



JAPAN INFORMATION  
AND CULTURE CENTER  
在米国日本大使館広報文化センター

# TEACHING TUESDAY

## BONSEKI

The lesser known relative of bonsai, bonseki (盆石) is the Japanese art of creating miniature landscapes on black lacquer trays using white sand, pebbles, and small rocks.

Legend dictates that the first techniques used in bonseki date back to the 600s, and it's often believed to have originated in Kyoto. The first mention of bonseki came in the 1300s, in an essay by the Japanese Zen monk Kokan Shiren, "Rhyme-prose on a Miniature Landscape Garden." However, it gained popularity during the Muromachi period, and even became closely tied with the Japanese tea ceremony. Meditation and contemplation often accompanies the careful construction of the miniature landscapes, and finished bonseki trays were placed in the little alcoves below the hanging scrolls in family tea ceremony rooms. Tea ceremony practitioner Hosokawa Sansai even created a school dedicated to the art of bonseki. The art form flourished in the Edo period, as more schools were established and techniques refined.

Modern bonseki still holds its traditional stylized roots, but has also been heavily influenced by Western art. Today, artists often use different colored rocks, fossils, and even miniature figures to make their designs. Although often meant to be temporary, sometimes these landscapes are preserved using special methods.