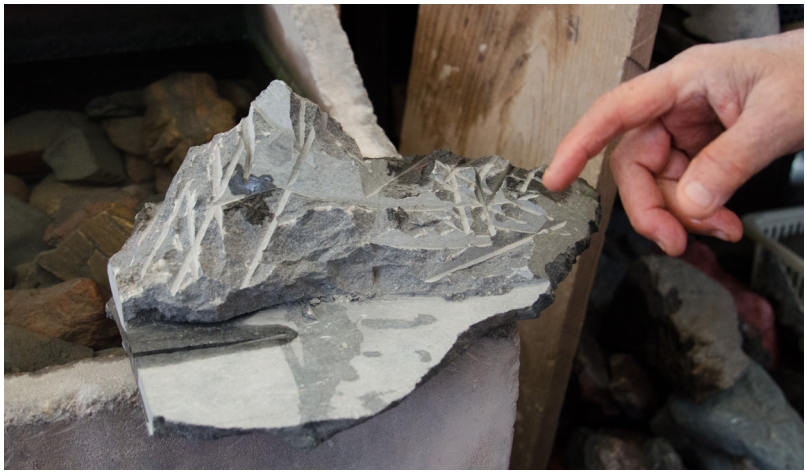
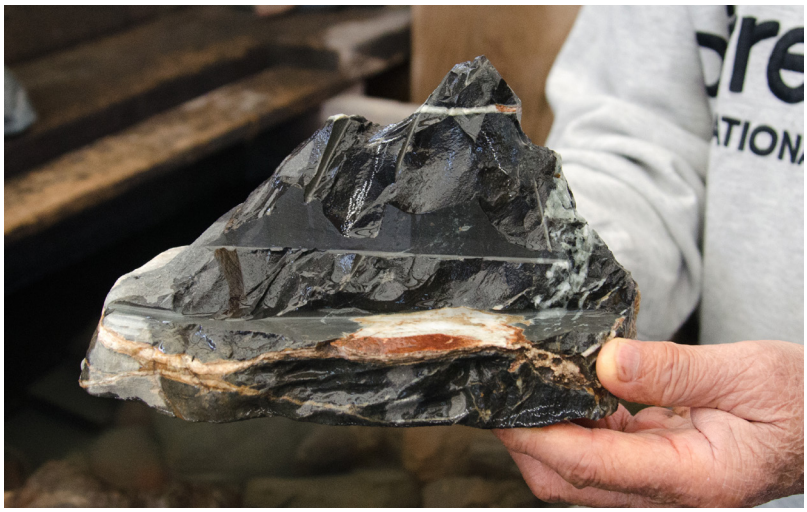
Enhancing the STONE
PART TWO

Sakurai Toshio, Japan's Leading Professional Stone Carver

By Thomas Elias and Hiromi Nakaoji, USA

In Part One of this two-part article, we established that cutting and carving stones, specifically for *bonseki* and *suiseki*, was a well-established component of stone appreciation in Japan. These practices have been clearly documented in numerous Japanese publications. Enhanced stones have been readily accepted as suiseki and included into recognized exhibitions and numerous books. In this part, by sharing information we gathered from interviewing one of Japan's leading and most successful *suiseki* carvers and manufacturers, we will show that enhancing and manufacturing stones to make *suiseki* has continued from the 1960s to the present.





Several years ago, we visited a stone carver and his shop located on the Ibi River, but that visit was brief and our limited time did not permit us to document the extent of the stone carving at this location. Over several intervening years, we became personally acquainted with each of the stone vendors at the Kokufu-ten and Taikan-ten exhibitions. We learned that some of these dealers were also stone carvers, but one of them—Sakurai Toshio—was considered to be the last of the major Japanese stone carvers making *suiseki* in Japan. We knew that many of the stones he sells have been partially or totally made, but we did not know how he made them. Sakurai invited us to visit his home and his shop in Yaizu in central Shizuoka Prefecture. Our first visit with him was on November 10, 2015 and then we spent two more days with him in his home and immediate area in March 22nd and 23rd, 2016.

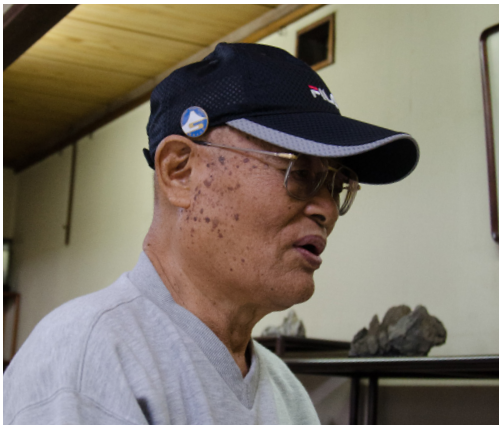
Our two-hour ride by bullet train (Shinkanshen) southwest from Tokyo to Yaizu gave us time to review our questions for Sakurai. Sakurai met us at the Yaizu train station and took us directly to his shop. On both visits, we sat and talked in his stone showroom before touring his facility. We soon learned that he had been buying, enhancing and selling stones for just over forty years, and that he was friends with many stones dealers in Shizuoaka and nearby Giu Prefectures and in Tokyo. Now in his early 80s, he is considering closing his business at the end of this year due to health issues. His shop area, large by Japanese standards, consists of two parallel buildings and extensive open-air bench systems between and around the two buildings and along the rear of his property, a driveway and parking area. It is large enough for several cars to park inside the property. The extensive outdoor bench system is for cultivated stones or *yoseki*, the Japanese practice of cultivating stones outdoors.

