Enhancing the STONE

PART ONE

The Japanese Reality of Modifying Suiseki

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS USED IN THIS ARTICLE:

Biseki: *Stones with beautiful color, often polished*

Bonseki: *Originally used for an interior viewing stones in Edo period; later used for tray landscapes using small stones and sand.*

Diabase: *a common dark-colored igneous rock of basaltic origin*

Suiseki: *A general term referring to a stone that captures the poetic beauty of natural landscape scenery according to Nippon Suiseki Association's Japan Suiseki Exhibition guide February 9-13, 2016.*

Schalstein: *a plate or sheet-like rock formed from the compression and metamorphosis of basaltic and an andesitic tuff (igneous rocks resulting from explosive volcanic eruptions).*

Every Japanese *suiseki* dealer and most serious collectors are aware that *suiseki* have been, and continue to be, enhanced; yet it is a subject that is rarely discussed and seldom written about in contemporary stone reference books. Numerous Japanese *suiseki* have been enhanced by various degrees and methods, some of these are displayed at major exhibitions each year and included in publications on stones. Despite this, many Western collectors continued to believe that Japanese *suiseki* are completely natural stones. Stone collectors and dealers in Japan were interviewed over a two-year period to better understand the extent to which *suiseki* are enhanced in Japan, and to better understand the dichotomy that developed between Western beliefs about Japanese *suiseki* and the realities in Japan. This article is based upon experiences in Japan and a review of the Japanese-language literature on this subject. In

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our second article on this topic, we will present the results of in-depth interviews with one of Japan's leading stone carvers, confirming that the carving of Japanese stones was common in the 1960s and has continued to the present.

Stone collectors and connoisseurs have long admired the many beautifully shaped landscape stones of Japan and their refined elegance. Foreign visitors to Japan were often first introduced to Japanese *suiseki* at their national exhibitions in Tokyo-the Meihen-ten or the more recent Japan Suiseki Exhibition—or at the fine Taikan-ten each November in Kyoto. Many attractive small hut stones and Ibi River waterfall stones were purchased at these events. These stones were partially to totally manufactured. Slowly, and after repeat visits to Japan, some Western stone collectors learned that other Japanese stones were often worked to improve their appearance, many extensively so. Many of the Ibi River stones have been cut so the quartz vein is at the base of the stone. Sometimes they are further worked to make the cut bottom appear natural. A broader range of Japanese stones were being worked in one way or another to improve their appearance as a natural stone. Western stone enthusiasts who are able to communicate with Japanese collectors and stone dealers, and who have access to the Japanese literature and practices, learn that many of the Japanese stones have been worked in some capacity. Some well-respected stone dealers have said that a vast majority of the landscape stones in Japan are enhanced while another dealer's estimate was 60% to 70%. This clearly conflicts with information published in English, French, Italian and German on Japanese *suiseki* and differs from what has been promoted in Western countries over the last thirty years.

The presentation of Japanese stones as natural is found in many influential books on the subject. For example, Vincent T. Covello and Yuji Yoshimura (1984) stated that Japanese "*suiseki* are small, naturally formed stones admired for their beauty and for their power to suggest a scene from nature or an object closely associated with nature" in their book, *The Japanese Art of Stone Appreciation*. This work was translated and published in Italian in 1994. The French language book, *La Collection de Suiseki de*

Facing page; This Ibi River hut stone was our first Japanese stone.

Top; An Ibi River waterfall stone with single basal cut.

Bottom; A small manufactured hut stone.

Top; This California Eel River stone was collected and cut from a larger rock by Ben Nanjo, a well-known stone enthusiast from the San Francisco Bay area. It is typical of the many fine viewing stones obtained from a single basal cut.

Bottom; This attractive Kamo River stone has a cut bottom. It was attributed to the Meiji Era by Arishige Matsuura, former chairman of the Nippon Suiseki Association, when it was acquired.

