

TWO STUDIES

by Ernie Kuo

Collecting California junipers from the wild is just the beginning. The collecting trip may last only a day, but it will take years of work, study, and patience before the tree becomes a bonsai. In these two studies, California bonsai artist Ernie Kuo describes the process of styling two collected California junipers.

NINE YEARS IN THE LIFE OF A COLLECTED CALIFORNIA JUNIPER

This California juniper (*Juniperus californica*) was purchased in 1985 from a bonsai friend who collected it from the Horse Canyon area in the Tehachapi Mountains, Kern County, California. What caught my eye was the natural shari on the right side of the tree and the movement of the living vein on the left. The shari on the right was shortened to its present length and the tree was planted in the present pot in spring of 1986. The front was chosen to emphasize the tree's taper.

After the tree was planted, many bonsai friends who came through my backyard found the yet-unstyled tree very interesting and offered their opinions as to the front they would choose. At least eight different fronts were

suggested by about twenty different people. All these opinions just confused me, so I kept the front I originally chose.

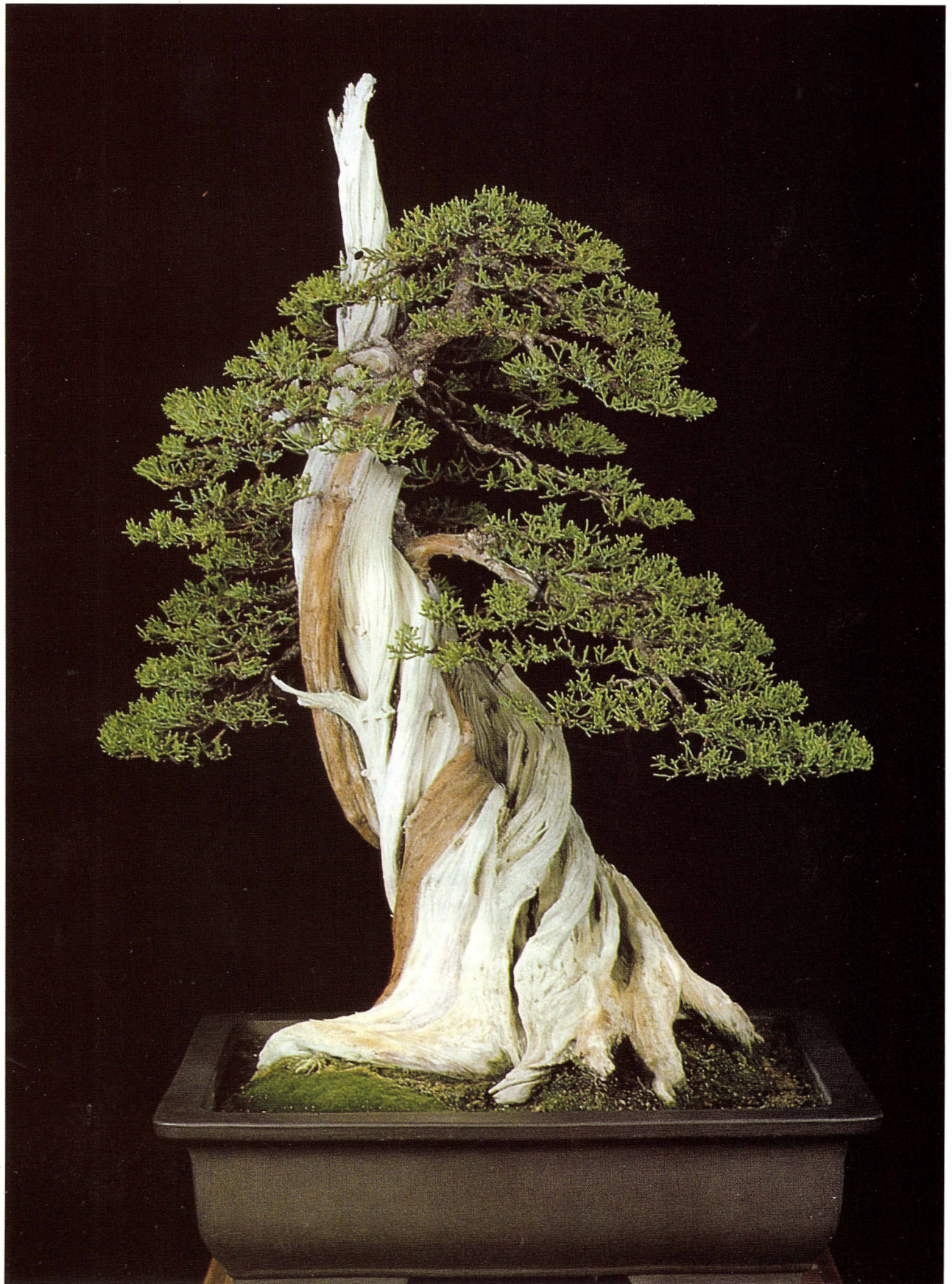
Styling did not start right away because the sparse foliage sprouted from only three elevations on the trunk. I studied and restudied the tree over the course of a year. I felt the foliage started too high on the trunk. So, one moonlit evening, after downing a beer, I gathered enough courage to eliminate all the foliage from the highest elevation of the trunk. A new apex was subsequently developed from a small branch positioned lower on the trunk.

