

The *wabi-sabi* of *boro* rags and the art of textile conservation

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Abstract

Wabi-sabi is a Japanese aesthetic described as one of beauty that is “imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete.” *Boro* is a Japanese term meaning rags. This paper compares the Japanese attitudes and aesthetics regarding rags and the art of stitching to the mainstream textile conservation stitching approach developed in the West. The aim is a consideration of the cultural relativism of our profession in order to rethink the “rightness” of our decision-making. Domestic cloth-mending techniques, such as darning and patching, are compared with the conscious selection of the textile conservation stitching methods that originated in the West during the past century. Using conservation stitching as living heritage in Japan as an example, this paper points out that the selectivity that emerged during the last 100 years, during the development of a profession in the heritage sector, and the departure from domesticity have narrowed the choices and decision-making possibilities of textile conservators, which can also be reflected in other areas of conservation. The concept of diversity in conservation approaches will not be integrated if a culture is viewed as absolute. A spirit of tolerance and a sense of historical consciousness are necessary to acknowledge differences as an independent culture. The author hopes that the arguments and case studies in this paper will stir an open debate about how to preserve textiles, and spread an awareness that impermanence also has a place in the art of textile conservation.

INTRODUCTION

Wabi-sabi is a beauty of things imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete. (Koren 1994)

This paper examines the Japanese attitudes and aesthetics related to stitching and kimono conservation and compares them to Western thinking in textile conservation stitching. Its aim is to understand the cultural relativism of textile conservation and encourage a rethinking of the “rightness” of current decision-making in this field. While studying and working in the UK and the US before returning to her native country, the author did not question the “rightness” of her choices and practices because they followed those of the two countries, which were largely similar. However, upon moving back to Japan, she became aware that the country’s conservation culture was noticeably different. Furthermore, the experience gained in teaching textile conservation in countries such as Egypt, Armenia, and Taiwan led her to believe that rightness is relative. Unlike oil painting, textiles are a universal material and their ethnological repair, based on local sewing techniques, has enabled them to be passed on. But how much do we know about practices of mending cloth around the world? Implementing Western methodology imposes an ethnological continuity that precludes a consideration of different perspectives in conservation (Simila and Eastop 2017). An example of ancient darning can be seen in an ancient Egyptian tunic (E.T.60, 178) in the collection of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. Technically, there is no difference compared to today’s darning, whether Egyptian, British, or Japanese, because the fabric structure of the plain weave cloth is common, and the problem of its damage has been tackled in a similar manner. One could even say that darning is a human tradition. However, when a damaged cloth is handed over to a textile conservator who is systematically trained in the “Western system” (i.e., conservation courses or museum training), a different approach may be adopted and darning would not be considered as an option. We must examine the reasons for this. The Egyptian tunic has lasted for centuries, with the darning in place and entombed. Surely, darning should be valid in today’s museums. The hypothesis is that the selective academic and scientific approach towards stitching in textiles that was adopted in the last century has narrowed our views and restricted choices in preserving historical textiles.



Figure 1. Quilted priest's robe in nine strips of mottled colors, No. 1, a *kesa* that belonged to Emperor Shōmu (701–756). Courtesy of the Shōsōin Treasure House, Imperial Household Agency

THE VIRTUE OF STITCHING

Boro (襤褸) is a Japanese term for rags, or cloth that is used until it is rendered useless. In the 21st century, as the perfection of things has become less of a commodity, the pleasure inherent in imperfection is becoming increasingly recognized. This global trend can be seen in the popularity of tattered jeans, although they are most often artificially crafted. Coinciding with this shift in values, *boro* has entered the limelight.

The humble act of piecing fabric and sewing it together or darning layers of fabric to strengthen a piece of cloth seems to have touched the senses of a global culture caught up in materialism. In a 2019 exhibition titled *Repair and Design Futures* at the Rhode Island School of Design's Art Museum, curator Kate Irvin explained that "Repair invites renewed forms of social exchange and offers alternative, holistic ways of facing environmental, and social breakdown"¹ and, quoting Spelman, noting that: "Repair is a creative distraction of brokenness" (Spelman 2003). Yet, the act of piecing tattered fabrics and the aesthetic appreciation behind *boro* can be better traced to Buddhism, in which mending is seen as an act of virtue.

