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bci

Bonsai & Stone Appreciation

2021
Q1

The 23rd TBCA Exhibition and
Competition

The Rocky Mountain Bonsai
Society Tackles Pandemic
Obstacles

The Beauty of Soft:
Ficus pedunculosa

Grape Agate
Stones

Styling a *Pinus sylvestris*

An *ishizuki* of *Juniperus itoigawa*

A *chokkan*: *Chamaecyparis obtusa*

Kuntoro Wiryanto's
suiseki collection

The Abe Dynasty

Where is
the Red Jade?

Bonsai Fair,
Indonesia: 2020



Grand Champion, The 23rd TBCA Style
Exhibition and Competition
Dwarf Leaf *Murraya paniculata*
(小葉七里香)

Wu Wen Fong 吳文風

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President's Message

Happy New Year!

We all want to put 2020 behind us and move forward to health and economic recovery worldwide in 2021. With vaccines now becoming available, things are looking much brighter for this year, and I hope we can put the pandemic and the impact it has had on everyone internationally behind us.

I hadn't realized just how much many of you, along with myself, would miss our International Conventions and Tours. Several people have contacted me saying they miss catching up with BCI friends that they only see at our BCI events, as many plan their annual holidays to coincide with our International Conventions. Most countries have not been able to host local Bonsai or Stone conventions or exhibitions in 2020. Some exceptions being Taiwan who hosted the Taiwan Bonsai Creators Association 23rd Competition and Exhibition, and the Indonesian Bonsai Society, Bekasi Chapter, Bonsai Fair. We feature articles on their exhibitions in this issue. Several clubs have been hosting Zoom™ meetings and virtual exhibits, including The Rocky Mountain Bonsai Society, about who's Adventure in Virtual Bonsai you can also enjoy reading.

I'm sure we all can't wait to get back to personal contact. Not only do we learn from attending events, but we get the opportunity to catch up with friends and make many new ones. I think over the past forty-plus years, I've learned heaps from viewing exhibits or chatting and exchanging ideas over a meal or drinks with friends and acquaintances at bonsai and stone events. It's always a great opportunity to share knowledge and ideas with friends and like-minded people.

BCI Conventions

While regional BCI events may be possible later in 2021, I don't expect BCI to hold international events until 2022. 2022 marks BCI's 60th Anniversary, and it would be great to celebrate with a big International Convention. If your club or region is interested in bidding for 2022, please contact BCI convention Chair Helen Su or myself for details and guidelines. To host such an event, your club or organization needs to be a BCI Member.

Complimentary Membership

Due to the financial impact that the virus has caused, many members and clubs have not renewed their BCI memberships in 2020. We have offered a one-year complimentary online membership to all individual members who haven't renewed. This membership includes access to all back magazine issues online. As clubs aren't eligible for online membership and many have experienced financial difficulties during the pandemic, we have offered them one-year complimentary club membership and includes the hard copy of the magazine. When things get back to a new normal, we hope they will all be able to reinstate their memberships. Please watch for an email from BCI



We have offered one-year complimentary memberships to club and individual members who haven't renewed. Please watch for an email from BCI with details on how to extend your complimentary memberships.

with details on how to extend your complimentary memberships.

BCI Video Competition

The BCI Video Competition will be extended into 2021. Detail of how to enter can be found on the BCI website or contact the Education Committee Chair, Sujata Bhat.

BCI Virtual Bonsai and Stone Exhibition

As I mentioned in my last message, we are working on holding a BCI Virtual Bonsai Exhibition this year. Watch for details via email once we have them finalized. If the quality and quantity of the entries are good, we can look at the possibility of producing an e-book.

BCI Everything Bonsai Online Auction

Last year's BCI Everything Bonsai Online Auction, which we conducted on Facebook, was a success. We are looking at hosting another one this year. If you have items you would like to donate, please contact BCI Promotion Committee Chair Frank Mihalic.

BCI Magazine Advertisers

I'd like to thank our advertisers for their continued support in 2021, particularly our major advertiser Ken Carlson at Joshua Roth Limited. I ask that if you are looking to purchase bonsai tools, please support those who support BCI. 🌱

Stay safe.
Cheers from Down Under,
Glenis Bebb

P.S. A full list of BCI contact e-mails is on page 2.

You are invited to be a part of the BCI Vision.

**We are raising funds for the future of BCI!
Any donation you can make, will help.**

Remember BCI in your will, your trust, your future!

For more information contact:

Glenis Bebb, president@bonsai-bci.com



MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR

This edition of *Bonsai & Stone Appreciation* magazine marks the third issue where COVID-19 has dominated our collective consciousness. As disruptive as the pandemic has been, we have seen bonsai enthusiasts adapt and innovate in the ways they stay connected to the larger bonsai community. Like many clubs, our local group, Bonsai Winnipeg, has adopted Zoom™ to deliver our monthly general meetings. Attendance has been similar to in-person meetings. While we miss the face-to-face interactions and camaraderie, we continue to move forward with our programming. We have even gained more members, perhaps due to people having more time on their hands to pursue new interests. How has it been for you and your club? Drop us a line.

With this edition, we begin to see signs of things returning to normal. Taiwan contained the Coronavirus spread, making it possible to hold its exceptional bonsai exhibition that focuses on bonsai and its creators. Even though Contributing Editor José L. Rodríguez Macías was in Puerto Rico, half a world away, he did a great job coordinating and translating the article on the 23rd TBCA Exhibition, and a companion article on Black Tea.

During a lull in the pandemic, the Indonesian Bonsai Society, Bekasi Chapter, felt safe to hold an indoor bonsai exhibit. It helped attract an audience to a Mall to the benefit of the stores there. Read Budi Sulistyoy's report, *Bonsai Fair 2020*.

The Rocky Mountain Bonsai Society rose to the challenges posed by COVID-19. It may have developed a format that will make their annual exhibit better than ever and accessible to a larger audience.

Bonsai pioneer Min Hsuan Lo and his son Andrew showcase the development of a unique species of *Ficus* with a vine-like growth habit. These bonsai not only represent an innovative aesthetic but underline the superb quality of bonsai in Taiwan.

Passionate about stones and intrepid in the pursuit of adventure, Gudrun Benz presents the rare and beautiful Grape Agate Stones from the Gobi Desert. Another passionate suiseki collector, Kuntoro Wiryanto, and his impressive collection are profiled by Budi Sulistyoy.

BCI Instructor Marco Tarozzo submits an *ishizuki* of *Juniperus itoigawa* inspired by a heritage site in Japan. BCI Instructor Mario Pavone and Marco Insuberman focus on a group's combined action to bring out the best in an old pine bonsai. Massimo Bandera reports on a formal upright *Chamaecyparis* in development for over 20 years as a precursor to an upcoming and in-depth article celebrating the *Chokkan* style in bonsai.

Remember the good old days before COVID? Relive a memorable day about bonsai, culture, and friendship by Marco Tarozzo. 🌳

—Joe Grande, Canada

MISSION STATEMENT

BONSAI CLUBS INTERNATIONAL

Bonsai Clubs International, a not-for-profit educational organization, advances the ancient and living art of bonsai and related arts through the global sharing of knowledge. We educate while promoting international friendship and solidify world relationships through cooperation with individuals and organizations whose purpose is consistent with ours.

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The Magazine reserves the right to edit all materials accepted for publication. Articles requiring extensive editing will be returned to the author with suggestions from the editorial staff. Manuscripts, drawings & photographs, with clear identification for captions, should be provided in digital format, on disk, or by e-mail or internet. Digital images must be provided at 300 dpi resolution for an 8 x 10 inch size minimum.

Authors are requested not to submit articles simultaneously to another publication.

PUBLISHING SCHEDULE

Issue	Month	Closing Date
Q1	J/F/M	December 1
Q2	A/M/J	March 1
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A Mirage on the Horizon

The 23rd TBCA Style Exhibition and Competition (中華盆栽作家協會)

By Huang Ching Fu (黃進福), Hsieh Jue Zhong (謝爵仲), Paul Linn (林建宏), Taiwan,
and José L. Rodríguez Macías, Puerto Rico.

Panorama of Sun Moon
Lake in Nantou County by
Arthur Chapman, Creative
Commons.

The 23rd Taiwan Bonsai Creators Exhibition and Competition was held from November 7 to 11, 2020, at the Sun Moon Lake's Xiangshan Visitors Center (向山行政暨遊客中心) in Nantou County, Taiwan. Dedicated to TBCA's Founder, Lin Jun Long (林俊龍), this year, the year of the COVID-19 pandemic, we were fortunate to celebrate our annual event because the number of contagion cases in Taiwan has remained low, indoor restrictions have decreased, and thanks to the help and precautionary measures taken by Hong Weixin (洪維新), Director of the Visitor's Center. However, we noticed the absence of our international friends, a presence which would have indeed made our activities more colorful. We really missed our overseas partners and supporters, as all of you are and remain part of our continued success.

Fortunately, encouragement from abroad came by way of numerous congratulatory speeches from The World Bonsai Friendship Federation (WBFF), Bonsai Clubs International (BCI), The Nippon Bonsai Association (NBA), The Indonesian Bonsai Society (PPBI), The Malaysian Bonsai and Suiseki Society (MBSS), The Bonsai and Suiseki Alliance of the Philippines (BSAPI), The South Asian Bonsai Friendship Federation (SABFF), bonsai Professionals David Benavente (Spain) and Michael Hagedorn (USA) and, for the first time ever, our sister professional organization; The Nihon Sakka Kyokai (Japan Bonsai Creators Association), responsible for the famous Sakufu Ten Bonsai Exhibition.

In a formal effort to advertise bonsai art and agricultural practices, local government officials, Liu Qi Fan (劉啟帆) mayor of Yuchi Township (魚池鄉) in Nantou County and Su Zhen Chang (蘇貞昌) Director of Taiwan's Executive Yuan (行政院) also actively participated in this year's event. The annual Sun Moon Lake Black Tea Exhibition (日月潭紅茶) promoting local producers, the development of manufacturers, and offering market opportunities to connoisseurs of fine tea was an added feature to this year's bonsai exhibit. An article on this unique event is on page 12.

For your enjoyment, viewing pleasure, and to ease the way during these difficult times, we include pictures of the Gold Awards for the year 2020 and snapshots of the festivities. As the Covid 19 pandemic diminishes and travel restrictions are lifted, we hope our international friends join us during forthcoming editions of our Style Exhibition.

We look forward to seeing you! 🌳



Top: The unique architecture of the Sun Moon Lake's Xiangshan Visitors Center (向山行政暨遊客中心) in Nantou County. Photo by triplefivedrew @ www.flickr.com



Middle and bottom: The judges scrutinize every detail of every tree and use a complex scoring system to evaluate these Taiwanese works of art.



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15th October, 2020

I would like to congratulate President Huang Ching Fu and the Taiwan Bonsai Creators Association on their 23rd Competition and Exhibition to be held on November 7-11, 2020 at Sun Moon Lake Visitors Center, Nantou County, Taiwan.

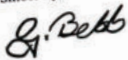
Bonsai Clubs International has a very close relationship with the Taiwan Bonsai Creators Association. They have contributed many articles to BCI Bonsai and Stone Appreciation Magazine sharing their stunning bonsai and vast knowledge with our International membership. The Grand Champion, at the TBCA 22nd Exhibition and Competition a *Premna obtusifolia* featured on the cover of Q1 2020 issue of the BCI magazine.

The special feature of the TBCA is that all members of the Taiwan Bonsai Creators Association are bonsai artist who create and developed their own bonsai.

I wish you a very successful Competition and Exhibition and my thoughts are with you all during these tough times due to COVID-19.

Stay safe.

