

(EXTRA)ORDINARY OBJECTS THAT TRANSCEND TIME

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“What I remember, I have.”

João Guimarães Rosa, in *Grande Sertão, Veredas*

The exhibition *Design e cotidiano na coleção Azevedo Moura* [Design and Everyday Life in the Azevedo Moura Collection] focuses on the still little known and little analyzed design developed by European immigrants in southern Brazil. Furniture, work tools, construction materials, toys, and household utensils made between the second half of the 19th century and the early decades of the 20th century combine the memories, techniques, and customs brought by immigrants from their homeland, on the one hand, and the conditions and materials they found in their adopted land, on the other. These are what we might call “ordinary” objects. They were made by and for ordinary people, for use in their daily lives—and how extraordinary they can be in this condition!

The 930 works in the exhibition are part of the Azevedo Moura collection, procured over the last five decades by the architect couple Tina and Calito de Azevedo Moura, mostly in the countryside of Rio Grande do Sul, but also in Santa Catarina, and Paraná. I fell in love with these works in the mid-1990s, when I saw them for the first time. I was then the editor of *Design & Interiores* magazine, and I had gone to see Tina and her twin sister Lui Lo Pumo’s work in furniture design and handicraft revitalization projects more closely. The observation conditions, I have to say, were not the best. The objects, which were very numerous, were piled on top of each other in the small two-story houses in the Moinhos de Vento neighborhood of Porto Alegre, where Tina and Calito live and work. However, it was like an epiphany: the collectors’ sensitive gaze revealed lessons of inventiveness and simplicity to my eyes.

Every time I went to Porto Alegre, I was delighted with new acquisitions. The collectors’ choice to not vary the typologies too much—but rather to explore the different features that the same type of artifact can have—was an excellent opportunity to reflect on the paths of design in our country. In the institutionalization of design teaching in Brazil, which began in the 1960s with

the creation of the Escola Superior de Desenho Industrial (ESDI) in Rio de Janeiro, the axiom “form follows function” was uncritically adopted, which for a time acted as a straitjacket for designers. The collection allowed us to see that form does follow function, but it also follows culture, time, place, and the desires and dreams of the minds that conceive the objects and the hands that shape them. And this needed to be shown to a wider audience, in an exhibition that would do justice to its importance and representativeness.

The first chance came when I was director of the Museu da Casa Brasileira (MCB) in São Paulo. In 2007, *Desenho anônimo—Legados da imigração no sul do Brasil* [Anonymous Design—Legacies of Immigration in Southern Brazil] occupied the main rooms of the museum, curated by my colleague from Rio Grande do Sul, Alfredo Aquino. Another occasion arose in April last year, when the exhibition *Artefatos do Sul—Legados da imigração alemã e italiana* [Artifacts of the South—Legacies of German and Italian immigration] opened at the Farol Santander Porto Alegre, and was scheduled to remain there until July. At the beginning of May, however, severe flooding devastated many areas of Rio Grande do Sul, causing the deaths of almost 200 people. Schools, stores, airports, and offices were closed—as were museums and cultural centers. The Farol, isolated by water in the city center’s Praça da Alfândega, also had to suspend its activities. It was very frustrating to prepare a 1,000 m² exhibition for months, only for it to remain open to the public for such a short time.

A selection of 45 works was presented in February 2025 at the exhibition *Design da imigração—Primórdios do aqui e agora* [Immigration Design—The Beginnings of Here and Now], at the Movelsul fair in Bento Gonçalves, in the mountainous region of Rio Grande do Sul, where Italian immigrants laid the foundations for strong industrialization, making the southern region’s furniture industry the country’s strongest.

We are delighted to have the opportunity to present a selection of 930 items from the collection in the temporary exhibition room of the Museu Paulista, in São Paulo, between May and September 2025. Contact with teachers at the institution, which is part of the University of São Paulo (USP), has enriched the reading of the works and made it possible to explore new layers of their significance. This museum, which specializes in history and material culture, is of national importance and has also become noted for its accessibility initiatives. Our team learned a lot in the process.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Before I go any further, I’d like to go back in time. In the 16th century, the Portuguese and Spanish arrived in what they called the “New World”—an expression coined from a European point of view, given that the territory of the Southern Cone of the Americas had already been occupied since around the 11th century by indigenous peoples such as the Guarani, Kaingang, and Xokleng, whose cultures were systematically disrespected and attacked by the Europeans.

