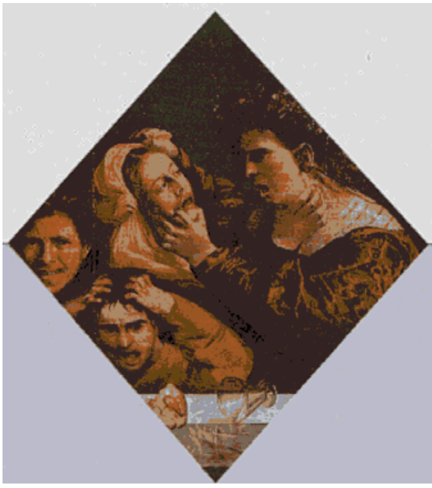
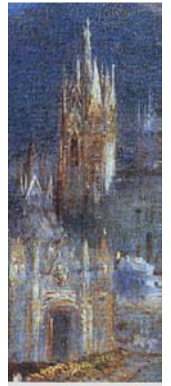


Anger, c. 1515-16) is one of seven allegorical works with genre figures painted for the ceiling of Duke Alfonso's bedroom

DOSSO DOSSI



AFTER FOUR CENTURIES A RENAISSANCE ARTIST IS BROUGHT TO LIGHT

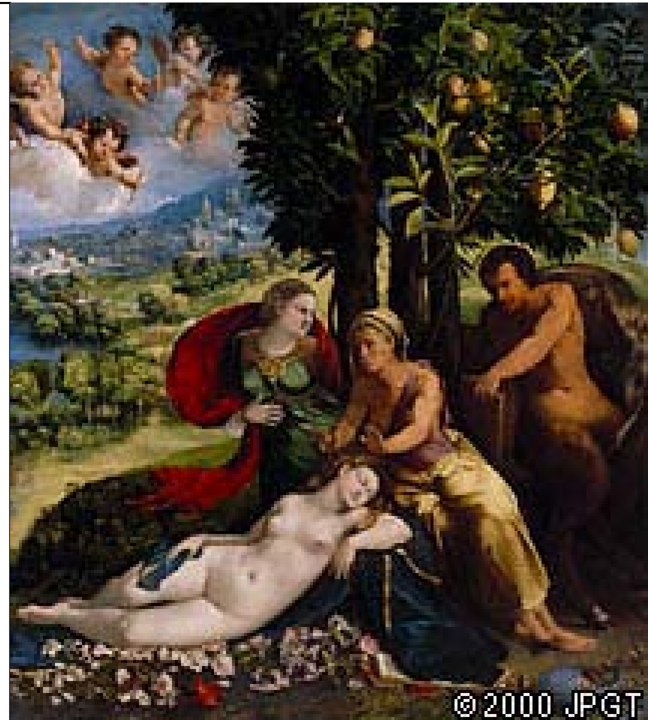
BY BENNETT SCHIFF, *SMITHSONIAN,* JANUARY 1999

The first large-scale international loan exhibition to be shown at the new J. Paul Getty Museum, resplendent atop a hill in Los Angeles, is of a little-known Italian Renaissance artist who, in the more than 400 years since his death, has never before been given a one-man show. It is, as this intriguing exhibition reveals, long overdue.

It is a remarkable and imaginative choice—a deeply satisfying collaborative venture by the Getty, New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and a cluster of Italy's regional cultural authorities. Here then is Dosso Dossi.

Dosso who?

It is not a name anyone would drop at an arts event. The references to him in books on the period are slight. And yet, as it happens from time to time, fine and even great artists can be overlooked for a century or two. Witness the case of Vermeer, who died in 1675 and dropped out of sight for more than 200 years.