Sincerely,



Glenis Bebb,
President
Bonsai Clubs International

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The Most Prestigious Exhibition in the World! I said it once and I will say it again. The Taiwan Bonsai Creative Association (TBCA) annual Exhibition is the most prestigious exhibition in the world!

When I was young in studying engineering at Gadjahmada University in Jogjakarta, I started my Journey in Bonsai Art. Back then, there was few to little sources of information available to the public, so most of my experience was by trial and error. During those early stages as practitioner in Bonsai Art, I would have never fathomed bonsai trees are cultivated and shaped to day. The TBCA Exhibition is a key factor and an epicenter in Style and Beauty in World Bonsai Art. To my mind empirical knowledge has played a key role in the development of Taiwanese Bonsai Art. Together with persistence and a strong sense of beauty, The Taiwanese Professional Bonsai Community has taken Bonsai Art to new heights, developed new techniques and has manage to forge their own identity within Bonsai, to the point of becoming one of the most, if not, the most respected Bonsai Community in the world.

Twenty-three consecutive years of Bonsai excellence. In Numerology the number 23 denotes adventure with a touch of diplomacy and creativity, so it's no surprise that this year's exhibition is bound for success. In this TBCA Style Exhibition, I, respectfully and with a deep sense of appreciation, offer my best wishes of success to the Taiwanese Professional Bonsai Community. Without your creative knowledge, Bonsai world will not be as colorful. To President Huang Ching Fu, I thank you for your valuable friendship and wish for this wonderful exhibition to be the first among many more successful exhibitions for the TBCA years to come.

Jakarta, October 14, 2020
With respect and admiration


Ir Budi Sulisty
President
The Indonesian Bonsai Society
Jakarta Chapter

Nippon Bonsai Association, Inc.
2-8-1, Ikenohata, Taitoku,
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October 16, 2020

Mr. Jose Luis Rodríguez Macías
Director of International Affairs
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中華盆栽作家協會

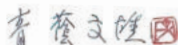
Dear Mr. Jose Luis Rodríguez Macías

Subject: 23rd Taiwan Bonsai Creators Association Annual Exhibition

It is a great pleasure to congratulate President Huang Ching Fu and member of the Taiwan Bonsai Creators Association of holding the 23rd Taiwan Bonsai Creators Association Competition and Exhibition on November 7-11, 2020 at Sun Moon Lake Visitor Center, Nantou County Taiwan.

I understand that it has been required a great deal of effort to hold this event under this very difficult situation in the world. On behalf of Nippon Bonsai Association, I wish you the 23rd Taiwan Bonsai Creators Association Annual Exhibition will be great successful and safe event.

Sincerely yours,



Aokage Fumio
Chairperson
Nippon Bonsai Association

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11 October, 2020

It is my pleasure to congratulate President Huang Ching Fu and members of the Taiwan Bonsai Creators Association on the occasion of the 23rd Taiwan Bonsai Creators Association Competition and Exhibition held on November 7-11, 2020 at Sun Moon Lake Visitor Center, Nantou County Taiwan.

This is a very difficult time for all bonsai organisations during the COVID-19 pandemic and although it is not possible for me to visit the exhibition personally, my thoughts and best wishes are with you for a highly successful and safe event.

TBCA has been a driving force for improved bonsai creation and education by example, both within and outside Taiwan. I encourage you to continue the excellent work.

Kindest regards,



Lindsay Bebb
Chairman,
World Bonsai Friendship Federation (WBFF)



Gardenia jasminoides
(梔子花)
Wang Zhao Lin 王兆麟



Pinus massoniana
(赤松)
Wu Zong Yu 吳宗諭

Juniperus chinensis
(真柏)

Zhao Ming Hui 趙明輝



Premna obtusifolia
(壽娘子)

TBCA Founder,
Lin Jun Long 林俊龍



Pinus morrisonicola
(五葉松)
Lin Shi Chang 林世昌



Three Point Display - Table
arrangement (席飾);
Juniperus chinensis, var.
itoigawa (系魚川真柏),
Grass companion (草),
Zelkova serrata (檫木)
Chou Yuan Peng 周元鵬



Juniperus chinensis
(真柏)

Ho Yong Yu 何永裕



Celtis formosana
(石朴)

Zhu Zhang Yuan 朱長淵





Grand Champion

Featured on the cover of this edition.

Dwarf Leaf *Murraya paniculata*

(小葉七里香)

Wu Wen Fong 吳文風

Juniperus chinensis

(真柏)

Lee Zhong Hong 李仲鴻



Where is the Red Jade?

The Black Tea Scented Land of Yuchi County

Liu Qi Fan (劉啟帆) Associate Professor, Feng Chia University (逢甲大學), Taichung, Taiwan

Translation: José L. Rodríguez Macías

Yuchi County in Nantou, famous for the beauty of Sun Moon Lake, in addition to its beautiful mountain village scenery and booming tourism, has another prominent industry; Black Tea (日月潭紅茶).

Surrounded by mountains and the influence of the lake climate, Yuchi village has become a natural choice for tea. In the 1920s, the Japanese introduced Assam black tea to Yuchi and in 1936 founded the “Taiwan Government’s Central Offices for the Black Tea Research Institute” that is, the current tea improvement standards for black tea production were laid in Yuchi, thus beginning the history for the first 100 years of Black Tea cultivation in Taiwan.



Top right: Three Elements of the Black tea flavor wheel; water color, flavor and taste, so that black tea promotion is more diversified.

Middle left: Sun Moon Lake Black Tea Culture Season; in every year's activities, tea tasting is a key feature.

Middle right: Large leaf variety of Yuchi, high mountain black tea, rich in taste.

Bottom left: The tea-sealing ceremony is a form of respect for the preservation of black tea.

Bottom right: 2020 Sun Moon Lake Black Tea Culture Season Big 30 Red Jade Producers join onstage for a picture.

Black tea is a shared memory of the Yuchi people. When I was a child in the tea garden playing hide-and-seek, farmers were busy under the early morning clouds picking the tea, skillfully placing their hearts and leaves into the teapot; tongue tip and taste buds, savoring the golden orange tea brew. With the advent of improved tea varieties, Taiwan Yuchi tea has a set of standards (8,18,21). Each Yuchi citizen has their way with the tea. One could say that there is always a cup of black tea brewing in every home.

However, in the 1970s, due to the adjustment of the Taiwanese industry's center of gravity, the black tea market in Yuchi was temporarily replaced, although not in its entirety, by betel nut production. Right until the Jiji Earthquake (集集地震) of 1999 hit Yuchi, the tourism industry nearly halted. In efforts to revive the Yuchi tourism

industry during the earthquake's aftermath, and as part of the reconstruction process, everyone, old and young, was reminded that black tea represented a key factor in the area's industrial development. Once again, black tea production became the central focus, offering opportunities to boost economic growth.

In 2003, in efforts to increase awareness of Yuchi's Black Tea, Yuchi's own Liao Xuehui began promoting the "Assam culture season." With rural tea farmers, production techniques, and workshop exhibits, this large-scale festival attracted the eyes of the Mainland Chinese, thus re-shaping the branding image of Yuchi Black Tea. As a result, lured by Taiwan's local black tea's excellent quality and flavor, the Chinese began to flock to Yuchi. With its success, in 2006, the Yuchi Government officially renamed this Festival as the "Taiwan-Yuchi black

tea culture season." It established the Yuchi Township Black Tea Farmers Cooperative to improve tea quality and establish current tea grading standards. With the establishment of the Farmers Cooperative, Yuchi black tea has more stable production quality and has deeply cemented itself into the preferred choice of black tea consumers.

Eventually, Yuchi Township's Black Tea Culture Season became the largest annual black tea event in Taiwan. To gradually catapult the black tea industry to the international stage, in 2011, the Culture Season was rebranded as the "Sun Moon Lake Black Tea Culture Season." This time, incorporating the international tourist attraction of Sun Moon Lake and its surrounding leisure and agricultural activities. This move proved to be a huge success, resulting in Yuchi Black Tea, reaching a new production milestone

Witness the early autumn cool weather with a cup of warm black tea in hand, smell the tea infused air accompanied by the beauty of the lake, and listen to the stories and tales of the farmers that take care of this land.

Views of the tea plantation surrounded by mountains (Yuchi Township)



Top left: Black tea is engraved in the memory of the Yuchi people and is part of their cultural heritage where Tea Kneading is part of the experience. (Yuchi Township)

Top right: Sun Moon Lake Black Tea Culture Season opening ceremony, former chairman of the Yuchi Black Tea growers Cooperative, Liao Xuehi; excitement behind the scenes. (photo courtesy of Yang Tai Sheng)

Bottom right inset: Tea Master demonstrates the Way of the Tea (茶藝) using Red Jade Yuchi Tea.

Bottom: lake and mountain scenery is the best companion for Yuchi tea.

and becoming the most popular companion element to Sun Moon Lake tourism.

Since then, further innovations in the marketing standards of Yuchi Black Tea have been implemented. For instance, in 2018, the Farmers Cooperative and the Yuchi Government began the promotion of the “Black Tea Flavor Wheel,” incorporating similar grading quality and tasting standards as those of coffee, in terms of color, flavor, tea brew appearance, consistency, as well as other elements. The Black Tea Flavor Wheel is a free tool for farmers, further making the promotion and quality control of black tea more diverse.

In 2020, the Sun Moon Lake Black Tea Culture Season was promoted under the moniker “Where is the red jade?” Anticipation began to boil up, causing a lot of positive feedback, attention, and discussion. In recent years, Ruby Tea has become the new darling of Yuchi black tea. With its particular cinnamon and mint aroma and its unique high mountain climate growing conditions, Number 18 Ruby tea stands out among all kinds of black tea. As festivities neared, the Yuchi Government issued creative promotional tools calling for everyone to search for Red Jade. This unique promotion created a favorable atmosphere, enticing a unique response from consumers.



In recent years more and more people visit the Xiangshan Visitor Center (向山行政暨遊客中心) during Sun Moon Lake Black Tea Culture Season to witness the early autumn cool weather with a cup of warm black tea in hand, smell the tea-infused air accompanied by the beauty of the lake, and to listen to the stories and tales of the farmers that take care of this land. This is the most unique and beautiful scene in Yuchi. I cordially invite you, together with your five senses, to experience the hundred-year-old black tea heritage and our most beautiful hometown—Yuchi township. 🌿



Kuntoro Wiryanto

A suiseki lover from Bandar Lampung

By Budi Sulisty, Indonesia

Photos courtesy Kuntoro Wiryanto



Above: Kuntoro Wiryanto with his bonsai

Bottom: Near mountain view, West Sumatra – L 43 W 22 H 18 cm

When you talk about Suiseki in Indonesia today, the story is not complete without mentioning Kuntoro Wiryanto. He is a fanatic suiseki lover from Bandar Lampung, a city in the Southern part of Sumatra. Kuntoro is one of a few people who always joins in the big suiseki exhibition in Indonesia, and mostly his stones have won some awards in the show. During a big display in Bandung some six years ago when we invited foreign guests, including Kuno Kobayashi and Tom Elias as the competition judges, he got the third-best award



Top: Stream, from West Sumatra
L 30 W 18 H 37 cm

Bottom: Volcano, Lingbi stone, China
L 27 W 14 H 7 cm





in the exhibition for his stone called *Volcano*. Later on, during another big Exhibition in Bandung some three years ago, he won six awards from the twenty awards chosen among all exhibited stones. It was a really outstanding achievement.

Lake by the mountain, from Sei Batanghari, West Sumatra
L 37 W 24 H 12 cm

Kuntoro was born in Bandar Lampung. He moved to Jakarta to continue his high school study. Later on, he entered the Economic Faculty until he got his degree. He then returned to Bandar Lampung started to work on his own on a trading company. His business grew well, so he opened new business lines, mainly in Expedition and Hotel. Some of his big suiseki are displayed in his hotel.

