

# ART and AESTHETICS OF BONSAI

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## Chapter 1

### NOTES

#### I. OBJECTIVES

As a result of studying this section of the *Intermediate Bonsai Syllabus*, viewing audio visual presentations, or participating in other activities provided by an instructor, you will be able to:

1. Define the meaning of the terms *art* and *aesthetics*, and relate them to the styling of bonsai.
2. Explain why bonsai is a horticultural art form.
3. Describe factors which enhance the appearance of ageing in a bonsai.
4. Explain how rhythm enhances the artistic and aesthetic appearance of a bonsai.
5. Define *visual speed* and explain how texture on a bonsai affects visual speed.
6. Explain how good proportions and balance enhance the appearance of a bonsai.
7. Explain how the display of a bonsai affects its aesthetic value.

#### II. GENERAL

A. An understanding of **artistic composition** is essential in creating an aesthetically appealing bonsai.

1. The bonsai **artist's responsibility** is not only to create and maintain healthy miniaturized trees, but also to present an aesthetically appealing, that is, beautiful tree.

2. The function of **art** is the creation of things that have form and beauty. **Composition** means to put together. The putting together of a beautiful thing should be the objective of artistic composition.
  3. What makes a work of art special is that the artist was able to communicate his emotions to the viewer through his art. The communication of this emotion is the **aesthetics** of the art.
  4. The word, **aesthetics**, comes from a Greek word meaning, "perceptive by feeling". Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary defines **aesthetics** as, "the theory of the fine arts and of people's responses to them; the science or that branch of philosophy which deals with the beautiful; the doctrines of taste."
- B. The creation and maintenance of an aesthetically pleasing bonsai composition involves the application of a variety of horticultural and artistic principles.
1. The **horticultural principles** are well founded in the science of Botany: light, water, correct temperature range, soil within a particular pH range, periodic fertilizing and disease and pest control.
  2. The **artistic principles** applicable to bonsai are not unlike those appropriate to painting, sculpture, and other art forms. Proportion, balance, unity, rhythm, focal point, framing, texture, color, visual speed, display and environment all affect the quality of a bonsai.
  3. Bonsai is a synthesis of horticultural practices which permit the plant to thrive and artistic applications which make it attractive. Bonsai is a **horticultural art form**.
- C. A quality bonsai, incorporating various principles of both horticulture and art, creates within the viewer a feeling, an intuition, a sense of beauty. The techniques of applying these principles involve the creation of the appearance of ageing, of a pleasant rhythm of visual movement, a pleasing sense of

proportion, texture, and manner of presentation.

### III. ELEMENTS OF BONSAI AESTHETICS

**A. Ageing.** People have preconceptions about the effects of aging on an object. In bonsai it is not necessary to present an old tree for viewing, merely one that has been styled to look old. In order to trick the viewer into intuitively believing that the bonsai is quite old, it is necessary to carefully replicate **visual cues** associated with age. Various techniques involving the roots, trunk, branches, and special effects are used to create these illusions of age.

1. **Roots.** Partially visible, large and mature **roots** gives the appearance of age. As a tree matures, the soil surface around its base erodes to expose surface roots which develop a mature bark. A well established tree has surface roots which cling to the earth in several directions.
2. **Trunk.**
  - a. **Trunk diameter.** The lower portion of the trunk is the oldest portion and should have a significantly greater diameter with a distinct taper, becoming narrower as it progresses upward. The overall diameter of the trunk should be appropriate to the height of the tree.
  - b. **Trunk posture.** The posture of the trunk gives visual cues to the viewer which tell a great deal about the apparent age of the tree. The trunk of a tree which emerges from the ground at an angle and continues up in a series of bends and curves gives the illusion of age overcoming the elements of nature.



Illus. 1-1

- c. **Trunk appearance.** The texture of a trunk's surface may be smooth and without blemish which gives the appearance of youth. Its texture may be rough, gnarled, and scarred giving the appearance of age. A mature tree usually has broken limbs and a trunk scarred by the elements.

### 3. Branches.

- a. The **angle** of the branches is a major visual cue in determining the age of a tree. Branches on juvenile trees have a strong upward growth while those on an older and more mature tree droop with weight and age.
- b. The lower branches, because they are older, are thicker. Since they have to reach out for sunlight, they are longer.
- c. The older the tree is the more branch **ramification** (multiple smaller branches) it will have. But, it will also have openings for the birds to fly through.
- d. The **apex** provides an indicator of age. The apex of an immature tree is relatively pointed, still moving upward. The apex of a mature tree is more rounded, having reached its maximum height and beginning to spread.

