

RMBS Heritage Trees at the Pacific Bonsai Museum – a field trip

There are two Heritage trees having RMBS beginnings currently in the permanent collection of the Pacific Bonsai Museum and they both are Bob Kataoka bonsai. The museum acquired the trees in 1989, which become part of their permanent collection; they were both on display as part of the year long "Natives" exhibit in 2017. This special exhibit celebrates North American native trees as bonsai subjects, combining art and nature and is featured in the "Natives" catalog of the exhibit. The goal of the exhibit was to display bonsai alongside elements of their natural environment, the connection between a bonsai and its habitat being reestablished. It also exemplified the true "American bonsai" that emphasizes the plants, geography and culture of the United States and reflect the spirit of the American wilderness.

Young Choe, who visited the RMBS last year, discussed with the club her challenge of finding local native material for each kusomomo that was from the same environment of its accompanying bonsai.

Interestingly, my husband Fred and I visited the PBM and "Natives" exhibit in October 2017, which is just outside of Tacoma Washington, and photographed the trees in this article not realizing the Bob Kataoka trees were some of those we viewed and admired! Thanks to Dan Widerrecht for the information.



Special thank you to Kelsi Dunn, coordinator of the PBM for the following information on the trees featured in this article.

Tree 122

Rocky Mountain Juniper

In training since 1964

This old specimen was collected as a natural dwarf at an elevation of about 8,000 feet near Raymond Colorado. The late artist Robert Kataoka collected the tree and began training it in 1964, orienting it to show off a large piece of dead wood, and keeping a broadly rounded, shrub like crown. In 1997, PRBV curator, Dave DeGroot, restyled the tree using a new front and a single leader. In 2015 curator Aarin Packard restyled the tree changing it back to its historic front to show off the natural deadwood while changing the angle of the tree."

The photograph shows the tree displayed in a Victoria Chamberlain container along with accent kusamono styled by Young Choe. The backdrop is a painting depicting Mt. Wilbur painted by luna Tinta.



Photos Pat Deutschman or "Natives" catalog, PBM
Photos supplied by Pat Deutschman and "Natives" catalog

Tree 123

Subalpine Fir

In training since 1960

This forest planting was created by artist Robert Kataoka from roadside seedlings he collected near Echo Park, Colorado in 1960. About 80 small trees had been collected over a period of three weekends, of which 47 were selected to plant on a sandstone slab. This bonsai has been titled "Ronin" by the artist, in reference to the Japanese legend of the 47 Ronin or samurai without a master. In the legend, the samurai's beloved master was unjustly forced by an evil royal official to commit seppuku (ritual suicide). The Ronin avenged their master's death with the certain knowledge that they would themselves be executed. The legend and this bonsai celebrate dedication, courage and loyalty in the face of death, and the trees in this bonsai - like the Ronin of legend - have succumbed until the forest has become a grove. Since the forest was built in 1960 it has died back to the 14 remaining trees.

The photograph shows the tree displayed in a Victoria Chamberlain container along with accent kusamono styled by Young Choe. The backdrop is a painting depicting Aleutian Range, Alaska painted by luna Tinta.



Photos supplied by Pat Deutschman and "Natives" catalog PBM

Additional story that appeared on the Bonsai Bark website.

Danny Coffey is one of the many young Western bonsai artists who spent formative years studying bonsai in Japan. His teacher was Junichiro Tanaka. Pictured here with 47 Ronin he states: "Recently the Pacific Bonsai Museum brought me out to Washington to do some bonsai work. This sub alpine forest was a really fun project".



Photo credit: Bonsai Birch and Stone Lantern

Biography of Bob Kataoka as printed in "Bonsai Book of Days"

Robert "Bob" Kataoka was born in Hiroshima, Japan in 1909 and came to America at age 17 with the intent to make his fortune and then return to Japan. He married Hanayo Kameoka in 1937 followed by the birth of his two children and working diligently, established roots in Delano, California. The attack of Japanese forces on Pearl Harbor in 1941 brought hardship on the Kataoka family as to 120,000 others of Japanese ancestry, by being removed from his home and interned until 1945. Upon their release the Kataoka family permanently settled in Denver where Bob earned his living as an upholsterer. Bob began collecting mountain trees to create his Japanese gardens at his home that began as landscaping but naturally led Bob's interest to bonsai. He was an early member of the Denver Bonsai Club that would eventually become the Rocky Mountain Bonsai Society. His bonsai clearly reflected the style, sentiment and influence of Japanese bonsai upon mountain collected native American tree material. He was a bonsai scholar who sought to adapt the techniques of black pine bonsai culture to the native Ponderosa Pine. He kept careful records of this trials and results. His best Ponderosa Pine became the logo of the Denver Junior Bonsai Club and eventually RMBS. Bob was an expert in grafting all kinds of trees and his philosophy was pure; you should enjoy the essence of the tree and the effort of the hobbyist rather than look for faults. He explained that bonsai are trained, not tortured - "It is not neglect that creates the weathered look, but the right training." He was a guiding light for the RMBS as the result of his reading many of the Japanese bonsai

magazines and adapting those methods to local native trees. Bob's reputation and expertise as an American Bonsai master was recognized before his death and acclaimed by such acknowledged teachers as John Naka, Ben Oki, Ken Sugimoto and Frank Okamura. Bob's bonsai reputation extended beyond the borders of the US when he was acknowledged by Japanese bonsai master Kyuzo Murata, who, after viewing Bob Kataoka's bonsai garden in Denver, asserted his opinion that Bob's bonsai were one of the great representation of American bonsai art he had seen and his artistry in creating bonsai was superlative and adhered to the purest traditions of the art.

In 1986, the year Bob passed away, the Bob Kataoka Memorial Award "Artist of the Year" was established in his honor and is presented at the RMBS's annual show to a member who had developed a bonsai that is considered outstanding. His daughter, Lily Uyeda, keeps his vision alive in the private garden.

Personal observations by Larry Jackel

Bob was very much like a kind grandfather who wanted his children (anyone doing bonsai) to have all the help they could take. He believed that the spirit of bonsai was to share everything he knew with anyone who wanted to know about bonsai. A kind and generous person, Bob was a model for me as what a human being should be like! Bob's bonsai were wonderful. Almost all had been collected yamadori. His styling and design concepts were advanced beyond what most of the bonsai artists were doing at the time and the trees would be some of the best today. We need a Kataoka tree in the DBG collection! Regards, Larry