

# Gallery - John Naka Trees

In celebration of John Naka's 100th birthday, the National Bonsai & Penjing Museum proudly presents the John Naka Centennial Exhibit.

This exhibit commemorates John Naka's unending contribution to the art of bonsai through some of his very best trees. This is the first time all seven of John Naka's donated bonsai have been displayed together. Six of them are on the following pages while the seventh, Goshin, is featured on the

cover of this journal. Each of these bonsai has a unique story that reflects some aspect of John Naka's love of bonsai. The text was prepared by Aarin Packard, Assistant Curator and the photographs were taken by Luke Pinneo.

In addition, there are four trees from the Pacific Bonsai Museum (the former Weyerhaeuser Pacific Rim Bonsai Collection) to round out this gallery.



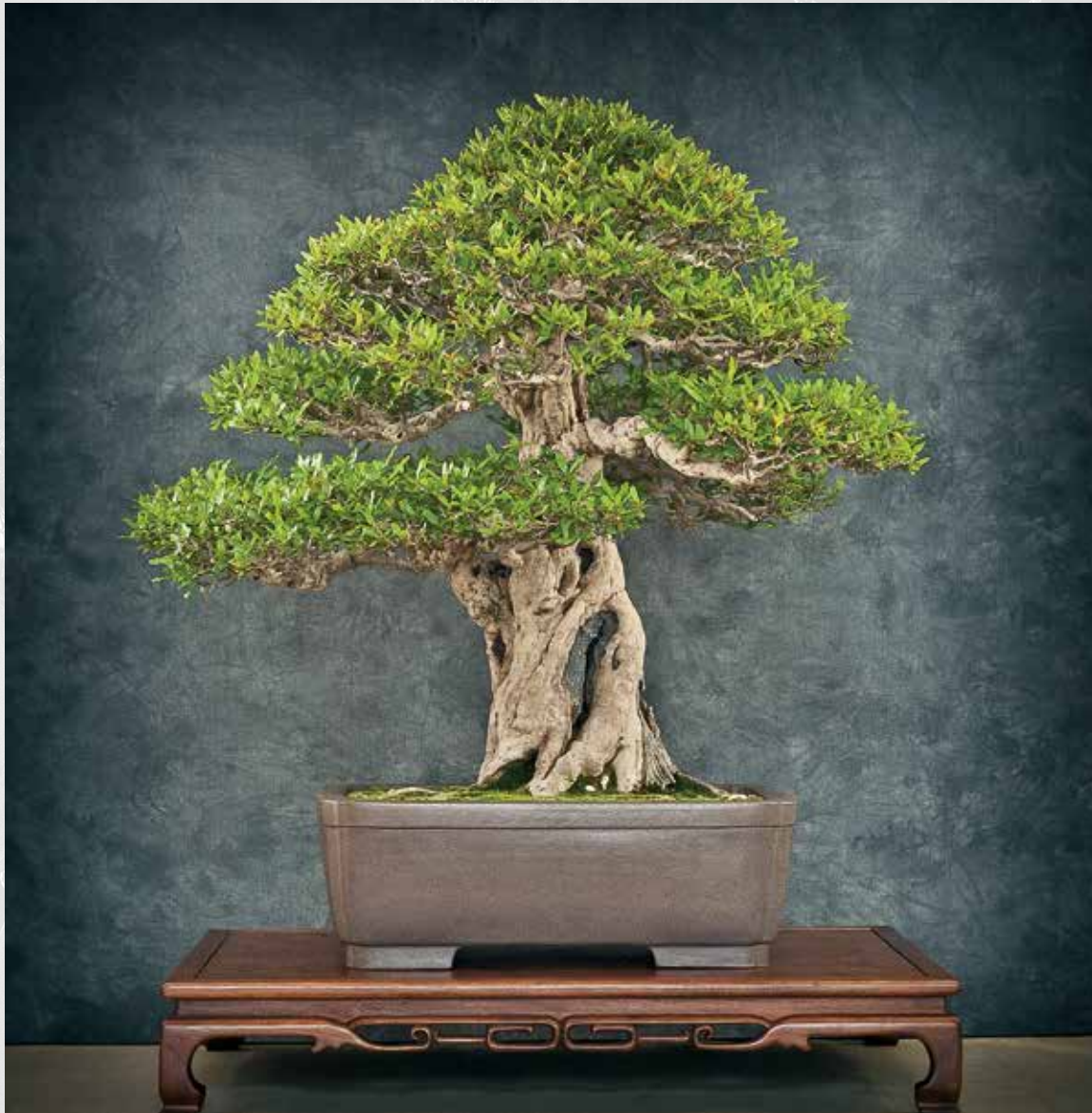
## Coast Live Oak, *Quercus agrifolia*

### The Story:

Bonsai which possess the most interestingly shaped trunks are usually found in the wild. Many of the bonsai in John Naka's backyard were collected from their native environment. This Coast Live Oak was found in 1986 on a cattle ranch about 55 miles NW of Santa Barbara. In his records John noted the curvaceous trunk of this tree, undoubtedly the reason he chose to collect it.