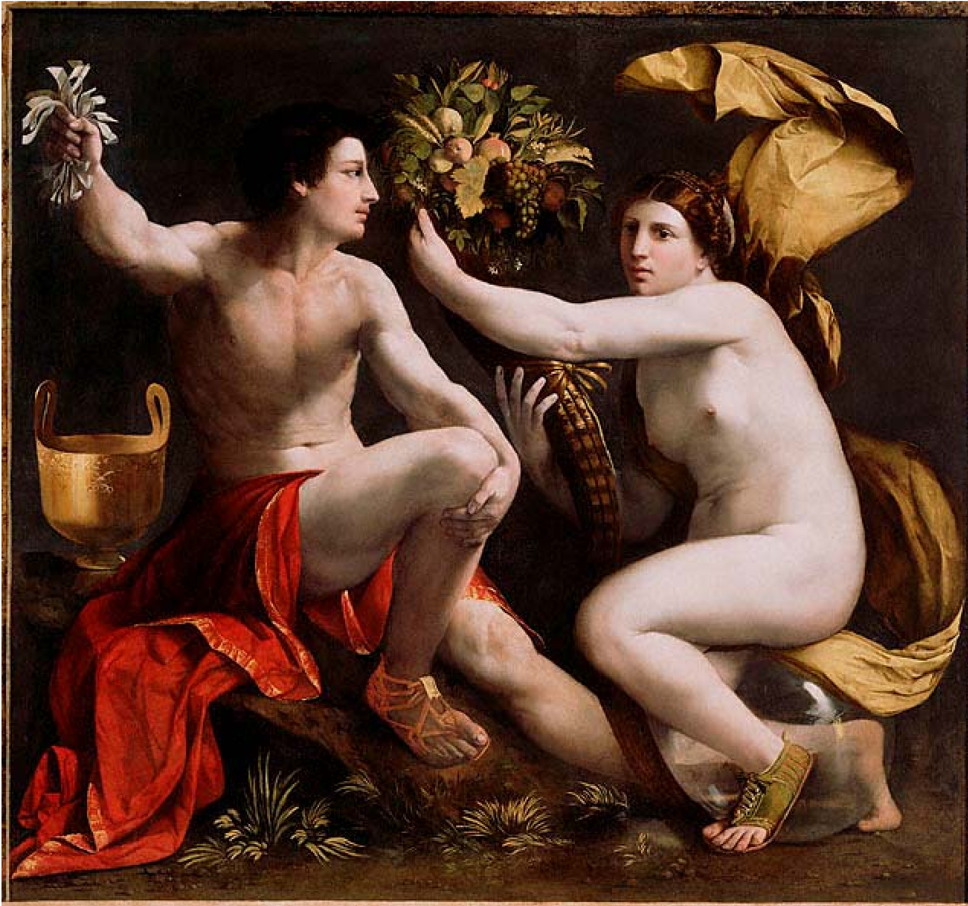


In the enigmatic *Allegory with Pan,* dubbed "The Sleeping Beauty" by the Getty, a luminous nude lies on a bed of flowers, as Pan-the only clearly identifiable figure in the composition-and two female figures hover over her. The detail (above) reveals Dosso's skillful rendering of the nude's dreamy state. The cupids (detail, below) indicate that the subject of the painting is love, but the artist's full intent remains elusive.

Dosso reworked this canvas, one of his most sensuously beautiful, several times, painting over the woman in the red cloak (she was later revealed during a 19th-century restoration) and then adding the more loosely rendered, less-defined figure of Pan. The fairy-tale landscape in the background features a shimmering Gothic city (detail, above). In his day, Dosso was known as the greatest landscape painter in Italy.

Dosso Dossi died in 1542 and by about the middle of the 19th century had descended into obscurity. The Getty acquired its first Dosso, a mythological scene (right), from the marquess of Northampton in 1983. Titled *Allegory with Pan* in the show's catalogue, it became known among the staff at the Getty as "The Sleeping Beauty, " an admiring salute to its sumptuous nude. As is more usual than not with Dosso's work, no one knew what its actual title was or when it was painted. Except for one signature of a sort at the bottom of his *Saint Jerome,* intended as a visual puzzle, he never signed a work. Nor did he date any—a situation that has

confounded authorities to this day, although continuing study has led to some logical revisions of previous estimates. But it is not only the subject matter, the titles, and the dates of Dosso's paintings that are elusive. Like that of many other Renaissance artists, the physical history of much of his work, how it got where it is now, is just as mysterious.



Dosso's Relief-like *Allegory of Fortune* (c. 1535-38) depicts the commanding figures of Fortune, bearing a cornucopia, and Chance, brandishing lottery tickets.

And so, in 1989, to the considerable delight of scholars and collectors, something happened that could in fact happen again. Another Dosso, a spectacular tour de force, turned up in a warehouse in a small town in upstate New York. Called *Allegory of Fortune,* it was quickly snapped up by the Getty.