Funzōe (糞掃衣), literary meaning a cloth to wipe feces, is a synonym for *kesa* (袈裟), which originates from the Sanskrit word *kāṣāya*, a Buddhist monk's robe made from rags. The ragged monk's robe comes from the Buddha, whose sole possession was a rag which not only covered his body but which he also used to sweep the street. A well-known example of a *funzōe* in Japan dates from the 8th century and belonged to Emperor Shōmu (701–756); it is now preserved at the Shōsōin Treasure House, Imperial Household Agency at Nara. *Quilted priest's robe in nine strips of mottled colors, No. 1* (Figure 1) is made of polychrome plain-weave silk patches stitched together with bast fiber thread using plain stitching. Another example of "virtuous patching" can be seen in the trousers worn by Emperor Hirohito (1901–1989) as a schoolboy, now in the Showa Memorial Museum, Tokyo. The trousers have patches on the knees. While it would have been considered shameful for him to wear clothes with holes, it was not shameful if they had been mended with patches.

In the 16th century, the Buddhist mindset of impermanence was furthered by the aesthetic sense of Sen no Rikyū (千利休, 1522–1591), who had a profound influence on developing the tea ceremony known as *wabi-cha*, literary meaning forlorn (pitifully sad and abandoned) tea. In the age of Japan's civil wars, Rikyū served as a tea master to the highest-ranking warlords and highly appreciated broken and repaired tea bowls for their added value of imperfection. The impermanence and continuous flux of the universe, *mujyo* (無常) in Japanese, was expressed by the aesthetics underlying Rikyū's choice of utensils when serving tea. An explanation of *wabi-sabi* in English is offered by the following, a citation from Koren's provisional definition.

Originally, the Japanese words "wabi" and "sabi" had very different meanings. "Sabi" originally meant "chilled," "lean," or "withered." "Wabi" originally meant the mystery of living alone in nature, away from society, and suggested a discouraged, dispirited, cheerless emotional state. Around the 14th century, the meanings of both

words began to evolve in the direction of a more positive aesthetic value . . . wabi and sabi have crossed over so much that today the line separating them is very blurred indeed. (Koren 1994)

Taking care of a cloth's life until the last thread was an act of virtue in Buddhism. Repair was an aesthetic pleasure, a reminder of the impermanence of the world. Many Japanese historical kimonos seen in museums today were originally cut up, pieced together, and reformed into *kesa* or an *uchishiki* (altar frontals) as commemorative offerings to the temple. They were only put together in kimono form when, in the early 20th century, the art market drove their collection and display, and museums started to collect Japanese art.

REVIVAL OF REPAIRING AND DARNING

In recent years, the eco-movement and the interest in sustainability have found expression in darning as a hobby or life skill. *Sashiko*, a reinforcement stitching pattern used to put together patches of *boro*, has become popular as a functional form of embroidery in countries other than Japan. Similarly, Japanese handicraft enthusiasts are fascinated with Western darning using a wooden “darning mushroom.” Colorfully darned cloths have been presented in a recent publication, and kits can be bought that contain a wooden darning mushroom and threads (Noguchi 2018). The author joined a local workshop to learn Western darning from simple curiosity, wondering how Father McKenzie in the Beatles song *Eleanor Rigby* darned his sock, and a question arose: Why was I not taught this during my conservation training in the UK or US? How do our approaches as textile conservators differ from this darning method to sustain a sock? Are we sure that our methodology, so “conscious of ethics” and so highly selective in its choice of materials, will ensure the longevity of a sock better than simply darning it? Why do we not darn the socks collected in a museum?

