

Sean Smith

SUISEKI DIAZA CARVING

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Workshops are always hard to plan! You sign up hoping the material is as good as they say it is, and then you hope your number will bring you a lucky draw for one of the beautiful trees. Then after making it through this entire scenario, you now hope that your teacher is on his or her best game and has worked with the material before and that your workshop isn't overcrowded so you get enough artist time. This summer I attended a workshop and I wanted to share my experiences with you. First, I must say it was one of the best bonsai experiences I have had in my short bonsai life.

I have had a interest in viewing stones (suiseki) for a while now, and have tried to read all that I can

and educate myself on the art of suiseki and stone collecting. I have always loved stones and have a few in my collection. I was planning on attending the BCI-FELAB 2007 Convention held in Puerto Rico last summer and wanted to sign up for a workshop. I noticed they were offering a workshop that looked very interesting and was being presented by Sean Smith, a very well known authority on suiseki and daiza carving. The program was a series of workshops, For Part I, we were transported by bus to a beach in the town of Salinas for a stone collecting expedition. Part II was a workshop on daiza carving for the stone you collected on your trip. I signed up right away and was really looking forward to the trip. The area

in which we were going collecting was featured in the BCI magazine, July/August/September 2007 issue. The article was written by Chiara Padrini of Italy and was very interesting. This was a great opportunity to visit this stone collect-

searched, and searched and the more we looked the more confusing it seemed. There were so



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ing mecca with Sean for an incredible hands-on learning experience.

Sean gave us a brief explanation of what we were looking for, and a little history on stones and the site we were about to visit. We arrived after a lengthy bus ride to a beautifully rural location with the sun shining and the waves crashing along the beach. We promptly exited the bus to hunt for our treasures armed with just enough information to be dangerous! We

many stones to look at, to turn over, to pick up. We were all attempting to find the perfect suiseki to present to Sean for his approval! We collected bags upon bags of stones, while we listened to the sound of the crashing waves that sent the stones tumbling forward and then back again into the crystal blue ocean. The clacking of the stones, as they rolled back and forth with the waves was at times like a song lulling us into a stone stupor. The



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shining sun and the beautiful azure blue of the Caribbean waters glistening all around us made for an outstanding afternoon! We sat and picked through our stones, then waded into the waters of the ocean to clean the sand from our finds. Everyone enjoyed the camaraderie of our fellow bonsai friends. We were all taking pictures and hunting stones. Everyone found a few good stones and brought several bags home just to be sure!

Sean explained that color is very important when collecting. Also make sure the stone was not newly fractured or broken, as it will make the stone look new. Sean explained the history of the art of suieski. The story begins with a samurai warrior coming home from battle where his very good friend had been

killed. He stopped along a stream to water his horse and to get a drink for himself. Upon dismounting from his horse he spotted a beautiful stone which reminded him of the mountains near his home where he and his friend grew up together, where they played and learned the ways of the samurai. He placed the stone in his pocket to keep so he could look at the stone when he wanted to remember his friend. Although the stone made him sad because it brought him memories of his friend who had died, it also brought him fond memories of their youth together, memories that meant so much to him. This is how the art of suieski came about and it is the reason we collect stones. They trigger memories in us of something. They should make us



remember a special place from our youth or a place we visited once, or a place we read about in a book! Everyone from our trip will now have a stone to mormorialize this trip, not as romantic or touching as the samurai's story but none the less, a memory captured in a stone!

We stopped along the way for lunch on a beautiful bay overlooking the

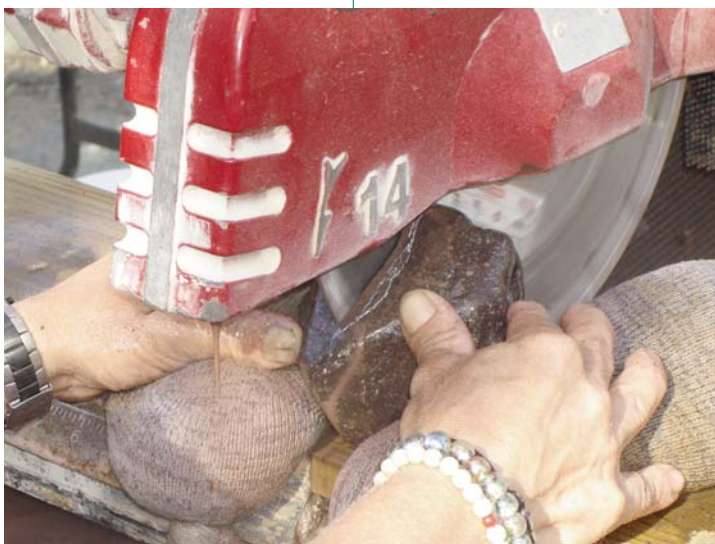
how to cut and complete their project. After washing our stones Sean took us one by one and asked us why we collected the stone. We showed him what we saw in the stone and why we thought it was worthy of a diaza. We explained and Sean listened and he made suggestions and at times found a better position for the stone, or explained why another stone we collected might be better. He carefully cut each stone and explained his thoughts to us. We didn't leave Pedro's until all the stones were ready for the next day's program – diaza carving. We