To scholars the acquisition of a Renaissance painting of high quality and originality is a delicious event, a feast for research, examination and explication, a fairy tale that in the world of art comes true only now and then.

"It appeared out of the blue," says Dawson Carr, associate curator of paintings at the Getty and one of the show's curators. "We already had our 'Sleeping Beauty,' and we jumped at the chance to get another Dosso. The idea of a Dosso show emerged gradually. We realized we had two of his best works and the public liked the pictures. We needed a good partner, though, and so we went to the Met." Together, the two museums applied to the Italian authorities, the superintendents of the arts of Ferrara, Modena and Bologna, and were enthusiastically received. It was an ambitious undertaking.

The exhibition opened in Ferrara late last September in the Palazzo dei Diamanti, a perfectly preserved 15th-century palace that once was the home of the princely Este family of Ferrara. The show moves to the Metropolitan on January 14 and closes there March 28. It then travels to the Getty, where it will be on view from April 27 through July 11.

From the moment the exhibition was planned, the Getty decided to launch a scholarly project that would look into the social, intellectual and historical context in which Dosso lived. Two seminars, one at the Getty and the other in Trent, Italy, were held. The result was a revitalization of Dosso scholarship and a series of intensely researched papers. A selection of these papers has been handsomely published by the Getty as *Dosso's Fate: Painting and Court Culture in Renaissance Italy.*

But Dosso is not only of interest to art historians, conservators and other specialists involved in the intricacies of Renaissance art and life. He is also an immensely entertaining, engaging and poetical artist who has a great

deal to offer people who simply like to look at pictures. Look at Dosso's work long enough and it begins to cast a spell.

For some time there have been conflicting opinions regarding Dosso's date of birth. It has now, more or less, been narrowed to 1486 or 1487. His father, Niccolo Luteri, came from Trent and served as the bursar at the court of Ercole I d'Este in Ferrara. The artist had a brother, Battista, also a painter, with whom he frequently took on joint assignments. For some time his work was attributed to his brother and vice versa, but the differences now are evident. A small section of the show that is devoted to Battista reveals this clearly. Dosso was married and had three daughters, the youngest of whom was only about 10 when he died. We don't know what he looked like because he never, so far as is known, painted a self-portrait. Nor is there a documented portrait of him by someone else.

Dosso's sensitive portrait of a sibyl, or prophetess, reflects his interest in representing human attributes, in this case clairvoyance. The care that he lavished on delineating the opulence of such elements as ribbons, gold and jewelry is evident in the detail below.

He was born Giovanni Francesco Luteri, not far from the small property called Dosso that was owned by his family. As frequently happened with Italian painters of that time, his birthplace has transmuted into his name. His younger brother was known as Battista del Dosso or Battista Dossi, and historians wrongly concluded that the brothers' family name was Dossi. Thus, "Dosso Dossi" emerged and became part of history.

Much is known about the court life of the Este dukes of Ferrara, Alfonso I and his son Ercole II for whom Dosso spent some 30 years of his life working. The painter first appeared in Ferrara in July 1513. He was in his mid~20s, a fully professional artist, although it is not at all certain with whom he studied. The only documented record of his work before that time dates from the previous year when, as Peter Humfrey, professor of art history at the University of St, Andrews, Scotland, writes in an illuminating essay in the show's comprehensive catalogue, Dosso received payment for "a large picture with eleven figures" for the palace of San Sebastiano in Mantua. This was the favorite residence of Alfonso I d'Este's brother-in-law, Francesco II Gonzaga, marquess of Mantua, the husband of Alfonso's sister Isabella, who was renowned for her interest in poetry, music and the fine arts.

In any event, Dosso's work was apparently pleasing to all who saw it, and so in 1514 he took up residence in the palace complex of Duke Alfonso and went to work as a court painter, a job which entailed a good deal more than painting pictures. Alfonso, writes Andrea Bayer, the Met's curatorial representative in the joint effort, seemed to be very fond of Dosso. Vasari says in his *Lives of the Painters* that Dosso "was much loved by Alfonso ...first for the qualities that he brought to the an of painting, and then because he was an affable and pleasant man, and such men gave pleasure to the duke." Dosso almost certainly traveled with the duke to Rome, which was no small distinction in those days. When Alfonso died in 1534, his son Ercole II continued Dosso's employment.