The differences between approaches to domestic vs. historical fabric care derive from an urgent and conscious desire of the pioneers of the 20th century heritage sector (museums and educational institutions) in Europe and North America to depart from domesticity and become part of an academic establishment. Thus, the humble act of stitching was consciously and systematically transformed, resulting in *techné*, an implication of knowledge or principle and synonymous with art. The result was the field of textile conservation, which incorporates Western philosophy, science, and technique into needlework in an approach that cannot be achieved by domestic education alone. Yet, among the various methodologies within textile conservation today, stitching is a sensitive area. Many textile conservators enter the profession because they enjoy needlework and are proud of their skills; thus, they may feel offended if someone criticizes their “hand” or the choice of a “stitch,” hence making discussions difficult.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF TEXTILE CONSERVATION STITCHING AND ITS EXPANSION

In a case study of conserving flags at the Museum of National Antiquities, the Swedish pioneer in textile conservation Agnes Geijer (1898–1989) noted

TEXTILES

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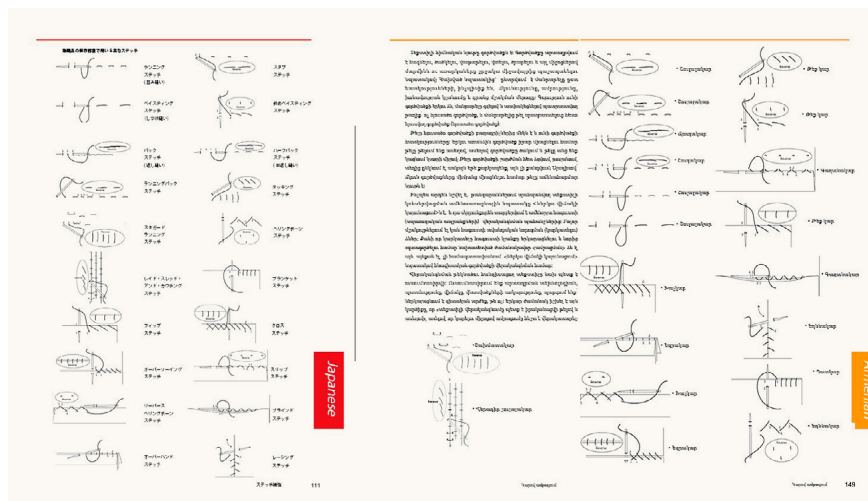


Figure 2. Texts explaining conservation stitches based on Western methodology in Japanese (left, Ishii 2015a) and in Armenian (right, Ishii 2014b).

the origins of the use of silk *crêpe*line as a material introduced in the 1920s from the archival conservation of books (Geijer 1957). She describes a method of sandwiching a silk flag with *crêpe*line and stitching the layers together. Hers was the first case study on the conservation of historical textiles in an international, peer-reviewed journal. Geijer held a doctorate in archaeology, specializing in textiles, and trained the first generation of European leaders in this field, including Vera Trudel (1919–1959), from Switzerland, and Sigrid Müller Christensen, a German who founded the textile workshop at the Bavarian National Museum in Munich. Dissemination of the Swedish methodology is evident in the National Museum of Denmark’s *Studies in Museum Technology 2: Conservation of Textiles*, which includes a diagram of a couching stitch (Jacobi et al. 1978). Mechthild Flury-Lemberg, who established textile conservation at the Abegg Stiftung in Switzerland, was among the first trainees under Müller’s supervision in Munich (Niekamp 2011). Flury-Lemberg’s monumental publication *Textile Conservation and Research* also explained the couching stitch (Flury-Lemberg 1988). This Swedish line appears to be the basis of textile conservation in Europe. Danish-born Karen Finch, who trained at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, established the Textile Conservation Centre and started the first post-graduate course, in affiliation with the Courtauld Institute of Art, in 1975. She included photographs of couching stitches in Finch and Putnam (1986). British-born Sheila Landi, who trained and taught at the Victoria and Albert Museum, explained couching as “the most important stitches in conservation,” in *The Textile Conservator’s Manual* (Landi 1992). Textile conservators in North America produced collective notes on stitching, such as the *CCI Note 13/10* (CCI 1985) and the *Directory of Hand Stitches Used in Textile Conservation* (Grimm 1992), available online due to the efforts of members of the American Institute for Conservation’s Textile Specialty Group.² Individual training, expert publications, and selective and collective output have thus shaped textile conservation stitching in the latter half of the 20th century.

