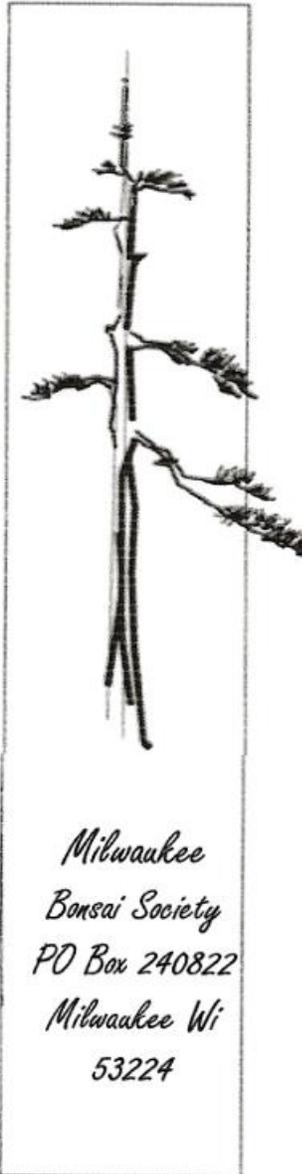


BONSAI NEWS

October 2024



Upcoming Meeting

The October meeting will have Houston S talking about the root over rock trees from the 2023 workshop: doing a quick health check, suggesting next steps and offering tips on what to watch for in the next year.

The rest of the meeting will be dedicated to Suiseki. Our guest, Rafael Guerra, will have a presentation on Suiseki that will cover the history, characteristics and aesthetic qualities of this natural art form. Suiseki make wonderful companion pieces for bonsai.

Finding a stone in nature to become a Suiseki is not as easy as just picking up a rock and Rafael will tell us about stone collecting and hunting also.



Dr. Rafael Perez Guerra

Next Meeting
October 5, 2024
9 am
Boerner
Botanical

October

October 5 – Suiseki Art/Root over Rock revisited

October 12 – Bonsai Skills 101*

October 13 – Bonsai Skills 201*

November

November 2 – Wiring/Winter Storage problems to watch for

November 9 – Bonsai Skills 101*

November 10 – Bonsai Skills 201*

November 15-17 – Folk Fair
State Fair Park

December

December 7 – Holiday Party

January

January 4 – General Meeting

February

February 1 – General Meeting

March

March 1 – General Meeting

*Open to MBS members only

President's Message

At the upcoming October meeting, we have a real treat on the calendar. An internationally recognized expert will be joining us to do a presentation on *suiseki*, also known as viewing stones. It's a subject that is an interesting adjunct to what we do with trees, and the aesthetic underpinnings of *suiseki* share much with the principles of bonsai.

When I first became interested in *suiseki*, I joked to my wife that it was a Japanese word meaning "something else to spend money on". One certainly can do that—as with many things, there are some rare specimens that are very desirable to collectors, and they're priced accordingly. At the same time, there's an abundance of interesting stones literally everywhere around us. I have a couple of shoe boxes worth of stones that I've brought home from places as diverse as the high plateau of Montana and the shore of Lake Michigan.

Like most Japanese cultural pursuits, *suiseki* is full of rules. Purists will rail against slicing the bottom off of a stone to make it more feasible to fit into a stand. Some will also rant about how it's virtual blasphemy to use oil or some other substance to recreate the patina on very old stones, that is a result of being handled over and over for a hundred years. However, as I have said many times about trees, it's whatever makes your personal tail wag.

The magic in viewing stones is in how, in a reflective moment, they can remind us of a place, a time, or a life event that is, at the same time, both deeply personal and universal. I have never seen Mt. Fuji "in person", but I have a beautiful small stone that is almost a photographic depiction of it. When I look at it, I'm reminded of how that is a place I want to go, sometime in the life span I have left.

Next to it, on my living room fireplace mantle, is a softball-sized, caramel-colored stone with a groove deeply etched down its center, what some would call a waterfall stone. It sits, not on a stand, but in a round, shallow pot, filled with fine gravel that compliments its color. It came from a place outside a very small town in Oklahoma. I found it when we were visiting our grandchildren on the very small ranch where they lived. My then six-year-old granddaughter couldn't wait to show me the small stream that ran across the back of the woods on their property—the perfect stream for kids, too shallow to drown in, but deep enough to get really muddy and dirty.

On that afternoon, we went looking for treasures together, and I found that stone wedged into the bank of the little stream. Every time I see it, I am reminded of the excitement in a little girl's eyes, how the light came through the tops of the trees, and how privileged I felt that she wanted to show me this part of her world.