Pius Notter by Arishige Matsuura and Martin Pauli defined *suiseki* as small stones that were formed by nature. The concept that *suiseki* are completely natural was further promoted by Willi Benz in his book, *The Art of Suiseki* published in 1996. This was an English adaptation of his earlier book, *Suiseki: Kunstwerke der Natur Präsentiert von Menschen.* Thus, European stone collectors believed that Japanese *suiseki* were all natural stones formed by nature. This belief was supported by Felix Rivera when he wrote that "*Suiseki* is an art form that values the intrinsic qualities of hard minerals and stones shaped by natural forces into forms suggestive of mountains, islands, waterfalls, glaciers, plains, people, and animals" in his book, *Suiseki, The Japanese Art of Miniature Landscape Stones (1997).* Many newly formed stone clubs accepted this notion, first presented by Covello and Yoshimura, then reinforced by Benz and Rivera, as fact.

In California, stone collectors from California Suiseki Society in the San Francisco Bay Area were regularly cutting stones to make suitable landscape stones with stable bases. Felix Rivera, founder of this society and author of the book, *The Japanese Art of Miniature Landscape Stones,* described *suiseki* by size, color, and patina and by saying that they "may not be altered other than to have their bottoms cut and leveled, if needed, to allow for easy placement within a wooden base." Rivera pointed out that many Japanese collectors made single basal cuts to make *suiseki*. In southern California, the sentiments were against any altering of the stone, including a single bottom cut. This was promoted by the California Aiseki-kai Club, led by Larry and Nina Ragle. According to the current California Aiseki-kai web site, "*suiseki* are small stones shaped by nature, unaltered by man, which suggest familiar landscapes such as mountains, islands, waterfalls, shorelines or seascapes."

Shaping, carving, polishing and inscribing stones is an ancient business in Japan necessary to meet the demand for various sizes and types of monuments, lanterns, pagodas, and Buddha figures. These skills were well developed and easily applied on a smaller scale to the art of stone appreciation. An examination of many older, important *suiseki* will show that the bottom was modified. Our Meiji era Kamo River stone, purchased from former Nippon Suiseki Association Chairman, Arishige Matsuura is a good example.

The Japanese stone appreciation community did not try to conceal the fact that many stones were partially or totally modified for use as s*uiseki*. In fact, numerous articles were published beginning in the 1960s about the processes used to modify stones. Stones that have been worked and extensively polished, often to a mirror smooth finish, frequently colorful, usually quite beautiful, and placed in the category of *biseki* or beautiful stones, are not included in this article.

Two references were found to Sakai Teikyo, usually considered by the most well-informed Japanese stone professionals to be Japan's finest stone carver. One reference is an article, *A Story of Sakai Teikyo* published in the book *How to Appreciate and Take Care of Suiseki,* edited by Inoue Yoshio in 1966. Teikyo was one of three sons of Sakai Sahichi, a stone carver in Gifu. Teikyo learned stone carving from his father and while he specialized in Ibi River stones, he also worked some Setagawa stones. He was known for his ability to make such natural looking *suiseki* that others could not see that they were enhanced. Sakai Teikyo studied different rivers, their rock formations and the way water flowed over and through them, to understand how they were formed. The way he worked on a rock depended upon the river in which it originated. He believed that movement in stones was important, and that working stones was unavoidable. This was due to the rapid increase in the number of collectors and the limited supply of stones. He also maintained that if working on a stone multiplies its value by many times, then a stone should be worked. The article included many photographs showing Sakai manufacturing *suiseki.*

Another important document was *Memories of Ibi River Stones* by Sakai Teikyo, third son, which was published in 1989 in a local publication, *Stone Friends* by the Ibi River Aiseki-kai association. It is an account

of his life and his family's lifelong work in acquiring and processing stones for the *bonseki* and *suiseki* markets. His father, Sakai Sahichi, started collecting stones from the Nagara River and later, from the Ibi River to sell along with his bonsai in the late 1880s in Gifu. A small group of bonsai and stone enthusiasts were buying these stones except during a period after the 1891 earthquake struck Gifu.