The list of references in the *Directory of Hand Stitches Used in Textile Conservation* includes the *Encyclopedia of Needlework*, first published by Dillmont in 1890. This popular hand-size volume has been reprinted

many times over the years and translated into 17 languages. In the chapter “Mending,” Dillmont describes this needlework as follows (Figure 3):

The mending of wearing-apparel and house-linen, though often ungrateful work, is yet a necessity to which every female hand ought to be carefully trained. How best to disguise and repair the wear and tear of use or accident is quite as valuable an art as that of making new articles. Under the head of mending we include the strengthening and replacing of the work and broken thread of a fabric, and the fitting in of new stuff in the place of that which is torn or damaged. The former is called darning, the latter patching. (Dillmont 1990)

Interestingly, the *Directory of Hand Stitches Used in Textile Conservation* excludes mending as a hand stitch used in textile conservation. Among previously mentioned notable publications, only Landi (1992) includes images of darning methods.

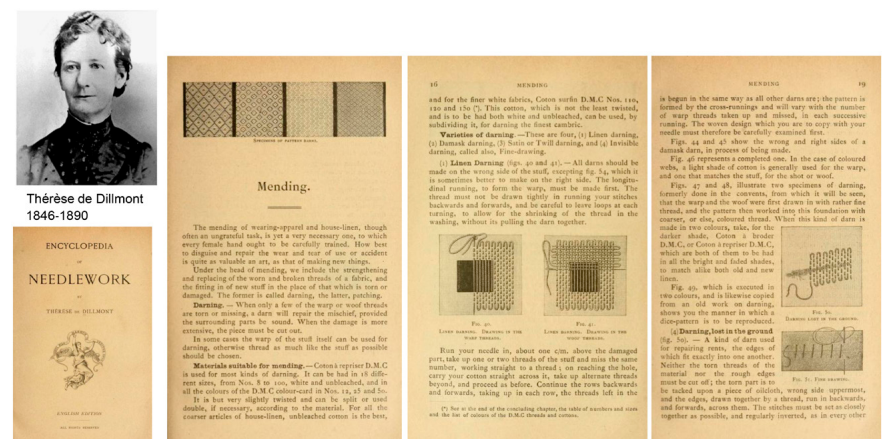


Figure 3. From Dillmont (1900)

The textile conservation communities in Europe and the US tend to use similar methods of stitching. Nilsson (2015) surveyed the stitches used in textile conservation and reported that, among the many stitches described in the literature, in the conservation of a historical silk costume, conservators in Europe and the US tend to use only three:

- backing with laid thread and couching to secure the damage;
- overlay with running stitch to protect a damaged and frayed area; and
- backing with brick couching to secure the damage.

The reason for this, as previously explained, is the line of education and a collective system that has played an important role in the choice of stitching methods used to reinforce a historical textile.

In 1993, during my education at the Textile Conservation Centre, affiliated with the Courtauld Institute of Art, the 1st year curriculum included conservation stitching, readings on the philosophical issues in conservation, and practical case studies. Students were encouraged to think about the reasons behind the choices, as part of their career preparation. This educational approach has produced a generation of textile conservators with similar attitudes and skills, as demonstrated in the study by Nilsson.

The fact that darning was excluded from instructional texts explains why I did not learn darning during my training. Although “mending cloth” is the

foundation of textile conservation, this method was consciously omitted, and thus also not taught at a post-graduate course in the mid-1990s. Why was it excluded, despite being “as valuable an art as that of making new articles” (Dilmont 1990)? Why does the continuity of the daily care of cloth cease once that cloth has gained historical value?

History in heritage conservation explains an aspect behind this thinking. The Austrian art historian Alois Riegl (1858–1905), who transformed the value concept of monuments of the 20th century, argued that “according to the cult of age value, what is required to keep a monument ‘alive,’ in use, is not necessarily concessions to either use value or its aesthetic counterpart, newness value, but rather a sacrifice of virtually everything that constitutes age value in a monument” (Riegl 1903).