He has liked bonsai and suiseki since he was a teenager. When he attended the APAC 9 in Bali in 2007, he saw many beautiful bonsai and suiseki exhibited. He was so much impressed and really fell in love with viewing stone art.

Bit by bit, he started collecting quality suiseki. He also has some good bonsai, but his main priority is suiseki. Landscape stones are his favorite, but later on, he also collected object stones and even pattern stones. He likes to collect historical stones. No wonder many fine suiseki from old collectors who do not do suiseki anymore are in his collections. It is not too much to say that he is one of the best collectors in Indonesia. 🌿



Top: *Ninja*, from West Sumatra
L 12 W 8 H 17 cm

Bottom: *The Shelter*, from
Sijunjung, West Sumatra
L 35 W 22 H 17 cm



*Top: The Golden Dragon, from Aceh
L 20 W 7 H 15 cm
Inset: Buddha bless you from West Java
L 10 W 8 H 16 cm
Bottom: Thousand windows, from Aceh shown in two orientations
L 32 W 11 H 16 cm*







Facing page, top: Plateau from Sei Batanghari, West Sumatra L 43 W 21 L 10 cm

Facing page, bottom: Small stones from various places

Top: Desserts from Various places

Bottom: Seven Steps, from West Sumatra L 38 W 22 H 20



20 Years Later

Chamaecyparis obtusa var. *Tsuyama*, the perfect species for the Chokkan style.

By Massimo Bandera, Italy



One of the main Chokkan styles in bonsai is undoubtedly represented by Hinoki, the sacred Japanese cypress,

There are over 200 varieties, but for bonsai, the most used are Tsuyama, which remains spinach-green in winter. Sekka, a very dwarf variety, becomes amaranth red in winter and is used a lot for shohin.

This Tsuyama is an import from the late nineties, but I cannot trace it back to the production nursery.

Here I present a masterpiece, a *Chamaecyparis obtusa* var. *Tsuyama* that I have been following for twenty years. As well as production, teaching, and sales, I work with about forty collectors. This means that I go to the collections carrying out routine maintenance and sometimes renovations, as in this case. Clearly, the collectors by nature trust their bonsai professional, and a very close relationship is created and often one of true friendship.

An important intervention in 2001 reduced the height, where the plant went from 115cm to 90cm. With a new *tenjin* feature, some branches were eliminated for better asymmetry—according to the chokkan style in the golden ratio. Then it was placed in a valuable and old Tokoname pot.

The top right three photos show the 2001 processing: Here, you can see the choice of branches for the new design and, above all, the creation of the *tenjin* that significantly lowered the crown. Notice the trunk whose diameter was half. The Hinoki grows slowly, so I have applied half a kilo of organic fertilizer per year to have such growth.

2009, Photo Pangrazi: After eight years, the studio photo reveals the new mature design: the apex replacement has created the desired effect.

2017: Now mature, the specimen shows itself in these Japanese bonsai Tsuyama cultivars' classic design. To create conicity and triangularity, the *tenjin* is now hidden by the foliage. It has grown a lot. 🌲

Watch for a comprehensive article on the Chokkan Style by Massimo Bandera in an upcoming issue of *Bonsai & Stone Appreciation* magazine. Ed.

2009

2001



2017



Chamaecyparis obtusa

Chamaecyparis obtusa (Japanese cypress, hinoki cypress or hinoki) is a species of cypress native to central Japan in East Asia, and widely cultivated in the temperate northern hemisphere for its high quality timber and ornamental qualities, with many cultivars commercially available.

Chamaecyparis obtusa is a slow-growing tree which grows to 35 m (115 ft) tall with a trunk up to 1 m (3 ft 3 in) in diameter. The bark is dark red-brown. The leaves are scale-like, 2–4 mm (0.079–0.157 in) long, blunt tipped (obtuse), green above, and green below with a white stomatal band at the base of each scale-leaf. The cones are globose, 8–12 mm (0.31–0.47 in) in diameter, with 8–12 scales arranged in opposite pairs.

The plant is widespread in Japan. The related *Chamaecyparis pisifera* (sawara cypress) can be readily distinguished in its having pointed tips to the leaves and smaller cones. A similar cypress found on Taiwan is treated by different botanists as either a variety of this species (as *Chamaecyparis obtusa* var. *formosana*) or as a separate species *Chamaecyparis taiwanensis*; it differs in having smaller cones (6–9 mm diameter) with smaller scales, and leaves with a more acute apex.

It is grown for its very high quality timber in Japan, where it is used as a material for building palaces, temples, shrines, traditional *noh* theatres, baths, table tennis blades and *masu* (Originally a measuring cup for foods such as rice and soy sauce, the Masu was used to measure rice when it was still used as a form of currency.) The wood is lemon-scented, light pinkish-brown, with a rich, straight grain, and is highly rot-resistant. For example, Horyuji Temple and Osaka Castle are built from hinoki wood. The hinoki grown in Kiso, used for building Ise Shrine, are called *go-shin-boku*, or “divine trees.”



Kurakichi, Kenichi and Daiki

Above: An alcove commemorating Kurakichi and Kenichi Abe, shown in center inset with the young Daiki.

Bottom, left to right: Daiki, Marco, Kenichi and Frederico.



The Abe Dynasty and a Chronicle of an Unforgettable Day

Text and photos by Marco Tarozzo, BCI-BCSA instructor, Italy

Translation from Japanese to Italian of Kurakichi Abe's writings by Dr. Norika Sato



Planing the Trip

As in recent years, this year too, I organized a trip to Japan with some friends and bonsai colleagues during the Kokufu-ten, perhaps the most important bonsai exhibition and competition.

This year, the program we drafted was more ambitious from a bonsai point of view. It included a visit to the gardens of some of the most famous masters, which some of us had already visited. For others, it was the first time ever. The visit I cared about most, and that I had never had the opportunity to make was the one to the garden of master Kenichi Abe and his son Daiki. They are respectively the son and grandson of Kurakichi Abe.

A few years ago, I read and reread my first book on bonsai by Kurakichi Abe, *How to create a pine bonsai*, until it was worn out.

I first met Mr. Kenichi and his son Daiki in June 2019 when I attended one of their seminars that focused on the styling and management of pine bonsai. From the first moment, I had a feeling, and then the certainty of being in the presence of people very willing to transfer all their knowledge to bonsai enthusiasts.

It was precisely this situation of ease, both technical, cultural, and personal, that strongly prompted me to ask if it would be possible to visit their garden if we found ourselves in Japan.

When I started drawing up the travel program, Daiki Abe recommended an interpreter and guide who would greatly help us develop our day together. This is how I met Dr. Norika Sato, an excellent translator from Japanese into Italian, who was our interpreter during the visit. If someone needs an excellent translator and guide, I advise you not to hesitate to contact her at her email address: norikasato@hotmail.com.

Norika then arranged our trip from Tokyo to Fukushima to meet the Abe family.

The Abe Dynasty

At this point, I believe it is correct to dedicate the next part of this story to the explanation of what the surname Abe means for the world of bonsai.

As I said earlier, the first book I read about bonsai was a small Japanese text translated into Italian called *How to create a pine bonsai*. It was written by a great exponent of bonsai, the Abe family's patriarch, Mr. Kurakichi.

It is a small text from the point of view of the number of pages but remarkably rich in notions and indications for those like me who were, (and are), full of curiosity and have a desire to learn.

Much of the story I'm about to tell you about Mr. Kurakichi I received from his grandson Daiki, and it was translated from Japanese by Norika Sato. Listening to and reading part of Patriarch Abe's life allowed me to understand him better and make very profound considerations on man and bonsai and understand a lot about how to interact with Kenichi and Daiki's bonsai.

Kurakichi, at the age of 11, found himself orphaned, the third child of the five survivors of what he called "the great devil," the pandemic caused by the Spanish flu



Top and bottom: Two examples of the many white pines in the Abe garden.





Top: The Abe garden, our translator Dr. Norika Sato and Kenichi Abe.

Middle: Daiki and Kenichi Abe with the photo album showing photos of their recent trip to Udine, Italy.

Bottom left: Kenichi Abe.

Bottom right: Frederico, Kenichi and Daiki.



virus. From 1918 to 1920, it caused about fifty million deaths in the world. In Japan alone, it infected 23 million people, causing the death of about 390,000 of these.

Faced with the fact that the five brothers were left alone, it is clear that they immediately had to work hard to survive. Kurakichi made a significant decision. He decided that he would dedicate himself to the growth of his younger brother, who was two years old. He did not want this young boy adopted by another family that could have raised him with less difficulty.

So for years to come, after pledging their belongings to pay for doctors and medicines, they remained without a home. The young Kurakichi did not attend school but devoted himself to his brothers, especially to the younger Yoshio, committing himself, body, and soul.

His passion for insects, herbs, and trees, present from birth, increased, which led him to build a garden to keep the trees that he was gradually collecting.

Around the 1920s in Japan, the *Goyomatsu*, the white pine or five-needle pine, was very popular, so Kurakichi went to Mount Azuma to collect some. After sowing or planting, with time, he increased his capacity for cultivation. Propagating and transplanting into metal boxes with holes in the bottom served as a substitute for the real pots he did not have the financial resources to buy. He was so skilled at growing the precious tree that he became the benchmark for his own and neighboring prefectures.

When the opportunity presented itself, he dared to ask a client of his, a brother-in-law to the best bonsai master who lived in Sugamo in Tokyo, to recommend Kurakichi to the master because he had decided that bonsai would become his life.

The time came to leave the family and go to the master where he intended to learn the secrets of styling bonsai trees with the *Kukan Yubi* technique. This literally means "there is beauty in empty spaces." It is wonderful to recall the image of the then very young master Kurakichi Abe, only 25 years old.

In Kurakichi's words, "A frog in the well does not know the great sea, so I decided to go and see the





great sea. I remembered a little story in the elementary school book. It was about a Larix tree smaller than the schoolchildren themselves when it was planted in the schoolyard. But the pine thought: I too will grow so big that everyone will have to raise their eyes upwards to look at me. In no time, it became a huge tree.

I devoted myself to bonsai, thinking about this story night and day.

My teacher told me I have never had a student like you, and now I am relieved because you are here. So I continued to follow his Kūkan Yūbi styling technique because I wanted to pass it on in the future.”

Kyūka-en and the Emperor’s Bonsai Trees

After the World War, Abe Kurakichi worked for the Kyūka-en nursery in Omiya, which was in charge of curating the Imperial Palace’s bonsai. As a nursery member, he too could have the opportunity to go to the Palace. When they revealed this to him, he was “really amazed, in seventh heaven, with a heart full of joy,” and could not help but thank the Sugamo master and the nursery, Kyūka-en. He was convinced that “there was nothing more honorable in the world of bonsai.”

The first time Abe went to the Imperial Palace to work with bonsai was in November 1955, in the same year his Goyomatsu was exhibited at the Kokufu-ten.

In his days of work at the imperial garden, it happened more than a few times that the emperor Hirohito, who was very fond of plants, met him and stopped to talk to him. He asked about what he was doing, asking for information on the technique of using thread, copper wire for modeling, and enhancing spaces on plants.

“At that moment, too much emotion made my mind fly in the clouds. Thanks to bonsai, I thought that I



could receive the emperor’s precious words and that this great fortune was due to my great passion for bonsai.

So I told myself that all the sacrifices I had made as a child had really served me.”

Kurakichi Abe, at that time, resided in Itabashi, Tokyo, at the home of his younger brother Yoshio to whom he had dedicated his youth. During one of the days spent together, he told him for the first time about when Yoshio was very small.

“When you were 2 years old, I did not want you to be adopted by another family, and I told the older brothers that I would take care of you even if I could not attend school. Now I can sleep in your house while I work at the Imperial Palace, and if we had given you up for adoption to someone, I could never have received

Top: Tokonoma with a pine of rare lightness and refinement (miyabi).