Between 1986 and 1991, the tree was trained mainly by pinching and pruning; only the main branches were wired. Progress was slow. Nevertheless, the tree was shown several times in some major shows in Southern California between 1987 and 1990.



California juniper, 1989.

Since July of 1991, the tree has been restyled using Masahiko Kimura's method. Stated very simply, all old and short foliage was removed, the branches were brought down, the foliage was fanned out, and the tips of the foliage were brought up by detailed wiring. Using this method, the tree acquired an entirely different look.



5 years later, in April 1994. California juniper by Ernie Kuo.

THE STORY OF ANOTHER CALIFORNIA JUNIPER

The styling of collected material often presents special challenges and, therefore, has its own story to tell. This California juniper was collected from the Sand Canyon area of the Tehachapi Mountains. The name Sand Canyon was not very appropriate, because this California juniper was growing on hardpan clay and rocks.

It was March 9, 1990, and California was in the middle of one of its worst droughts. Digging this tree was not easy. It took me six hours of hard work with a rock pick and a six-foot crowbar, literally chiseling at the hard clay and rocks to get the tree out. I soaked the tree overnight in a tub of water before I washed away the clay and rocks with a hose. Apparently, because of the hardpan clay, there was enough moisture to keep the fine feeder roots close to the surface and the trunk alive. The tree was planted in pumice in a wooden box.

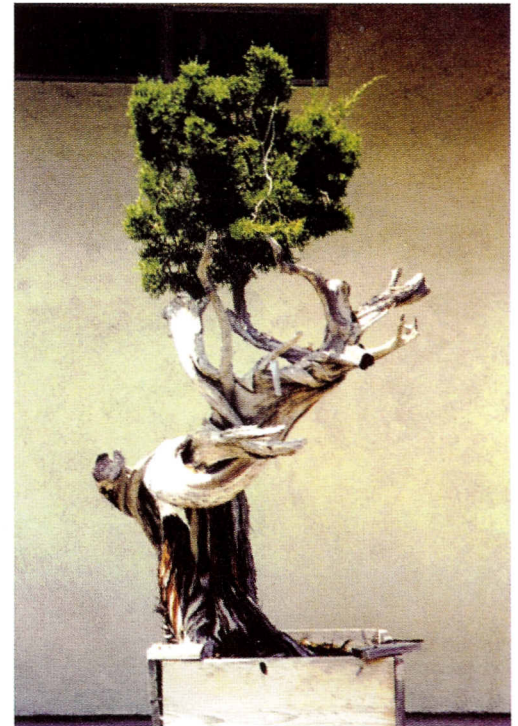
On July 16, 1993, the tree was ready to be styled. It told me so by its pointed new growth, which usually indicates that the roots of a collected California juniper are well-established and ready to be worked on. I was certainly ready. I had been studying the tree and

waiting for a long time. Besides, I had just bought a Chinese pot that was just right for it.

Using both hand and power tools, I began to work on the jin and shari. Recalling the natural jin and shari I saw in nature, I tried to reproduce them on this tree, keeping the jin that were aesthetically pleasing and removing or shortening the others. I also shortened any jin that would interfere with the eventual position of the foliage mass.

The plan was to have the foliage mass eventually sitting above the top portion of the trunk that slanted to the right. This meant the live branch that slanted upward to the left had to be brought down so that it was almost parallel to the trunk. The deadwood on the live branch was hollowed out (using a die grinder and tungsten carbide discs) until the branch was pliable. Two heavy-gauge aluminum wires were placed in the hollow and the branch was wrapped tightly with raffia. The branch was brought down using a series of guy wires. This took a whole day of working a little and studying a lot.

The next day was devoted to wiring the tree. The old foliage was removed before wiring. As you would do with almost any bonsai, the branches were brought down, the foliage was fanned out, and the



The tree before styling, July 1993.

tips of the foliage were brought up. The foliage mass was shaped into a triangular form that complemented the shape and movement of the trunk.

The tree was transplanted into the present pot in the spring of 1994. The foliage mass has been reshaped several times as the foliage filled in, without having to rewire. The photograph on the next page shows how the tree looked on April 26, 1995, five years after collecting.

All too often, enthusiasts rush the styling of collected trees. In this case, four years passed before Ernie potted this venerable bonsai into its show pot. In Japan, old masters sometimes grow collected trees for years before they even touch them.



The tree in April 1995. Height: 38." By Ernie Kuo.