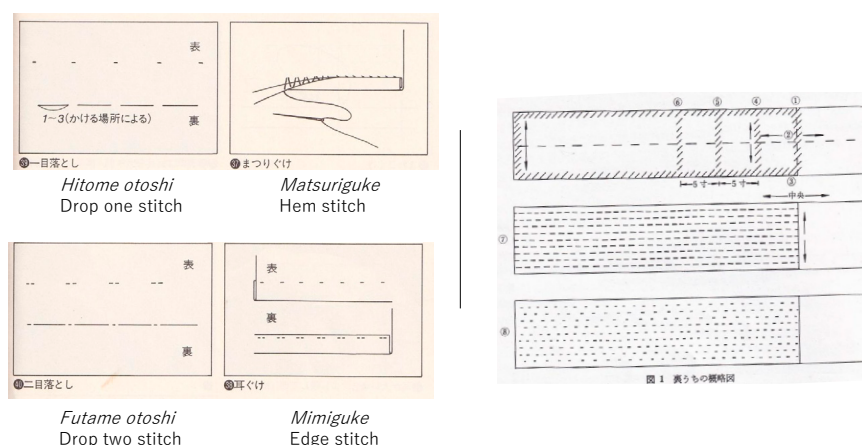
AN ALTERNATIVE ART OF CONSERVATION STITCHING

Overseas students, like myself, returning to their home countries apply the knowledge and skills gained during their training. In many cases, they are the first graduate-school-trained textile conservators in their native countries. These newly minted textile conservators have contributed to disseminating the use of selected stitches as “textile conservation stitching” (Kim 2011, Ishii 2015a, 2015b, and 2016a). Little did I think about the impact I was making when I taught textile conservation to students in Japan, Armenia, Egypt, and Taiwan, until I had the opportunity to work closely with textile conservators in Japan, most notably Yoshimi Shiroyama and Naomi Yoda, who as part of Shōkakudo Conservation Studio work on historical textiles of registered national and important treasures under the supervision of the Agency for Cultural Affairs.

In Japan, a historical kimono, whether in a museum collection or in private hands, is designated as cultural property and continues its life of being cared for in the daily manner and repaired (Koshiishi 2018). There are considerations and implementations of the methodologies of the West, but unless a kimono is seriously degraded and taken out of its cultural continuity method of care, it will be handled in the same manner as it would be if in private hands.

This unique system was introduced outside Japan through a series of workshops directed by Masato Katoh of the Tokyo National Institute of Cultural Property. A two-week program was held in Taipei, Taiwan, in cooperation with Yuan-Feng Chang at the Taiwan Normal University in 2017–2019. The aim was to provide information and encourage the understanding and care of Japanese textiles in collections outside Japan. It was also an opportunity for Japanese conservators, curators, and scientists to form a joint program on textile conservation. Oyama Yuzuruha, curator of textiles at the Tokyo National Museum, demonstrated the handling, display, and storage of kimonos in a museum. She showed how a kimono is exhibited, using an *eko*, a clothes hanger for kimonos or a T-shaped stand that shows off the design from the back side, as a kimono is designed to be viewed from the back (Oyama 2019). She also demonstrated folding a kimono for storage and placing it into an envelope known as *tatō-shi*, made of mulberry paper. Her presentation included images of the museum

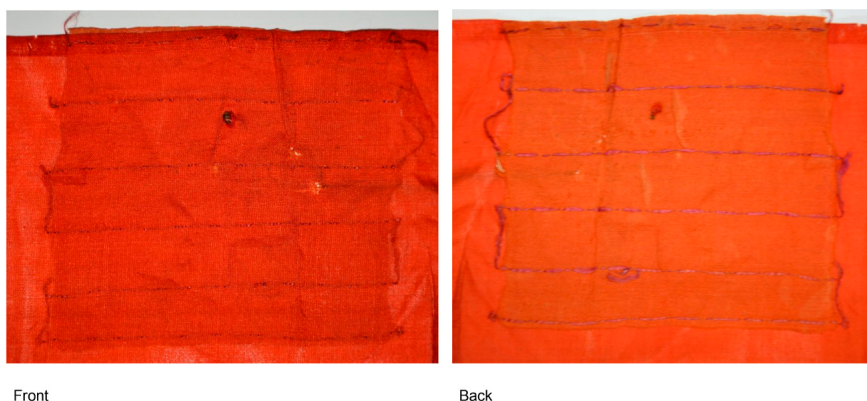
storage of kimonos with chests made of Kiri wood (*Paulownia*), a traditional material used for storage boxes because of its low acid emissions and its ability to absorb humidity (Oyama 2019). Shiroyama and Yoda led stitching practice sessions on kimono repair and storage (Shiroyama and Yoda 2019a and 2019b). The session introduced specially prepared hand-reeled and hand-woven silk to reinforce a kimono fragment (Ishii and Shimura 2017). The supporting texts cannot be reproduced here, but the stitches used are common kimono sewing stitches and patching methods. Figure 4A shows examples of stitches used for kimono sewing and Figure 4B the placements of the stitch lines in the reinforcement of a historic kimono. Figure 5 provides an example of the patching of a kimono on an antique textile using a technique similar to that taught at the workshop.