### Something Unique:

During the winter of 1999 the apex suddenly died back and the tree's original design had been compromised. On a visit to the Museum in 2003 John made a sketch of the future design as a guide for the staff. The tree has fully recovered and this year we celebrate the bonsai's return to public display for the first time in over a decade.



**Pomegranate, *Punica granatum***

**The Story:**

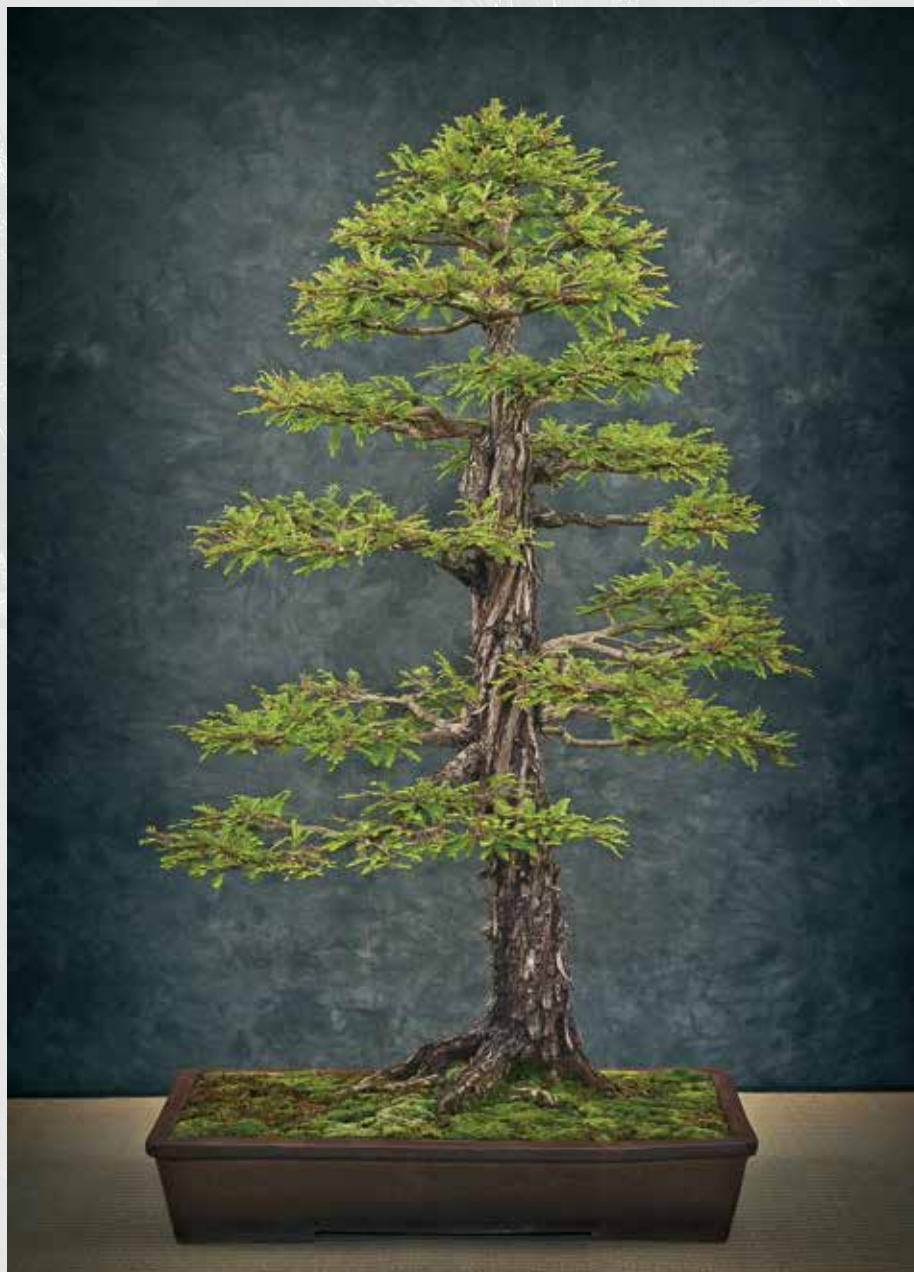
John Naka was always on the lookout for new material to create bonsai with. With the expansion of Interstate 5 in Los Angeles numerous houses were slated for demolition. John would comb these neighborhoods looking for any gems planted among the vacant homes.

