly Tamkó Sirató (1905–1980) published his Dimensionist manifesto in Paris in 1936, signed, besides Hans Arp, Vasilii Kandinsky, and Camille Bryen, also by Prinner.
- 18 Prinner, autobiography, unpaginated.
- 19 Várnai and Peterdi, *Mint viharban a falevél*, pp. 265–266. Prinner's Hungarian friends called him Mafu because of his favourite turn of phrase, as described here by Zseni Várnai: 'He didn't give a damn about anything, except art. To everything that existed outside art, he said: *Je m'en fous!*' (Translation G. Jones).
- 20 Gabor Peterdi, *Printmaking: Methods Old and New* (New York: Macmillan, 1959).
- 21 Gaby Saade, one of Prinner's close friends, in personal communication with the author.
- 22 Heimovits, born in Budapest in 1900, was deported from Hungary in 1944.
- 23 Christine Dufour-Beothy, in personal communication with the author, c. 2000.
- 24 Vera Molnár, artist, in personal communication with the author, 1990s.
- 25 'Plasztikus csigavonalak (Spirales plastiques)' was also reproduced in the 1938 January 30 issue of *Pesti Napló* (*Pest Journal*).
- 26 Ferenc Martyn, letter to Lajos Török, 1936. Private collection.