A court painter had to be a facile switch-hitter in a number of disciplines, frequently keeping multiple assignments going at the same time. The ducal palaces were immense structures; the main complex included a moated14th-century fortress containing halls the size of football fields that rose 50 feet to their richly decorated, coffered ceilings, dazzling in the intricacy of their carvings and ablaze with color. These monumental spaces

had to be embellished, inch by inch, with frescoes. The private apartments of the ducal family and retainers were also marvels of refined decoration and carving. It is no small measure of the respect in which Dosso was held that one of his works hung in the duke's private apartment alongside paintings by Giovanni Bellini and Titian. Since the 15th century, the Este of Ferrara had employed such artistic eminences as Rogier van der Weyden, Piero della Francesca, Jacopo Bellini and Pisanello to produce the allegorical, mythological, secular and devotional paintings they required.

Ferrara at the time was renowned for the splendor of its court life. When Dosso and his assistants weren't painting huge wall frescoes or turning out individual canvases, they were designing theater sets and tapestries, as well as banners for tournament trumpets and flags for the duke's ships. They gilded the palace's elaborate woodwork and even undertook the richly decorative painting of the ducal coaches.

The poet Ludovico Ariosto, acclaimed author of Orlando Furioso, was a resident of the city. His work was produced for the ducal theater with scenery designed and painted by Dosso and his helpers. The brilliance of the Este court rivaled that of Rome, and from Rome in 1501 came Lucrezia Borgia, daughter of Pope Alexander VI, to marry Alfonso, then a widower. At 21, the beauteous, golden-haired Lucrezia had already disposed of two husbands (one of them allegedly murdered by her notorious brother Cesare). As it turned out, Lucrezia became in time a model duchess and a cultivated patroness of music and art. In 1597, Lucrezia's grandson Alfonso II died, and being without children and thus leaving no lineal male Este descendant for the first time since the 13th century, made it possible for Pope Clement VIII to march in, take over the rich prize of Ferrara, which Rome had long coveted, and append it as a papal state. Thus began the eventual diaspora of Dosso's work. In the course of the l7th century, one scholar points out in *Dosso's Fate*, "virtually every major Roman family claimed to own one or two paintings by Dosso."

The exhibition in the United States has some 50 works of the 100 or so that are believed to exist today in museums and private collections in Europe, the United States and Russia. "It is a sobering thought," writes Peter Humfrey, "that, with the conspicuous exception of the monumental Costabili polyptych [a massive altarpiece executed c. 1513 by Dosso and his older colleague Garafalo for the Church of Sant' Andrea in Ferrara] virtually nothing by Dosso remains today in the city where he lived and worked for three decades."

The Giorgionesque style and delicacy of handling of the arresting and amusing *Buffoon* (c. 1510) point to its being one of Dosso's earliest surviving works. The canvas was very thinly painted, which accounts in part for its current badly damaged condition.

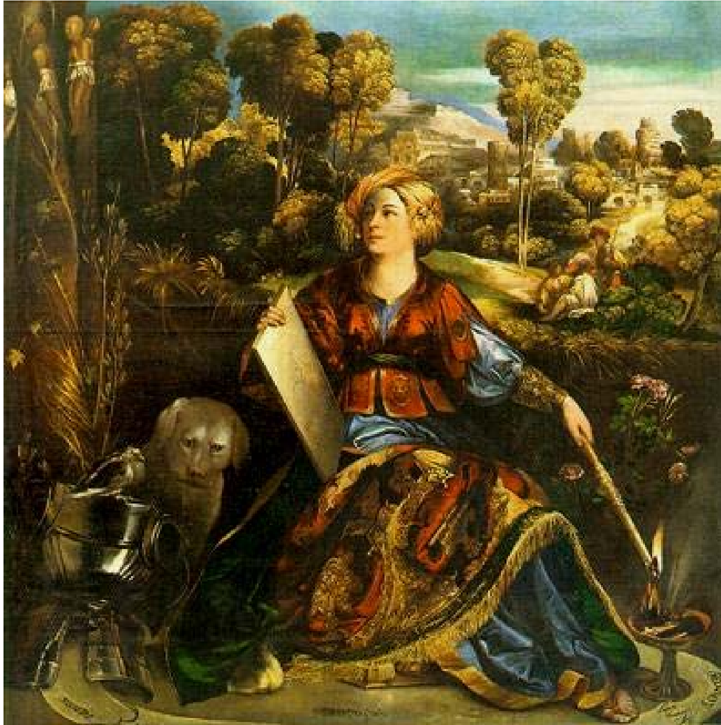
There are, however, two little panel paintings in the show—a Nativity and an Adoration of the Magi—each about 15 by 21 inches, that are in the permanent collection of Ferrara's municipal art museum. These are devotional works, glorious in the depth of their color, notable for their encompassing mood of pious warmth, and remarkable for their lack of the cloying sentimentality so common in the painting of that time. These are early works, and the influence of the Venetian master Giorgione is clear.