On one of these scouting trips, John saw several promising pomegranates that could be made into good bonsai. While digging them out, a patrol car stopped and two policemen approached him to see what he was doing. After explaining to the officers about bonsai and his intent to save the trees for that

purpose, the officers revealed they too enjoyed bonsai and allowed Mr. Naka to continue on the condition that he collect a few extra trees for them.

**Something Unique:**

You may notice this tree was not donated by John Naka but his wife Alice. Alice admired this tree so much that John gave it to her as a gift. Aside from the initial work outlined in his book *Bonsai Techniques*, Alice cared for this tree up until she donated it to the Museum in 1990.



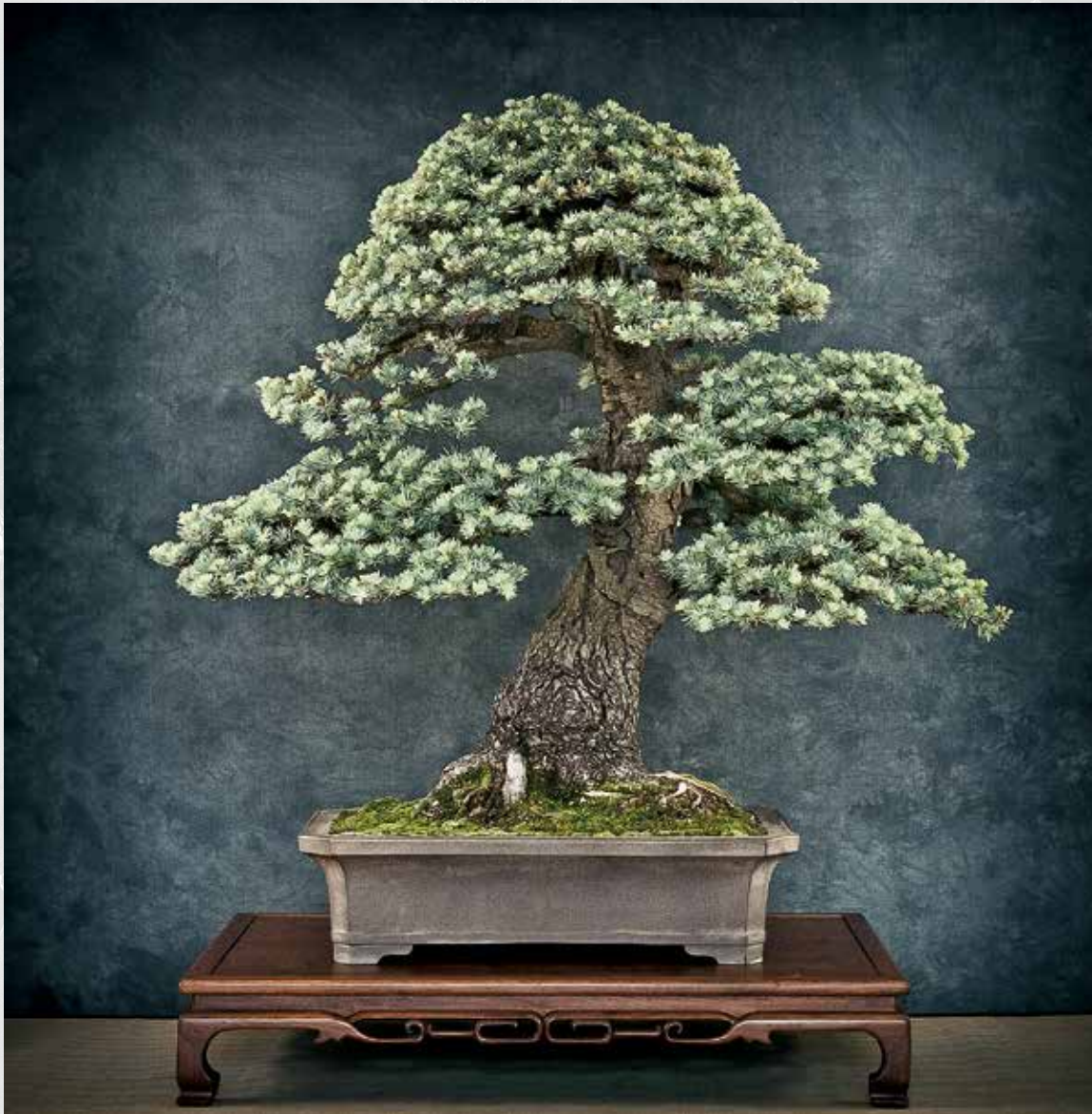
**Montezuma Cypress, *Taxodium mucronatum***

