

Picturing Our Past: An Archive Constructs a National Culture

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## Picturing Our Past *An Archive Constructs a National Culture*

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*Examining how photography has been used to document and preserve national culture offers insights into the ideology of visual representation and its place in the construction of a common cultural heritage. Here, the Nordic Museum provides the case for exploring the photograph's authority in the institutionalization of knowledge of an authentic Swedish past.*

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PHOTOGRAPHY'S POSITION IN WESTERN CULTURE is embedded in an ideology of representation that regards it as simultaneously copying and constructing the world that it pictures. Photographic practice, which includes not only the taking of pictures, but also how photographs are looked at, thought about, saved, used, and re-used, illustrates the ways we resolve this apparent paradox. State institutions that rely on keeping records produce photographs that can be used as documents—as replicas of the world—with all apparent disinterest in how their pictorial records construct the objects and arena of the institutional gaze. Yet a closer examination of the routines an institution employs in gathering, selecting, and preserving its records reveals strategies of representation and conservation that create and perpetuate the world within the institutional boundaries, with implications reaching beyond its specific time and place. The photographs thus are joined in a mutually authenticating discourse that validates the institution's picture of its sphere at the same time that the photographs' ideological power is increased by their link to the institutional practices that have produced them.

Museums established as official repositories of culture and history offer clear examples of this pattern. Charged with documenting and preserving that which is considered valuable, the museum has also become the institutionalized arbiter of value, determining what is worth collecting and saving for the future. Because photographing and archiving are primary ways of assigning value, they often occupy a central position in the museum's task of constructing and perpetuating a shared conception of a collective past.

Since its founding in 1873, the Nordic Museum has been a central institution in the collection and documentation of Sweden's cultural history. Included in the museum's vast and intersecting collections of cultural artifacts are the pic-

ture archives, where more than one-and-a-half-million drawings and photographs of objects, environments, and practices have been gathered to depict and preserve selected aspects of Sweden's heritage.<sup>1</sup> Photographs make up the largest part of the archive's holdings; many of these have been purchased or acquired as gifts by the museum, and others were taken by museum employees while carrying out research. These photographs, the picture of Swedish culture that they represent, and the institutional practices that account for this picture can serve as keys to comprehending the Nordic Museum's construction of a Swedish national culture. They also suggest ways that museums from other local and national settings have used photography to construct the ideology of a cultural heritage.

This study draws its scholarly inspiration from two bodies of literature. First, from the works of American anthropologists, including Sol Worth (1981) and Richard Chalfen (1975), who examine photographs as cultural artifacts that take their shape and meaning from patterns rooted in shared historical and cultural experience (Worth and Adair 1972). Critical analysis of photography-based field research that examines how visual data is shaped by the cultural perspectives of the researcher has been particularly relevant (Ruby 1972; Scherer 1975; Worth 1981).

The second source, a body of literature based on Michel Foucault's work and post-structuralist theory, has inspired a major revision of the history of photography, taking the archive as its central concept (Foucault 1979; Sekula 1983, 1986). The archive, which both detaches meaning from, and produces meaning in, photographs, permits images to be used by public and private institutions through their networks of power as instruments to undergird institutional goals (Nye 1985; Sekula 1984; Stange 1989; Tagg 1988).

### *Photography's Place in the Nordic Museum*

Photography's invention in the mid 19th century coincided with the emergence of new institutions and practices of observation and record keeping. The photograph acquired what Roland Barthes calls its "evidential force" (1981:89), not because of any natural or factual relationship to the subjects pictured, but through photography's historical and cultural ties to the rise of the social sciences within industrializing societies (Tagg 1988:4-5). The camera was also soon established as a companion in exploration and tourism, used to capture the exotic and, occasionally, the typical for re-experiencing at home.

At the same time that the photograph was treated as the bearer of facts, in other contexts, it was seen as representing a different order of truth, expressing the intuitive response of the artistic imagination (Sekula 1975). Photography's relationship to the art worlds of the late 19th century remained marginal and more troubled than its place in the worlds of science. Nevertheless, many of photography's themes exhibit a symbolic recovery of the preindustrial past and express the romanticism of the period (Lundström 1989:54).