Sakurai was born in 1935 in the Ochiai family that ran a small family sake brewery. Toshio married into the Sakurai family and assumed the Sakurai family name, a tradition in Japan when a family only has daughters. Toshio first became interested in stones from the Yoshima River as a young adult around the time his father died. He started working as a taxi driver in the 1950s since he had his own car. Whenever he drove to nearby Yoshima, he would purchase several boxes of attractive Yoshima stones from farmers and then take them to Tokyo to sell to Mr. Kasahara, owner of Sansui-en, a nice stone shop in the Nerima region. Sakurai was able to sell them for ten times what he paid. He was aware that buying and selling was stones were a good business.

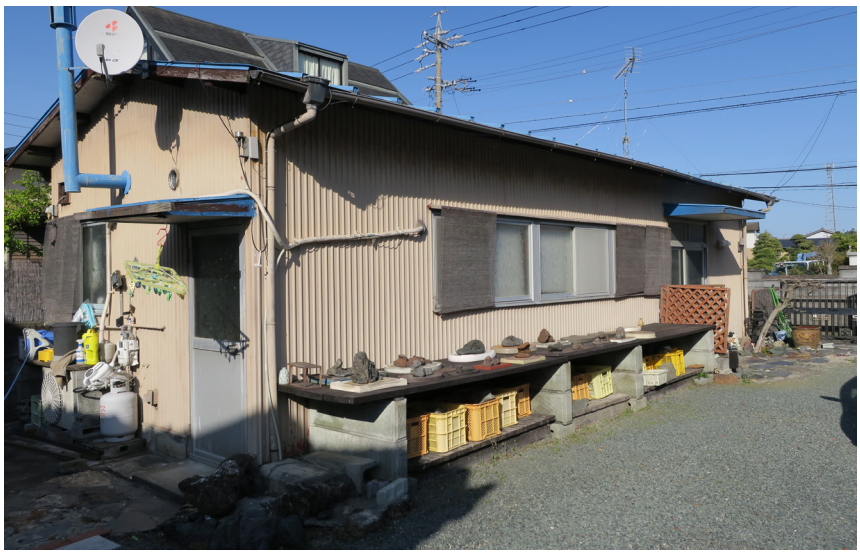
These transactions occurred at the beginning of Japan's biggest boom in *suiseki* appreciation. Japan was occupied by American military responsible for the reconstruction of Japan was administered by them until the treaty of San Francisco in 1951 when Japan was turned back over to Japanese leaders. This was followed by a period of steady growth and prosperity. A plethora of new books were published for *suiseki* hobbyists throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and *suiseki's* appeal expanded from the pre-war

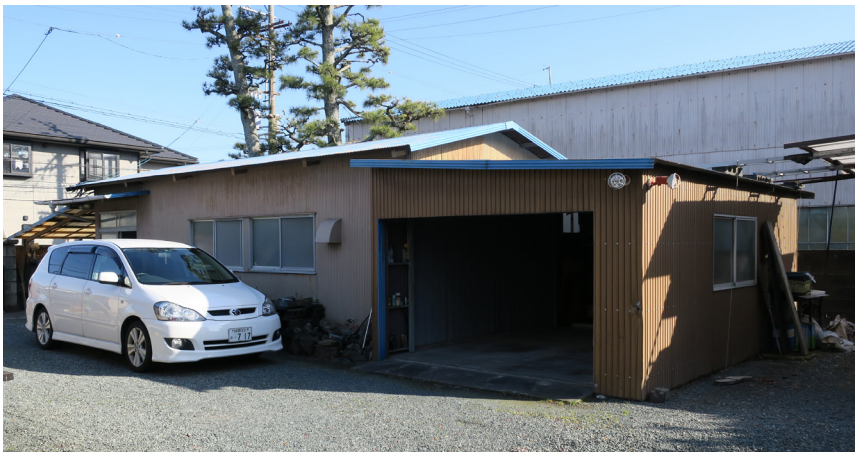
Top; The first major or rough cuts have been made by Sakurai to form a single peak mountain stone. These first cuts (lighter colored areas) were made with his large circular saw. Later cuts, to make the mountain stone more realistic, will be made with the power circular grinding tools and the hand-held pneumatic chisel. After the final shaping has been completed, it may be subjected to sandblasting to minimize the smooth cut surfaces and then acid washed for a short time to darken the stone. Sakurai can make an attractive landscape stone in four to six hours.

Facing page; Two examples of stones in the process of being carved.



Top left; Mr. Sakurai Toshio has been one of Japan's foremost stone carvers and a leading supplier of enhanced stones in Japan for over 40 years. One of his specialties is the manufacturer of hut stones. He is also a stone dealer at the major events each year in Tokyo and Kyoto. Now 81 years old, he is preparing to close his business.