Caribbean, where we ate local food and rested, and talked of our experiences. Later we visited Pedro Morale's home and nursery where we cleaned and cut our stones. Now remember we were in a diaza workshop and the purpose was to learn to make a diaza. Sean explained that it is better not to cut your stones but for the purpose of learning to make a diaza it was easier to learn on a flat-bottomed stone than one that wasn't cut, and he wanted everyone to learn

returned to the hotel in time to get ready for dinner and the evening's events. We were all beaming from our day in the sun, the nature and the beauty of this island.

Day two found us back on our busride to Pedro's nursery with our tools in hand, brimming with excitement to learn how to carve a diaza. We sat at a table and arranged our tools, waiting for Sean's direction. Sean



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gave us a short lecture on carving and drew pictures on a large tablet explaining the type of wood to use, the tools needed and the various ways a stone should be positioned on the wood to complement the grain. He also explained where to position the feet and how

bit so the bottom of the cut would be flat like the bottom of the stone we were fitting. We followed the pencil outline we made with the router stopping several times to make sure we were not going out of our outline. When we completed the outline we took the car-



out. We all know you can't put the wood back. Its like the old adage, measure twice, cut once!

We then inserted our stone and took the pencil and traced another line around the stone to create

the wall of the diaza. Large stones would have about a 1/2" line around the stone and smaller stones about 1/4". The proportion is very important for smaller stones. We then used a band saw to cut out



many to include on a diaza.

We all took copious notes and listened to his every word. After his lecture we were all given a piece of wood to fit our stone, two pieces of extra fine sandpaper, a pencil and carbon paper to work with. We were then asked to draw an outline of our stone on the wood making sure the stone was positioned properly according to his instructions on the wood's grain pattern. The line should be traced tight and close to the stone following the contours. This is where the wood will be cut, and the stone needs to fit snugly inside the cut.

We then made a hole with the router with a flat

bon paper and placed it under the stone and pushed the stone into the cut-out of the outlined area; any place the carbon remained on the wood needed to be carved a little more.

We continued until no carbon marks were on the wood and the stone fit snugly into the wood base. We also used a dremel to make the fit work, removing small edges of the wood. Sean gave us a note of caution, "Don't go too fast", and "Remove the wood slowly." Sometimes removing too much wood means starting over with a new piece of wood because you inadvertently took out too much wood and the stone is now too loose in the cut-

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around the diaza wall line, cutting on an angle to give the diaza a finer or more tapered look. From the pictures I have included you can see our cuts and how the blade was positioned.

The next process was to decide how many feet

Sean's approval. Then using a dremel, we cut the feet around the X marks. Following this, we sanded with a disk sander, doing the top, bottom and sides of the diazas. We were now ready for the fine sanding work, and were told to continue sanding by hand



were needed on the diazas, and their position. The reason for the feet is to support the stone. Sean explained there should be a foot at each end of the motion of the stone, usually three; two in front and one in the back for balance is what often works. If the stone is wide and more complex you add a foot to each peninsula of the island represented by the stone. Object stones are more simple in that they only need four feet.

We all found the areas we believed the feet should be on our diazas and marked them with an X in pencil and waited for

until every part of the diaza was smooth. Following this, we were instructed to then sand some more. This was a larger job then you would have thought, but it was fun to watch the wood evolve into a fine carved diaza for our stones.

When we were finished all that was left to do was to stain, sand, then apply the desired finish. Appropriate finishes are either satin or low luster. After the initial application we again sanded; reapplying and sanding again until the piece looked like furniture. Then insert stone and enjoy the finished piece.



The process was enjoyable and gratifying as I returned to the hotel holding a beautiful stone that I collected, sitting proudly in a diaza which Sean and I finished together. I have a better understanding on how to repeat the process once I return home.

Sean will offer a class like this at

the BSF 2008 Si-Diao Convention. He will supply the stones, since we all know why we can't go on suiseki collecting trip in Florida!

Look for this workshop in the convention program and don't miss signing up for this class it will be great fun!

Louise Leister



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