Against this background, it is not surprising that the Nordic Museum collected photographs both as evidence of cultural forms and practices and as a means of recovering an ideal past. The museum's founder, Artur Hazelius, saw his nation's traditions being eclipsed by the urbanization, industrialization, and homogenization of society, and established the museum to document and preserve ways of life that were slipping from memory. Over the years, Hazelius's original goals for the Nordic Museum have been refined and modified and, increasingly in recent years, criticized for their nostalgic view of preindustrial society and for locating culture in static concepts of traditional forms. Yet, it is fair to say that the founding principles have had a tenacity that continues to influence current debate and definitions of the museum's role. In this light, the photographs collected in the archive provide a visual record of the museum's various and changing constructions of Swedish culture.

An archive is built on a classification system, which, as Jonas Frykman has pointed out, reflects the research interests and ideals that were current at the time the archive was founded. As new material is collected according to the changing focus of subsequent research, it no longer fits into the archive's original subject categories (Frykman 1979:232–234). How the newer material is classified has implications beyond the practical problem of finding it again: to classify is to create a frame that validates the material as data, defining how (and even whether) it will continue to be seen and used (cf. Trachtenberg 1988:56). It is in this sense that the Nordic Museum's picture archive produces meanings for its photographs. The archive, following Trachtenberg's description of the file of Farm Security Administration photographs, "is an intellectual construction . . . between the tens of thousands of single images it contains and the meaningful stories those images might tell" (1988:45). To understand these meanings requires an investigation of the practices and classifying activities by which certain photographs have come to be seen as authentic pictures of Swedish cultural tradition.

The photographs that form the basis of the present study were collected in the museum's picture archive between 1900 and 1940. The analysis began by tracing the archive's chronological development through the acquisition lists and the museum's yearbook, *Fataburen*, which summarized the year's activities, listed major acquisitions, and published articles on current research by the museum's staff.<sup>2</sup> Other illustrated literature the museum had published, including exhibition catalogs, were also important keys to understanding how the photographs were seen and used. I attempted to locate any photographs in the archive that had been listed or published, and compared them, first, with other photographs taken on the same occasion, and then with material cataloged in the same file, but collected in other years, to see how a subject might have been treated in different ways. In this way, I could learn which subjects were most common, how different photographers had approached these subjects, and how the focus of research gradually changed during the first decades of the 20th century.<sup>3</sup>

*Collecting Photographs*

By the turn of the century, gathering photographs was already an important part of the museum's research activities. Photographs taken by the museum's staff as well as those received or purchased from local photographers were considered valuable acquisitions. The number grew from a few hundred per year in 1900 to more than 2500 photographs and drawings in 1912 (Nordic Museum 1913:24). Most of the photographs collected prior to 1904 concentrated on the outdoor museum, Skansen, and documented the reconstruction of buildings that were moved there from different regions of the country. Others recorded the many events held at Skansen to celebrate Sweden's folk culture.

Field expeditions were already a well-established tradition of Swedish natural science research, and it is not surprising that the museum staff followed the pattern of spending long periods in the field during summer months, documenting, cataloging, and collecting samples of folk culture (Arnstberg 1989:21). The ability to make carefully detailed sketches of the objects they found was a highly valued skill, and photography never entirely replaced it. The camera was an early partner on field trips, used to document the many valued objects it was impractical, or impossible, to bring back to the museum. By the 1920s, *Fataburen* had nearly stopped mentioning photography as part of the staff's field activities, even as the number of photographs from their expeditions expanded steadily in the archive—a clear sign that photography had been integrated into fieldwork.

The museum's staff came from different backgrounds, and had varied academic training. This, in turn, directed their research topics. Ethnologists worked primarily in the museum's Department of Peasant Culture (“Allmogefördelningen”), where data were collected according to traditional conceptions of folk culture, mainly through village studies. The other major division in the museum, the Department of Upper Class Culture (“Afdelningen för de högre stånden”), studied country estates, vicarages, and selected small cities (“herrgårds-” “prästgårds-” and “stadsundersökningarna”). Most of this research was done by art historians or architects.