### 4. Special Effects to Enhance the Appearance of Ageing

- a. Scarring and damage caused by time can be created on a bonsai by creating areas of **dead wood**.
  - (1) The top of the trunk or the end of a branch may be stripped of bark, carved and bleached.
  - (2) A portion of the live bark on the trunk may be stripped to simulate a lightning strike or where a branch broke, fell and ripped tissue from the trunk.
- b. The **container** should have a patina of age rather than

appear bright and shiny.

- c. The **soil surface** of a bonsai gives the appearance of age if it has some contours and if a ground cover of moss is permitted to grow.

**B. Visual Speed.** If the eye moves too rapidly over an object the viewer may get a disquieting feeling. It is more pleasant to allow the eyes to rove around, to explore, to make comfortable stops at interesting places. Several factors affect visual speed.

1. **Texture** of the container, bark and foliage affects the speed at which the eye scans the composition. Eyes tend to move more quickly over smooth surfaced containers, bark and foliage which may be used to increase or reduce visual speed. The more interesting the texture, the more the eye will dwell on it.
2. The **rhythm**, straight or curved, affects the speed at which the eye scans the composition. Your eye tends to move up or down a straight trunk much more quickly than when viewing a gently curving one.
  - a. The **trunk** establishes the theme for the entire tree; branches and foliage take their cues from the rhythm set by the trunk.
  - b. If the trunk is **curved**, the branches should be curved.
  - c. If the trunk is **straight**, the branches should also be straight.
  - d. If the trunk **leans** to one side the branches **counterbalance** by leaning toward the other side.
  - e. **Curves** generate a calm and gentle feeling while the feeling created by angles and sharp curves is less gentle.



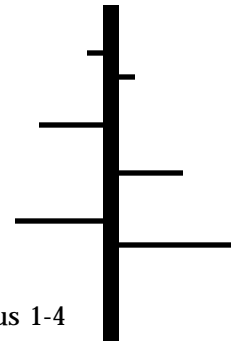
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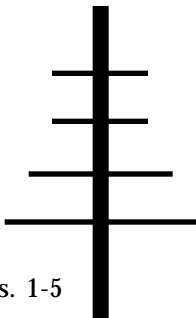
### 3. **Branch placement** may be used to slow visual speed.

a. Properly placed branches, as shown in the illustration, can provide an interesting and leisurely viewing of the tree. Each branch should invite the eye to pause and examine that branch before resuming its movement along the trunk. Notice how easily your eye travels up the trunk, pausing to explore a branch, and then moving on.



Illus 1-4

b. Improperly placed branches can result in the visual speed being slowed and even stopped. If two branches are growing from the same location on the trunk, one to the left and the other to the right (“T” or “bar” branching), they act as a barrier to smooth eye movement. The eye stops at the junction of the two branches and has difficulty deciding whether to go left or right and then has trouble resuming the vertical scan.



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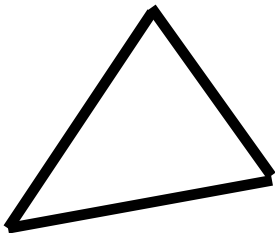
### C. Proportion (scale)

1. **Proportion**, or scale, is the comparative relation between parts.
2. The proportions of the bonsai have to be **balanced**, the elements have to be in scale, and therefore appear logical to the viewer. The proportions must reflect what the viewer expects to see in a mature tree.
  - a. We expect to see the **larger diameter branches** lower on the tree and we expect the lower branch to be in proportion to the trunk.
  - b. There also needs to be a **logical proportion between the mass of the tree, the mass of the trunk, and the mass of the pot**. When any one of these three is too small or too large in relation to the other, the composition is unbalanced, disharmonious and therefore aesthetically unpleasing.

- c. The **rule of thirds** is an artistic concept which bonsai artists the world over use as a starting point when designing a tree.
- (1) The **lower third** of the tree should be devoted to surface roots and to a proportionately tapered trunk.
  - (2) The **middle third** of the tree emphasizes branching.
  - (3) The **top third** consists of small branches and the apex.

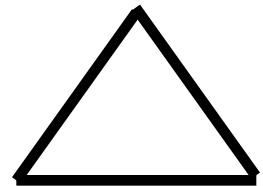
### D. Balance

1. **Balance** is an integral part of the aesthetics in a bonsai composition.
  - a. Much of Western art relies on **symmetrical balance** as seen in the design of a formal English garden which uses basic geometric shapes such as the circle, square and triangle.
  - b. Of the various geometric shapes, the triangle best represents strength and stability. The equilateral triangle is static, inactive, passive and motionless; elements to be avoided in most Oriental art.
  - c. The isosceles triangle, having three unequal sides, is not static, supplies variety and a feeling of motion, and in its own way provides an **asymmetrical balance**.