The Jesuit-Guarani Reductions, which began settling in 1626, are considered to be the first organized non-native settlements in Rio Grande do Sul. In the 18th century, enslaved Africans began arriving in the southern region; from 1748 the Azoreans began arriving, first in Santa Catarina, where they colonized a large part of the coast; from 1907 onwards, the Poles and Ukrainians began their arrival, the latter more numerous in Paraná; and from 1875, it was the Italians. The 1814 census shows that black and indigenous people made up 52% of the population of Rio Grande do Sul.¹ It is important to emphasize that no history of the south of the country will be complete without considering this plurality and the cultural conflicts that began with the ethnocide of the native peoples.²

The Azevedo Moura collection looks specifically at the memory of German immigration, which began in the South in 1824, and Italian immigration, which began in 1875. European immigration took place under different conditions and circumstances in Brazil’s various states. While in the state of São Paulo, for example, the Italians came to work on the coffee plantations, in the South, both the Germans and the Italians were given plots of land to settle on with their families. These were not isolated individuals, but large families, often made up of more than a dozen people of different generations.

The vast majority of immigrants came from rural areas and were fleeing poverty. According to Professor Günter Weimer—one of the authors whose essays appear in this catalog—the Germans lived in communally-owned villages, covering between 100 and 150 hectares, including the forest areas that provided the wood for heating houses in the winter. “In Brazil, each family received 75 hectares, so they felt like feudal lords.” Immigration was subsidized by the imperial government, which covered the cost of maritime transport and donated land, work tools, and other benefits. It was the result of a deliberate policy by the

imperial government, which, among other things, was aimed at whitening the Brazilian population, based on the belief—openly expressed by the elites of the time—in the racial superiority of whites.

FARMERS... AND ARTISANS

Most of the immigrants were literate. Historical accounts emphasize the fact that they were farmers, but the fact is that they brought with them not only the experience of farming, but also of the crafts practiced in the off-season during the long European winters. Joiners, carpenters, blacksmiths, bricklayers, potters, ceramicists, textile workers, tinsmiths, saddlers, and shoemakers, among others, brought their “know-how”, their knowledge.

The works exhibited in *Design e cotidiano* were mostly made in Brazil. Furniture, work tools, construction materials, and household utensils combine the techniques brought by immigrants from their places of origin with the conditions they found in Brazil. They are not, therefore, a pure and simple transplant, but the result of syncretism.

The craft workshops created by the immigrants and developed by their descendants are at the genesis of the industrialization of the southern states. Authors Isabel Cristina Arendt, Marcos Antônio Witt, and Günter Weimer point out that it was from the handicrafts of the early years of German immigration that small, medium, and large factories emerged in Rio Grande do Sul, giving prominence to surnames that have emerged on the Brazilian economic scene, such as Adams, Arnt, Dreher, Gerdau, Mentz, Oderich, Renner, Ritter, Trein, among others.³ Italian heritage has significant examples of companies born from small workshops, such as Tramontina, Dell Anno, Marcopolo, and Todeschini. Ranking Brazil's main furniture production centers, the municipalities of Bento Gonçalves (RS), São Bento do Sul (SC) and Araçuaia (PR)⁴ lead the way, in descending order.

If the immigrants walked barefoot in the fields in the early years, reserving their shoes, when they had any, for Sunday church services, it was the work of the Germans—who transformed leather into boots, shoes, and riding saddles—that earned Novo Hamburgo (RS) the title of “national footwear capital”.

Rudimentary artifacts are prevalent in the collection, handmade to meet needs, but going beyond them in the pursuit of beauty. They are heavy, solid,

durable objects. The scale of many of them is impressive, such as the doors. The objects tell us about the techniques used, the processes, and the customs. Through them we learn about cooking, what was prepared, and how—Italian pasta, German *Schmier*, sauerkraut, dairy products, wine.

