

## **The Bonsai Art Museum and Its Collection**

The Omiya Bonsai Art Museum is at the heart of the bonsai art. Located on the outskirts of Omiya Bonsai Village, a community that has been a nucleus of the Japanese bonsai industry for almost a century, it is the country's first publicly owned bonsai art museum, opened in 2010. The museum's focus is as much on keeping bonsai vital and relevant into the twenty-first century as on telling its millennium-long story.

The museum buildings are a contemporary take on traditional Japanese architecture. Inside the lobby visitors are greeted by staff who speak English, and offered the option of an audio guide (¥310) available in English, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese. From there, through a vast floor-to-ceiling window, is a preview of the elegant bonsai garden at the front of the building. Appealing souvenirs are available for purchase in the museum shop.

Before entering the Collection Gallery, visitors pass through a Prologue Area that introduces bonsai basics using easy-to-understand, visually rich panels in both Japanese and English. The panels introduce the types of trees used; the shapes they are "sculpted" to achieve; key details such as what to examine while viewing a bonsai; and information about related objects such as rock-like decorative stones called *suiseki*.

The collection includes around 120 of the most significant bonsai to be found anywhere in Japan, selected to illustrate the history, rarity, provenance, originality, and of course sheer poignant beauty of bonsai. Many of the trees are over a century old, and the fact that bonsai can have such lengthy lifespans means the museum does invaluable work in caring for very special specimens whose previous owners have departed this world. One award-winning bonsai kept here has been owned by a string of dignitaries, including two former Japanese prime ministers.

The main gallery displays five bonsai from the collection: the selection is changed weekly with the season in mind. Each tree is set inside its own open-fronted display cube, with lighting that is simultaneously revealing and atmospheric. The frosted glass walls of these cubes resemble a twenty-first-century version of traditional, translucent shoji panels.

Next are the three *zashiki-kazari* rooms; the world's only exhibit showing how bonsai are displayed within traditional Japanese interiors. Again, the single bonsai installed in each room is changed weekly. From here visitors pass outside into what for many is the

museum's highlight: the Bonsai Garden displaying a further 60 or so trees. Do not miss the chance to enjoy an expansive bird's-eye view of this garden from the second-floor Bonsai Terrace. To the Bonsai Garden's east, meanwhile, is the Exhibition Room which hosts regularly changing displays on the history of bonsai and neighboring Omiya Bonsai Village.