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- (1) The unequal, or **asymmetrical** triangle, lacking equality or symmetry, is the concept upon which a unique type of **balance** can be achieved.

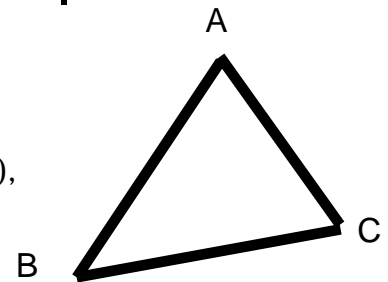


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### NOTES

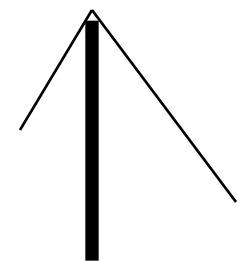
(2) Eastern painting, flower arranging, garden arrangement and bonsai all rely on the unequal triangle to provide balance and harmony to the composition. The Japanese term, *sabi*, meaning “deliberate imperfection”, comes to mind.

(3) The three points of an **asymmetrical** bonsai outline would touch the apex (point “A”), the longest lowest side branch on one side (point “B”), and either a lower side branch on the opposite side, or the edge of the container (point “C”).

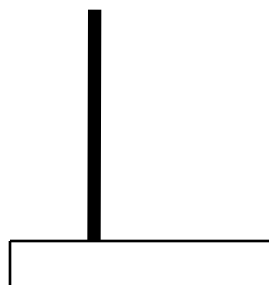


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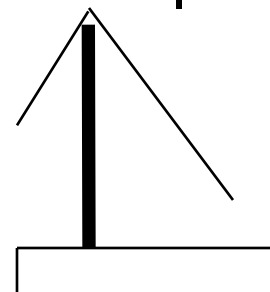
(4) When the tree is placed in its container, an asymmetrical **balance** is achieved by positioning the tree so that the greater horizontal mass of pot and soil on one side balances the greater vertical mass of the tree on the other. For this reason the tree is placed **off center** in its container.



Tree is off center to right



Pot is off center to left



Two off-centers balance each other

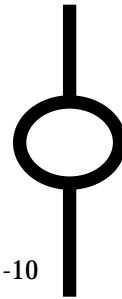
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(5) The tree is **asymmetrical** and the relationship of the tree to the container is **asymmetrical**, but together they provide a **balanced** composition.



### NOTES

2. **Balance** can be enhanced or destroyed by the **focal point**. An example of a focal point is the circle on the line in the illustration. The circle draws your attention, it is the place to which your eye consistently returns.
  - a. The **focal point** should be that portion of a bonsai composition around which the rest of the tree is styled. The focal point should have the greatest visual impact on the viewer. It has the ability to direct the viewer's attention toward that particular feature and away from lesser features.
  - b. It is important that a focal point be an appealing feature. If a focal point is an **undesirable feature**, the viewer has difficulty seeing the more commendable elements of the composition and tends to discount the artistic value of the bonsai. An example would be a brightly colored glazed container to which the eye constantly returns or a section of dead wood which is so overpowering in appearance that it inhibits the viewing of other elements of the composition.
- E. **Unity**. Unity within a bonsai composition is provided by the repeated use of similar or related elements throughout the composition. This repeated use of related elements provides a **rhythm**, a flow or a movement which enhances the unity of the composition.
  1. One of the unifying elements in most bonsai compositions is the **triangle**. It can be seen in the shape of individual branches, in the tree's silhouette and in the entire composition.
  2. **Unity** is achieved by relating trunk shape to branch shape. If the trunk is straight, the branches should be straight. If the trunk curves, the branches should have curves.



Illus 1-10

3. There should be a **unity**, a consistency in the elements which denote age. If a tree is young it should have a pointed crown, a slender trunk and branches, and no massive roots. If it is to portray an image of great maturity, it should have a wide foliage canopy, a thick and gnarled trunk and branches and strong roots. If it is to portray an image of an ancient tree, past its prime and on the decline, it should have a heavy short trunk, few branches, sparse foliage and dead wood.
4. **Unity** requires that a tree have a consistent trunk line; it must not mix several types of movement. There should be **unity** in the direction of movement: if the tree emerges from the ground leaning to the left, the apex should terminate leaning to the left.
5. A tree should have a **unity of gender characteristics**. A tree which is angular, has dead wood, has coarse foliage, and has a look of strength is a masculine appearing tree. A feminine appearing tree should be the opposite. The elements should not be mixed on the same tree.