Bottom: A Tokonoma with kusamono created by Daiki Abe.



Top: The dishes prepared by Kenichi's wife are made with local products grown directly by the family.

Middle: A meeting of cultures discussing bonsai over a pleasant lunch.

your help. The sacrifices I made as a child are now well rewarded by these happy days."

The Legacy

I believe that in what you have read so far, all the simplicity, goodness, perseverance, and passion of a simple but fantastic man emerges. When I learned this part of his story, I thought how beautiful it is to know this facet of a man like this who is so important for the art of bonsai.

It often happens that one is led to imagine these people as "immortals," men with "incredible powers." Then, knowing their history, one realizes that it all comes not from the fact that they have had something more, but because they were able to give something more. Their giving was rewarded during their life.

Master Abe today has an heir, his son Kenichi. He takes care of the plants he has grown and which are well visible on the benches of the nursery he manages with his son Daiki's help. Together they continue to carry forward what has been learned from patriarch Kurakichi Abe.

The Garden in the Snow

And here we are now, in the present, and my visit to their garden.

Arriving Fukushima by bullet train from Ueno station, we find our interpreter Norika, who is not difficult to recognize. She has a beautiful bag with the Italian flag printed on one side.

The weather is not the best. It is very gray, a cold wind blows, and the forecasts say that there is some

possibility of snow. It is worth saying that the weather forecasts in Japan are as wrong as trains and subways are wrong, that is, never. Therefore it will snow!

We quickly hire two taxis, and in about 10 minutes, we are at the Abe garden. Kenichi welcomes us with an extremely courteous greeting, and immediately afterward, Daiki also arrives. Right away, I lose some of my traveling companions who go straight to the benches where the potted trees are displayed. They are mostly white pines, which, even if I am observing them from far away, give the impression of being very old and at the same time in excellent shape from the point of view of cultivation.

After recovering the "missing" friends with the help of Norika, we begin the introductions and listen to Kenichi, who gives us the first notions about white pines.

From the words that Norika is translating for us, I discover that most of the bonsai I am seeing are defined as "absolutely not for sale." They were sown by Kenichi and some even by Kurakichi. Above all, the master Abe remembers the development, the settings, the twisting of the branches, and the accidental problems. In short, better than a computer!

Questions about growing trees follow one after the other. The methods to be implemented, to get adequate results in the foliage formation, and suddenly, the wind increases a little more, and the predictions come true. It starts to snow.

Lunch, Sake and Goyomatsu

After almost an hour and a half of discussion outdoors, and seeing that the weather was getting worse, I tell Norika that maybe it would be better to say goodbye and go to the train station to return to Tokyo. In response, I am told that this is not what was expected. We are invited to enter the house, sit, and continue our conversation in the warmth. Afterward, we will have the pleasure of being guests for lunch.

I swear I'm happy as a child given the first football jersey of his favorite team. We have many questions to ask about the techniques, cultivation, grafting, and display of white pines. Having even more time to get to know all this is just what we need.

We enter the house and immediately take a seat in a large room with a central table. We are invited to sit down and put our legs under the table because covered by a long blanket/tablecloth, they will be heated by the heat emanating from a stove.

We continue to ask questions and receive answers on the cultivation of pine bonsai. In the meantime, the first hot tea arrives. So we also meet the master's wife and the grandchildren, Daiki's children, Arata, his son, and Shiori, his daughter. Pleasant and lively.

After another very informative chat, Daiki gets up and takes a photo album from inside the drawer and hands it to us, Federico and Davide (travel companions and bonsai friends). We expect to see the photos of some pine trees or those of his grandfather Kurakichi, and we start leafing through it.



Instead, they are the photos that portray them with us a few months earlier in Florence (UBI congress) and in Udine (workshop), which were shown to us out of courtesy.

We appreciate the gesture and the level of courtesy that has been reserved for us.

Ready for lunch, we move to the next room, and we settle down only after expressing our satisfaction with the tokonoma staging that has been prepared for us. It is a pine of rare lightness and refinement (*miyabi*) accompanied by a *kusamono* in which Daiki is extremely capable.

Lunch is very pleasant. The dishes prepared by Kenichi's wife are made with local products grown directly by the family. The sake is excellent and will be finished soon.

Don't worry, there is a reserve, but we'll finish that too.

They, Japanese, we, Venetians; the battle is on an equal footing!

After lunch, we move to the greenhouses where about a thousand newly grafted white pine seedlings are kept. Then we go to Daiki's laboratory, where the children, watched over by their mother, Mrs. Kayo, are pruning. Yes, that's so! Pruning pine trees that need to be grafted.

The time has come to leave, and therefore, we are squeezing the time to say goodbye. Aren't we going to joke? There is sake to finish.

The Japan vs. Veneto clash must be consummated until the end.

We then go back into the house, re-settle down, eat some sweets, and finish the sake.

I am now like that kid in the football suit I was telling you about before, only now I'm a little bit drunk as only a happy adult can be.

We leave the house. It no longer snows, and there are some rays of sunshine trying to break through the clouds.

We all gather for a photo together and, really, I have the feeling that I have known this family forever.

The friendliness and hospitality of the Japanese people that I studied in books (*omotenashi*), today, I have genuinely experienced in person.

Thank you. Thank you. I don't know how many times I feel like saying it, but I don't think it is enough, so thanks again!

A run to the station, the Fukushima/Tokyo train, and we are in the megalopolis in a short time, but my thoughts bring me back to that garden and in that house.

And those special people.

I relive the day thinking about words, expressions, gestures, and bonsai. Bonsai that I like to define as "an experience that unites people."

What an unforgettable day that I continue reliving. 🌲

Top left: Norika in the greenhouses where about a thousand newly grafted white pine seedlings are kept.

Top right: A shohin white pine with dramatic exposed roots.

Middle left: Kenichi's grandson Arata pruning a pine that will be grafted.

The Beauty of Soft

Ficus pedunculosa

By Min Hsuan Lo, and Andrew Lo, Taiwan



“Materials such as paints, canvases, and pens are objective. Bonsai creators are subjective cultural consciousnesses. Subjective and objective integration can outline touching works.”

— Min Hsuan Lo

Cultural Background

2005, Washington DC, USA. On the right side of Capitol Hill, I found a wisteria wall that left a deep impression in my heart and would profoundly impact my future creations.

Ficus bonsai development in Taiwan seems to have experienced a rise and fall in its more than three hundred year history. It used to take the lead but then sank into obscurity. There were fewer and fewer Ficus in bonsai exhibitions. Thus it was getting less popular. It is hard to believe that the last century was the golden age of Ficus. However, I have faith in Ficus that no matter how the environment changes, it will eventually shine again if it keeps evolving.

This is a short story about my personal Ficus creation. It started with my first Ficus creation, which won the Golden Award in the first Ficus Bonsai Association Award in 1994. After that, my second and third works were all innovative and received rave reviews. Like a tide. Thanks to the positive reviews, I was invited to hundreds of lectures at home and abroad in elementary schools, universities, and professional bonsai courses

to share my experience and professional knowledge. In these courses, Ficus is one of the essential elements.

Most of my early Ficus bonsai creations were masculine, like the ancient giant tree on a great plain. On the contrary, feminine trees like vines were rarely seen. Although these masculine trees' craftsmanship and spirit were highly mature, I still felt a lack of pleasure and was bored. Thankfully, after years of serious thinking and attempts, I gradually blazed a trail for the Ficus family, which really spiced up my life!

Connection to Nature and Travel Notes

Kenting, Taiwan

During the summer vacation of my second year of senior high school, I participated in the Hengchun Hiking Team. Our visit to Kenting for a week left an unforgettable memory. After getting older, I visited



2009, Spain, Spring. My good friend, Master David Benavente, took me to an old castle to meet this maple.



2005, Los Angeles, CA, USA. Bonsai Master Ernie Kuo brought me to the seaside in Los Angeles to see this Cajeput, (*Melaleuca quinquenervia*).

Most of my early Ficus bonsai creations were masculine, like the ancient giant tree on a great plain.

Top: My first Ficus creation, which won the Golden Award in the first Ficus Bonsai Association Award in 1994.
Bottom left and right: My second and third works were all innovative and received rave reviews.



Kenting again and again, whether it was a family trip or field trips with my bonsai students, no less than a hundred times.

Kenting National Park, well known for its tropical climate, is one of Taiwan's most popular tourist spots. Located in the southernmost part of Taiwan, Kenting is surrounded by the Pacific Ocean, the Taiwan Strait, and the Luzon Strait. Numerous typhoons in summer and autumn and strong downhill winds in winter over an area full of coastal reefs and cliffs affect the plants there. These external forces throughout the year age the plants dramatically, creating extreme bends.

Kenting occupies a significant position in the history of Taiwan's bonsai development. Counting the early varieties of plants in Kenting, from *Pemphis acidula*, *Murraya paniculata*, *Diospyros ferrea*, *Premna obtusifolia*, *Hibiscus tiliaceus*, *Gelonium aequoreum* to *Ficus gibbosa*, a large number of materials suitable for bonsai have been found. Most of the famous early trees originated from Kenting. The *Ficus pedunculosa* recorded in this article is almost the last species adopted in Kenting.

In nearly nine hundred species of *Ficus*, most of them are huge, while *Ficus pedunculosa* and *Ficus gibbosa*

are scrubby plants. Originally, *Ficus pedunculosa* was born in southern Taiwan's coastal reef area, mixed with other plants like *Pemphis acidula*, *Premna obtusifolia*, and *Hibiscus tiliaceus* in the intertidal zone. Gradually, they moved inland, far from the shore, and grew into small trees, except for *Ficus pedunculosa*. Not migrating inland, *Ficus pedunculosa* plants stay in the intertidal zone and the coastal reef area. This plant endures harsh weather almost all year round, from the typhoons in summer and the downhill winds in winter. Owing to the severe environment, *Ficus pedunculosa* become intricate and changeful, especially the ones growing on the windward cliffs.

Travel Notes

I am lucky to have the opportunity of traveling around the world because of bonsai. On my travels, researching old giant and unique trees was my personal hobby. Below are some pictures that highlight this interest!

2005 Washington, DC, USA. On the right side of Capitol Hill, I found a wisteria wall. I got out of the car to take pictures, but two security guards found and expelled me, so I could only take photos from the car. The wisteria on the wall left a deep impression in my heart and would profoundly impact my future creations.

2005 Los Angeles, CA, USA. Thanks to Bonsai Master Ernie Kuo, he brought me to the seaside in Los Angeles to see the Cajeput (*Melaleuca quinquenervia*).

2009 Hungary, Spring. I met this massive ivy on the way to a Demo & Lecture.

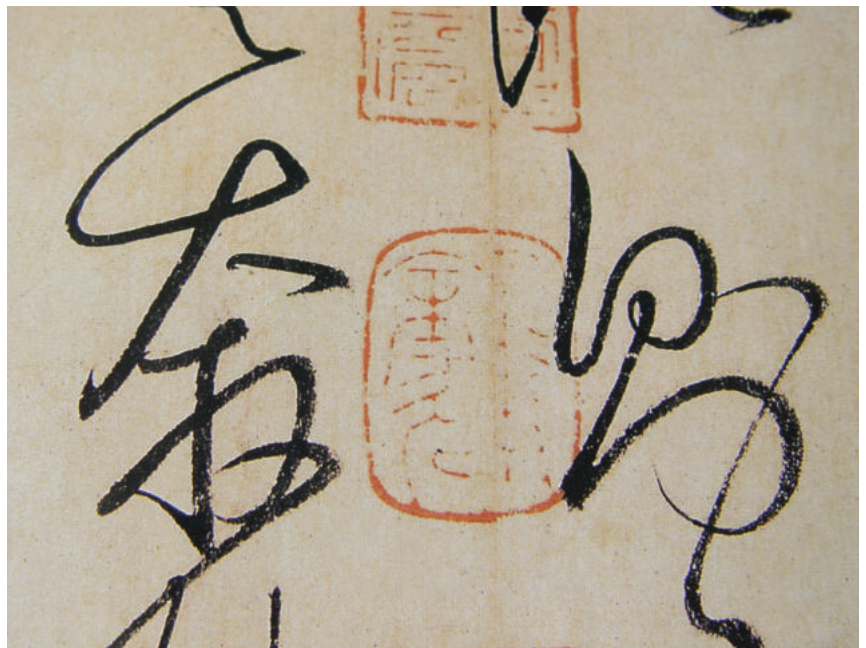
2009 Spain, Spring. My good friend, Master David Benavente, took me to an old castle to meet this maple.

