

April, 2005 Columbus Bonsai Newsletter

Random Thotz

Man has Spring snuck up on me this year. I hope you have been able to keep your trees watered in the warmer weather we have been having. I have trees at every stage from early bud swell to early leaf out. And I am hopelessly behind in getting them repotted. Looks like my evenings are spoken for the rest of this week and next. On the up side, Michelle is supporting me on getting a decent display set up going. On the downside, that means I have a lot of landscaping that needs to be done. Sigh. I guess its an example of "Be careful what you ask for, you may get it!"

Coming Attractions

At the April 17th meeting Jose Cueto will be demonstrating an Acer genella (Amur maple) group planting and slides of design essentials for group plantings. This is a change from the previously advertised material, but after looking at the different plants available, the maples were chosen as being a more educational offering at this time. The maples had a variety of sizes and more mature looking trunks and branch structures than the hornbeam. Jose will be planting the group in a pot donated by Bob Puseker and we will be raffling this to the membership after it is established and healthy.

There will also be soil, pot, and tool sales at the meeting so if you have ordered anything or need supplies, this is the time to come and get it!

There will be Intro Bonsai classes offered by Franklin Park Conservatory again this year, They will be offered consecutive Wednesdays, May 11, 18, and 25 in the evenings. The classes start with design elements, move on to care and pest control, and the final session will include styling and potting of a tropical. I believe the tree this year will be a ficus. The last two years these were from Miami Tropicals and were nice specimens. If you or any one you know would like to take a beginning course on bonsai this is a good opportunity to get a complete class in to establish the basics. We have several members who got started with the club from these courses. Contact Franklin Park Conservatory for details of time and cost. There is a discount for FPC members. Phone 614-645-1507 or <http://www.fpconservatory.org> to get details.

President's Column

Spring started slow but really has picked up the pace. Now the bonsai grower has to be alert. Trees are popping out all over, the forsythia and magnolias are in full regalia. The rule about the forsythia is that it will snow three times after they bloom and we have had one snowfall so far, two more to go. The warm temperatures, low humidity and windy conditions can cause problems for plants fresh from winter storage or newly transplanted. If you have put plants on benches you are watering every day, right? If you are transplanting (and you should be starting) you must water, water, water.

Jim Doyle gave us his growing mixture for healthy bonsai. How does that compare to our own mixture? What the Club has now is similar to Jim's. He adds more 'rock' using turface as well as haydite. One difference is that Jim Doyle does not like chicken grit and we have not added that this year. Since some of you may need soil before the April meeting please let me know and I will arrange to get it to you. I live near Franklin Park and work downtown and currently I am carrying bonsai soil in the truck. Call and we can work something out...205-2712 cell, 487-7506 work, 236-2286 home. Soil, tools and some trees will be sold at the April meeting. See you then or before.

“Book” of the Month

Figurines & Bonsai A Question Of Relativity Story& Photos by Randy Clark, Charlotte, NC

Figurines used in conjunction with bonsai plantings. Are they a valid and effective enhancement to the creation or are they a pollution of the artistic precepts upon which bonsai is based?

One thing is certain. In the west at least, the inclusion of ceramic figurines of all descriptions is fairly rampant. Given the western predilection for things that are “cute” and “tiny”, it is unlikely that their use will diminish anytime soon.

The commercial bonsai industry in the US and abroad, whether through ignorance or deliberate intent, continues to jam all manner of “cute” figurines into retail bonsai (sometimes referred to as “mall...sai”.) along with a plentiful quantity of glued pebbles and spray painted moss. The shelves at Target, Home Depot and other retail outlets are fairly jammed with pseudo-bonsai creations that anyone who has ever even superficially studied the art of bonsai would be forced to characterize as appalling.

However, to reject, out of hand, the creative use of figurines in conjunction with bonsai simply because the retail industry does it with such enthusiastic abandon and remarkably bad taste, might be a mistake.

Under what circumstances does the inclusion of a figurine in a bonsai composition constitute enhancement of the overall artwork, and at what point does it transform that artwork into something akin to HO scale railroad? The answer is not simple and the artist's decision to include such an item in his or her finished composition can bring heated criticism and derision by peers.

In attempting to find an answer to the “figurine” question we tend to look to our teachers. Most of the techniques, guidelines and concepts used today in the practice of western bonsai were learned and wholeheartedly adopted from our original teachers... the Japanese. The Japanese answer to the use of figurines is simple and straightforward. You just don't do it... ever!

Just saying “NO” however, is not an answer. It is a refusal to confront the issue. If the Japanese never use figurines in a bonsai planting they are at complete odds with the Chinese, who seem to insert one kind of figurine or another into every planting they make. Where did the Japanese first learn of bonsai? From the Chinese, of course. Is one completely right and the other completely wrong? The answer again is “no.” It should also be noted that the Japanese do not reject the use of figurines completely out of hand and will frequently include them as accent pieces in a formal display. What they will not do is place figurines, rocks, accent plants or anything else except moss, directly on the surface of a bonsai container without changing the

classification from “bonsai” to “saikai.”