Illus 1-11

### F. Simplicity

1. Simplicity implies the **absence of the ornate**. Simplicity implies **naturalness**. Simplicity is freedom from unnecessary complexities. We eliminate that which is not necessary.
  - a. Seldom are bonsai **decorated** with balls, bells and streamers or with ceramic figures.
  - b. **Containers** are relatively simple; not ornate.
  - c. **Open space** is as important as filled space.
2. The Japanese term, **wabi**, meaning “richness by not needing” is appropriate to bonsai. If a bonsai is of quality, adornments are not needed. “Less is more.”

### IV. EVOLUTION IN DESIGN

- A. The creation of a bonsai involves a processes similar to all other art forms; the **process of evolution**.
1. First comes a concept, then comes the transference of the concept into reality, and finally its refinement over a period of time.
  2. This process of conceiving and creating provides the creator of the bonsai a certain aesthetic pleasure accompanied by a sense of accomplishment.
  3. A sculpture can be finished as can a painting. A living bonsai is never finished because it is continually growing and changing.
    - a. It requires the constant application of artistic and **horticultural skills** to maintain its health and appearance.
    - b. If a branch dies or is damaged and if it must be removed from the design, the rhythm and speed of the overall tree is changed and redesigning is necessary to compensate.
    - c. If a tree dies in a group planting, consider leaving it as part of the composition.
    - d. Consider placing a **dead tree trunk** or branch on the surface of a mature planting to show continuity of its evolution.
    - e. A **container** may be broken or become otherwise unserviceable, requiring the repotting of the bonsai. This will again cause a change in the overall appearance of the tree and may require that some adjustments be made to the tree or to the soil surface to compensate for the changed container.

- B. In each stage of the evolution of the bonsai, artistic techniques, aesthetic considerations and horticultural principles have to be employed.

### V. DISPLAY AND PRESENTATION

- A. A bonsai should be displayed in such a way as to maximize the tree and to minimize its surroundings. Height, surroundings and background are all factors in displaying bonsai.
1. Bonsai should be displayed at a **height** which enhances the illusion that it is a mature tree in nature; middle of its trunk at the viewer's eye level.
  2. The bonsai may have an **accessory** displayed nearby which either blends or contrasts with the mood of the main tree. The accessory may be a rock, another but smaller bonsai or a small planting of grass or a succulent.
  3. There may also be a **scroll** or other appropriate wall hanging in the vicinity to enhance the display.
  4. The **scale** of each item in the display should be coordinated to harmonize rather than to conflict with the focal point, the bonsai.
- B. The **area** where the tree is displayed should be uncluttered; in relative isolation. The background should be plain and of a neutral color to not conflict with or detract from the tree.
- C. An appropriate **container** should be used and the tree it contains should be potted according to the principles of balance and proportion. The container functions like the frame of a picture; to enhance the composition but to not detract from it.
1. The container should be an appropriate **size** for the bonsai. There are various recommended proportions, the most common being that the length (long axis) of the container should be approximately two thirds either the

height of the tree or the spread of the foliage mass, whichever is greatest.

2. The container should complement the rhythm, texture, and color of the bonsai.
- D. The **soil surface** and ground covers should be tended without appearing to be artificially groomed.
- E. If wire remains on the tree the **wiring** should be done skillfully and not in such a manner as to detract from the appearance of the tree.

### VI. HARMONY

- A. The result for which we all strive is **harmony**. Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary defines harmony as:
- “...fitting together, agreement, a combination of parts into an orderly or proportionate whole, congruity, proportionate arrangement of color, size, shape which is pleasing to the eye...”
- B. Harmony in a bonsai composition is achieved by the application of various artistic techniques, many of which are summarized in a slide/tape program titled, *Harmony in Bonsai*.
- C. The next chapter in this Syllabus explores harmony further.

### VII. SUMMARY

- A. Bonsai is a horticultural art form. Horticultural principles keep it alive and healthy and artistic principles make it attractive.
- B. Many factors contribute to a bonsai's appearance of great age.
- C. The artistic and aesthetic appearance of the bonsai are enhanced by the rhythm, or the visual flow of the composition.

## Art and Esthetics of Bonsai, Continued

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### NOTES

- D. Correct proportions not only serve to unify a composition but send subliminal messages about the tree to the viewer.
- E. A bonsai, living, growing and ever changing, is never “finished”.