

John Naka's Gift of "Goshin"

Making Bonsai an American Art

By Felix Lauglin, President, National Bonsai Foundation



Figure 1:
"Goshin" 2013
Photo credit: US
National Arboretum

In celebrating this year the 100th anniversary of John Naka's birth, we need only look back 33 years to 1983 as a pivotal year in the development of the art of bonsai in the United States. That was the year in which John donated "Goshin," perhaps the most famous bonsai in the world, as the first candidate for display in the new John

Y. Naka North American Pavilion at the National Bonsai & Penjing Museum at the U.S. National Arboretum in Washington, DC. (Figure 1)

Just a few years earlier, in 1976, the people of Japan had donated 53 bonsai to the citizens of the United States to commemorate America's Bicentennial. Those bonsai, put on display in the newly-built Japanese Pavilion, became the cornerstone of what is now the National Bonsai & Penjing Museum. The excitement over Japan's Bicentennial gift

"At its dedication in 1990, the John Y. Naka North American Pavilion displayed more than 50 of the finest bonsai from North America."



Figure 2: Bust of John Naka sculpted by Bonnie Koburt, installed in John Y. Naka North American Pavilion in 2001
Photo credit: Joe Mullan 2003

led the American bonsai community to create the National Bonsai Foundation in 1982, with the objective of building a pavilion that would display bonsai from North America.

John's generous donation of Goshin in 1983 and his iconic stature within the national bonsai community "inspired more than 500 students, friends, admirers, bonsai organizations, and foundations to contribute to a fund for the pavilion named in his honor."¹ Bolstered by a major challenge grant from Barbara H. Marshall, the fundraising team for the John Y. Naka North American Pavilion included Fred Ballard, Marybel Balendonck, Mary Ann Orlando, and others on the NBF board; the building project was overseen by NBF board member H. William Merritt; and the selection process for the other bonsai to be included in the North American Collection was headed by NBF board member William N. Valavanis.

At its dedication in 1990, the John Y. Naka North American Pavilion displayed more than 50 of the finest bonsai from North America. In the intervening years until his death in 2004, John came to the Museum every year. During his visits, as he helped the curators, he also created precious moments for everyone present to remember for a lifetime. (Figure 2)

For those who knew John or even met him once, his infectious and self-effacing humor and boundless love of nature left an indelible impression. His greatest gift was to show us how to appreciate the beauty of nature through the art of bonsai. I remember walking with John through a field in Virginia covered in dandelions when he looked down and said he wanted to take one back to California. Although rather stunned that he would want what most people kill with Roundup®, I carefully dug up the selected dandelion and wrapped it up for John's flight home. Several years later, on visiting John's home, I spied a little pot on his bench, sitting among his most famous bonsai; in it was that humble little dandelion, looking not out of place at all.

John's donation of Goshin to the National Bonsai & Penjing Museum in 1983 was as important, if not more so, to the development of bonsai in America than Japan's Bicentennial gift in 1976. For it called on the American bonsai community to make bonsai an art form that Westerners can appreciate – not as a distinctly oriental curiosity but as a very practical and universal means by which we can refresh our spirits and behold the beauty of our natural world.

In order to thank John for all he has done to make bonsai an American art form and pursuit, NBF has created a special "John Naka 100th Birthday Card", available on NBF's website at www.bonsai-nbf.org. Please sign the card with your best wishes and photos, and NBF will present the card to the Naka family on his birthday, August 16, or shortly thereafter.

1. National Bonsai and Penjing Museum - Composite Catalogue. *Beyond Wonderment and Curiosity: Dedication of the John Y. Naka Pavilion and The National Collection of North American Bonsai*, October, 1990. Frederic Ballard, editor.