THOSE WHO KEEP

Just as important as who makes an object is who keeps it. Carlos de Azevedo Moura, better known as Calito, is a born collector. His father was an engineer who built some of the main buildings in central Porto Alegre between the 1920s and 1970s. In a video testimonial prepared for the exhibition at Farol Santander, Calito recounts how his father was interested in culture, philosophy, art, and architecture. He had worked for the Villares company in São Paulo.

With this family context, the choice to study architecture wasn't a hard one. He graduated from the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS) and soon followed up with a Master's degree at the Instituto de Artes of the Universidade de Brasília (UnB), where Calito greatly expanded his horizons, befriending people such as the self-taught designer and architect Zanine Caldas, the architect Elvin Dubugras, and the visual artists Athos Bulcão and Amélia Toledo. At that time, the UnB, conceived by Darcy Ribeiro, the then Minister of Education, was in full swing.

It was then that the “closed-off” gaúcho, as he describes himself, found himself opening up to a rich universe of knowledge and possibilities—and sharpened his eye for design. The subject of his Master's degree was the design of a line of office furniture, and included a period at the Royal College of Arts in London. However, one of the consequences of the 1964 military coup was the dismantling of the UnB, with the dismissal of several professors. This led him back to Porto Alegre, where he started an architecture firm and began teaching at the same Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism at UFRGS from which he had graduated, remaining there until 1997.

This experience was vital in developing his aesthetic sense and his eye for objects from immigration. But it should be remembered that the urge to collect has been with him from an early age. In his essay in this catalog, Calito says that he started as a child, with promotional pencils, orchids, and saints. His concern for heritage goes back a long way: in the 1960s he bought and

restored a house built by Azorean immigrants in the 19th century by the beach in Garopaba (Santa Catarina).

When he married fellow architect Maria Cristina Cuervo de Azevedo Moura, known as Tina, he found a partner who was also passionate about the historic crafts of the countryside of Rio Grande do Sul. Tina has accompanied him on many of his forays into the countryside of the southern states. She is particularly enchanted when she recognizes the human hand that carved the objects, the craftsmanship of those who made them, their personal touch, which, with a careful eye, distinguishes the nuances between objects that at first glance are very similar.

Tina and Calito have, since the 1990s, lived and worked on Félix da Cunha street, in the Moinhos de Vento district of Porto Alegre, in a group of four-story semi-detached houses built in the 1930s, with no setback from the sidewalk. They were originally used for housing and today are mixed use, also occupied by bookstores, art galleries, and bars with tables on the sidewalks—a place for socializing in a “cool” area. A movement led by the building owners has succeeded in getting the complex listed by the City Hall.

THOSE WHO DISCARD — ASHAMED OF A POOR PAST?

The gathering of works relating to European immigration in the South began in the 1960s and became more systematic in the 1970s. There were hundreds of trips to the countryside in search of banal everyday objects that Calito and Tina saw as relics, but which, for those who had discarded them, were old junk of no importance or significance. Over those decades, they learned of the demolition of many 19th century houses.

What makes people discard houses, doors, and objects? French author Annie Ernaux, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2022, offers a clue when she talks about her childhood in a humble social environment in the small town of Yvetot, Normandy, in the French countryside, in her book *La Place*.⁵ She says that as her working-class parents ascended socially and opened a café in the house where they lived, they were able to gradually make improvements to the property, removing elements “that brought back memories of the old days, such as the exposed beams, the chimney, the wooden tables and the straw chairs. [...] With the flowery wallpaper, the brightly painted counter and the marble-imitation tables, the café became a clean and cheerful environment. The rooms' wooden floorboards were covered with yellow and

brown checkered flooring. The only annoyance that lingered for a long time was the facade made up of wooden beams forming black and white lines. Maintaining the stucco was beyond possibility.”

She continues: “Passing by there, a teacher of mine once said that the house was beautiful, ‘a real Normandy house’. My father thought she was just trying to be polite. Those who admired our old things, the water pump in the courtyard, the Norman houses with exposed wooden beams, certainly wanted to stop us from having what they already had, they who were so modern, with running water and a white house.”