This, to me at least, is the real value of viewing stones—not how rare they are, or what country they came from, or what someone paid on eBay. Rather, their value lies in the way they help us to connect with people, places, and moments in time that have meaning in our lives.

Rick W.



Newsletter Help Needed

The newsletter is created to bring bonsai news, tips, tricks and information to you each month. The club needs your help with ideas on future article ideas, article contributions or even pictures. You do not need to be a professional writer in order to send in an article. I will help you. I can edit articles, give advice or even help with writer's block. Help me keep the newsletter fresh with your contributions. Contact Melissa J @ missyuc2@yahoo.com or 414-350-5924.

Root Over Rock Bonsai

by PAM W

Houston S will be taking a quick health check of the workshop trees from his 2023 workshop. He will suggest next steps on these trees, and what to watch for this coming year. Houston will also present his ideas for the 2025 follow-up workshop planned for March of 2025.

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Viewing Stones - In Japan "Suiseki" In China "Scholar's Rocks"

by Pam W

In traditional Japanese culture, suiseki are small naturally occurring or shaped rocks which are appreciated for their aesthetic or decorative value. They are similar to Chinese scholar's rocks. These stones are not just any stones which can be found in nature; they must be expressive stones and have a special shape, color and texture to be categorized as *suiseki*.

The stones are of natural origin and are found in rivers, oceans and karst areas. They are not allowed to be reshaped. An exception is the cutting of stones to have a flat base, so they can be placed stably on a *daiza*, *suiban* or *doban*, to be displayed properly. However, this diminishes their value in the eyes of some enthusiasts.

Five Elements According to the Nippon Suiseki Association, there are five factors used in evaluating a stone and its potential as a suiseki. An excellent suiseki should be of **quality** material; have a fine **shape**, surface **texture** and **color**; and have an appearance that intimates **age**. In the case of the patina of age factor in particular, aspects such as who has previously owned the stone and in what circumstances, or the owner and associated episodes, all become things to be appreciated.

Classification and evaluation of Suiseki revolves around their shape, possible markings and subtlety of color.

Landscape - in the form of a mountain, island, waterfall, shore- or coastline, cave, canyon or a plateau.

Object or Figure -representing a person, animal, boat, house or bridge.

Celestial - with patterns resembling the moon, sun or stars.

Plant - with patterns picturing flowers, fruits, grasses, forests or even Bonsai.

Weather - resembling rain, intense sunlight, lightning or snow.

Abstract - with surfaces similar to animal prints, tangled nets, etc.

Rafael Perez Guerra

Rafael has participated in stone hunting Drussaco, Lake Giacopiani, Sicily, China and the city of Lingbi where he has acquired dozens of Lingbi stones. His private collection nears 100. An expert in the art of Suiseki, he likes to help Bonsai collectors select good Suiseki stones to be companion of their trees.

Historical background, characteristics and aesthetic qualities of suiseki, the presentation will also cover classifications and combining suiseki with bonsai for display. We will also learn about collecting and stone hunting.



Dr. Rafael Perez Guerra

"Just like there are Shinto shrines that enshrine stones as objects of worship, the Japanese have strongly sensed divinity in stones since ancient times. That kind of sensibility is tightly condensed in suiseki."

Kobayashi Kunio, who is a leading bonsai craftsman, the founder of the Shunkaen Bonsai Museum, and chairman of the Nippon Suiseki Association

Confessions of a Pot Snob

By Rick W

[Trigger warning: the following article is chock full of opinions.]

I have recently had a couple of people tell me that I have a reputation for being a bit of a snob when it comes to pots. More precisely, one used the word 'snob'; the other referred to being known to have strong opinions.

I can only plead "guilty as charged". Anyone who knows me would not be surprised by the "strong opinion" part, on many topics within bonsai and without. I would insist, though, that the opinions are simply my own preference and personal sense of the aesthetic, and I do not hold them out as being right for anyone else.

By way of analogy, I would turn to the subject of wine. It happens that I love red wines made from the Pinot noir grape. To my tastes, the best Pinot in the world comes from Burgundy. I have friends who absolutely love Pinot from Oregon, and I simply can't enjoy the stuff. One of those friends would opt for Oregon every time. Neither of us is right or wrong, we simply have different preferences in taste.

Similarly, I have a very strong preference for Japanese pots, and I have a special weakness for painted pots. Part of it is aesthetic, and part is functional.