Middle left; This building is his show room filled with hundreds of different types of stones for sale. *Bottom left;* This building is his workshop where he manufactures suiseki ranging from small hut stones to large scenic landscape stones.

literati to the general population. This can be called the "period of popularizing *suiseki*." Several journals were started for the growing number of stone clubs throughout Japan. Many of these clubs held their own local or regional exhibitions and some participated in the annual major exhibition—Meihen-ten—held annually at the Meiji Shrine in Tokyo starting in 1961. This period was also a time of major economic expansion as Japan was investing heavily in their industries and infrastructure.

Sakurai's showroom, a large rectangular-shaped building, contains shelves lined with different examples of natural and enhanced *suiseki*. These stones are available for sale to individual domestic and international collectors. Sakurai is a major wholesaler who also supplies other dealers with quality landscape, waterfall, hut stones, and other Japanese stones. Sakurai has been making various sizes of hut stones to sell directly to the public and also to sell to dealers. He has been doing this for approximately four decades. It was then that we realized that we were talking with the person who made the first Japanese stone we ever purchased, a small hut stone, approximately twenty years ago. Many of the stones on display have been enhanced in one way or another by Sakurai. Some were completely manufactured, others have been cleaned and polished by sand blasting, and others have been carved or shaped by removing portions of the rock to create a scenic stone.

As we sat on two old couches drinking tea and talking, Sakurai talked about his life and his role in Japanese stone appreciation. He was open, detailed, and we believe, honest. Sakurai was more relaxed on our second visit and eager to answer a long list of questions. When he first began buying and selling stones, he would occasionally take a stone to someone else to have the bottom cut. He found this to be expensive and decided to buy his own cutting equipment. He was familiar with several others who were buying stones and making *suiseki*. He quit his

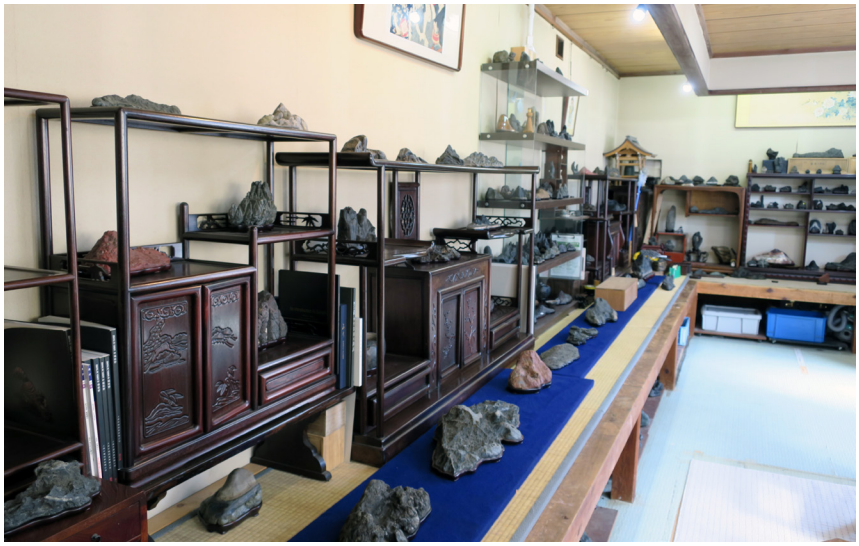
taxi business and devoted full time to being a stone dealer and a stone carver. Sakurai worked primarily with stones from the Abegawa, Ibigawa, and Sagigawa Rivers, all located in the same general region of Japan. He told us that there were twenty professional stone cutters working in this region in the 1960s and 1970s. At that time, the raw material was abundant and inexpensive. Today, Sakurai is the last of the major professional stone cutters. There is another smaller carving operation on the Ibi River which specializes in making waterfall stones, and one other dealer who hand makes a few mainly landscape type stones for his retail sales table.

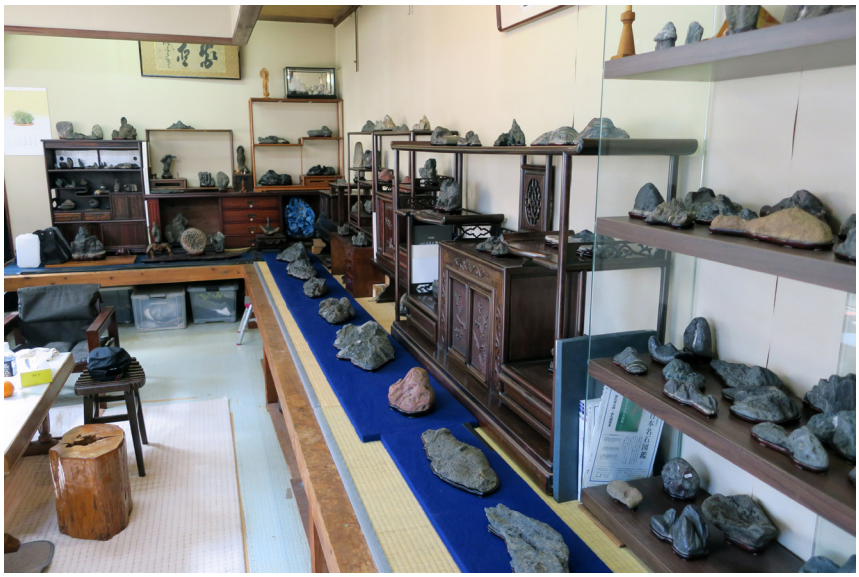
Sakurai told us that he has a sales booth each year at the Kokufu-ten's Green Club in Tokyo in February and then at the Taikan-ten in Kyoto in November. These are his primary venues for retail sales to individual collectors. He maintains a "don't ask, don't tell" policy regarding his stones. He doesn't talk about working the stones he has for sale unless someone specifically asks. He also has some completely natural stones for sale at his booth.

