

# il Nibelungo

by Massimo Bandera, Italy

How a semi-cascade Mugo pine became  
an informal upright

Interview by Joe Grande, Canada

Photos by Massimo Bandera



**F**ounded in 2006, Museo Fujisato, located in the famous bonsai centre in Turin, is one of five Italian bonsai museums. Open to the public every day of the year, it offers a collection of bonsai imported from Japan and China, and a collection of native Alpine species. The museum features a collection of Mugo pines.

The following interview is about one of these pine trees and the work of BCI Director and bonsai artist Massimo Bandera who is developing this tree into a masterpiece bonsai. The most interesting facet of this story is how the tree, first styled as a semi-cascade, was transformed to an informal upright style, complete with dramatic deadwood features.



Top; Views of the Mugo pine after it was collected in the Alps.

Bottom right; The pine was collected by Piero Masiero, founder of the Museum Fujisato, and commercial collector of bonsai.

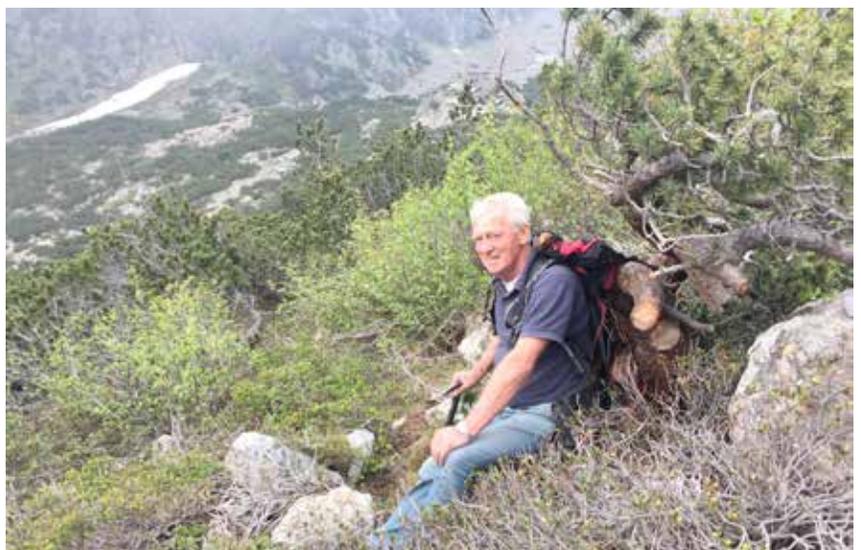


**BCI: What is the story of how this tree came to Museo Fujisato?**

MASSIMO BANDERA: Collected in the Alps in 2007, it was grown in top vigor for three years before starting the first interventions. It was brought immediately to Museo Fujisato and acquired as a piece with great future potential. The pine was collected by Piero Masiero, founder of the Museum Fujisato, and commercial collector of bonsai.

**You have named this tree *il Nibelungo*, why?**

With the new stylistic choice of informal upright, this bonsai shows considerable strength and dynamism, and for this to be all Western, we decided to give it a name from Northern European tradition that expresses great strength and power and is also a suitable name for a northern species such as *Pinus*



Top four images; Initially the tree was styled as a semi cascade and coarsely wired.

Middle left; the Mugo pine with its inclination changed from semi cascade to informal upright.

Bottom; Antonio Jesús from Spain, is shown below applying the wire and jin solution at the top right of facing page.



*mugo*. Nibelungen are a mythological people of Germanic legends ruled by Prince “Nibelung.” The composer Richard Wagner composed a cycle of four operas titled *Der Ring des Nibelungen* based on these mythological legends.

**How did you cultivate this tree during the first three years while it was recovering from the shock of being transplanted?**

To increase its strength and maximize growth, it is necessary to use the method taught to me by my teacher Kimura, consisting of attentive watering, amino acid protein fertilizers and pure Akadama growing medium for an exceptional capacity for cation exchange.

**Akadama’s ability to hold and release plant nutrients is renowned. Are there other types of growing media that have similar properties?**

No, in my opinion there is nothing like Akadama.

**Are there other potting mixes that you use and why?**

I personally use pure Akadama during the first ten years after the collection of pine trees, then switch to a mixture of 50% Akadama and 50% Kiryuzuna which is a harder equivalent to Akadama that will retain structure for longer.