Sometime between 1891 and 1907, Sakai Sahichi and Sakai Sasuke, his first son, began to work stones because they did not sit well. At first, they removed pieces from the bottom of the stones so they would be more stable. The Sakai family sold many stones at an exhibition held in Tsu City in Mie prefecture in 1907. According to Sakai Teikyo, this event made Ibi River stones famous throughout Japan. As a result, by the Taisho era (1912-1925), more stone dealers opened shops in Gifu and along the Ibi River.

In 1924, Sakai Kanhichi, second son of Sakai Sahichi opened Gaseki-en, a stone shop in Tokyo, to sell more of his Ibi River stones. Kanhichi and his younger brother Teikyo travelled to Kuze Village in Ibi County where they met Mr. Yojuro, a stone collector who had been collecting a two-tone type of stone from the Ibi River. This stone had a narrow light band—a nearly white layer of stone—near thicker layers of dark gray to black stone. The Sakai brothers started making wonderful and very realistic mountain *suiseki* from this material. They called these stones Yojuro-ishi. There is no record that the stone collector Yojuro ever carved this type of stone to make his own mountain stones. The stones sold well and the Sakai brothers ordered larger quantities of the two-tone stone from Yojuro. This gave rise to the Yojuro stone type, one that is recognized in *suiseki* manuals and displayed in major exhibitions today. Later stone carvers copied the Sakai's family's work, but few could ever match the fine craftsmanship of a Sakai mountain *suiseki*.

Sakai's business continued to grow when he was asked to provide stones to other bonsai nurseries. In 1931, Teikyo purchased a large cutting machine to enable him to meet the demand for stones used as *bonseki* and *suiseki*. *Bonseki* is an art form that used small stones up to 18 cm (7 inches) with white sand to make a temporary landscape scene on a black lacquer oval or rectangular tray. This was a popular art form with several schools that declined sharply after the major collapse of the Japanese economy in the late 1980s. This coincided with a steady decline in the number of Japanese collectors purchasing bonsai and *suiseki*.

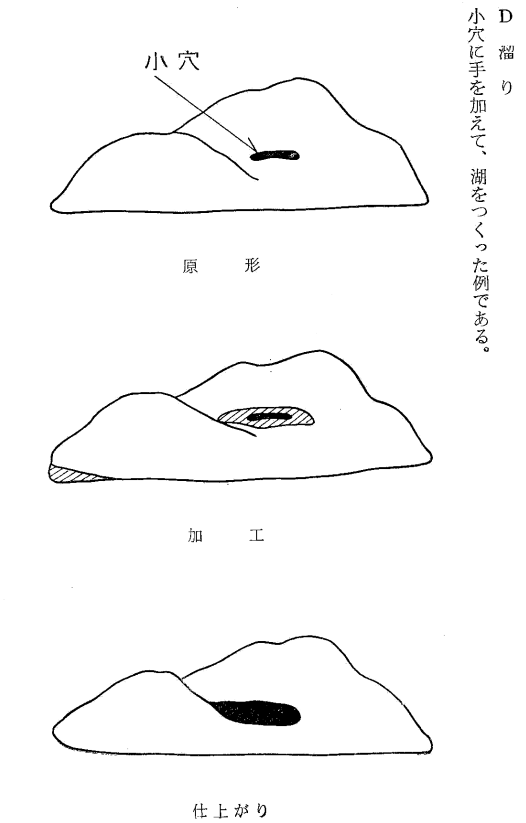
The 1960s was a period of rapid growth in the numbers of people collecting and displaying stones in Japan. Concurrent many new *suiseki* clubs were established, as was the Nippon Suiseki Association in 1961. Numerous books were published and periodicals started to help inform new stone enthusiasts about this fascinating hobby and art form. These were primarily books for stone hobbyists written by fellow hobbyists, while others were written or edited by Murata Keiji, a leading professional bonsai and stone specialist.

