

Matsuura Arishige

World Leader of Suiseki

by Thomas Elias and Hiromi Nakaoji

photos by Thomas Elias

The name and personality of Matsuura Arishige is synonymous with the art of Japanese suiseki throughout much of the world. He, more than others, through his writings, lectures, critiques, and leadership of the Nippon Suiseki Association (NSA), has done more than anyone else to preserve and promote the original art form of Japanese suiseki in Japan, and especially, in Western countries. Since he stepped down as Chairman of the NSA in October 2010 after serving in that position for twenty years, it is appropriate to recognize him and his contributions at this time.

We have had the pleasure of knowing Mr. Matsuura for nearly fifteen years and visited his home in Tokyo, many times, attended several international meetings and conventions outside of Japan, and even travelled with him and his wife in China. He has patiently answered

questions and helped us gain a better understanding of Japanese suiseki. Underneath his serious nature and his signature blue pin-striped suits is a man with a steadfast conviction about what constitutes suiseki and who enjoys good food and a nice sense of humor.

Born Betto Arishige on December 11, 1935, he was raised almost entirely in Tokyo. In 1957 at the age of 22, Betto became an apprentice of Matsuura Tokichi at the Kankoen bonsai nursery in Tokyo. He was originally interested in bonsai and became a bonsai artist under the tutelage of Matsuura. Betto also was introduced to suiseki by Matsuura Tokichi and joined the NSA in 1961 when it was founded. At that time, Murata Kenji was a high-ranking member of the association. At some point, Betto married into the Matsuura family and changed his name to Matsuura. This was common practice in Japan with families that had only daughters

Mr. Matsuura holding one of his mountain stones in his Japanese style studio with *tatami* mats adjacent to his home office in Tokyo.





left; This beautiful Seigakuishi landscape stone was photographed in Matsuura's studio prior to being displayed in the 2009 Meihin-ten at the Meiji Shrine in Tokyo.

below; Mr. Matsuura has several outstanding hut stones in his collection including this exceptionally rare chrysanthemum flower hut stone. This stone once belonged to the late, famous Japanese stone collector, Sugii.

bottom; This well known and exquisite Kamogawa hut stone was displayed at the October 2004 Sogo-ten in Tokyo and in Mr. Matsuura's 2002 book *Suiseki Introductory Manual*.

and no sons to carry on the family name. In 1969, Matsuura Arishige became the head of Kankoen. Later, he was certified by the Nippon Bonsai Association as a bonsai instructor.

Matsuura stated that he was fascinated with suiseki and studied this art form with Murata Kenji for three years. He ran his bonsai nursery from 1961 until 1971 when he decided to focus on suiseki full time. He observed a trend in the late 1950s towards more polished stones in the Japanese stone appreciation community. He opposed this growing trend and made it a goal to bring the community back to original Japanese suiseki. While acknowledging that stone appreciation originated in China and that some of Japan's most treasured stones originated in China, Matsuura thinks that Japanese style suiseki existed in their present form at least by the early Edo period (1603-1867), although records of stone appreciation in Japan date back much earlier to the Muromachi period (1333-1573). Matsuura feels he has succeeded in his goal and that this is one of his major accomplishments during his tenure on the NSA board. In 1990 he became the chairman of the association and served in that capacity for the last twenty years.

For the last fifty years, the association has staged a major, national, juried exhibition of excellent suiseki known as the Nippon Suiseki Meihin-ten (Exhibition of Japanese Suiseki Masterpieces). He participated in every one of these exhibits, first by helping to carry and set up stones, then in varying positions until he supervised this event after becoming Chairman. Matsuura was responsible for changing the venue of this exhibition to the Meiji Shrine in Tokyo, a more prestigious location than its former location at Mitsukoshi Department Store. The association publishes an attractive photo album of this exhibit annually. Matsuura oversaw these exhibits and production of the catalogs while he was Chairman. The NSA also stages a non-juried exhibition called the Nippon Suiseki Sogo-ten (General Exhibition of Japanese Suiseki) at the Ueno Green Club in Tokyo where hobbyists can display their stones. Matsuura feels that the Sogo-ten is a wonderful





entry point to the hobby of suiseki where anyone can display a wide range of stones in this non-juried exhibit.

When asked about changes in the Meihin-ten over its history, Matsuura noted that the exhibited stones are getting smaller in size. During the 1960s and 1970s, larger stones were popular but gradually declined in size after this period. Also, he observed that more varieties or types of stones were being exhibited, largely because more rivers were being searched for new stones. Red Sado Island stones were exhibited before World War II while larger specimens often were first used as *niwa-ishi* (garden stones). The latest stones to be incorporated into these exhibits were from Kyushu and Hokkaido, the southern- and northern-most of Japan's four main islands.

above; Part of his extensive collection of stones is on display in his studio located within his home.

right; Mr. Matsuura often sits in front of his *tokonoma* in his studio when discussing aspects of Japanese stone appreciation. This is a perfect setting for Mr. Matsuura to explain and demonstrate the proper ways of displaying stones.

