

## **Bonsai as *Time Machines***

### ***An Exhibition Exploring Our fascination with Age***

**By**

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As with many forms of art, Bonsai are three-dimensional objects, but they can also express a fourth dimension – *time*. As living entities, when we look at a Bonsai not only do we see it in a moment of time as we would in a painting or sculpture, with a Bonsai, the moment is just one in the continuum of a life in-progress. In some cases, a life that has existed for centuries, and may exist for centuries more. This fascinates us and because of it, there is a common perception that all bonsai are of extreme age. The reality is that most Bonsai are less than 50 years old. Understanding this paradox begins with the knowledge that all Bonsai are not created equal. **(See Illustration 1)** Some are propagated from seeds requiring decades of training to produce the image of an aged tree, representing a lifetime of effort by its creator. Others are propagated from cuttings or simply crafted from nursery stock, reducing the time it takes to create them to a few short years. Then there are those Bonsai that are created from wild trees. Known as *yamadori*, a Japanese term that literally means “taken from the mountains.” Bonsai created from these “wild” trees are often of extreme age, some quite literally hundreds of years old and displaying the natural ravages of time. Yet, most of these *yamadori* -based “*Bonsai*” have only been a Bonsai for a fraction of their long lives. **(Illustration # 4)**

So, what then is the answer to the riddle of age in Bonsai? It lies in the art itself and in the hands of those who create it. In the words of one famous Bonsai practitioner, “It’s not how old a Bonsai is that matters, it’s how old it appears to be.” This simple statement encapsulates the essence of the art of Bonsai. It is an artist that uses the medium, a plant, to create a convincing image of a mature tree. This requires the inclusion of visual indicators that convey age. Spreading roots, heavy tapering trunk, a broad canopy of limbs that divide into branches, that further divide into finer branchlets and finally a multitude of twigs. Scarred and twisted trunks, broken and savaged by the elements, wind-shaped and stunted dwarf trees clinging to a rock face; these and more affectations inspired by mother nature, are skillfully and quite intentionally recreated by Bonsai artists to convey the image of “age” on a diminutive scale. Thus, any given Bonsai can represent many forms of age. Its true age, how long it has been a Bonsai, how old it has been made to look, or yet another aspect of age in Bonsai generational expression. **(See Illustration #2)** Being living entities with lifespans that can extend much longer than those of the artists that create them, Bonsai are often passed to a new generation of artists who become their caretakers and aesthetic guardians. Thus, the age of a Bonsai can be measured in the passing lifetimes of those who are entrusted with them.

Still, it is the contemplation of a life span that is exceedingly longer than our own that most captivates us. We are enthralled by stories of ancient living things. This is particularly manifested in trees collected from the wild. As we gaze upon a five-hundred-year-old Juniper, we reach out, touching it to confirm it is indeed a living thing. We wonder, could it be that the life I feel was already two hundred and fifty years old when the declaration of Independence was signed? It is inevitable that we compare our relatively fleeting lives of less than a century to these engaging creations and consider an intriguing question, how old do these things get? Well, that depends on how we measure it. A Bonsai that resides in the Japanese Imperial

Collection is well documented to have been created more than five hundred years ago. Originally owned by none other than the Tokugawa Shogun Iemitsu. However, as we know, there are Bonsai created from ancient trees collected in the wild, already hundreds, perhaps as much as a thousand years old, before they started lives as Bonsai. **(See Illustration # 3)** Maybe it is simply the enigmatic nature of Bonsai and their complex relationship with time that enchants us most.

You are invited to visit The Clark Bonsai Museum, where art meets nature, to experience the coming Exhibition, “A Journey to the Fourth Dimension: The Element of Time in Bonsai”. Enjoy a stroll among living artifacts that offer us a glimpse into time past, and time progressing...and perhaps, muse on the influence that art and nature exert on our own lives.



**Illustration 1** This camphor forest bonsai was created from seedlings just 6 years ago, making it one of the youngest bonsai in the Clark Bonsai Collection. However, those seedlings came from a very old camphor tree that survived the bombing of Hiroshima in 1945, stretching its long, memorable history far beyond the few years of its current existence. The Camphor Peace Tree Forest will be on exhibit in August for the annual commemoration ceremony of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,



**Illustration #2** This large windswept style juniper began its life as a bonsai in 1993 when it was collected as a no more than 30 year old landscape bush on an estate in Sacramento. Beginning with the work of Vincent Owyong it was progressively styled and refined over the next 30 years by a series of well known bonsai artists to achieve its impressive ancient appearance today,



**Illustration # 3** This California Juniper grew for over 1000 years in the high Mojave desert where it was collected by a local bonsai artist who began its life as a bonsai just a few years ago. It has since been styled by Visiting Bonsai Master Todd Schlafer who was inspired by the even more ancient bristlecone pines. Its long life has predated the first European explorers and the entire long history of this western-most land, hundreds of years before it was known as California or became a state in the US.



**Illustration # 4** This 500 year old California juniper was collected from the high Mojave desert and has been styled and restyled over the years by a series of dedicated bonsai artists with the shared goal of creating art out of a tree that has survived nature's harsh environment, paying homage to its stark beauty. It's current dynamic contemporary styling makes it appear as though it is in movement, too wild to be contained in its pot.