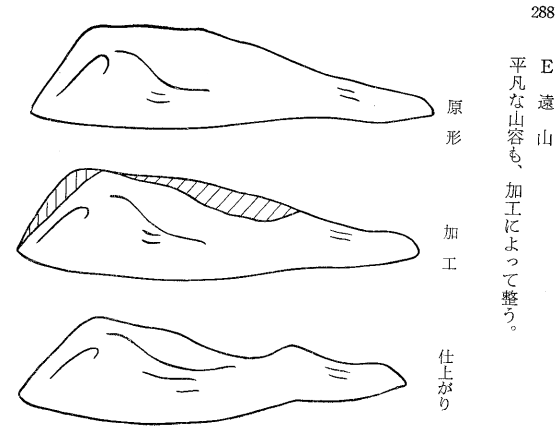
Top; The Ibi River in Shizuoka is a tributary of the larger Kiso River. Its broad channel with numerous extensive deposits of gravel, cobbles, small to large boulders, makes it an ideal place to search for suiseki.

Bottom; This Ibi River stone was collected by Mr. Yojiro in the 1930s and was then made into a classical Japanese mountain range with a single tall peak. This stone carver was probably Sakai Teikyo. In Japan, this stone and other similar stones are given the name Yojiro-ishi rather than Ibigawa-ishi.

Different steps in cleaning stones—making them shiny by using a cloth, polishing techniques, adjustment of the bottom of stones, and the removal of softer portions of stones—were all subjects presented in the 1966 book, *How to Cultivate and Polish Suiseki,* edited by Murata Keiji. Inoue Toshihiko, who contributed a chapter in this book about modifying stones, wrote that he was providing assistance to collectors by presenting approaches to the modification of stones in order to reveal the interest and the beauty of stones. He was advocating expanding the horizon of viewing stones by adding abstract *suiseki*.

Enhancing stones to make *suiseki* was not limited to Ibi, Seta, Saji and Abe river stones, but a much wider range of stones were modified. A list of 29 different stone types from as many areas was listed in Appendix 2 in Inouye Yoshio's 1966 book *How to Appreciate and Take Care of Suiseki*. The common name, geological





Top left; This small but beautiful mountain-shaped stone was first used in *bonseki*, later a wood base was carved for it so it can be used as a *suiseki*. It is 15.8 cm (6.2 inches) wide, 3.5 cm (1.4 inches) tall, and 4.5 cm (1.8 inches) deep.

Middle left; A typical black, smooth and shiny Kamuikotan stone from the northern most main island of Hokkaido.

Bottom left; Sado island mountain stone that has been completely manufactured from a larger piece of Sado island akadama.

Right column; Tanaka illustrates how to form a mountain lake in the line drawing at the top; then below, he uses line drawings to show how to shape a stone to improve flow and to make it look more like a natural mountain shape. The upper drawing is the stone before any alterations, the middle drawing shows what stone to be removed, and the bottom illustration is the end product. From *Small Stones for Hobby* by Tanaka Kouki (1967)

description of the stone and the material used to modify the stones, was given for each type listed in this appendix. Examples of other types of stones listed here included Kamuikotan, Akadama, Kifune and Hakkaisan. Kamuikotan stones were described as Schalstein, diabase and that wet sand paper #250 to #600 can be used on these stones. Akadama stones were identified as iron quartz and that they should be worked with a grinder first followed by wet sand paper from #200 to #1200. Sandpaper with a grit size of #200 to #600 is considered fine to super fine.

Saruta Masami dealt with the subject of how much working was acceptable; points of modifying and working stones; and practical methods of working

stones in his 1967 book, *How to Collect and Enjoy Suiseki*. He was opposed to modifying stones just to add value and to deceive others. Instead, he advocated that enhancing the beauty of stones should be accepted to a certain degree. Saruta illustrated how to suspend a stone in an acid bath to modify the surface of the stone. This is another indication that some *suiseki* were being produced by working the stone to varying degrees.