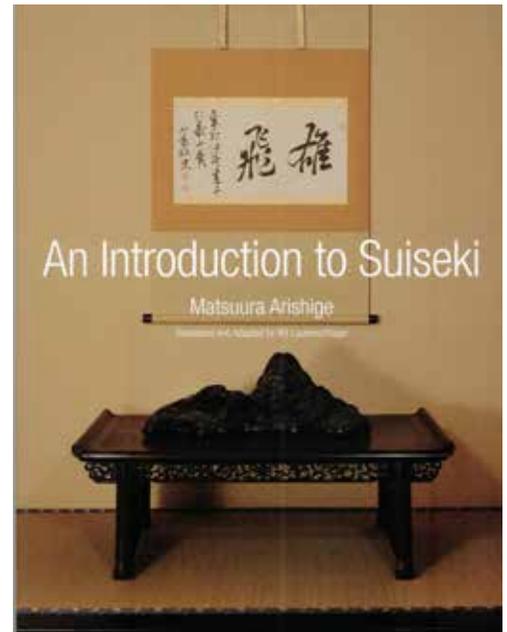
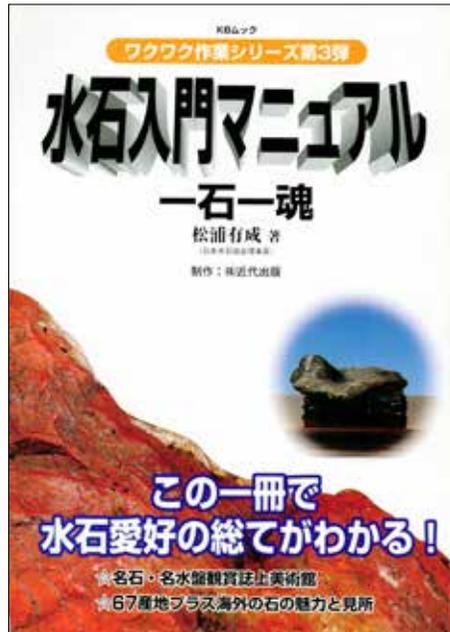
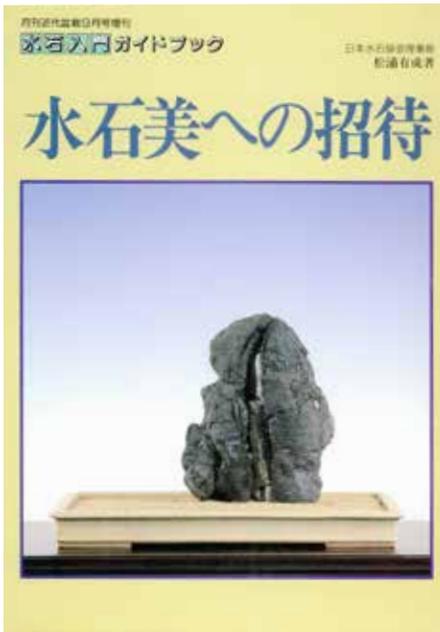


When asked which stones among all of the important stones he has handled for the Meihin-ten made the greatest impression on him, Matsuura named two groups of stones. He first mentioned several of the Edo period stones belonging to the Iwasaki collection. This Iwasaki family founded the Mitsubishi Group, and the second head of the family, Iwasaki Yanosuke, who also served as the President of the Bank of Japan, assembled a large collection of suiseki. Iwasaki numbered many of the stones in his collection. After the Second World War, the family sold most of the collection including about eighty numbered stones. Five of the best stones in his collection were retained and now are part of the Seikado Bunko Art Museum in Tokyo.

The other groups of stones he mentioned belonged to the Tokugawa Museum in Nagoya. The Tokugawa family reigned throughout the Edo period in Japan. Matsuura smiled as he noted that it was easier to borrow stones for the Meihin-ten from the Imperial Household Collection than from the Tokugawa Museum.

Matsuura acknowledged that older Chinese stones have influenced his understanding of stones. He feels that many of the older classical Chinese stones are like suiseki, except for *Taihu* stones. He mentioned some of the notable Chinese stones in Japan that have been displayed at the Meihin-ten for example.

A series of important books written, co-authored, and supervised by Matsuura is another of his significant accomplishments. His first, a major and highly sought after reference today, *Nihon suiseki meihin taikan* (*A Grandview of Japanese Suiseki Masterpieces*) was published in 1988 by Kodansha. This large format volume was co-authored



with Yoshimura Kin'ichi. Matsuura followed this with two introductory texts to *suiseki*, *Suiseki bi heno shotai* (*An Invitation to the Beauty of Suiseki*) in 1992 and *Suiseki nyumon manyuaru* (*Suiseki Introductory Manual*) in 2003. While these were beautifully illustrated, they had limited impact outside of Japan since they were in Japanese. It wasn't until late 2010, that he published an 84-page *Introduction to Suiseki* in English. This important work presents Matsuura's view of traditional Japanese *suiseki* and puts to an end various and interesting interpretations of what Japanese *suiseki* is by non-Japanese stone enthusiasts. He worked closely with NHK television in Japan to produce a television show promoting *suiseki* and a small book to accompany this show. Two other important NSA books that Matsuura helped supervise are their *Nippon Suiseki Kyokai Nintei: Juyo Suiseki, Yogu Shashinshu* (*Nippon Suiseki Association Certified: Photobook of Important Suiseki and Tools*). Volume 1 was published in 1998 followed by Volume 2 in 2001.