The process of creating calligraphy in bonsai

I obtained the first *Ficus pedunculosa* material in 2000, hence the name Millennium. Straight lines and curves mirror each other, seeking harmony in strong contrast, and capturing tranquility amidst the noise. In this too uncertain age, the blurred and lingering thoughts are precipitated into old trees and withered vines, rendering the image of spring in the heart.

“For such fresh and challenging material, I couldn't let go of the desire and sense of mission to create, so I went to the bank to raise funds and buy it at a high price.”

At the beginning of the Millennium, everything is full of new hope. For many years, I have been fascinated by the Tang Dynasty monk Huai Su's cursive script, thinking hard about how to “write calligraphy into bonsai.” I was ecstasy to get this material, for it was possible to add cursive elements into it, and then the style of my bonsai would become more diversified. Works followed with *Juniper*, *Bougainvillea*, *Premna serratifolia*, and *Eugenia uniflora*, imprinted in Lo style: wild and cursive.



Top: 2009 Hungary, Spring. I met this massive ivy on the way to a Demo & Lecture.

Middle: Tang Dynasty monk Huai Su's cursive script, inspired me to “write calligraphy into bonsai.”

Bottom: The cursive character of a drawing in the *Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden* was also a source of inspiration.

First tree: Millennium, *Ficus pedunculosa*

(Top right)

2000 Spring. The elegant main stem and the stems on the slightly messy side seem to be weak, making full use of the slender lines to weave intoxicating dreams.

(Middle left)

2000 Spring. While the buds are not yet lignified, aluminum wire is used to adjust the direction. Used chopsticks to support the left branch and cut the stem that grows out of the root.

(Middle right)

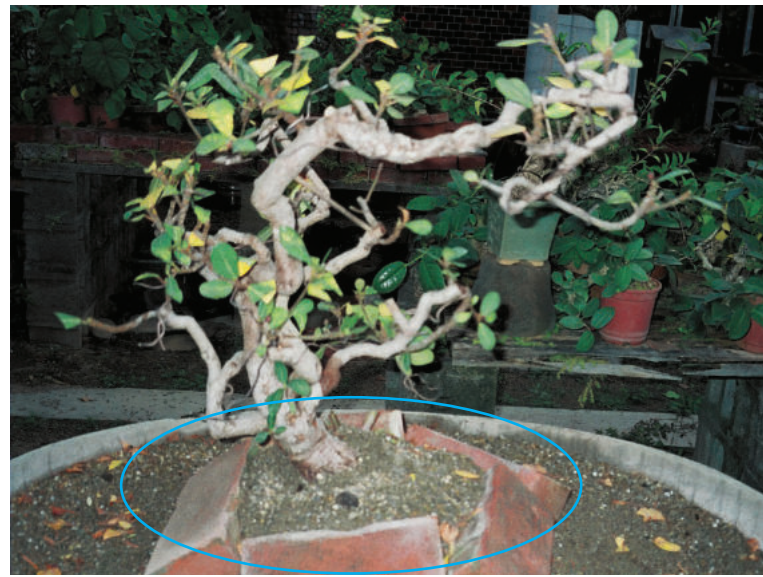
2001 Autumn. Moved to a large training pot and raised the root base. Covered it with sand temporarily and built a wall with bricks for protection.

(Bottom left)

2002/02/05. Adjusted the angle and orientation of the branches intensively. The main trunk is slightly adjusted from the right to the left and rises. The root base is not yet stable, supported by wooden sticks.

(Bottom right)

2003/11/04. After three years of fertilization in the training pot, order is seen in the chaos.



(Top right)

2004. Move to display pot in 2004.

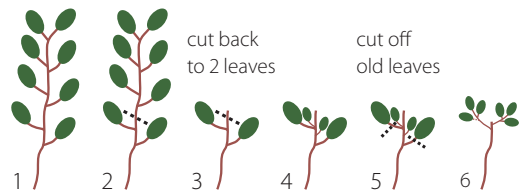
2005/01/05. Sphagnum moss covers the pot's surface to keep humidity.

(Middle left)

2005/01/06. Cut in winter to get shorter intervals.

(Middle right)

2006/07/02. Prune branches to 2 leaves. About ten days later new buds emerge on the pruned branches. Then cut the old leaves on these branches. The new buds will be perfect, and twig die back in summer is avoided.



(Bottom left)

2006/01/18. Changed the soil and raised the level of the root base.

(Bottom right)

2006/01/18. The lower right side is not solid enough to keep the leaves and shoots and promote balance.





2006/01/18. Styling roots.



Adjust the position of the root with aluminum wire and covered it with coarse sand.



2007/10/04. Above, defoliate and prune in Autumn.



2009/07/31. Below, before defoliation



2008/08/24. The thin roots are removed, and the thick roots are retained. Covered with moss to keep it beautiful and healthy.





(Top left)

2009/07/31. Cut the leaves.

(Upper right)

2009/08/06. The soil is dried for about seven days after the leaves are removed, and the branches are soft and less likely to break, and then wrap with aluminum wire.



(Inset)

View of backside

(Bottom)

2010/04/26. The buds begin to sprout. Spring is in the air.





A close-up view of the roots, upper right and middle.

Through deep-thinking and cultural awareness, the external image of the quirky, non-beauty, and non-ugly is transformed into a unique image.

2010/08/04.

Millennium, *Ficus pedunculosa*, 82 cm.
Green, unripe fruit.





Second *Ficus pedunculosa*

2000 Spring. Above. Re challenging the new style! Breaking away from traditional norms and logical thinking and looking for the essence of life that is full of flowers. Keep all branches and expand the pattern.

(Top right)

2009/01/26. The leaves gradually turn yellow and wither in winter!



2008/08/03. *Ficus pedunculosa*, 92 cm. The bright red buds gradually turn green in about ten days. Pressed the shutter during their most brilliant period to retain the image in eternity.

An Adventure in Virtual Bonsai

The Rocky Mountain Bonsai Society Tackles Pandemic Obstacles



By Tom Anglewicz and Paul Koening, USA
Photos courtesy RMBS

Photographer Mike Green documenting every detail of one of Lou DeHerrera's elephant bush bonsai.

2020 and the pandemic it brought with it, presented the Rocky Mountain Bonsai Society (RMBS) with a unique set of challenges that demanded flexibility and creative response.

We began the year with a great set of programs and guest artists. The logical assumption that projected meetings and workshops would occur in person, indeed in the great new facility that the Denver Botanic Gardens (DBG) recently constructed to accommodate the numerous plant societies and other activities.

Ominous News and Our Last In-person Meeting

Early in February, several of us traveled to Japan to participate in a wonderful tour and visit to the Kokufu-ten bonsai exhibit organized by Bjorn Bjorholm and his wife, Nanxi. We had heard of the strange new virus occurring in China, but Bjorn assured us that there were no known infections in Japan at that time. The tour was terrific, but by the time we were preparing to fly home, news of the virus was more ominous. When we left Japan on Valentine's Day, a cruise ship in Yokohama had many sick passengers. The Japanese were trying to figure out what to do with them. Returning

to the States, it still seemed that this was primarily an Asian problem, but we wore masks on the flight home.

In early March, we staged a bonsai repotting workshop for our sister club in Colorado Springs. On March 3rd, we held what would be our last in-person meeting of 2020, focusing on the development of Pinyon Pines as bonsai. At this point, it was clear that the corona virus was in full swing internationally. Our board decided that in-person meetings and workshops were not safe or prudent under these conditions. The Denver Botanic Gardens also cautioned all plant societies that it would likely prohibit meetings within their facilities until further notice.

The Show Must Go On

Starting in April, we utilized the Zoom™ computer platform to host our monthly membership meetings and programs. Over several months our members became more comfortable with this format, and attendance at our monthly “virtual” meetings has grown. We asked that all presentations to the club, by members or guest artists, be done remotely, either “live” or pre-recorded. After several experiments with this format, we have concluded that the most successful presentations are pre-recorded and edited by the presenter, who can also



From Left to right: member Derrick Starkey, photographer Mike Green, and Show Chair Paul Koenning. This is one of two pop up bonsai photo booth sessions put on by Rocky Mountain Bonsai Society to safely and professionally document the memberships' bonsai for the 51st annual show. As you can see masks are on, and there is plenty of social distancing.

be available during the Zoom meeting to comment and answer questions. Guest artist Jan Culek pre-recorded a demo for our November meeting and even joined us live from his home in the Czech Republic, at 3:00 AM his time!

Given the restrictions imposed by COVID-19, we wrestled with what to do about our annual bonsai and viewing stone show, which we typically stage in a huge tent at the center of the Botanic Gardens. Should we go forward in person? Should we cancel the show altogether? Or, should we attempt to produce a “virtual” show, whatever that might mean?

Here’s how RMBS Show Chair Paul Koenning describes the situation, “Taking on the show chair position for the 51st annual bonsai celebration was supposed to be easy work on the heels of the large 50th yearly show. Follow the same blueprint, tone it down a bit, and you have a prepackaged show ready to go, with plenty of detailed notes from previous years. That is not what happened, as COVID changed everyone’s plans and abilities for the year.

“Once our board realized an in-person show was not likely to happen and was also not a responsible decision for the board to support, the question came down to whether to have a show in 2020 or to cancel. The world of social interaction during COVID had already changed drastically at this point. As a club and a society, I felt it was imperative to remain active and continue providing a mental refuge. Even if our show was a small virtual effort, we could gather and post photos to our social media platforms and website to say we still had a show. I knew more was possible, but wanted to accomplish that at least.”

In 2019, at the behest of RMBS president Andy Berry, our website was completely redesigned and upgraded, utilizing the volunteer services of a professional, who is now also a bonsai enthusiast! Given this vital resource, we determined that the focus of our efforts would be



Photographer Mike Green having some fun making bonsai compositions by species and or styling type.

to transform the website into an electronic venue for the 2020 virtual show.

Photography in a Safe Open-air Location

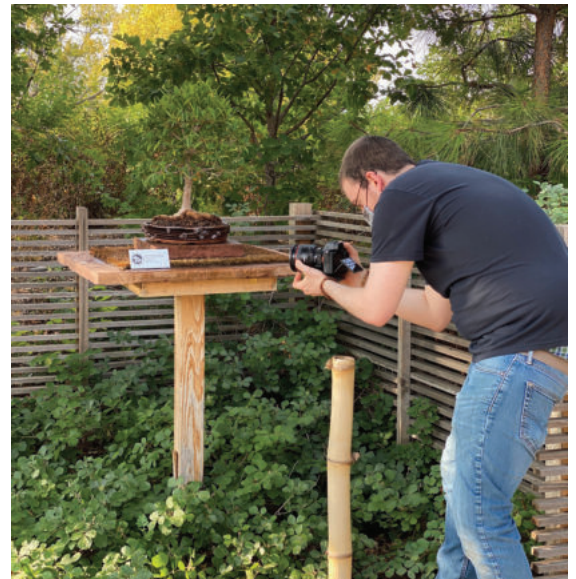
Show Chair Paul Koenning, “For the 50th annual show, I had managed the photography, so I also took that on for the 51st annual show. The challenge was how to set up a COVID-safe photobooth and to convince the membership to transport their trees to it for the 2020 show? My wife is a fine artist who usually travels a portion of the art festival circuit with her tent to display and sell her paintings. Because of COVID, the tent, lighting setup, grey wall panels, and other creature comforts were available for me to use. This worked wonderfully and enabled our professional photographer Mike Green to create a portable bonsai photo booth. I was able to identify empty parking lots and permission to use them at two diverse locations. Now we had safe open-air locations and the ability for excellent bonsai photos to be taken.