A. Stitches used for kimono sewing and repair.

B. Placements of stitch lines in kimono repair.

Figure 4. (a) Kimono sewing stitches, from Murabayashi (1990). (b) The support stitches used in kimono repair, from Ogasawara (1982, 81, fig. 1)



An Example of patch support on an antique kimono lining using drop two stitch in intervals (author's collection).

Figure 5. An example of a patch on an antique kimono (author's collection). *Futatsume otoshi* (drop two stitch), a stitch used for kimono sewing, is used in alternate rows to hold the patching fabric in place. In the workshop, the same stitching method was explained as being used in historical kimono repair in Japan

Preservation of a kimono is based on a holistic approach aimed at preserving the tangible historical textile bearing in mind the intangible techniques associated with the production of the material. The methodologies applied to preserve a historical kimono are not separated from those used in its daily care, even after the textile enters a museum. Now that the Japanese have almost completely stopped wearing kimonos, curators and conservators are aware that they have an added responsibility to keep up the body of

knowledge developed for their maintenance, which includes the methods for handling, making, and repair that have been handed down for generations. Hence, textile conservation of Japanese ethnic attire can be viewed as living heritage (Ishii 2016b).

In the past, cloth was regarded as a precious commodity, as it was not easily made or obtained. The act of repairing and mending cloth exemplifies what we value. In the West, mending cloth was previously a humble art equivalent to new creations. In Buddhist belief, it is an expression of virtue and the *wabi-sabi* view of the world is that incompleteness adds value. After a century in which ethnographic domestic mending and darning were rejected for textile conservation stitching, it is time to realize what was lost and what can be gained. There is also a need to rethink the philosophy that guides our choices as textile conservators and the methodology that underlines our decision-making and practice. Looking beyond our boundaries will provide a broader perception that will enrich the art of textile conservation.

CONCLUSION

Textile conservation stitching is a sensitive topic of discussion even among contemporaries in the field. The traditional Western education widespread in the profession has come to dictate what conservators think is the correct approach but this may narrow both thinking and methodologies. Using the example of conservation stitching, this paper has pointed out that, during the last century, textile conservators' selectiveness and their eagerness to develop a profession in the heritage sector resulted in a departure from domesticity and a restriction of our choices and decision-making options, issues that are also reflected in other areas of conservation conduct. The arguments presented herein are not intended to provide a direction for the future or to insist that textile conservation include living heritage. The Japanese system is legally binding and also has issues that limit its perspective. The concept of diversity in conservation approaches will not be integrated if a culture is viewed as absolute. A spirit of tolerance and a sense of historical consciousness are necessary to acknowledge differences as an independent culture. Openness and dialogue are encouraged and are the keys to overcoming the challenges inherent in textile conservation, by rethinking our practices and recognizing new opportunities beyond our perspectives. The author hopes that this paper will stir an open debate about how we preserve our textiles. The *wabi-sabi* philosophy may lead us to an appreciation that "nothing lasts, nothing is finished, and nothing is perfect."

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NOTES

- ¹ The author has not seen the exhibition but was able to hear Kate Irvin's presentation—"The creative destruction of brokenness: Japanese boro, repair and fashion futures"—at the ICOM Costume Committee Program, ICOM Kyoto 2019 General Conference, 3 September 2019, Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto. The exhibition's website can be found at <https://risdmuseum.org/exhibitions-events/exhibitions/repair-and-design-futures> (accessed 15 November 2019).
- ² The AIC Textile Specialty Group Conservation Wiki's version of the *Directory of Hand Stitches* is based on the revised 1995 manuscript. Available at https://www.conservation-wiki.com/wiki/Directory_of_Hand_Stitches (accessed 15 November 2019).

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