To learn how he enhances stones, we walked across to the other parallel building to begin our lessons. The first area was enclosed on three sides and held a large sink, cabinets full of tools and stones, and a large electric grinding machine on the floor. The large sink was used to determine where to cut stones. This was accomplished by placing a stone where it could rest on other stones that were slightly below the waterline. Sakurai adjusted the stone up or down to obtain the desired line to cut to have a good hut stone. The cut line was then marked on the stone and it was taken to the next room for cutting. Sakurai sits on a chair in this first room and uses a series of hand chisels to rough out a hut stone.

Small stones, mainly from the Ibi River, are suitable for making hut stones with a layer of white stone alternating with darker layers. After obtaining the shape with cold chisels, he uses an electric grinding tool to refine the shape. A little polishing and further refinement, if needed, yields an attractive hut stone in fifteen to twenty minutes. Because small hut-shaped stones are easily recognized, attractive, and not too expensive, they have been popular with foreign visitors or with Japanese who are new to the art of stone appreciation.

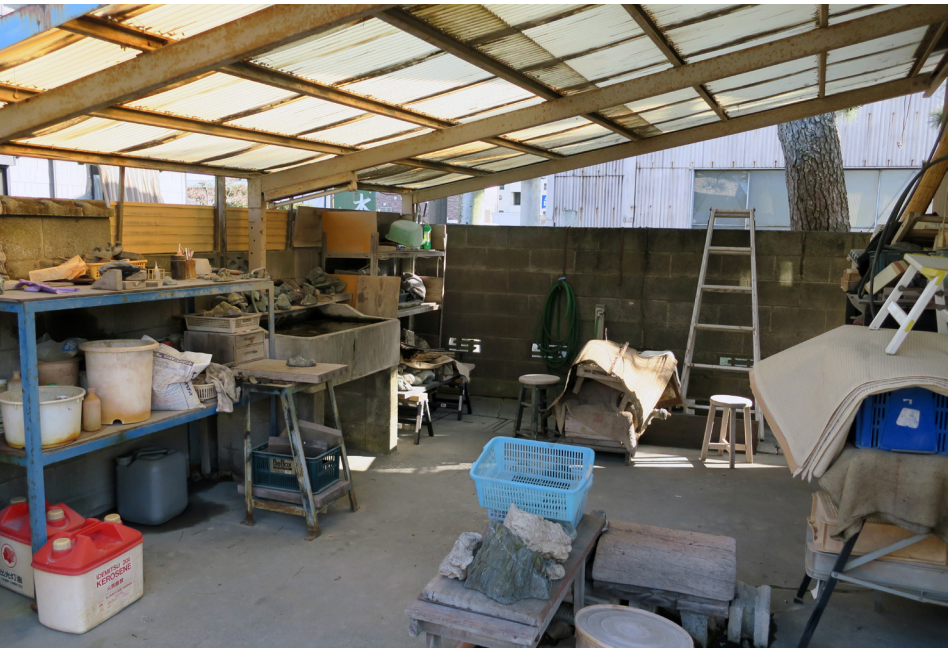
We took a medium-sized black rock into the next room where Sakurai had a fairly sophisticated large circular bladed electric saw for cutting even large boulders. The blade is diamond coated and running water cools the blade and stone during the cutting process. He showed us how his equipment can cut through a medium-sized rock in a few minutes, a bit longer for larger stones. Often, he just makes a bottom cut, but sometimes he makes a series of shallow to deep cuts as his first steps in making nice single-peak or multiple-peak mountain stones. After the initial cut, he further works the stone with hand-held cutting and shaping tools. He had a sizeable pile of rocks that had already been cut in preparation for turning them into landscape stones. We examined these "landscape stones in progress" and brought one back with us as a souvenir.