**The Story:**

Upon moving to Los Angeles in 1946, Mr. Naka had put much thought into his first bonsai. He wanted this tree to be in the classical formal upright style and be able to convey each of the four seasons in the almost seasonless Southern California climate. Mr. Naka found this Montezuma Cypress hidden away in a local nursery and brought it home as the first of many bonsai.

**Something Unique:**

In 2004 Mr. Naka decided to donate his very first bonsai to the Museum. While the tree was in transit to Washington D.C. Mr. Naka passed away at the age of 89. We are honored to have the first bonsai he began so many years ago to represent his final gift to the Museum.



**Blue Atlas Cedar, *Cedrus atlantica* 'Glauca Group'**

**The Story:**

John Naka had an affinity for finding potential bonsai material in local nurseries. John was always on the lookout for trees left to grow alone, forgotten in the back of some nursery. This Blue Atlas Cedar found growing in a coffee can was one of these forgotten trees which he purchased for \$2.50. It had been there so long that a lone root had grown over the edge of the can and into the ground.

**Something Unique:**

In January 1988 the Consul General of Japan, Mr. Hiromoto Seki, bestowed the name Ginpo which is Japanese for Silver Phoenix in a formal naming ceremony. In Japan the act of naming a bonsai is reserved only for the very best trees. Despite its humble beginnings, Ginpo has risen to the highest level of bonsai through John's vision and artist talent.



**Eleagnus, *Elaeagnus pungens***

**The Story:**

On another of his bonsai hunting trips among soon-to-be demolished homes near a new freeway, John Naka found this Eleagnus. Eleagnus is a native plant of Japan and is a popular species there for bonsai. John knew its appealing white flowers and bronze colored fruit would make a great addition to his collection. His fondness for this tree is evident as it is one of a few of his bonsai to appear in both of his books.

**Something Unique:**

Of all 12 of John Naka's grandchildren, Mike Naka at the time was the only one interested in bonsai. Upon John's passing in 2004, Mike inherited all of his grandfathers bonsai and decided to donate this tree to the museum.