The contrast between the departments is reflected clearly in the photographs their staffs took—not only in the subject matter but also in the ways the pictures are composed. As the museum underwent reorganizations over the years, departments received new names, and research areas were modified. One significant example occurred when the documenting and archiving of peasant culture was gathered into the new Department of Ethnological Research (“Etnologiska undersökningsavdelningen,” or “EU”) in 1929. Different disciplinary approaches persisted, however, and distinguished the different branches of the museum's work. These differences continued to be reflected in the photography. I will return to this point, for its implications are significant.

In addition to taking their own pictures, the museum staff had the authority to purchase photographs of subjects that were underrepresented in the archive. The work of regional photographers was acquired, when possible, from areas where the museum had not yet been able to carry out much fieldwork. For example, the museum began purchasing August Christian Hultgren's photographs of rural life near his village in Småland and Östergötland in 1903, several years before Hultgren joined the museum staff as photographer of objects ("föremålsfotograf"). Philologist Matthias Klintberg's photographs, taken during his research on local dialects on the island of Gotland where he was a schoolmaster, is another example of a purchased collection.

On the one hand, collecting appeared to be headed toward a comprehensive picture of Swedish life that would include visual records from all social classes and from all regions of the country. On the other hand, the selective nature of these activities was producing blind spots that could be revealed only under the light of different ideas—and research questions—about Swedish culture.

### *Mapping the Archive*

Early in this study it became apparent that the structure of the archive itself reflects shifts of focus and changing conceptions of the museum's research fields. No comprehensive catalog exists to cover the entire archive; instead, many partially overlapping classification systems exist (Lundwall 1965). The oldest of these carries the name "topographic" and divides the country by province, village, and, in areas of concentrated data collecting, individual farms or dwellings. This system was developed to catalog the material from the village studies, the museum's largest research projects during the early decades of intensive fieldwork. The thousands of photographs and drawings of log buildings, house and farm plans, and village maps indicate the ethnologists' devotion to surveying Sweden's folk culture.

The photographs reveal that "culture" was understood as the material remains of a former way of life. The images show many empty log houses and abandoned summer farms surrounded by tall grass (Fig. 1). People rarely appear in the photographs, and when they do they are likely to be members of the research team. In addition to the clear emphasis on traditional folk architecture and construction details, the topographic catalog reveals that the most comprehensive research was being carried out in regions considered typical of Swedish farming culture, where agricultural land reform continued to be resisted, notably, in the province of Dalarna. These seemingly romantic efforts to document and preserve traditional folk forms also had a scientific rationale, as Arnstberg has pointed out, in the ethnologists' search for the origins of the "ur-form" of Swedish vernacular architecture, which they believed lay in the summer farms of Dalarna (1989:63, 65). The emphasis was on collecting data that could be used to verify the ethnologists' ideas about the origins and diffusion of cultural traditions.



Figure 1. Log building photographed during a 1916 field expedition to the summer farms of Älvdalen, a region in the province of Dalarna. Photographer: Sigurd Erixon. Photograph in the Nordic Museum Archive (28 B.o.).

Frykman has noted the power of the archive's classifications in shaping subsequent research: gaps appear that remain to be filled, and the archive's system of categorizing materials resists the conceptualization of new problems (1979:235). Although changing the name of the museum's Department of Peasant Culture to Ethnological Research would appear to have broadened the range of researchable topics, the topographical classification remains in force. More recent data, reflecting altered research perspectives, is still occasionally filed topographically.

Photographs collected within the Department of Upper Class Culture are cataloged separately from those collected by Ethnological Research. Material on churches and vicarages is classified according to province and diocese, and material gathered on country estates is classified under the province and the estate's name. The results of city studies were filed alphabetically according to city name and were dominated by maps and architectural plans and drawings, with the emphasis on public buildings and older architecture. Researchers often returned to the sites recorded in earlier photographs to document how a city's profile was changing.

Museum staff members documenting upper-class domestic architecture had many of the same concerns that affected the researchers photographing vernacular house forms. Deteriorating mansions were photographed to show form and construction details, preserving them in much the same way that the

simple log buildings were being documented. Many of the estates were no longer used as dwellings, and the furnishings were being dismantled. The photographs, thus, present a reconstruction of a past era, as complete as the condition of the building permitted.