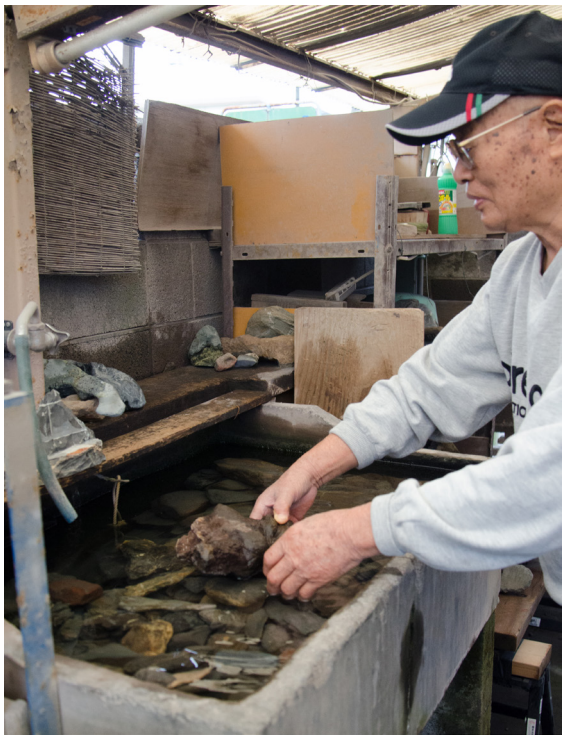


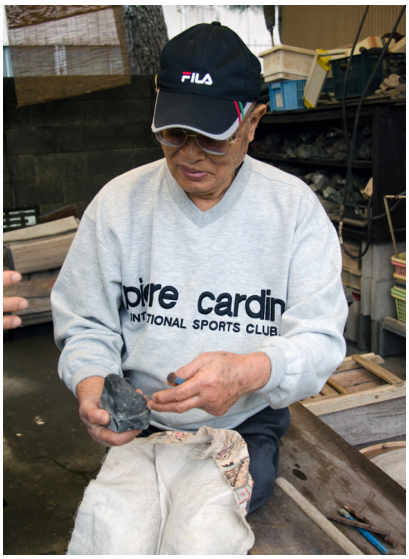


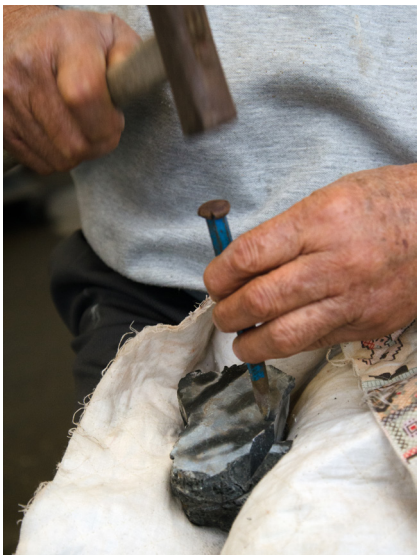
Above; Sakurai's showroom with various types of stones he sells. He has partially, and in many cases totally enhanced the stones. He is a major supplier of suiseki to several dealers who in turn supply stone collectors in Japan and internationally.

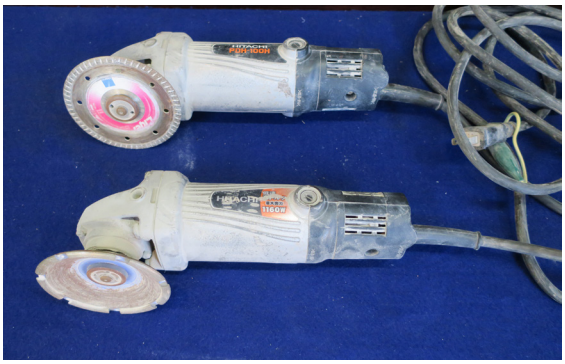
Sakurai's sand blasting equipment sat nearby at the other end of the same room. This consisted of a large air compressor with thick rubber tubing connected to a large box shaped structure. A large metal tubular bin, which held the etching sand, sat above the compressor on a heavy metal stand. The actual sandblasting occurs inside the box. An exhaust and recycling system protects the user from fine sand, rock and dust. The box is also equipped with lights and blocks to hold a stone in a particular position while it is being sand blasted. The sequence it this: Sakurai places a stone inside the box in the correct position, closes the side door, then sits in front of the box and looks inside the box through a strong flexible plastic window. A hole in the plastic window allows him to insert the heavy tubing through which high volume compressed air and sand make contact with the stone. He can move the hose and nozzle to any position he wants. A series of different-sized nozzles allow him to select the

