

HARMONY in BONSAI

Chapter 2

NOTES

I. OBJECTIVES

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

1. Define harmony.
2. Discuss the concept of *harmony* as it applies to bonsai, to include:
 - a. Understatement
 - b. Perspective
 - c. Line
 - d. Balance
 - e. Soul and spirit
 - e. Nature and natural appearance
 - f. Display of bonsai

II. GENERAL

A. An expanded discussion of Harmony is included in APPENDIX C to this Syllabus.

B. Definitions

1. **Harmony.** Harmony means fitting together, agreement, a combination of parts into an orderly or proportionate whole, congruity, agreement or proportionate arrangement of color, size, shape, etc., that is pleasing to the eye. It is an affirmative emotional response for which bonsai artists strive.

2. **Bonsai.** Bonsai is the art of creating a miniature replica of a mature tree or group of trees which could be found in nature. The bonsai artist attempts to create an **illusion** by changing normal plant material into a mature tree.

III. ELEMENTS OF HARMONY

Various elements, concepts and conditions contribute to the existence of harmony in a given composition. They include: understatement, perspective, line and its continuity and rhythm, balance, and the soul and the spirit of the creation. These will be discussed briefly here. See **APPENDIX C** for more details.

1. **Understatement.** There is a basic aesthetic premise in the Orient which states that the **less** powerful a thing may be, the **more** effective it can be. Empty space is as important as filled space.
2. **Perspective** refers to a method of organizing forms in space to create an illusion of depth on a two dimensional surface, or of greater depth in three dimensions. Perspective in bonsai is used to further the illusion that the bonsai has greater mass, greater age and greater maturity and is in a much larger environment than is really the case.
3. **Line** in art refers to a series of points which cause the eye to move along a particular path. It controls the way we view a particular composition. The **visual movement** along the path created by these points of interest should be smooth and fairly continuous to preclude the eye's becoming confused and lost in the composition.
4. **Balance** fosters harmony. However, unlike much of Western art, Oriental art, on which bonsai is based, relies on **asymmetrical balance** rather than on symmetrical balance.
5. **The soul and the spirit.** Many years ago an early Chinese art critic attempted to establish a criterion by which to

judge landscape paintings. In effect he said that a work of art may be technically perfect, exhibiting perfect technique in execution and workmanship, and it may follow all of the rules, do everything right. But unless it has a **soul and a spirit**, it has not been “divinely inspired”. This soul and spirit separates the great bonsai masterpieces from other specimens.

IV. NATURE'S PLACE IN BONSAI HARMONY

- A. **Nature** provides our most basic lessons on harmony. Some of the greatest artists spent their lives studying nature. Mountains, streams, rocks and trees in their natural environment usually exist in simplistic harmony with each other and with their surroundings. The bonsai artist learns by observing nature.
- B. **Natural Style.** Bonsai styling should, within reason, reflect the natural growth habit, shape and form of a species. The bonsai artist combines horticultural and design skills to create a miniature replica of the tree which is in harmony with what might be seen in the wild.
- C. **Illusionary Age.** Bonsai present an **illusionary age**; they appear to be of a certain age regardless of their actual age. The trunk, branch and foliage mass should be compatible; consistent with the illusionary age which the bonsai represents.
 - a. A **Juvenile** tree, 10 - 25 years old, has a slender trunk, little taper, upward sweeping branch growth, foliage in a ball shape. The ratio of lower trunk to branches is about 50/50.
 - b. A **Mature** tree, 25 - 75 years old, has some taper in the trunk, ramification of the roots, greater trunk diameter and maturing bark. There is more foliage mass in proportion to the lower trunk. Lower branches begin to grow outward so the tree begins to get broader.

- c. **Old** trees, 75 - 250 years, have significantly heavier trunks and branches and the branches are more horizontal or drooping.
- d. The **Ancient** trees, 250 + years, have very heavy trunks, natural dead wood, open wounds, scars, mature bark and a crown which is broader and more rounded. It is just surviving with short branches, understated foliage close to the trunk. The trunk may be split or it may be squat and robust; almost as wide as it is high.

V. HARMONY in the DISPLAY of BONSAI

- A. In the **display** of bonsai, concepts of understatement, space, perspective, visual movement, rhythm, balance, and natural appearance apply in order for there to be harmony.
 - 1. **Focal point.** Each display and each segment of a display should have a bonsai as a focal point.
 - 2. **Empty space** on a display table is as important as space which is filled. The empty spaces in front of, between and behind the displayed items establish perimeters or borders to assist the eye in remaining within the viewed grouping.
 - 3. The **background** should be neutral. A cluttered background is distracting and makes it difficult for the eye to follow the line in the nearer image.
 - 4. **Triangulation** is not only considered in the vertical dimension but also in the horizontal plane on the surface of the display table.
 - 5. **Stands** must be in proportion to the bonsai being displayed and should complement the color, shape or texture of the item being displayed.
- B. Most of these concepts of harmony involving the display of bonsai apply to the outdoor display also. Plants should be

thoughtfully grouped, should have adequate empty space, should not be lined up side by side and should have a relatively non-distracting background.

VI. SUMMARY

- A. A harmonious bonsai is one whose lines, shape, size, container and display environment blend together to present a beautiful coordinated scene.
- B. Various elements, concepts and conditions contribute to the existence of harmony in a given composition. They include: understatement, perspective, line and its continuity and rhythm, balance, the soul and the spirit of the creation, natural appearance, and its display.