Further evidence that stones were being worked extensively, and not just on the bottom, is obtained from Tanaka Kouki's book, *Small Stones for Hobby: from Searching to Appreciation,* published in 1967. Tanaka believed that polishing and processing stones enhances and deepens the beauty that *suiseki* holds. He included a chapter in his book to illustrate the tools and materials used in modifying stones, as well as a series of simple line drawings showing how to alter a stone by removing portions to make it look more like a natural mountain stone. Tanaka shows how to make a lake in a mountain stone. Other line drawings show how to make other types of *suiseki.*

The concept of removing parts of a stone to improve its appearance was not limited to Tanaka's largely obscure book, but it was discussed by *suiseki* leader Murata Keiji in his book, *Encyclopedia of Suiseki Hobby* (1969). Murata wrote about the limits of "worked out" stones by saying, "yes to removing stone, but no to adding to the stone." This was, in effect, setting the limits to the level of working stones. Further evidence to support this concept is found in an essay in Matsuura and Yoshimura's well known classic work, *An Overview of Japanese Suiseki Masterpieces* (1988). In describing *suiseki*, the authors wrote "As a principle, no works are allowed. However, it has been said that removing is acceptable, but no adding."

Articles describing the different methods used in stone enhancement were being replaced with photographic essays of attractive stones. Published works in the last two decades are largely silent on the matter of enhancements except to briefly state that it was acceptable to alter the bottom of a stone. Matsuura's 2010 English language book, *An Introduction to Suiseki,* supported limited basal alterations. Matsuura emphasized and promoted Japanese *suiseki* as natural stones in his lectures in North America and Europe. Kasahara Manabu, former chairman of the Nippon Suiseki Association, also stated in his book, *Notes on Suiseki,* published in 2013, that altering the bottom of stones was acceptable.

Even though the emphasis today in the West is on natural stones, some worked stones are regularly displayed in major exhibitions in Japan. A carefully examination of the stones in each of the major displays will reveal several stones with bottom cuts. One example is a large Kamo River Mountain shaped stone which was included in the 1987 Taikan-ten and a photograph of it published in their display catalog for that year. Another example is the nearly perfect *suiseki*, a two-peaked Saji River stone, exhibited in the 3rd Japan Suiseki Exhibition in Tokyo in 2016.

The evidence that Japanese *suiseki* were enhanced by altering stones, especially stones from the Ibi, Abe, Sajigawa and other rivers, is overwhelming. Despite the fact that some Japanese *suiseki* enthusiasts did not support the modification of stones, numerous articles were published in books and newsletters showing how stones can be modified to appear more natural. The demand for attractive landscape stones was great during the 1960s and 1970s, the peak of the boom among hobbyists in stone appreciation in Japan. Many of these pieces were so well-made that serious collectors and even dealers could not tell the altered from the unaltered. The fact that no records were kept of each of the worked stones as they passed from stone carver to dealer to collector helped to obscure the origin of each stone. Thus, it is time to dispense with the myth that Japanese *suiseki* are all natural and recognize that a significant number of stones held in collections and shown in exhibitions have been worked to some degree. Our findings blur the distinction between rocks displayed as found objects and a sculpted rock that is treated as an art object. The lines between the collector and the artist evaporate in regards to Japanese *suiseki*.

Top; The authenticity of this nearly perfect mountain shaped stone from the Kamo River was seriously questioned a year after it was purchased. It was sold as a natural stone with only slight work on the bottom; however, leading Japanese suiseki specialists said it was definitely "worked out." This is a very atypical shape for a natural stone from a fast flowing river.

Bottom; This Kamo River stone was displayed in the 1987 Taikan-ten in Kyoto and later published in the catalog for that exhibition. It is a beautiful island or mountain stone that was made by a single basal cut from a larger rock. This large stone was recognized as the best mountain *suiseki* in the World Bonsai Convention in Washington, D.C. in 2005.