Yet even in these early works, one can discern elements of Dosso's style that appear time and again in his later paintings: tiny romantic, evanescent landscapes added to the upper right or left quadrants of his pictures; individual personalities given to the animals present; minute attention to plants, stones and blades of grass.

Dosso's color is intense and vibrant, almost as if it were mixed with light itself—glowing dusky reds, blues out of the heavens, vivid oranges, and a penetrating green. The orange in particular, which contains a sulfide of arsenic called orpiment, could be dangerous to work with, and Dosso was as liberal with

it as was Titian. Dosso got his paints from nearby Venice, where the best color merchants in Europe practiced their trade.

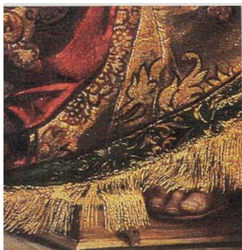
He apparently also studied in Venice—where he was influenced deeply by Giorgione—at a time when oil-based paint was replacing tempera, and canvas was taking over from wood panels as a surface on which to work. These were revolutionary changes, permitting entirely new methods of expression-plasticity and texture, and the magical color for which the Venetian painters, particularly Titian, became noted.



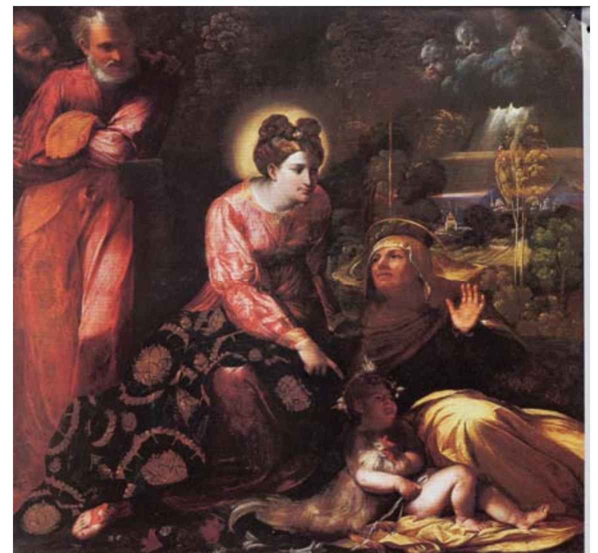
Dosso's masterful *Melissa* (c. 1515-16) owes its richness of color and texture, grandeur of form and its lush landscape to the artist's study of Venetian painters. The strong element of fantasy and the minute rendering of such details as the damask drapery's fringe (below) are Dosso's own.

It was Giorgione, explain Carr and Andrea Rothe, chief conservator of the Getty, in the show's catalogue, who reversed the customary method of applying paint in transparent, increasingly darker layers, working up from a light ground. Instead, he began with a dark ground and worked toward lighter values. "By combining the use of opaque paint with glazes, Giorgione achieved an extraordinary tonal range," they write.

Dosso adopted this technique, along with Giorgione's method of feathering the edges of his forms, blending figures and objects into the surrounding air to achieve a more natural appearance, more consistent with what the human eye sees. He shaded precise outlines to make hazy transitions between objects and volumes of color. At the same time, in the midst of a canvas loosely brushed in a poetically casual way (an attitude toward painting that was especially characteristic of him) there is the most precise examination and portrayal of small details-fabrics, flowers, eyelashes, eyebrows, fingernails, feet. Following Giorgione's lead, he was also one of the first painters



to work out compositions immediately on the canvas, creating form directly out of color and varying the consistency and application of the paint for expressive purposes. "This is the moment," maintain Carr and Rothe, "when brushwork truly became a vehicle for creative expression."



