

The pine is green for a thousand years

A display in the *tokonoma* of Kunio Kobayashi

Text: Peter Warren

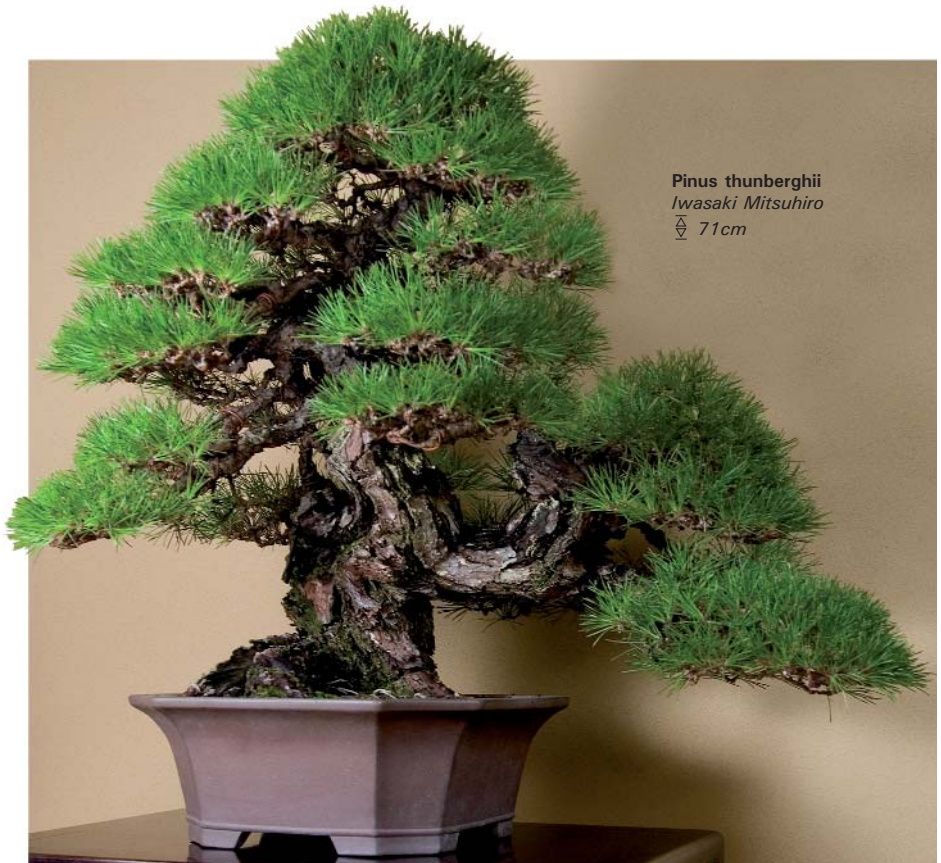
Photography: Bonsai Europe Studio

'Displayed in a subtle *tokonoma* at Shunkaen in November, this ancient black pine is a tree that I hold very close to my heart.' Peter Warren student of Bonsai Master Kunio Kobayashi, guides us through the fascinating world of the bonsai display

We have a relationship, which sadly is now an estranged one. It is a very interesting tree, difficult in many ways, but unique and full of character and contradictions. When it first arrived in our garden I was immediately intrigued by the thick almost trunk-like branch, sticking out at right angles to the actual trunk, which then reared back on itself before cascading turbulently down and away. The highly evocative and irregular movement in the branches and the overall shape of the tree is very contrary to the formal movement of the lower trunk and the start of the first branch; yet somehow this works, giving the tree great depth of character, which is unusual.

This is one of the few trees that turned my head and made me stop and look and think. At the time I begged my Master to let me work on it, which was a first, as I usually try to turn work away. It sat untouched for almost a year, gaining strength after having been weakened by poor care, until I convinced a customer to not only buy the tree, but to let me wire and style it for him. After discussing my ideas and my passion for this tree, he was convinced and agreed to let me get my hands on it. Sadly, after display, it was repotted the next spring and he took it back to his own garden, which was a painful separation indeed.

The display itself is, if anything, a little lacking in narrative and dynamism; due mainly to the limited resources available to us, a problem that we all face. If you have only a small number of scrolls, accessories and accents, it is impossible to create a large number of perfectly balanced displays. The scroll shows two cranes flying high through



a wispy sky, a common symbol in the Japanese aesthetic, with the crane fabled for its thousand-year life span and fidelity. The accent is an autumnal fern, ablaze with red and orange, this is the only indication of season, but for such a small object, it does so very well.

What this tree has in abundance, which almost all bonsai in Europe lack, is age; it has been a bonsai, in a pot for at least 200 years. Once it gets to that stage it is difficult to tell the origin of the tree, be it *yamadori* or man made material, but what is certain is that the bark and the movement of the branches betray age, and hardship, yet there

is a solemn vigour, which is befitting of such a tree. There is an expression in Japan, 'Shouju sen-nen no midori', which translates roughly as 'The pine is green for a thousand years'. The Japanese see the pine as a symbol of strength, longevity and power. Taken as one of the symbols of the Rinzaï school of Zen Buddhism, pine trees are planted at monastery gates for the benefit of those who come after. The pine also serves as a reminder that, despite the severity of life, every year it repeats itself with the rebirth of new shoots, new growth and will continue to do so for a thousand years, since before we were born and long after we have died. □

Overleaf: the *tokonoma* display of the black pine