“Everyone was hesitant about how many of our members would actually participate and cart their trees to an empty parking lot for a quick photo. In the end, the turnout was great, and the quality of the photoshoot energized the membership. It seemed to be

Top left: Show Chair Paul Koenning, and Producer Han Soto practice and prepare for the video sequences to be shot for the virtual show.

Top right: Video tech Billy Vinson taking detailed photos of every tree on display at Denver Botanic Gardens.

Middle left: Video tech Billy Vinson, and Producer Han Soto making settings adjustments to be sure equipment and lighting are correct before the shoot.



Lower middle left: Member at Large Dave Regan making micro adjustments to trees to be sure all bonsai are ready for the show.

Bottom: Producer Han Soto preparing Previous President Tom Anglewicz, Denver Botanic Gardens Bonsai Curator Larry Jackel, and 2020 Artist of the Year Jim Lantis; for their video presentations for the show.



a pleasant surprise to the members and spoke volumes about the level of quality we intended to bring to the full virtual show.”

A Small Exhibit at Hosokawa Pavilion

A breakthrough occurred when senior member Larry Jackel, who is also the curator of the bonsai collection at the Denver Botanic Gardens, suggested that, for the show’s duration, the Hosokawa Bonsai Pavilion at the Gardens would be transformed into a limited show venue. We temporarily replaced trees in the permanent DBG collection with member trees. Although this option could not be a real substitute for the annual in-person show, which typically contains 70–80 trees and viewing stones, it would provide a week-long display of up to 30 trees visible to DBG visitors. For security reasons, we elected not to include viewing stones in this unsupervised exhibit.

In addition to photography, members were asked whether they were willing to have one of their trees exhibited at the Hosokawa Pavilion during the week of the show. A separate selection committee identified the trees to be so exhibited based on diversity of species, diversity of members, representative quality, and design excellence. The result was a display of about 25 trees that provided a broad range of bonsai experiences to casual visitors to the Gardens.

Adding Rich Media

The physical display at the DBG bonsai pavilion also provided several other components for the virtual show, all of which were recorded for inclusion on our website by professional videographers.

First, it enabled show chair Paul Koenning to record an introduction to both the physical exhibit and the virtual show on our website.

Second, it afforded a venue for our RMBS Artist of the Year, Wyoming resident Jim Lantis, who was given the opportunity to place three trees in the exhibit. Jim was interviewed by show chair Koenning, and that conversation is in the show.

And lastly, Larry Jackel and I did a walk-through



and commentary on selected trees in the Pavilion to provide visitors to the virtual show with some insights into the diversity of bonsai and its practitioners.

All three of these videos are available on the RMBS website, along with two recorded demonstrations: Vince Lee's styling of an ancient Olive (*Olea europea*); and further refinement by Todd Schlafer and Will Kerns of the massive 500-year-old "Thermopolis Juniper," collected initially by the late Bob Kataoka, a founder of the Rocky Mountain Bonsai Society. Please visit RMBonsai.org and look under the "News & Events" and "Galleries" tabs for all virtual show content.

Per Paul Koenning, "The wildest crazy moment during the show's planning and execution had to be a filming crew incident. At the last moment, the videographer was not going to make it to the Vince Lee demonstration for filming. Somehow, Vince had another crew on its way that day to film a documentary about him, and they were willing to stand in and film the bonsai demonstration for us! The Austin Bonsai Society was involved in that documentary, and I am grateful to them and Vince for having our back when we didn't even know we needed it!"

Unexpected Bonuses

One advantage of working in a virtual medium is that there is more opportunity to expand individual trees' narrative description. This led us to include a feature titled "Bonsai Evolutions." Several of our artist-members have employed a series of photographs, coupled with verbal commentary, to show how their respective bonsai have evolved, from collection to final display form. This added yet another educational tool that enables us to communicate bonsai to the viewing public.

The whole experience of conceiving and executing a virtual bonsai exhibit has been a real adventure for our club. Some board members were skeptical at first, but the end product has been very well received. An added benefit of utilizing our website as the venue for this show, and publicizing that fact, is that the range of attendees has been truly international. We have received responses from viewers across the U.S., as well as Europe and Asia. The positive reaction to this electronic format has convinced us that even when we return to doing "live" exhibitions in the future, we will continue to complement those shows with a virtual format on our website to expand our audience and their appreciation for this living art form! 🌲

Bottom: While Japanese black pine are not native to the Rocky Mountains, this bonsai would look right at home among the wind swept peaks. Former President Tom Anglewicz has done an excellent job of seasonal maintenance on this pine to develop very short needles for this species.



Top: This American beech bonsai has been in training for 47 years by member Alan Hills. The ramification and delicate leaves just beginning to take on fall color make for a very calming composition.

Bottom: The members trees were able to enjoy the close camaraderie their care takers were not during the photo shoot.





Top left: This Utah Juniper displayed by Vice President David McPeters does an incredible job of mimicking the species in nature and at a tiny fraction of the scale!

Top right: Dan Wiederrecht's Ponderosa pine speaks to the rugged beauty of trees found in the Rocky Mountains. The Japanese Yamaaki container does a great job in taming and framing this ancient tree. Dan was kind enough to write a blog post instructing the membership how to photograph bonsai. With this knowledge the membership was able to take their own photos, or come to the pop up photo shoots.



Artist of the Year Jim Lantis's Ponderosa pine bonsai photographed by Daniel Wiederrecht. The bark and deadwood on this tree are amazing, and Jim has done an incredible job bringing a slight touch of balance to this very asymmetrical composition.

Member Mike Horine always sets a high standard with his intricate displays.



Lou DeHerrera is the Society's specialist in *Portulacaria afra*, and his mastery with the species can be seen in this cascading bonsai.





Top left: This Douglas Fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) by artist Todd Schlafer is from the Rocky Mountains. Marc Noelanders first styled it at the 2012 ABS/BCI convention. In training for eight years, its age is estimated at 150 years. It is in a Peter Krebs container.

Top right: Artist Adam Johnson present his Engelmann Spruce (*Picea engelmannii*) with a Fragrant Bursera companion plant. In training for ten years, it is about 100 years old collected in the Rocky Mountains.

Bottom: This Colorado Spruce (*Picea pungens*) styled by owner Will Kerns with Ryan Neil, is presented in a Horst Heinzelreiter container. Collected in the Rocky Mountains, it is about 60 years old and has been in training for ten years. Will appropriately displayed it with a mountain stone.



Mario Pavone, Italy
BCI/IBS Instructor



Widar, a centuries-old *Pinus sylvestris*, before styling.



Left to right: Flávio Ambrosioni, Mario Pavone and Marco Insubreman

TRUE BONSAI IS TEAMWORK

Styling *Widar*, a centuries-old *Pinus sylvestris*

Photos and text by Mario Pavone, BCI/IBS Instructor, and Marco Insubreman, Italy

As is often said, “bonsai is a great team game,” and today, dear readers, Marco Insubreman and I are here to tell you how true all this is! We work together with this article’s protagonist, a Scots pine as majestic as it is ancient. We call it *Widar* after the Norse god of nature and the forest, son of Odin and the giantess Grid. *Widar* is defined in the sagas as “large” and “silent” for the reverence he imposes on those who observe him, a name that suits this pine perfectly.

In fact, giving a new styling to this massive bonsai was a work worthy of a Viking saga. It took three days of hard work, and in addition to Marco and me, Flávio Ambrosioni and Marco Gadola also participated in this epic enterprise.

1 2

As a first intervention, we carried out some cleaning of the excess vegetation, eliminating the internal dead branches, which appeared as soon as we parted the foliage even slightly. Subsequently, we removed those needles, which, no longer receiving any light inside the plant, had already been discarded over time.

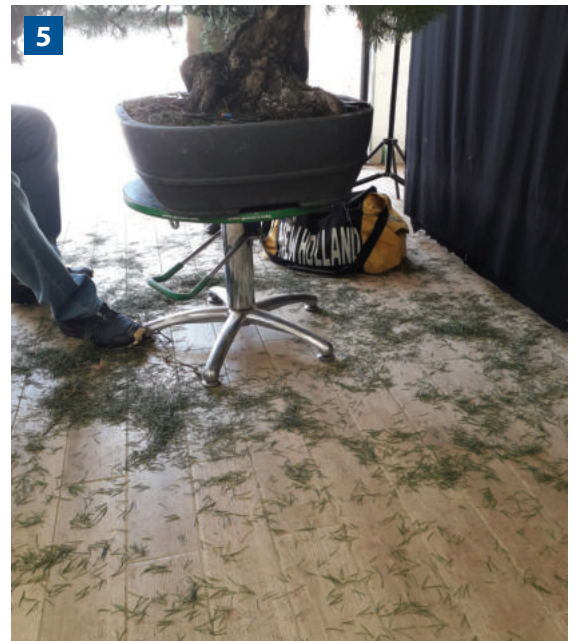
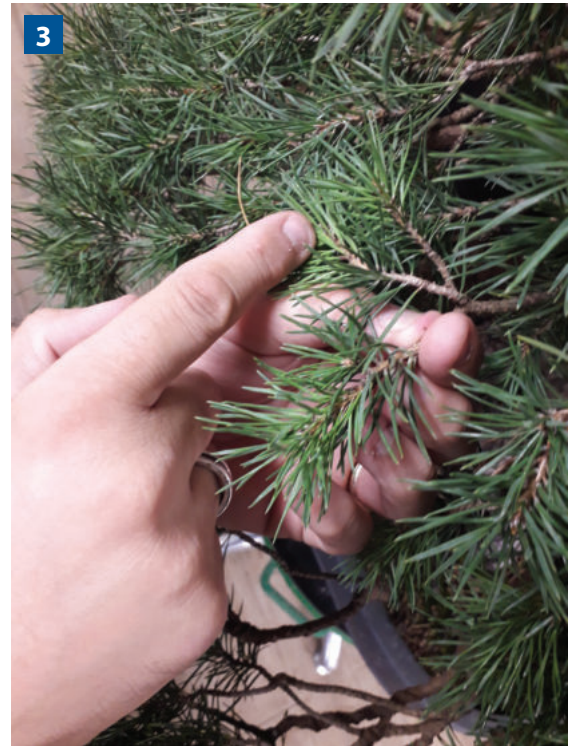
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In fact, even some buds had been abandoned by the pine. That is why I explain to my students to consider all



***Widar* is defined in the sagas as “large” and “silent” for the reverence he imposes on those who observe him, a name that suits this pine perfectly.**

The future arrangements of the pads are already beginning to be glimpsed.



the cleaning to result in a better arrangement of every single branch, large or small, to favor every single bud or group of needles as much as possible to receive light.

4 5

Here is our sylvestris after at least half an hour of cleaning. The future arrangements of the pads are already beginning to be glimpsed. Even the floor speaks for itself, almost becoming a green carpet made up of the needles of this mammoth specimen!