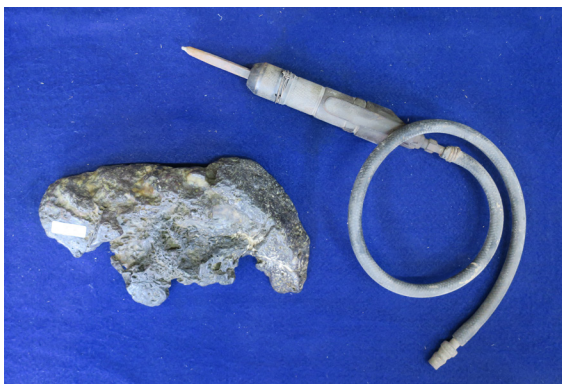








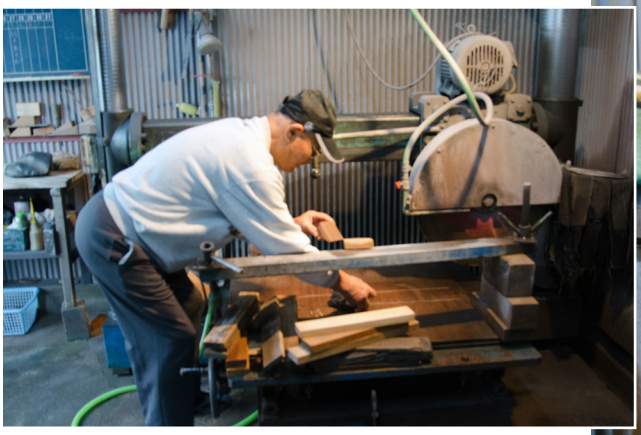


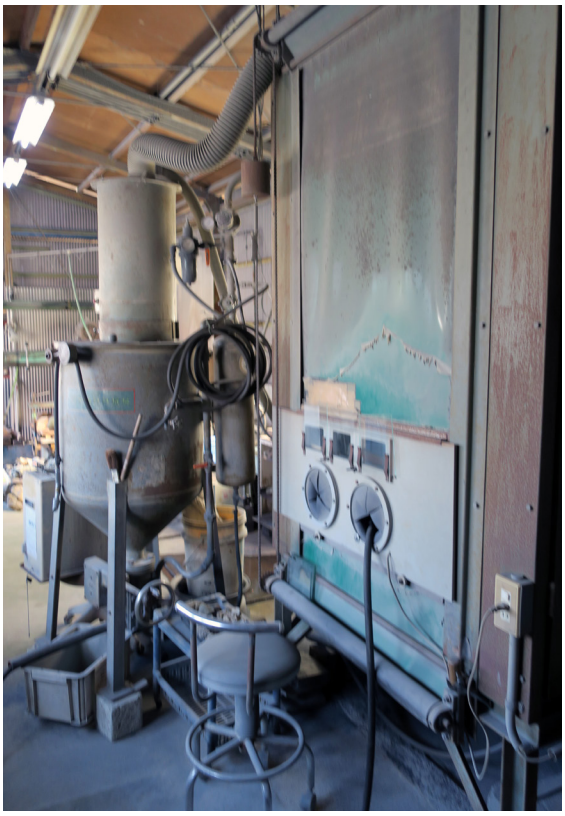


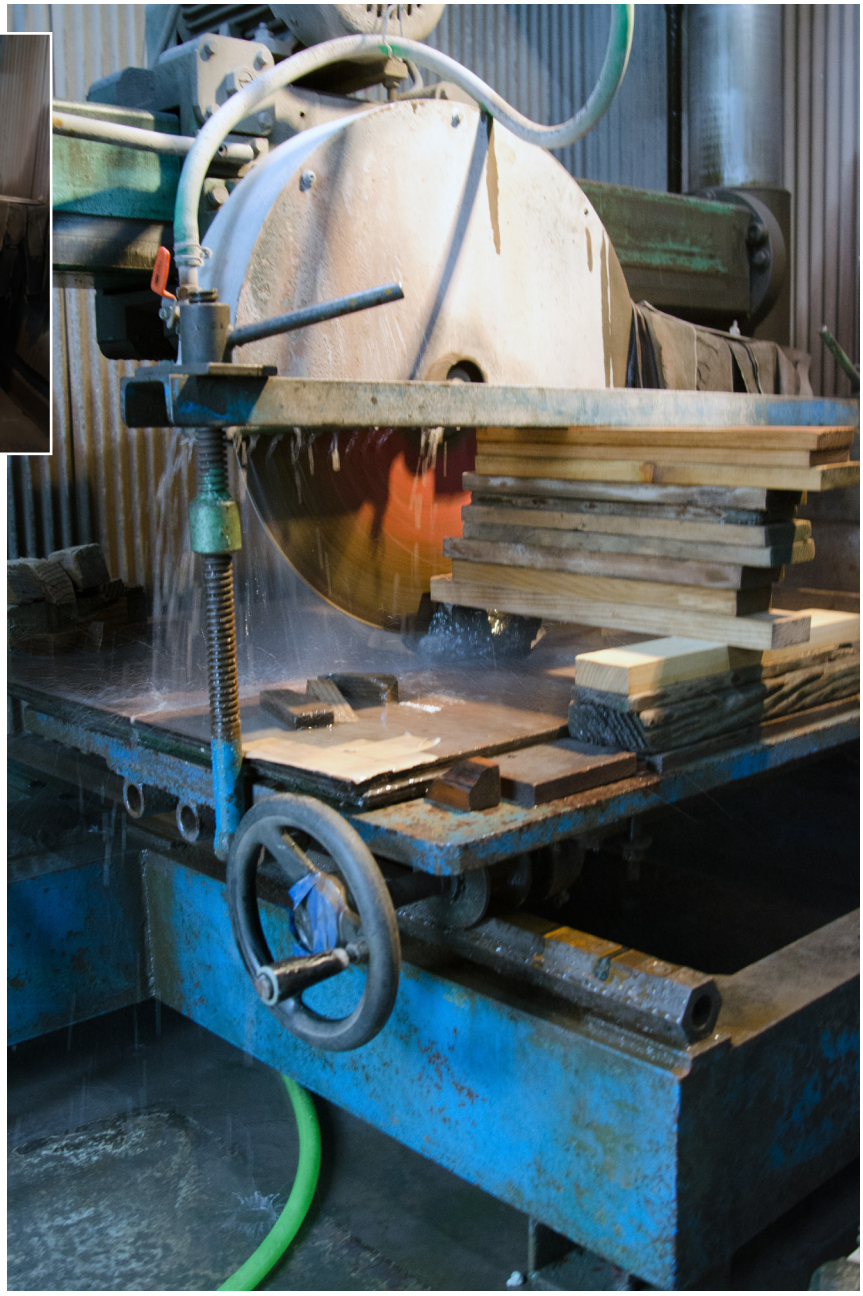
Top row and middle right; This is one of Sakurai's work areas where he begins the process of making suiseki. He places a stone in a water filled sink to determine where to cut it. The stone on the middle right has been marked for a basal cut. Removing a thick layer of stone at the bottom will result in an attractive mountain stone.