First, the functional aspect: thickness, weight, and clay composition are all important parts of the equation. I have heard many people talk about how some pots supposedly "breathe", as if air somehow magically transcends the physical density of the pot material. Some of these same folks condemn porcelain pots in particular, because they don't "breathe". I admit to having slept through part of high-school physics, but this is a notion that I find scientifically impossible.

What will transmute through the walls of a pot, though, is heat. Broadly speaking, Japanese pots tend to be thinner and lighter than production pots from China, for example. Accordingly, they do a much better job of transferring outside heat to the root mass inside the pot. Most of what I do involves azaleas, both domestic and imported, and azaleas love to have their roots warm, and my experience in that regard with finer Japanese pots has been very positive.

However, I remember my grandfather telling me that while it's true that the school of experience is the best teacher, the tuition can sometimes be expensive. As I've written previously, the vast majority of my pots are a deep, dark navy-blue glaze, known to the Japanese as "ruri". As anyone who has ever owned a black car in the summer knows well, dark colors can heat up very quickly to high temperatures in direct sunlight. The corpses of a couple of pretty nice azaleas bear witness to what happens when those dark blue pots get too hot in the sun.

The center of the Japanese bonsai pot universe is the town of Tokoname, where virtually all of the great kilns and artists are domiciled. Unfortunately, the bonsai pot industry has been devastated in the

last couple of decades by two unfortunate phenomena. The first was the flood of cheap production Chinese pots. The production of quality is always more expensive, and as bonsai interest exploded in North America and Europe, the Chinese produced masses of cheaper pots because of lower labor costs and government subsidies for construction of their factories. Some of the legendary kilns, like Yamaaki, Yamafusa, and Shibakatsu were saddled with old facilities and lower production capacity and were driven out of business.

The second phenomenon is the end of a series of generations of craftsmen artists. Spend a little time on YouTube and you'll find dozens of videos about the 85-year old, fifth generation makers of wooden ladles, or whatever. Young people in Japan today are no longer willing to follow in that path of low-paying, labor-intensive craftsmanship for its own sake, and the last generation of truly great ceramic artists is dying out.

Part of what attracts me to learning about Japanese pots and their makers is that it is a whole new area of knowledge for me. It's also full of pitfalls and traps for the unwary. First one has to learn the names of at least a handful of kilns, both extinct and those still producing. Then there's the fact that many of the best potters have what I would equate to a "stage name". This name might, or might not, be the same as the name of the kiln. Just as one example, take Shuho. This is the name of the kiln, but also the name assumed—and often stamped on pots—by their most senior, accomplished potter. The kiln has been in existence for about one hundred and fifty years, and the current master is the fourth to go by the name Shuho. I have an eight-inch round by the second generation Shuho, which is probably about a hundred years old. I've owned it for seven years, and I have yet to own a tree that is worthy of it.



Antique Shuho, 8" round
Picture by Rick W

Shuho is particularly known for a glaze that is a combination of light and dark blues, known as "namako". Interestingly, this is also the Japanese name for a sea cucumber with similar coloration, considered a great gourmet delicacy. I also own a couple of new pots from Shuho, and the glaze is so bright and so reflective that I doubt that they will acquire much patina in my remaining lifetime.

At the same time, I have a number of small, painted pots from the Tosui kiln. Their lead potter also goes by that name, and so far, there have been fourteen identified in their line of succession—none of them actually named 'Tosui'.

Then there's the challenge of what I like to call "the -zans". Single name artists, easily confused and hard to keep straight in your head: you have Gyozan, Mazan, Yozen, Kakuzan, Kozan, Kouzan, Seizan, and Bunzan, to name a few. They range from the almost painfully exquisite to, say, Bunzan's work—which includes hand-formed pinch pots so clownishly painted that I think my eight-year-old granddaughter could give him a run for his money.

There are some pretty good internet resources that provide background about different potters, old and recent as well. There are also a couple of sites that show photos of the stamps of the kilns, and

those of the individual maker. The vast majority of a kiln's production will have no stamp, or just that of the kiln. It is only the best works by the best potters that will carry their stamp as well. [Helpful hint: With painted pots in particular, if you see the maker's stamp or kanji signature closest to one side of the bottom, that is the side that the painter of the pot—often someone other than the person who made the pot itself—believed to be the best front.]