The feeling of the past as something to be ashamed of was noticed by designer and cultural manager Ronaldo Barbosa among descendants of European immigrants in the mountainous region of Espírito Santo. Over the last two decades, Ronaldo has dedicated himself to changing this situation: “Third and fourth generation people used to build masonry houses next to their grandparents' houses, with ‘modernities’ such as porcelain floors and aluminum frames. They let the historic houses fall into disrepair and gave them up to traders who harassed them into selling the wooden floors, doors and windows at bargain prices. These in turn fed the ‘antique furniture manufacturing’ chain. All they had to do was shave off the wood, give it a patina, make cabinets or tables, and sell them in other cities outside the state.”⁶

In 2014, Ronaldo bought a Pomeranian house made using the half-timbered construction technique, numbered the beams, columns, and wooden floors and reassembled it in the Aracê district of Domingos Martins. In the following years, he restored three Italian houses and also rebuilt them in the same municipality, more precisely in Morro do Canário. “People's mentality is changing. What used to be seen as a testimony to the indigence of ancestors is now being valued as an important sign of identity building. Those who sell now ask for higher prices and sell their houses whole, not chopped up.” This experience is recounted in the video series “Montanhas contemporâneas capixabas”⁷ [Contemporary Mountains of Espírito Santo]. A major achievement was the opening in 2024 of Casa Nostra, a cultural center and experience tourism hub in Venda Nova do Imigrante, which tells the story of Italian immigration in the state and offers gastronomic experiences, a project created by Sebrae Espírito Santo. On the near horizon is the opening of the Museu da Imigração (MIM), which will be curated and designed in co-creation with local young people and children.

COLLECTIVE HERITAGE

The objects in the Azevedo Moura collection cannot be seen as totally representative of German and Italian immigrants in the south of Brazil or exclusive to this population. Firstly, because in the formation of any collection there is the filter of the collector's gaze, which is always subjective; and secondly, because many of them have similarities or points of convergence with those of other cultures in the historical period covered, especially with regard to the rural universe. I would like to mention the collections of three museums that I follow with much interest:

- The Museu de Artes e Ofícios, which opened in 2005 in Belo Horizonte, with objects collected in the Minas Gerais countryside by engineer Flávio Gutierrez and continued by his daughter Angela Gutierrez.
- The Museu Nacional de Etnologia, created in 1965 in Lisbon, which was the subject of the book *The Hard Life* by English designer Jasper Morrison in 2017.⁸
- The Shaker Museum in New York, dedicated to the objects and furniture of the Shaker religious group—which is also the theme of the exhibition *The Shakers: A World in the Making*, a joint venture between the Vitra Design Museum in Germany, the Milwaukee Art Museum, and the Institute of Contemporary Art Philadelphia, both in the United States, which will run from June 2025 to January 2027 at these institutions.⁹

It should also be pointed out other initiatives to highlight the memory of immigration in the South. On the German side, we have the Museu Histórico Visconde de São Leopoldo (1959); the Museu Histórico Municipal de Dois Irmãos (1989); and the Museu Comunitário Casa Schmitt-Presser, in Novo Hamburgo (1992). On the Italian side, there is the Museu Municipal de Caxias do Sul (1947), the Museu do Imigrante de Bento Gonçalves (1974) and the Museu do Pão, in Ilópolis (2008), among other examples.

Mention should also be made of the various antique shops, including Normélio Brill's in São Sebastião do Caí and Luiz Fitarell's, who is also responsible for the Parque Museu Etnográfico in Garibaldi; and the tourist routes that link private ventures in historic mansions in some regions, such as the Caminho de Pedras, in the Serra Gaúcha, and the Caminho dos Moínhos, in the Alto Taquari region.

Due to its scope, variety, quantity, and the quality of the items, the Azevedo Moura collection is an account of the wide-ranging memory of immigration in the southern region of Brazil. At the beginning of 2024, the

collection held around 6,500 items, but the floods that hit Rio Grande do Sul in May that year also affected the works. The warehouse where they were stored was reached by the floodwaters, and remained unreachable for two months. Around 30% of the collection was lost, including all the books. The items kept at the Farol Santander and those kept at the collectors' home were saved in their entirety.