**Creeping Juniper, *Juniperus horizontalis* 'Prostrata'**

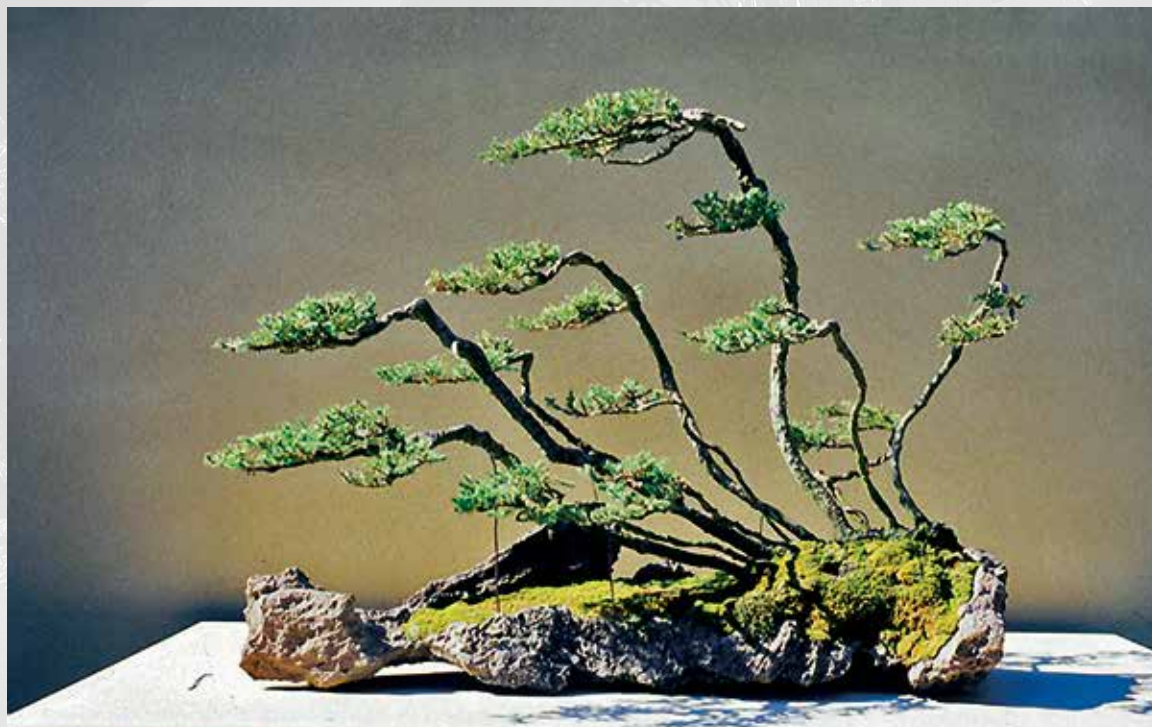
**The Story:**

Every bonsai tree has a story behind it; unfortunately we don't always know what that story is. This bonsai is one of those trees. What we do know is that John sold it sometime around 1985 and it was relocated to the East Coast. It unfortunately suffered neglect and was almost dead when it came to the bonsai nursery of Chase Rosade, a long time friend and student of John. Chase nursed the bonsai back to health and eventually brought the tree to the Museum in 2011.

**Something Unique:**

Even though little is known about this tree, we can assume John was proud of this bonsai as it too was presented in his first book, *Bonsai Techniques*. Only one of the seven Naka trees here did not appear in any of his books, distinguishing this group of bonsai as some of John's very best and most beloved trees.

## From the Pacific Bonsai Museum



### **Creeping Juniper, *Juniperus horizontalis***

Date of Origin: 1950

Bonsai Training Since: 1957

Height: 33"

This planting is the fourth composition that bonsai artist John Naka created in his career. It is an example of "raft" style bonsai, a variation of group planting in which a tree is laid on its side and the branches trained upward as individual trunks. Three bonsai sub-styles are also represented, including windswept, rock

planting and literati (freely composed, with long, slender trunks and short, sparse branches).

The plant material was originally five-gallon nursery stock that the artist shaped into a conventional group planting in 1955. In 1969, he restyled it and transplanted it to a piece of Mexican volcanic "Wonder Rock". The evolution of this remarkable bonsai is shown in Mr. Naka's book *Bonsai Techniques II*.



**Catlin Elm, *Ulmus parvifolia* 'Catlin'**

Date of Origin: 1970

Date Bonsai Training Began: 1970

Height: 28"

The broad, rounded crown of this bonsai is typical of the way Chinese elm and many other tree species grow in sub tropical environments such as southern California.

California bonsai artist John Naka raised this tree from a cutting he struck in 1970. After just a couple of years in a nursery pot, the young tree had already developed numerous long roots. In 1972, Mr. Naka found this shapely piece of black lava while on a tree collecting outing in southern Washington State. The rock and tree seemed made for each other, so Mr. Naka combined them in a "root-over-rock" style bonsai composition.

The bonsai has been featured in the publication "Bonsai in California".





**Flowering Plum, *Prunus pissardii***

Date of Origin: Unknown

Date Bonsai Training Began: 1967

Height: 22"

Collected from a farm in the San Fernando Valley in the mid 1960's, this purple leaf plum has gone through several design changes. Initially, the field grown tree was styled into a rather tall informal upright style, in a process that was documented in the artist's book *Bonsai Techniques II*. In

the early 1980's, termites attacked the tree, destroying part of the base and causing the death of the upper trunk. Mr. Naka restyled the tree in 1986, and again in 1991.

Between 2002 and 2005, the tree developed a large, disfiguring viral canker on the trunk which stimulated partitioning and significant branch dieback. As a result, the tree has been withdrawn from the display collection and lives in the Museum's reserve area.



**Oriental Sweet Gum, *Liquidambar orientalis***

Date of Origin: 1965

Date Bonsai Training Began: 1967

Height: 25"

A sturdy trunk reveals that this bonsai was developed from a taller tree, cut into a deep "V" notch about 18 inches above the soil.

Branches fan out from the trunk both below and above the cut to produce a widely spreading crown typical of broadleaf trees in

warm climates. The leaves are attractively small for this genus, and display a brilliant yellow color in fall.

The hand-made, wood fired antique container was created in the kilns of Bizen, famous for centuries as a center of ceramic art. It originally had no drain hole as it was designed to hold "Ikebana", or flower arrangements. Mr. Naka adapted the container to bonsai use by having a drain hole cut in the bottom by a concrete drilling company.