Ah, yes, on to painted pots, which will be the death of my financial well-being. Painted pots range from the simplest transfer ware, known as 'sometsume', all the way up to rare, exquisite pots in the thousands of dollars. Sometsume literally translates to "apply color", and the scenic patterns can be applied to the pot with a stamp or a stencil. They tend for the most part to be inexpensive but can be quite attractive if the scenery is well-executed. If the pot is signed, it was either done by hand or embellished that way. A bargain to watch for is pots from the Maruto kiln. Their master artist goes by Marufuji. I have two five-inch square pots, one signed by Marufuji and one not, and the difference is apparent.

When I was in college, Sansui was a very respectable name in stereo equipment, and a system to be envied. I was surprised to learn that 'sansui' refers to painted pots in which both mountains and water are depicted.



Small Round by Ishida
Shoseki
Picture by Rick W

I have several pots, too few to call a collection, more like an assemblage, of pots by members of a family named Shoseki. The matriarch, Ishida, was born in 1925. She started to learn to make pots in 1969, and in 1970 to 1974 she studied under the artist known as Bunsho, making glazed but unpainted pots. She then apprenticed under Miyazaki Tosato to paint pots in the Imari style that was so popular in traditional painted ceramics in the nineteenth century. Imari is characterized by pictorial images, framed by repeated geometric patterns.

Ishida died at the height of her fame in 2005. Her painted pots often depict frolicking children, nature scenes, or figures from folklore, "the fox's wedding" being a favorite subject. Ishida's daughter-in-law, Yuki [sometimes spelled as 'Yuuki'] was born in 1948, and in 1988 began her apprenticeship with her mother-in-law. She took over the family name when Ishida died in 2005, and continued to produce pots until sometime in 2020, and is now retired.

I have several of Yuki's pots, ranging from a 2.5" round to a 4" by 5" rectangle. Most of her pots sell on eBay in the 200-ish range. I also have four of Ishida's unpainted pots, as her painted pots are hard to come by, and a little rich for my blood. Probably my favorite pot, among all that I own, is a small, 1.75" round, only one inch deep, with cracked glaze. I love this little pot because I know precisely that it was done between 1970 and 1974, in the moment before she would go on to the apprenticeship that would make her a famous painter of pots.



5" Round by Yuki Shoseki,
probably 2000-2005
Picture by Rick W

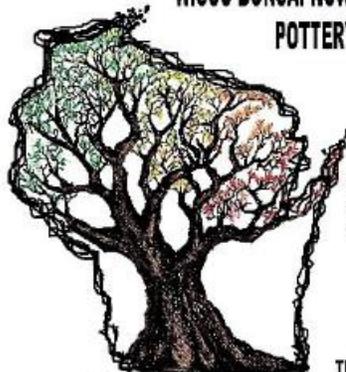
If you wish to make a quantum leap to a whole different level in pots, though, there's always what's known as kutani ware. Kutani refers to a technique in which multiple glazes are applied in multiple firings to create dimensionality or texture in the scenes depicted on the pot. A depiction of cherry blossoms, for example, would have raised elements where the blossoms are, much like Braille dots. As you can imagine, the failure rate in such complex work is very high, and suffice to say they aren't cheap.

Probably the most exquisitely beautiful pot in my house is a 5.5 by 6.5-inch mokko-shaped pot by an artist named Mufu. I obtained it courtesy of my friend, Rick Garcia, who is representing the artist in this country. It has the most insanely detailed geometric borders surrounding its four panels of delicate, multicolored scenery. I knew it was something special when I turned it over and saw the painting of the phoenix bird on the bottom. Somehow, I can't imagine running wire over the top of that image, and I think this will be a trophy piece, rather than a working pot. As an art object, it stands pretty well on its own.

I would, in fact, say that Mufu pots rise to a level of sophistication I have never seen anywhere else. If you share my vulnerability to beautiful painted pots, I'd give some thought to that whole "abandon hope, all ye who enter here" thing before going to the website. If, however, you [and your wallet] can resist the almost hypnotic attraction, you will see images that demonstrate incontrovertibly that bonsai ceramics can rise beyond craft to become high art.



Mufu
Photo by Rick Garcia



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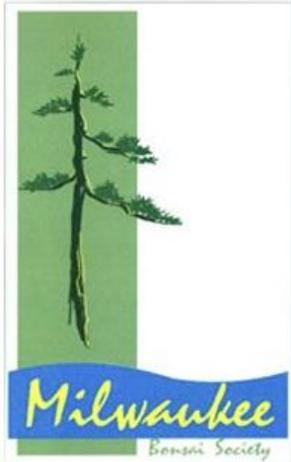
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Next MBS meeting will be
October 5, 2024 @ 9am

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*Breezy autumn day
Dreaming of trick or treating
Childhood memories.*

~Roxanne Rhoads