



## Natural Rootwood Sculpture

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Height: 50.8 cm. (20 in.)

Width: 61.0 cm. (24 in.)

Qing dynasty

19th century A.D.

The remarkable natural sculpture was probably once part of a root of a tree. It sweeps up in flame-like formations with numerous hollows and crevices. The piece is upright with basically two orientations, front and back, each very different looking. One side appears like crashing upswept waves with fish tails and the other side resembles a pterodactyl. However, even a small rotation of the 'rock' can give the viewer a mental workout for imagined forms—often the goal of a scholar rock. The wood is reddish brown and polished.

If one was not able to wander out into nature, then the Chinese brought it home, in many ways and forms. The images of landscapes, as they appeared in paintings on silk or paper, was one way, bringing home a "landscape" to wander through in summer, fall, winter, and spring, when not possible to do so in reality. A so-called "scholar's rock" brought a miniature landscape, or simply a wonder of nature, close to home. Scaling cliffs, crawling into crevices, sneaking behind mysterious outcroppings—all with the eye, and with the mind's eye, were adventures that might help one maintain balance, restore sanity when wrapped up too much in, consumed by, the "dusty world."

A fantastic and eccentric object might draw one in more forcefully, dramatically, whether it be an actual fantastic rock or a desiccated or petrified organic entity. Found objects, discovered on a stroll, along a hiking trail, or off the beaten track might need some cleaning up or polishing and perhaps a stand, if even that, to show them off to best advantage. If one wasn't fortunate enough to come upon such an object while out in nature, then discovering something very special that someone else previously found and preserved, which at some point made its way into an antiquary

shop, such as Kaikodo, would be the next best thing.

Traditionally in the West, collected and preserved objects and oddities of nature were never considered "art" nor the preserve of an art student, historian nor serious art collector. They were rather relegated to their own corner or cabinet of curiosities. And, at the same time, questions did not arise as to the role of a "found" object and whatever that means of acquisition had to do with art, until modern times. As noted by Richard Rosenblum, among Westerners the lord of scholar rock collecting and grand defender of nature as a contributing artist, "I believe to be an essential truth about Chinese nature art: that by isolating things in nature that would re-resonate and transform into something else, its creators were traversing the border between culture and nature."<sup>1</sup> To the Chinese this world of collected natural objects was one deserving not only attention and interest but a degree of reverence as well since it was considered part of a greater cultural context.

1. Richard Rosenblum, *Art of the Natural World: Resonances of Wild Natures in Chinese Sculptural Art*, (ed. Valerie C. Doran), Boston, 2001, p. 33.