Important differences occur in the composition of photographs from these two departments, however. Photographers documenting estates and their often lavish furnishings seem to have paid particular attention to qualities of light and to have observed classical ideas of balance. Individual items of furniture and other domestic articles of the upper class were often removed from the original setting, to be photographed in front of a white cloth that masked the background, permitting the object to emerge more clearly. Photographs from the village studies, on the other hand, appear to have been less consciously “constructed.” Photographers centered the primary subject in the frame and simply “took what was there.”

### *The Styles and Their Meanings*

Part of the explanation for this way of photographing the country estates lies in the researchers’ training and experience as art historians, as distinguished from the photographers in the village studies whose documenting styles were consistent with ethnological research approaches.<sup>4</sup> But the meanings borne by these different styles in the context of the class divisions that they reinforced point to a deeper cleavage at work here.

First, what does it mean when an object is removed from its everyday setting to be photographed? It suggests that how the object was created and how it is used are not important to its meaning. Against a “neutral” background, a new meaning is constructed, privileging the object by re-presenting it as having an intrinsic value (Fig. 2). Although researchers often may have had practical reasons for moving objects from their everyday settings (to increase the light, for example), a “neutral” background can never be truly neutral. It signals the viewer to regard the object as a work of art.

Because this aestheticizing strategy, as well as others (such as the use of “artistic” light and composition), was used to portray the objects owned by the upper class, it supported a hierarchy of value that took for granted the superior worth of those cultural products. The assumption, in turn, that researchers with classical aesthetic training in the visual arts were the best suited to study that culture was a consequence of institutional acceptance of the values enconced in the class hierarchy.

The strategies used to document rural and village settings lifted out aspects of life that appealed to a romantic longing for a simpler past, but they were not “aestheticizing” in the same sense. Often the objects being recorded had an aesthetic appeal: the intricate pattern of a hand-smithed lock and the weathered signature carved into a log gable, for example, were beautiful to look at, and there is no doubt that ethnologists found beauty in many of these tradi-



Figure 2. One of several "Karlskrona"-style chairs purchased in Gothenburg, signed "P.ASL," for sale in November 1942 in the Stockholm shop, Högre Stånds Antiken [Upper Class Antiques]. Photograph in the Nordic Museum Archive (308 H.ad).



Figure 3. One of several birch chairs made by Per Andersson from the village of Kättered during the 1850–60s. The village and surrounding area of Lindome were known for well-crafted furniture. In 1942, the chair was owned by Karl Andersson, also of Kättered. Photographer: Gösta von Schoultz. Photograph in the Nordic Museum Archive (423 F.aö).

tional forms. Indeed, the field has been criticized for romanticizing folk culture by ignoring what was dirty, ugly, or in other ways lacked aesthetic appeal (Frykman and Löfgren 1979; Klein 1986a).<sup>5</sup>

When photographing the beautiful artifacts of folk culture, however, the ethnological approach was straightforward, even analytical (Fig. 3). Centering an object and holding it at eye level, while letting other objects fall where they may in the picture's frame—these are conventions that came to be associated with photographs made in the “documentary” style. Although there have been periods and occasions when the documentary aesthetic has entered the institutional domains of high art (the 1930s is generally considered to be one such period), as Victor Burgin points out, the documentary style continues to be subsumed within the cultural hierarchy (1986:5). Its strategies of representation signal that the viewer is seeing something that is accessible, ordinary, and of the people, and thus the distinction between high and low culture continues to be reinforced. When the museum's ethnologists employed these strategies they likely did so unreflectively; it seemed the “obvious” or “natural” way to photograph the material culture of rural folk life. Their photographs, however, revealed and reinforced the social class of the people who produced that culture. Decades after Sweden officially dismantled the class structure, its values are perpetuated in these two distinct representational styles, in photographs that are positioned in an official archive and retain their status as evidence.

### *New Forms of Documentation*

Beginning in 1928, the Nordic Museum started the systematic application of a new research tool, the questionnaire (“frågelistan”), to complement field research. Detailed questionnaires covering different subjects were sent out to people living in different regions in order to collect information on older customs and practices. The local informants, as they were called (“ortsmeddelare”), were encouraged to illustrate their answers with pictures, either drawings or photographs. As the staff of experienced informants grew, a rapidly growing body of research material began to accumulate.<sup>6</sup> The museum's ethnologists also used the questionnaires in their fieldwork, interviewing and photographing local informants who could describe and demonstrate the customs that figured in the museum's current research agenda.