One of the most striking scenes of the climate tragedy in Rio Grande do Sul was that of Caramelo, the horse who remained on the roof of a house in Canoas, in the metropolitan region of Porto Alegre, for four days, and went viral in the news, becoming a symbol of the resilience of the people of Rio Grande do Sul. Another image that made the headlines was that of the enlarged replica of the children's wooden horse that was on the Praça da Alfândega, in front of the Farol, inviting people to the exhibition of the collection. The horse replica was swept away by the waters to the edge of the Guaíba river, more than a kilometer away. When it was rescued by the collectors, it was seen as a symbol of cultural resilience. During the exhibition at the Museu Paulista, this horse replica will remain in the museum hall.

THE RESONANCE OF OBJECTS WITHIN US

Collections of this kind have the capacity to uncover deep layers of people's emotional memories, even those that were dormant. In current museology, there is a change of focus, moving away from the exclusiveness of the object (how it is made, what its style is, what it represents, etc.) and focusing mainly on the subject (the resonance of the object in those who see it). It is precisely this exchange with the public and the desire to raise awareness among people from different social strata, levels of education, ages, etc., and to establish a "conversation" with them, that drives my trajectory as a curator.

In this sense, *Design e cotidiano* is a feast! "I had one at home", "My grandmother had one", "I remember..." are frequent comments when objects from the collection are shown. At both the Museu da Casa Brasileira and the Farol Santander Porto Alegre, I saw tears in people's eyes as they browsed the exhibition, and also smiles, showing a sense of belonging, regardless of whether or not they were descended from immigrants. One of the testimonies that touched me the most was that of the museum invigilator at the Farol, who felt interested and, in a way, represented,

even though he wasn't of German or Italian descent. That's what matters to me, it's this kind of reaction that drives my work.

In addition to the three-dimensional works, period photos, graphic materials, wall sayings and postcards reveal the human being "behind" the objects—the values cultivated, the established family, strong religiosity, school classes, the houses. These images help us explore the intangible dimension of the artifacts on display, allow us to recover the social imagery of the period and are highlighted in the exhibition.

The objects are considered in the video *Uma coleção, vários olhares*¹⁰ [One collection, many perspectives], which features interviews with the collectors and some of the authors of the essays in this catalog. In the video (and here!) we aim to go beyond the mere presentation of the items, in order to better understand the contexts, motivations, and implications that this collection has for Brazilian cultural heritage.

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

And so this brings us to another important point. Beyond the "good times that will never come back" type of memories, which could result in a sterile regressive nostalgia, I would like to emphasize the relevance of bringing these works together today, because they also provoke reflections that are the order of the day. I will focus on four points:

1. Sustainability—a word so worn out by use—also implies questioning the programmed obsolescence of products, curbing obsessive consumption, and opting for fewer and more durable things. The indigenous leader Davi Kopenawa has long been warning about the world built by white people, which is being destroyed by the "commodity society". Pope Francis dedicated an encyclical to this issue, the "Laudato Si", of 2015, in which he speaks of the "throwaway culture" so pervasive in contemporary culture, an "economy that kills" and threatens the survival of the planet. The encyclical's subtitle is very inspiring: "On care for our common home".

Because of their aesthetics, many of the objects in the exhibition could be found in contemporary design stores. They are strong, solid. They span generations. They challenge time. While some have functions that have become anachronistic in today's everyday life (such as those for skimming milk or making butter), most have retained their usefulness and allure. And in

the wake of changing customs, product types that had fallen into disuse are making a comeback, such as coffee grinders.

It's no wonder that the simplicity of the objects in Lisbon's Museu Nacional de Etnologia caught the eye of such an acclaimed designer as Jasper Morrison and that the Shakers' legacy to design is celebrated by important museums today.

2. Much is being said today about the symbolic dimension of objects. Designers are paying attention not only to the performance of products, but also to the layers of meaning they can bring, such as uniqueness and human warmth. Objects that were once discarded by families for being "old" are now recognized as timeless and called "vintage". The fascination can come from the overlapping layers of paint, revealing the patina of time, or from details—useful or useless—that convey the creative imagination of their makers. In Italian, *guardare* means "to look at" (in Portuguese, *guardar* means "to keep"). We could say that, to save, we first need to sharpen our gaze.