6 7 8

To begin to shape our bonsai, we have affixed copper wire of various diameters according to every single branch's need, excluding the 0.8 mm diameter. As often happens for old plants like this, it is preferable



Here you can see me at work while building and finishing the scaffolding. The goal of the first day is achieved.

not to apply too thin a wire to ensure sufficient stability and adequate support. In some cases, finally, we have used some tie rods to better position the branching and foliage.

9 10

The first branch's importance is fundamental for that play of proportions necessary for the plant's entire structuring. Here you can see me at work while building and finishing the scaffolding. The goal of the first day is achieved.



On the second day, we studied the arrangement of the vegetative masses.



11 12 13

On the second day, we studied the arrangement of the vegetative masses. This allowed us to significantly enhance this bonsai from an aesthetic point of view. First of all, we accentuated the visibility of the trunk in all its beauty. Then we started to allow the observer to follow with the eyes a continuous “coming and going” of the green all around the trunk. This recreates a constant novelty and a continuous “search for beauty” in every point—focal or less exposed—of the plant itself. Finally, we have begun to consider some choices regarding the presence or removal of some branches.

14 15 16 17

Removal mattered little if they were still to be wired or if they had already been wired, even the tertiary



16



17

branching. Time spent that precedes an aesthetic choice is never considered wasted. Indeed, wiring continues throughout the second day in an atmosphere of passion, shared, fun, and full of bonsai spirit!

18 19 20 21

Third day: our *sylvestris* definitely begins to show a much more defined shape, but the time of wiring the crown advances, and once again, we make meaningful choices—too much weight behind the first branch, too much vegetation around the trunk. Even if gratifying to the eye, it blocks the possibility of it wandering towards the back and prevents those crucial sensations in the art of bonsai: depth and emptiness. Thus, using a black

Left to right: Marco Gadola, Marco Insubreman and Flavio Ambrosioni



18



19

Many of us know perfectly well that before eliminating any branch on an old plant, it is good to think about it not once but ten times.



rag, we carefully weighed the possibility of eliminating a last, large branch. This branch was styled with great technical skill by the previous owner for a better enhancement of the bonsai, an important tie-down, as the photographs demonstrate.

22

Many of us know perfectly well that before eliminating any branch on an old plant, it is good to think about it not once but ten times. In this case, this is even more true in the face of this bonsai's significant past. Its previous owners made the history of Italian bonsai with the great work they have done over time! But once you have made your decision and observed the rewarding result, the satisfaction is incredible!

23 24 25 26

A last adjustment is made to the jin, both from a chromatic and dimensional point of view, with a small reduction to emphasize its naturalness even more, and then cleaning the pot with camellia oil. The container will be replaced one day by one similar in shape to this that you can observe, dear readers, but of a different color, so that it accompanies even better this great Scots pine that it will contain, highlighting its imposing shape.

Finally, a nice shower of fresh water to adequately moisten the foliage and branching, giving it breath after these days of wiring and styling. Now the feat is accomplished! Group-work—as we said initially—a work of friends, where it is not the individual who wins, but the whole team!

This is the philosophy, ethics, and creed of my school, Bonsai Wood School, and all my students! 🌲





Styling this massive bonsai was a work worthy of a Viking saga. It took three days of hard work, and in addition to Marco and me, Flavio Ambrosioni and Marco Gadola also participated in this epic enterprise.



Widar, a centuries-old Pinus sylvestris, after styling.

BONSAI FAIR 2020

GRAND GALAXY PARK



By Budi Sulisty, Indonesia

Top: Exterior of Grand Galaxy Park mall in Bekasi, Indonesia.

Left inset: BCI Director Budi Sulisty participates in the awarding of the medals with Dr. Himawan, Chairman of the event (back row, middle).

Middle right: Dwarf Black Olive, *Bucida spinosa*.

Facing Page:

Top left: *Cudrania cochinchinensis*

Top right: *Bougainvillea glabra*

Bottom: *Wrightia religiosa*

After nine months of staying at home, The Indonesian Bonsai Society Bekasi Chapter decided to have an indoor Bonsai Exhibition and Contest for medium- and small-size bonsai. The event was held in a shopping mall called Grand Galaxy Park in Bekasi, some 45 minutes by car from my house in Jakarta. The indoor exhibition was held from November 18 to 22 and was named “Bonsai Fair 2020.”

Indonesia, with more than 270 million people, has around 500,000 people infected by COVID-19. The good point is that most of them got well again. With tight health protocols, people can visit the shopping mall provided they are wearing masks, take social distancing, and wash hands with soap regularly after shaking hands or doing something. Maybe the humidity and hot tropical sun help the people get higher immunity.

Many bonsai lovers came and participated in the event. No wonder. They have been hungry for a social bonsai activity. The place is limited, anyhow, so that only 117 bonsai were displayed. These consisted of



several species like *Wrightia religiosa*, *Ixora*, *Ficus*, *Juniperus*, *Neea buxifolia*, *Cudrania cochinchinensis*, *Ulmus*, *Bougainvillea*, *Bucida spinosa*, and some more.

The interesting thing was the way the exhibition was handled. Shopping malls were mostly quiet due to most people’s reluctance to attend crowded places, thus avoiding COVID-19’s risk. Anyhow, businesses have to go on, and it is well needed by the shopping mall’s tenants. Looking at that opportunity, the chairman of the exhibition, Dr. Himawan, approached the Shopping mall manager and offered a joint operation. They would promote the Mall by having a bonsai exhibition to invite people to observe the display. After being absent for a long time, a bonsai exhibition was really a very tempting magnet for bonsai lovers to exhibit their bonsai and see



Top: *Premna obtusifolia* with a photo of the owner.
 Middle: An *Ixora* in bloom.
 Bottom: An exhibit and photo of one of the sponsors.



what other people are doing with their bonsai. Everyday people will surely enjoy the bonsai's beauty and take a little risk to come to the mall. The mall provided some space with lighting, air conditioning, sound system, and some other facilities free of charge.

As usual, exhibition participants have to pay some money to join the show. Besides that, some wealthy collectors were invited to show their main bonsai displayed with some notes on the trees about the collectors. In return, they donated some money to support the show. It was a brilliant idea introduced for the first time. You know that bonsai is a work of art that made the owners proud. Many





wealthy collectors are willing to spend money to gain prestige. This smart system in fundraising enabled the committee to provide good service, many door prizes,

nice awards for the contest winners, and most of all, to make the event successful. 🌳

Top left: *Wrightia religiosa*
 Top right: *Neea buxifolia*.
 Bottom: *Wrightia religiosa*





Marco Tarozzo, Italy
BCSA and BCI
Instructor



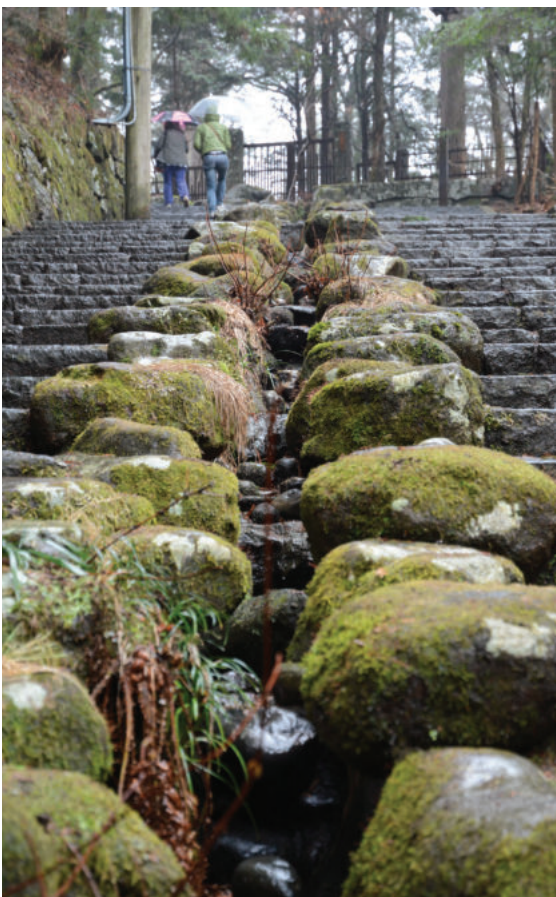
If you haven't seen Nikko, you can't talk about splendor.

Text and photos by Marco Tarozzo, Italy

Nikko, translated from Japanese, meaning “the city of sunlight,” is a small Japanese town in the Tochigi prefecture, in the mountains north of Tokyo.

In this city there is the splendid Tōshō-gū Shinto shrine, founded in 1617 and dedicated to the memory of Tokugawa Ieyasu, governor of the Tokugawa shogunate during the Edo period; the sanctuary, inside a cedar forest, includes the Yomeimon Gate, finished in gold, and houses the governor's tomb.

In 2014 and 2015, I had the opportunity to visit the town, which with its monuments, is a UNESCO heritage site. I was very impressed by its beauty, by the serenity



that pervaded the air when I ventured up the path that leads towards the sanctuaries and temples. And from the peace that I experienced during the visits.

I think it's the place where I took more photos during my travels in Japan. I didn't miss the smallest detail because every corner is enchanting, starting from the Shinkyo Bridge that can be glimpsed before going along the path that leads to the temples, up to the large roots of the millenary cedars that make up the forest that surrounds them.

Views of the Tōshō-gū Shinto shrine, the Yomeimon Gate the Shinkyo Bridge.



Top left: The Ishizuki at the time of the first styling, November 2015.

Top right: Different types of moss were used to cover and retain the earth are evident.

Bottom: The composition at the end of the day.

There is a saying in Japan that sums up what I want you to perceive about Nikko's beauty, it says: "if you haven't seen Nikko, you can't talk about splendor."

Nikko is also the name that I gave to the bonsai that I want to tell you about, an ishizuki of *Juniperus itoigawa*.





The name I chose is not so much due to the perceived beauty because it is very relative and tied to the individuals' subjective experiences. Even if the canons of the beauty of Japanese art should always guide us, the name indicates calm and the serenity it gives me when I look at it.

When I am in front of it, I like to go further with the imagination, go into its various tree-lined peaks. I imagine myself a wayfarer who walks the uphill path, going from the base to the top, to the last plateau.

There, under the uppermost juniper, I scan the valley below, far from noise and close to sensory peace.

When I look at this composition, I live with these feelings, and I feed on the sensations they give me, that's why he has become "Nikko."

The rock, which is the load-bearing part of the composition, is made of a compound of cement powder and broken rock mixed with a resin and modeled on a metal grid. It was shaped by the expert hands of Andrea and Giuseppe of Vulcanic Art. You can find them on Facebook.

On it, in 2014, three *Juniperus itoigawa* plants were planted. After fixing them with tie rods cemented on the rock itself, their roots were covered by a clay and akadama mixture, retained and protected with a bandage of jute gauze, a precaution that during the engraftment phase also has the purpose of not washing away the compound during watering. Watering must be constant and controlled because the trees' roots are housed in small basins with little soil.

When I removed the gauze, the mixture was covered with moss of different consistency and color.

After about a year, the composition is very vigorous, so much so that I am sure that the work I will do will not cause stress to the plants.

The work carried out involved several bends of the primary branches, which the juniper bears very well, and the elimination of a good part of the vegetation. I was confident in pruning the branches and simplifying the foliage because I was confident that it would react very well to the processing given the response to engraftment. This would also be helped by cultivation during the post-intervention vegetative period.

After a winter's rest, I placed the *ishizuki* inside an oval, deep pot about 6 centimeters. The roots, forced into the little spaces in the rock, could now go down and grow inside the tray.

Good fertilization brought the *ishizuki* to the state seen in the photo top left of this page. In November 2016, I proceeded with new styling, removing the wire where it marked branches, eliminated excess branches, and then set the foliage as in the photo top right.