Matsuura has represented the NSA many times at major overseas bonsai and stone appreciation meetings and conventions throughout the world. He has presented lectures, judged or critiqued stone displays in Europe and North America, and was an invited speaker at the last two Asian-Pacific Bonsai and *Suiseki* Conventions in Bali,

Indonesia (2007) and in Taiwan (2009). Matsuura spoke at the International Symposium on Bonsai and Viewing Stones held at the National Arboretum in Washington, D.C. in May 2002 and then again in Washington, D.C. at the 5th World Bonsai Friendship Federation's World Bonsai Convention held in 2005. These are but a few examples of his participation in international meetings and a clear indication of his professional standing worldwide. He has helped stone enthusiasts from many countries acquire quality stones for their collections. Matsuura was instrumental in arranging the donation of several excellent Japanese *suiseki* and scrolls to the National Bonsai and Penjing Museum at the U.S. National Arboretum. Through these actions, people in Western countries can



above; Three of Mr. Matsuura's books from left to right: *An Introduction to the Beauty of Suiseki* (1992), *Suiseki Introductory Manual* (2003), and his recently published *An Introduction to Suiseki* (2010).

far left; An attractive mountain-shaped "saba" chrysanthemum stone. Mr. Matsuura has several chrysanthemum stones in his collection.

left; This is a bold upright *Kamuikotan-ishii* from the northern island of Hokkaido on display in Matsuura's *tokonoma*.



above; Mr. Matsuura and his wife Sumie taking a break after viewing an excellent penjing collection near Shenzhen during a World Bonsai Friendship Federation meeting and tour in China in 2010.

gain a better understanding of Japanese suiseki and how to properly display them.

Recognizing him as the most influential person in modern Japanese stone appreciation, I asked Matsuura about his opinion of stone appreciation in Europe and North America. He responded by saying that the stones were getting better in recent years, more like Japanese suiseki.

Matsuura singled out the Italian Ligurian stones as quality stones similar to Japanese Furuya stones. He said that good mountain stones are also found in Switzerland. Matsuura stated that if these stones are like Japanese suiseki, then they can be called suiseki.

Matsuura's opinions are often closely held and he does not always reveal his innermost thinking. We inquired about the type of Japanese

stones that he personally enjoyed the most in terms of place of origin, shape, color and other characteristics. After a brief pause, he said that he was not specific about the shape of the stone, but that he enjoyed stones from three separate rivers, the Kamogawa, Setagawa, and Sajibawa. Stones from these rivers, along with historically important ones, are clearly his favorites. It's exciting to sit in his home and watch him disappear into a large closet only to reappear with an older, notable stone housed in a *kiribako* or paulownia box. Watching how carefully he removes a stone and places it on display reveals the degree that he values these older stones. Sitting and discussing aspects of stone appreciation with Matsuura is always informing and pleasant.

Now that he has stepped down as Chairman, Matsuura serves as Vice President of the NSA and will continue to represent the association internationally this year. He does not know, however, who will succeed him in traveling overseas to lecture and critique stone exhibits after this year. In October, 2011, he will travel to Germany to serve as a judge of the stones on display at the next European Bonsai Convention that will be held in Ratingen, Germany. A month later, he will present a lecture on Japanese suiseki at the 11th ASPAC convention in Takamatsu, Japan.

Regarding the future of stone appreciation in Japan, he lamented the effect of the current poor economy on people's lives in his country and how they have less discretionary money to spend on stones, antiques, and other nonessentials. He noted that modern Japanese homes lack *tokonoma* for displaying stones and that people must look at new ways of displaying them. He said that there are four or five people in their forties and fifties in the NSA that are capable of leading the association in coming years.

Matsuura served as Chairman of the NSA for two decades until the winds of change ushered in new leadership in October 2010. His influence on stone appreciation worldwide will continue for generations due to his leadership, his publications, and his convictions. 🌲

Matsuura Arishige was succeeded as Chairman of the NSA by Mr. Kasahara Manabu, a well respected and long-time member of their board. Kasahara will lead the association through a restructuring process including the adoption of new bylaws. Kasahara will be in this position for only a few years then yield the chairmanship to a younger leader. We can look forward to the NSA playing an international leadership role in the world of Japanese suiseki.

below; This Meiji era Kamogawa mountain stone once belonged to the late Japanese collector Sugii. His stones and storage boxes are numbered and bear his seal on the bottom of the *diasa* and the bottom of the boxes. Mr. Matsuura coordinated the sale of many of Sugii's stones after his death. This stone is in the author's collection.