Middle row; Sitting in his workshop Sakurai uses small hand held cold chisels and a hammer to shape small hut and other types of small stones. Typically, a hut stone can be made in twenty minutes; a small scenic stone takes a little longer.

Bottom row; Power tools used in the manufacture of suiseki include different sized circular grinders used to remove smaller pieces of stone and refine the shape. At right is a pneumatic hand-held chisel used to remove pieces of stone. The entire back or upper part of this stone was shaped using this tool.







type of etching he finds appropriate. A wider nozzle would cover a broader area than a narrow one which is more typically used to remove stone from a very specific area.

Sakurai uses his sand blasting equipment to roughen and make bottom cuts of stones look natural. He sometimes uses this technique to work freshly cut areas on the top portion of the stone to obtain a texture close to the texture and roughness of the original surface. A third use of this equipment is for cleaning newly collected stones from rivers. Sakurai informed us that this was a common method for cleaning larger stones in the 1960s and 1970s. At that time, he had four for five people each day bring stones they had collected in different rivers for him to clean by sand blasting. Many of the Seta River Tiger Striped stones that are occasionally seen in exhibition were cleaned in this manner. After sandblasting, they were polished using fine sand paper and water. Today, many of the owners of these stones are likely unaware that their stones were cleaned in this manner.

Sakurai also user smaller hand held power tools to make or modify stones to form suitable *suiseki*. Different sized circular grinding tools allow him to make small to medium-sized alterations including smoothing over cuts in the stone. These are used in the final shaping of landscape stones. Variable speed tools allow him to make more detailed changes that can only be obtained with a slower speed machine. High speed grinding can cause the rock to split into two pieces.

Another tool in his arsenal is a hand-held pneumatic drill. This is used to remove small piece of stone to improve its overall shape. This piece of equipment is used to remove unwanted knobs, protrusions, and other similar parts. When a stone needs a major reshaping, Sakurai would soak it for ten minutes in a hydrochloric acid solution to soften the stone making it easier to remove smaller pieces using the small

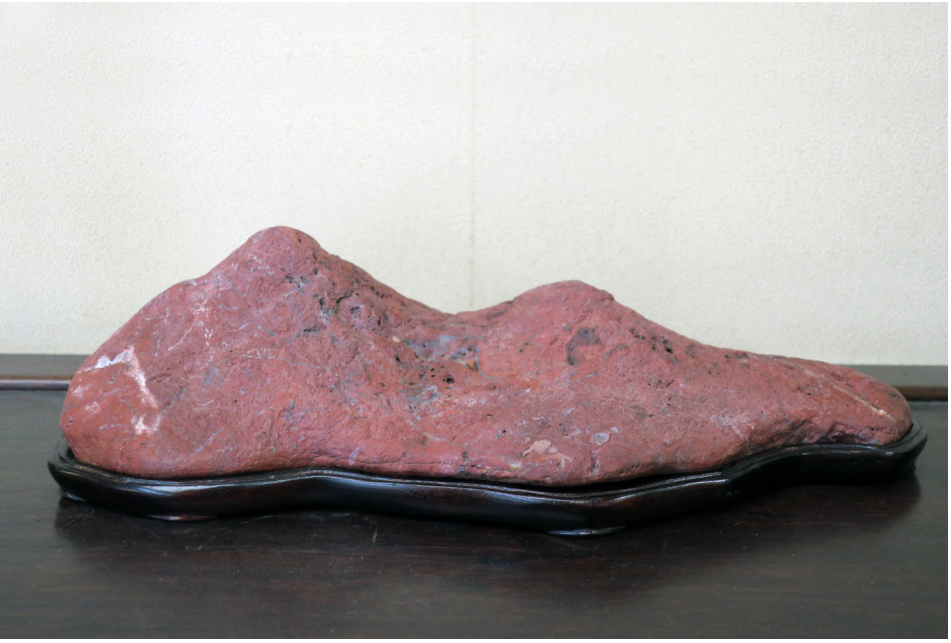
Top left and right; Sakurai's large circular saw is capable of cutting both small and large stones quickly and efficiently. He can also make the partial cuts needed to make mountain-shaped stones. The water cooled diamond bladed saw can cut through a stone in just a few minutes.

Middle left; His sandblasting equipment consists of a cone-shaped bin containing special etching material with a large air compressor beneath. The stone to be altered is placed inside the large box with a heavy duty plastic viewing cover. Hoses carrying high pressure air and sand are inserted through the arm hole ports on the front.

Top; Many Seta River Tiger Striped stones, including this one, have been cleaned and polished by Sakurai using this equipment.

Middle; This is a Narai stone and a fine example of one of Sakurai manufactured landscape suiseki using a variety of tools and a short hydrochloric acid bath to darken the color of this stone.