In 2017 I only fertilized it and removed the wire that marked the branches. In 2018, when the branches were already in position, I freed it from the thicker

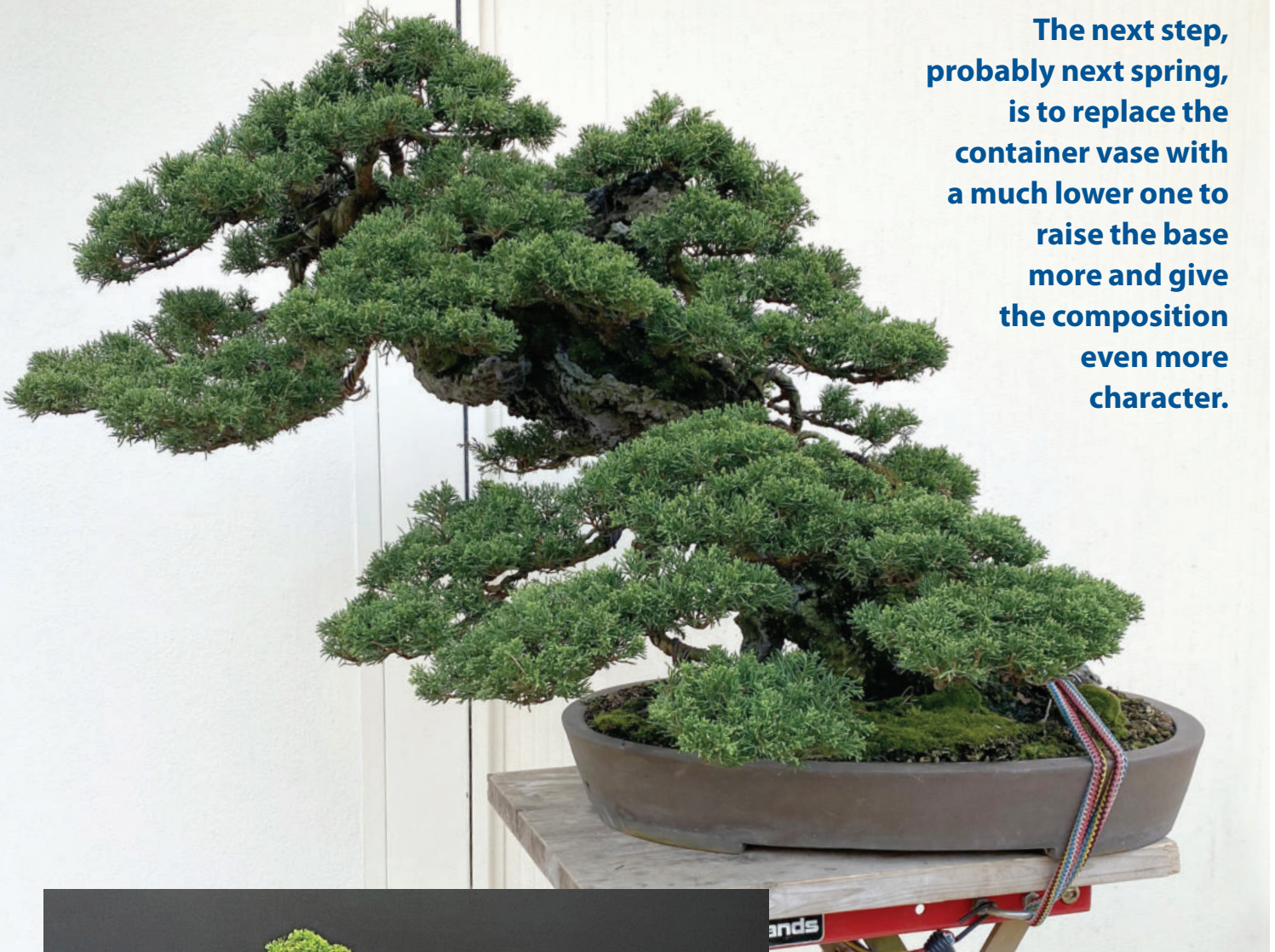
Top left: Good fertilization brought the *ishizuki* to a vigorous state

Top right: In November 2016, I proceeded to a new styling, removed the wire where it marked branches, eliminated excess branches, and then set the foliage.

Middle left: The beginning of the spring season of 2019, where I decide on a new styling, I pluck and thin the foliage and lift the back branch that disturbed the design.

Middle right: In the end, satisfied, I photograph the work done..

The next step, probably next spring, is to replace the container vase with a much lower one to raise the base more and give the composition even more character.



Top and inset: The result, before and after the styling in March, 2020.

wire (I also used 4.5 mm wire), except on a branch that gave depth but that I did not like very much in the overall design. I left only the finest copper wire on the peripheral foliage.

Therefore, we arrive at the beginning of spring, 2019, where I decide on a new setting. I pluck and thin out the vegetation and lift the back branch that disturbed the design. Satisfied, I photographed the work done.

2019 was a strange year for the cultivation of trees in my area. It went from an early spring in March, with temperatures over 20 degrees centigrade, to a cold and rainy April and May. All my bonsai were initially affected but then, during June, July, September, October, and partially November, they recovered well so that in March 2020, I decided on a new intervention on Nikko's foliage. You can see the before and after on this page.

Now, I just have to watch it throughout the growing season with pruning and downsizing the individual branches' apical vigor.

The next step, probably next spring, is to replace the container vase with a much lower one to raise the base more and give the composition even more character.

At this point, I think it will be nice to start a new journey by crossing the paths of "Nikko," climbing up to the plateau.

There under the branches of the last juniper.

Far from the noise to enjoy the silence, overlooking the valleys below.

Ah, "you can't talk about splendor if you haven't seen Nikko." 🌲

A Rarity of Nature's Wonders



A miner is unloading the overburden (boulders) down a slope just beside the mine. One can not clearly see which hill is natural and which one is manmade, what are natural debris and what are rubbles piled up by the miners.

Grape Agate Stones

By Gudrun Benz, Germany

Photos by Gudrun Benz

China is the oldest continuous civilization on earth, and its people were convinced their country was at the center of the world. Their achievements go back as far as 8,000 years. Besides its cultural accomplishments, China is more a continent than a country and possesses diverse climatic zones from harsh winters to semi-tropical lushness. Physical areas differ from the North to the South, from the East to the West. The big industrial areas, big river deltas, and wheat lands in the eastern coastal regions contrast with vast grasslands and desert zones, as well as high mountains and plateaus in the West. Accordingly, nature differs in the same way. There are extraordinary geological formations, such as the Stone Forest of Yunnan, the karst landscape of Guilin, the deep mountain ravines of the Yangtze (Tiger Leaping Gorge, Three Gorges), the Gobi and Taklamakan deserts, the towering Pamir Mountain, and much more.

One of the wonders of nature in China is the grape agate of the Gobi desert, Inner Mongolia.

The autonomous province of Inner Mongolia has about 1,180,000 square kilometers, and with this, it is more than three times larger than





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1. The remote landscape where grape agate is found/harvested. A winding dirt road is seen in the middle with Mongolian tents and huts.
 2. The path up to the mine
 3. Climbing down into the mine was a challenge. A worker stands ready for help.

4. The cable winch operated/ supervised by a worker
 5. A worker digs out an agate stone which is embedded in clay soil.
 6. A few electric bulbs gave light.
 7. We exit the mine, lucky to feel the fresh air again.



the Federal Republic of Germany. It stretches from East to the West about 4,221 km and from North to the South only about 400 km. The sparsely populated area has only 24 million inhabitants. Most of them are Han Chinese. However, 13% comprise Mongolians, descendants of the Mongol tribes of Genghis Khan (1162–1227), and other minorities. The territory is occupied by partly densely wooded mountains, enormous grassland areas. The largest part is covered by deserts in the Southwest (Ulan Buh, Tenggeri, and Badan-Jaran deserts, which

form the so-called Gobi desert). Even nowadays, it is virtually untouched by Western tourists. Mainly, the western part of the province has a distinctive continental climate with only three to five very hot summer months and long, strong winters where the average temperature of the year is only -10°C! On the other hand, significant mineral resources offer the best conditions for industrial development, reflected in an economic upswing in the last few years.

Grape agate is mined in the remote area of western Inner Mongolia. In an early geological era, this region was an ocean with many active volcanos. Even today, this area is under sea-level. The grape agate was formed in caverns near the volcanic chimneys.

At the stone museum in Alashan, a wall panel with the following paraphrased text provides information to visitors about the formation of grape agate stones:

At the big and impressive stone museum in Alashan, one can see numerous excellent and most beautiful grape agate exhibits.



Brief Introduction of Grape Agate

The grape agate mainly originates from the Su Hongu area of northern Alxa Left Banner, Inner Mongolia. Hard texture, brilliant color, unique shape all give them suggestive power. The color of grape agate always presents from light red to deep purple. The agate's whole body is covered by natural beaded agate balls that are varied in size and gorgeous color. These agate balls pile on top of each other, making them look like bunches of crystal and gleaming grapes.

The main component of the grape agate, whose Mohs Scale of Mineral Hardness is from 6.5 to 7.5, is silica. This kind of agate forms in large cavities near craters. When silica gel hydrothermal solution can't fill the entire space, it will condense into the shape of beads, balls, or water drops in the form of a particle such as sand mud or drops. The beads, balls, or drops will attach themselves to the pre-formed ones, either hanging from the roof, or growing at the bottom of the cave, or growing on the wall. They get bigger and bigger with time until they form a grape-like shape. As the conditions creating the grape agate seldom occur in nature, it is known as the treasure stone in China.

The stones show a great variety with their "berries" that are mostly of different sizes. The stones are brightly colored and different in overall shape and size.





The agates are covered by natural beaded agate balls that are varied in size and gorgeous in color.



At the big and impressive stone museum in Alashan, one can see numerous excellent and most beautiful grape agate exhibits. Some quite big pieces on elaborate huge wooden stands are set directly on the floor. The stones show a great variety with their “berries” that are mostly of different sizes. The stones are brightly colored and different in overall shape and size. Some resemble figures or animals; others are of abstract shape. The museum was opened in 2015 (Q1, 2016 pages 14–19, *BCI Bonsai & Stone Appreciation* magazine). I have already been four times to Alashan, but I would be tempted to revisit it if a trip to this outstanding place would be offered again.

A BCI VIP tour in 2007, organized by Mr. Su and his wife Helen for a small group, led to a grape agate mining area in the Gobi desert. Even if China’s infrastructure is developing incredibly fast, not only in the eastern parts of the country, I doubt that the situation of grape agate mining has fundamentally changed since then. Power or water supply doesn’t exist in this remote area. Electricity is provided by generators, asphalt roads don’t exist either. One cannot see plants, animals, or inhabitants, only some primitive huts for workers.

Nevertheless, we were warmly greeted and generously served with drinks and food when arriving at the



Some resemble figures or animals; others are of abstract shape.

“administrative building.” The table sagged under the weight of the food. Only a footpath led to the mine, which was just a hole into the earth. Therefore only a few people, Mr. Su, Peter Blumer, and I, among others, were willing to go down. It was tricky climbing down into near darkness where the only handhold was a thick rope alongside the rock face. Only a few electric bulbs lit our way. The air was sick without a ventilation system. At about 40 meters down, we met a worker who dug out an agate stone with just the help of a hand tool. It is not

possible to use powerful machines or power tools, or explosives to harvest the precious stones because this would destroy them. They usually are covered with clay soil, similar to kaolin. Taking photos wasn’t successful because of the dusty air. Climbing up again was even more strenuous. We were happy to be in the fresh air again. Nevertheless, it was an unforgettable experience.

The rarity and difficult conditions of mining explain the high prices for grape agates. 🐼



Some quite big pieces on elaborate huge wooden stands are set directly on the floor.

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