**How did the cultivation change when the tree regained its vigor?**





To balance its growth I reduced fertilization and container size. In a few years it will be transplanted in Akadama mixed with 50% Kiryuzuna. The tree continues to be cultivated for maximum growth to create branching and to thicken the live veins. In a couple of years, that is, ten years since it was collected, I will start to slow down its vigor to build fine branching and short needles.

We can see from the photos of the front, sides and back that the semi-cascade seemed like a obvious solution at the time. Did you consider other possibilities before committing to a semi-cascade style?

The cascade style had a couple of serious flaws: a surface root was in an unfavorable position and too long, and the trunk had a reverse taper which could have been masked with branches, but tilting it in the moyogi style, its sculptural qualities and extraordinary movement is more evident.

How was the tree cultivated while it was a semi-cascade? What work was done to the branches and needles?

As a semi cascade it was fertilized for strong growth and it was coarsely wired.

Was it allowed to grow freely at some point so that it could transition to an informal style or was it a chance discovery? Take us back to the day when you made the decision to dramatically alter the inclination of the trunk.



*Top left and right;* Jin solution is applied to the deadwood, a major feature of this subject tree.  
*Middle left;* This is a photo montage that combines a photo of the styled tree with the selected container to provide a preview of the finished composition.  
*Middle right and bottom;* The styled tree, Massimo Bandera and Antonio Jesús.



In fact it was a flash of lightning: one day cleaning the shari that was rotting under the trunk I saw a stunning beauty, I did a test to tilt it and—I wondered—how could I not see it before!

**How much time passed between the first work, when the style was changed, to the next intervention when the branches were wired and arranged, and the deadwood was carved and treated with jin solution?**

By following year I had redone everything! The shari was reinforced with epoxy resin and then bleached because it was rotting.

**Antonio Jesùs is shown applying the wire and jin solution. Can you introduce Antonio to our readers and tell us how he became involved in this project?**

Antonio, a BCI instructor, is my most advanced Spanish disciple. He was here with me in Italy for his annual internship, so I engaged him with advanced wiring that was very informative. Often one does not realize how much difference there is in wiring a bonsai in the various stages of its formation: from the wires and rods of the first major violent and energetic setting, to the fine wiring in copper for mature bonsai. Antonio is very good because he brings a blend of natural talent and practical experience.



**Looking at the finished result, what are the characteristics that make this tree a better informal style than a semi-cascade?**

The main point is the wabi-sabi-yuugen aesthetic has improved dramatically: now the bonsai appears as a massive ancient pine and very compact.

**You made a photo-montage to preview how this tree will look when it is planted in the correct pot. Why did you choose this container?**

A pot from imperial Japanese collections, with an amazing antique patina, has the necessary austerity for il Nibelungo.



**You transplanted the tree in a temporary pot but it is higher in the pot than in the photomontage.**

Yes, I wanted to put it in the temporary pot as it was in the photomontage, but during the transplant I discovered a more beautiful base.

**How much time will pass before this tree has to be repotted?**

A couple of years more and it will be ready for the first major aesthetic analysis.

**Do you take a formal approach to the aesthetic analysis? Is it a process you can describe?**

The aesthetic analysis is a complex process. For cutting-edge analysis is better to separate the

physical and metaphysical. This allows a more detailed study to choose the best path for this tree. The physical analysis involves triangular asymmetry, inclination of the trunk, foliage that supports the intended design, branches in the appropriate locations, detail work on the deadwood, asymmetrical position of the surface roots and proper placement in the Tokoname container. The metaphysical analysis is mostly focused on telling the story of the tree and highlighting how it has responded to its environment over time, emphasizing its unique reaction to climatic forces and its struggle to survive—storytelling that involves the artist's intuition and aesthetic sensibilities. 🌲

*Facing page, top to bottom;* Three views of the Mugo pine several months after the styling session.

*Top right;* The Mugo pine called "il Nibelungo" viewed from the formal front several months after the styling session.

*Bottom;* During the transplanting Massimo discovered a more beautiful base in the tree and has placed the tree in the container to highlight this important feature.