3. The place of the handmade in contemporary society has been expanding, in opposition to predictions that industrialization would kill off handicraft. Scientific conferences and publications point to the emergence in the 21st century of an aesthetics of production and consumption based on movements of small artisans, both in the southern and northern hemispheres, where this phenomenon has been dubbed the "maker movement" and "DIY". The wall with a hundred carpentry tools in *Design e cotidiano* is a delight for the eyes and hearts of the brand-new generation of designer carpenters and joiners all over the country, who have put aside the exclusivity of the pencil or the use of the computer to revel in working with planers, chisels, saws, and gouges.

4. Finally, I would like to question the way in which we Brazilians have received the immigrants and refugees who have arrived in our country recently, such as Venezuelans, Paraguayans, Bolivians, Haitians, Syrians, Senegalese, and Angolans. Like Europeans historically, they have arrived in search of better living conditions. Unlike the subsidized immigration of the past, however, they don't receive land, tools, or benefits. What have we done, as a society and as governments, to welcome them? After all, they arrive with their cultures and memories, enriching the mixtures that are so typical of our ethnic melting pot—and this will also have repercussions on our design.

SHARED MEMORY

I'd like to close by thanking everyone involved in the exhibition. We curators are usually the only ones who appear in interviews and talks, but the sum of skills required to put together an exhibition like this is enormous. I was able to gain a better understanding of the collection with professor and architectural historian Günter Weimer, antiques dealer and restorer Normélio Brill, and researcher and cultural manager Adauany Pieve Zimovski, responsible for the exhibition's educational program at Farol Santander Porto Alegre. I am indebted to the invaluable collaboration of the three of them and to the patience and generosity of the collectors.

During the many months I spent in contact with the collection, I consulted members of the exhibition team about their favorite object, in order to compose a diverse and representative icon board for the show. The answers were as varied as possible and almost always included personal stories about the object. For my part, my preferences varied over time. But it wasn't until I was writing the article for the catalog that I saw an image of a lamp almost identical to the first object I ever bought, around the age of 12. In a childhood immersed in countryside culture, where the closest I could get to artworks were paintings and sculptures of saints in Catholic churches, I admired the essential shapes of this simple object, which I still keep with me today.

As João Guimarães Rosa said through the mouth of Riobaldo: "What I remember, I have". And when we remember together, this "having" becomes stronger and more joyful. The etymology of the word "commemorate", of Latin origin, is after all, "com-memorare", or "to remember with". Thus, beyond the materiality of the items presented, *Design e cotidiano na coleção Azevedo Moura* seeks to contribute to the common memory of us Brazilians, which is formed from multiple mixtures and contributions.

1 In the 2022 census, this figure fell to just over 22%, still very significant, and little commented on by people, who don't usually associate the black population with the South of Brazil.

2 Rio Grande do Sul has many tragic episodes involving the black and indigenous population that are "minimized" by public opinion. Two examples are the Missões and the Porongos Massacre in 1844, an ambush that killed more than 100 black soldiers during the Farrapos War.

3 Isabel Cristina Arendt, Marcos Antônio Witt and Günter Weimer in *A imigração alemã no Rio Grande do Sul*. Available at: <http://brasil-alemanha.com/capitulo/19sec/A-imigracao-alema-no-Rio-Grande-do-Sul.php>. Accessed: 17 Apr 2024.

4 Source: Instituto Moveleiro. Available at: <https://instituto-moveleiro.com/os-maiores-polos-moveleiros-do-brasil/>. Accessed: 17 Apr 2024.

5 ERNAUX, Annie. *O lugar*. Translation: Marília Garcia. São Paulo: Fósforo, 2021, p. 35.

6 The quotes come from informal conversations between the author and Ronaldo Barbosa in November 2015.

7 Available on the TVE Espírito Santo YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLHyQmXLthXud-fu1hpWS-WykrAuRODLJ>. Accessed: 25 Apr 2025.

8 MORRISON, Jasper. *The Hard Life*. Zürich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2017.

9 Founded at the end of the 18th century in England, the Shaker religious group emigrated to the United States in 1774, settling in 18 distinct communities, from Kentucky to Maine. As the exhibition text says, "within these communities, the Shakers created furniture, domestic objects, and architecture that were soon acclaimed for their radical simplicity, as well as their innovative use of standardization and mass production".

10 BORGES, Adélia (Director of content and interviews). Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=53GNEB-wx8k8&ab>. Accessed: Apr 25, 2025.

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