Although much of the research was still a part of the village studies, the data—including photographs—were generally cataloged in the archive according to questionnaire topics instead of the old topographic divisions. This practice began to change the character of the picture archive and the ways its material could be used. In theory, the questionnaires enriched the ethnologists' understanding of village life and culture, but cataloging the material by questionnaire topic made it difficult to weave together a coherent picture of any given village. At the same time, it became easier to compare customs and traditions from different regions of the country.

The questions were often framed to call forth reconstructions of customs and procedures, particularly how things used to be done. Informants describing handcrafts, food preparation, or work practices typically went step-by-step through a particular production process, often with a series of photographs for illustration. This emphasis on the activities of cultural production and, particularly, the creative practices of specific individuals was a departure from the almost exclusive emphasis on artifacts that had dominated previous research.

One consequence of this type of documentation was the recognition of the individual actor and creator of the work. The museum's questionnaires required the source's name, age, and village, and the same information was usually supplied for the photographs. Those who were the masters of particular techniques, especially any techniques in danger of dying out, were particularly valuable informants (Figs. 4 & 5). At the same time, some ethnologists were involved in identifying and locating the work of specific folk artists and documenting the individual master's body of work.

On the other hand, the new style of documentation still appeared to have the artifact, the finished product, as its goal. The final photograph in a series was nearly always the completed artifact, or a small collection of samples of the maker's work (Fig. 6). The context where the work typically took place—the workshop or the home environment, for example—was seldom shown, and it was rare for a series to include photographs of completed artifacts in use.

By the 1930s, these conventions of documentation were commonly applied to many types of work, with the final photograph in a series showing the day's



Figures 4 and 5. Two images from a series of photographs of basketmaker Eva Nyberg from the village of Gafsele in Lapland, 1928. Photographer: Murre Möller. Photographs in the Nordic Museum Archive (192 V.k., V.1.).



Figure 6. The final photograph in the Eva Nyberg series shows examples of Nyberg's baskets. Photographer: Murre Möller. Photograph in the Nordic Museum Archive (192 V.n.).

catch of flounder hanging to dry, for example, or the field with its completed stacks of hay. The pattern of photographing the chronological steps in a process and ending with a photograph of the "product" had become incorporated

into the broader and more comprehensive data-gathering carried out within the Department of Ethnological Research. The method was not unique to the Nordic Museum's ethnologists; breaking down an activity into discrete steps or phases was, by this time, the expected or "natural" approach to photographic documentation. It was typical of the photographs preserved in many public and private archives, and was also seen in photographic series published in the picture magazines that were emerging throughout Europe (Freund 1980; Gidal 1973; Hardt and Ohrn 1981; Ohrn 1980). It is important to recognize this style not as a natural development of the camera's potential, but as a cultural construction in the history of what constitutes evidence (cf. Tagg 1988:4).

### *The Cultures of Photography: Some Final Thoughts*

Throughout the 1930s and '40s ethnologists continued to locate their field of study in the past. Despite changes in research focus and new approaches to data-gathering, for many years their primary goals were tied to the preservation and reconstruction of dying traditions. It was well into the 1950s before the museum's questionnaires began to address contemporary practices and beliefs (Klein 1986b; Österman 1991). The division of research topics along lines of social class also continued to haunt the museum's data-gathering. In the 1960s a major reorganization of the institution combined Ethnological Research and Upper Class Culture into the department of Cultural Historical Research ("Kulturhistoriska undersökningen," or "KU"; see Olsson and Rosander 1981). Although the creation of this new department would suggest that the same paradigms and research methods were now considered appropriate to all social classes, tensions persisted as researchers from different disciplines tried to conduct fieldwork together. Although ethnologists gradually became more interested in documenting changes in traditional ways of life, art historians continued to try to restore an image of the past by removing all contemporary objects from the camera's view.

Photography, which had been so readily accepted as a tool of research, had not itself become an object of study. The institution had never considered photographic records as artifacts of the cultural perspectives of the people who produced them. This had several important consequences. In the first place, it prevented any reflexive examination of the photographs in the archives, to see what they might reveal about the way the institution had constructed its research field, and how that construction was further reflected in the ways staff members defined, gathered, and cataloged photographs as evidence.