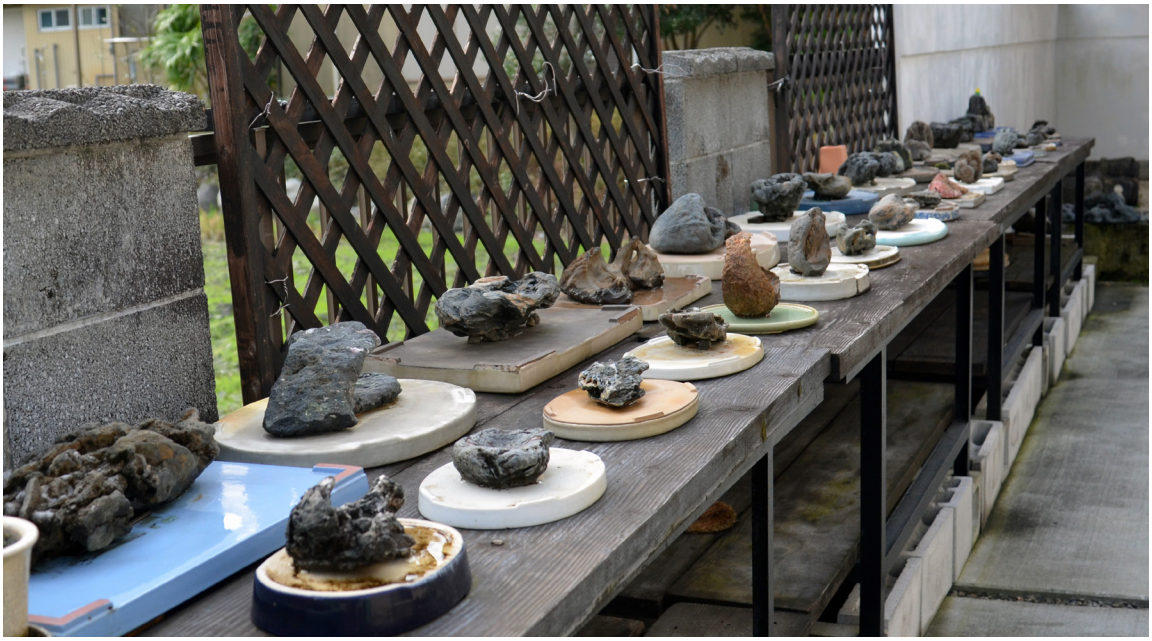
Bottom; An Akadama mountain-shaped stone from Sado Island. This is a completely manufactured suiseki. Most Akadama landscape stones have been altered to improve their appearance.



We have consistently heard from Western students of Japanese suiseki, that Japanese stones are never treated with oils or waxes and that they are always natural and aged with the process of *yoseki*. However, we learned several years ago that some Japanese stones, especially those coming from the earth, that the final stage of cleaning involves the use of a soft pliant wax from the Ibota beetle.

pneumatic drill. On the middle left is an example of a stone made in this manner. The entire back portion and some of the slopes of this stone was shaped using this method. Once a stone has been cut, altered and polished, it was often placed in hydrochloric acid for a few minutes to darken the stone. Buyer's preferences for dark or black landscape stones were driving this process.

Sakurai has been actively practicing *yoseki*, a Japanese practice of cultivating stones outdoors and by regularly watering them. Over the course of forty years he has placed thousands of stones on benches at his workshop and at his home. The stones are also exposed to rain and snow. While this is not suitable for all stones—Furuya, for example, should not be subjected to *yoseki* practices—many other stones will develop a patina that gives the stone a feeling of oldness, serenity, or quietness. This is likely a slow oxidation process. Sakurai uses this process for stones that have been cut and worked. Many years of this practice will erase all signs that a stone was cut and worked. This is never mentioned in books on *suiseki* in Japan.



Top and bottom; The Japanese practice of cultivating stones outdoors or ***yoseki*** will develop a nice patina on some types of stones, but not all stones. It is also an effective method of eliminating signs where a stone has been worked.

We have consistently heard from Western students of Japanese *suiseki*, that Japanese stones are never treated with oils or waxes and that they are always natural and aged with the process of *yoseki*. However, we learned several years ago that some Japanese stones, especially those coming from the earth, that the final stage of cleaning involves the use of a soft pliant wax from the Ibota beetle. This is placed in a soft cotton cloth and then rubbed on the surface of the stone. When we ask Mr. Sakurai if he ever used oils or waxes, he responded by saying that he does apply natural oil to many of his dark stones and then leaves them outdoors for at least one month before he will sell it.

We asked one final question. Why did you do this? The driving motivation for Sakurai was financial. It was a very profitable business. He was probably the most financially successful of all the professional stone carvers. For a period of several years, he could not manufacture enough *suiseki* to meet the demand. One day he sold over 300 stones to an engineer working on the construction of the Narita airport in the early 1970s.

Sakurai continues to make *suiseki* today even though the peak of *suiseki* popularity has long passed. He saw several of his stone carving friends close their businesses as demand dropped sharply and the supply of inexpensive suitable stones became difficult to obtain.

It is time to dispense with the myth that Japanese *suiseki* are all natural and recognize that a significant number of the stones held in collections and shown in exhibitions have been worked to some degree. Despite that, a carefully worked stone can have all the attributes sought after in a fine *suiseki* and can be appreciated as much as a natural stone.