Done relatively late in Dosso's career, *Holy Family* (c. 1528- 29)—an unusually domestic treatment of the subject—is characterized by dramatic highlighted areas emerging from dark shadows, by the monumental conception and complex poses of its central figures, and by its classic pyramidal composition.

In later years, under the influence of Raphael, whom he knew, and of Michelangelo, whose work he likely saw in Rome and Florence, Dosso was to change his style, defining outlines of objects and figures more clearly, smoothing out forms.

On a Sunday afternoon the citizens of Ferrara have come, as they have come every day since the exhibition opened, to see the work of a favorite son. They have dressed for the occasion. There are no jogging suits, no sneakers. This is a small, quiet city of roughly 150,000. Whole families are here. It is an easy atmosphere, but there is still something formal about it. Visitors appear engrossed

and emanate a feeling of engaged pride. They are paying their respects to one of their own, an affirmation of their history. And, not least of all, they are having a good time.

For here are gathered more Dossos in the city that gave them birth than there have been in 400 years, ever since the pope's forces incorporated Ferrara into the papal fold. The exhibition coincidentally marks the anniversary of the takeover and the dissolution of the ducal holdings. To have Dosso's paintings together once again is a remarkable feat.

The pictures have been hung, so far as the experts could determine, in chronological order. The exhibition begins with Dosso's *Nymph and Satyr*, which is thought to be his earliest known work. This close-up double portrait shows the direct influence of Giorgione in technique and composition but is Dosso's own in expression.

Another early work, likely done before Dosso became part of the ducal court, is titled *Buffoon*. It pictures a clown or joker in a dreamlike setting. A happy grin on his face, he cradles a sheep, which is painted with Dosso's usual tenderness toward animals.

One of the show's most commanding, richly painted works is thought to depict Melissa, the good enchantress of Ariosto's Orlando Furioso who delights in changing bewitched animals back into men again. This is a magnum opus, a display of Dosso's considerable skills in color, drama and landscape as well as his virtuoso handling of the brush. At Melissa's side is a beautifully observed, ghostly gray dog that appears almost on the verge of being morphed back into a man again.

The Getty's *Allegory of Fortune* is another masterpiece. Painted in Dosso's later style, it reflects the more ordered classicism of Michelangelo. It is a large, dramatically grand work showing two heroic nudes, a male and a female, highlighted against a spaceless, dark background. As the goddess of good fortune, the female figure holds a cornucopia. But she sits precariously on a dangerously bending bubble, a typical Dossesque conceit, which brings forward the artist's sleight of hand and quick mind. The male figure grasps a sheaf of lottery tickets. The golds, yellows and reds, and the sensitively observed skin tones of the nudes make this one of Dosso's most striking images.

Each of the paintings in the show casts its spell, and it is no easy decision to exit the Palazzo dei Diamanti and emerge into present-day Ferrara. Located in the heart of the Po River Valley in Northern Italy, the engaging city is a natural venue for bicycles. Fleets of cyclists sail by on their way to work or to shop. There are remarkably few motorbikes and not that much traffic. Taxi drivers smile, thank you, and speed away without waiting for a tip. People in the shops smile. In all, it is a place very like the idyllic, shimmering landscapes Dosso puts in so many of his canvases— extra little gifts to his viewers.

The exhibition is not, in the sense that has become customary, a blockbuster. In some ways it is better. It introduces a superb, enigmatic artist of great power, individuality, magnetism and eccentricity and it sets him solidly into the life of his age, the courtly life of the High Renaissance. It enhances our view of human society at a time of creative achievement, and it entertains and delights.

Think of Ferrara in 1529 at the height of Dosso's residence there. It is carnival time and Ercole II is giving a banquet for 104 guests in the great hall, which is truly great—a huge, lofty space, decorated over every inch in gilt, scarlet and vibrant blue. First there is a performance of Ariosto's La Cassaria. Each course of the meal is accompanied by different musical offerings: singers, harpsichordists, violists, flutists, trombonists, violinists, recorder and wind players. Four trumpeters sound the end of the feasting with ringing fanfares. Later there is dancing until dawn. And Dosso, you like to think, gets up from the table and, skipping sleep, heads for his studio to paint the picture you are looking at right now, 470 years later, and that others will look at for centuries to come.