The institution also failed to treat photographic materials gathered from other sources as cultural artifacts. The work of local photographers was valued for the subjects it covered, subjects that had been missing from the archive, rather than as a key to how photographers, as members of the local culture, had chosen to portray their environments. When, for instance, August Hult-

gren was recognized as a talented photographer, the museum hired him as a staff photographer whose job it was to document objects and interiors of general importance to the museum. During the period of his museum employment, Hultgren stopped photographing near his hometown of Svinhult. The value placed on the recent acquisition of photojournalist K. W. Gullers's work covering Swedish life during the 1940s and 1950s, a period when the museum was relatively inactive in its photographic documentation, illustrates the persistence of this attitude. The institution has ignored how the goals of the photographer who worked for the mass media in an international market shaped the representation of culture in this important collection.

Similarly, the archive's collection of postcards and photography albums are generally cataloged by subject, as are the early photographs that won the Swedish Tourist Organization's ("Svenska turistföreningens") annual amateur photography competition. Many other genres of photography were ignored, or collected haphazardly according to the subject they represented. One exception is the 1954 questionnaire on the profession of portrait photography. In general, however, portraits were treated as representations of specific sitters, and not as records of an important cultural genre. This would make it difficult, if not impossible, to use the archive's large portrait collection to address questions such as, how Swedish people of different classes and regions have dressed and presented themselves when purchasing a portrait of themselves, or what social occasions has photography been used to commemorate.

### *Conclusions*

The museum's archive has not been considered as a source for reconstructing the culture of photography in Sweden. This neglect of photography as cultural expression is not unique to Sweden. Nor is the Nordic Museum alone as it continues to consider the meanings and reasons for collecting photographs to be self-evident. Using photographs as documentary evidence of their subjects is typical of—even necessary to—the explicit purposes of most photographic archives. It further depends upon an implicit conception of the photograph itself as a "natural" object, thereby systematically obscuring the cultural processes that construct photographs as evidence.

As this article shows, the visual criteria for treating photographs as evidence are not permanent, but are themselves constructions of history and cultural practice, of different ways of seeing. The photographic archive presents the possibility of tracing the formation and disintegration of these ways of seeing through the genres of image-making in which they are realized (cf. Tagg 1988:171).

When these ways of seeing become institutionalized, the archive's status reaches beyond that of providing documentary (and potentially contestable) evidence. As an official repository of a cultural heritage, the archive, together

with the collective picture it creates and perpetuates, is authenticated. It has thus entered the ideological domain with the power to show us the way things were.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup>The museum's 1988 acquisition of photojournalist K. W. Gullers's work is not included in this figure. The Gullers collection more than doubled the photographic archive.

<sup>2</sup>*Fataburen* was founded in 1904 as the yearbook for both the museum and its outdoor sister, Skansen (*Nordiska museets och Skansens årsbok*). The volume was preceded, 1881–1903, by an annual review of the museum's activities, *Meddelanden från Nordiska museet* (Memoranda from the Nordic Museum).

<sup>3</sup>Although I occasionally refer to later acquisitions or data-gathering practices, an analysis of the archive's post-1940 holdings awaits the next stage of the study.

<sup>4</sup>I am grateful to both Annette Rosengren and Annika Österman, of the Nordic Museum staff, for this observation. Österman further explained exceptions to this pattern among the drawings and photographs in the topographical material as the work of young art history and architecture *students*, whom the ethnologist Sigurd Erixon had selected for his field expeditions because of their visual skills.

<sup>5</sup>According to Barbro Klein, Professor Sigurd Svensson also made this assessment of the field in a speech at the 1984 annual meeting of the Ethnological Society in Stockholm. I am particularly grateful to Klein for pointing out the need to explore more fully the class implications of the various photographing styles.

<sup>6</sup>For a list of topics covered in the questionnaires, see Olsson and Rosander (1981). See Rehnberg (1947) and Österman (1991) for more complete descriptions of how the questionnaires were used and evaluated, and Klein's analysis (1986b) of the generally overlooked value of informants' writings as native descriptions.

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