In trying to resolve this quandary, it may be helpful to understand what the artist’s goal is in creating his bonsai. The classical definition of bonsai from a Japanese standpoint has always been that the tree is a miniature statement about nature. By this definition, it is the artist’s objective, not to copy exactly what he sees in nature, but rather to observe it and to distill and focus those observations into a final creation which is called “bonsai.” The Japanese canon of “less is more” plays a paramount role in this vision of natural perfection.

From a Chinese viewpoint however, such an approach is considered boring and simplistic. They see Japanese trees as so uniform in their construction that they all begin to look alike. The Chinese point out that the Japanese culture places a high premium on conformity. It is not surprising, therefore, that Japanese bonsai should reflect this predilection for rigid conformity more often than not. The Japanese counter argument is that they have perfected the art form into the refined state in which it presently stands and that the Chinese are still practicing bonsai using stone axes and wooden clubs.

Stone axes aside, even a casual observer will see that the Chinese viewpoint is decidedly different than the Japanese. What accounts for this difference? For the Chinese, a penjing is a kind of painting or a well written verse of poetry. Indeed, many, if not most, Chinese penjing creations have a name or title such as “Summertime in the little village” and are quite often created to compliment a famous painting, song or poetic verse.

For the Chinese, some aspect of the tree which might cause it to be summarily rejected by a Japanese artist (such as bad rootage or a misshapen trunk) may quite often be the featured element in a penjing composition. (Because the trunk resembled the shape of a bird, it reminded the penjing artist of a song or poem about a nightingale, and he made it the central feature in his bonsai creation.) It logically follows that inclusion of a ceramic figurine depicting a wise old sage sitting beneath the boughs of a cherry tree or a group of horses meandering through a wooded glade to drink by the flowing stream, may then do much to enhance the artist’s primary objective.

Clearly, relying on guidance from our Japanese and Chinese teachers is not going to do much to help in resolving the correct use of figurines in a bonsai composition. Neither will this article or any amount of protracted debate on the subject. You should not expect classical bonsai artists to begin inserting figurines in their plantings anytime soon. Likewise, you will not find penjing artists removing their mudmen, boats, temples, bridges and pagodas. The fact is that both viewpoints have some merit. What Westerners need to do is to develop a third approach based on what we have learned from our teachers. Eventually this will result in bonsai creations which offer new and unsullied perspectives into the art. In time, the western bonsai “phobia” about absolutely never including figurines in a composition may begin to abate and we will truly begin to develop our own approaches to the art.

Philosophy and approach aside, the question still remains. Should we be putting figurines in our bonsai? In the last analysis, the artist’s decision to do so (or not do so) will be a personal one and will hopefully be based on artistic considerations rather than peer pressure. What should those considerations be?

First of all, one might begin by considering what the overall purpose is in creating a bonsai. If it is to create a representation of the perfection of nature, as is the case with most classical bonsai designs, then the inclusion of any kind of figurine in the composition will only serve to muddy the water. Remember the Japanese canon of “less is more”. Such a classically designed piece should be like a verse of haiku poetry.... compact, well constructed and straight to the point. Such a composition leaves no room for mudmen, bridges, pagodas, rocks or anything else which might otherwise distract from the purity of essence which is the hallmark of classically designed bonsai.

If, however, our goal is to create art for the sake of art, then a number of options become available to us. Painters, sculptors, authors and presumably bonsai artists are creating with the

intention that the finished work will eventually be seen by others and that those viewers will have some sort of reaction to it. If a painter is free to draw a picture of a tree which includes people sitting under it, the same latitude of expression should be extended to the bonsai artist. This is a much more contemporary approach to the art, and one that has only in recent years (because of the strict guidelines we were all brought up with) even been considered.

Artistic expression requires freedom and there is precious little freedom in adopting a strictly classical Japanese approach to bonsai design. Such a classical approach is both a saving grace and a curse, because it not only preserves the purity of the art, but also restricts it from further development. The classical approach requires the artist adhere to the rules and never deviate. Logically, one reasons that if the rules are followed, then what is produced must be of value. It may not be great art, but because it conforms it will be correct art and therefore good art. On the other hand the more contemporary approach of "art for the sake of art" certainly permits more freedom for expression, but it also leaves the door wide open for the creation of a lot of unbelievably bad paintings and/or bonsai.

Enough debate. Let us presume that a decision has been made to commit classical bonsai heresy and include some sort of figurine in our finished planting. What then should be the rules or guidelines governing such a decision?

Good taste and relevance for openers. I am reminded of a fellow artist who showed me a tree whose nebari and trunk base had been badly damaged by a rabbit or mouse. He had taken a small matchbox car, used a ballpeen hammer on the hood and front bumper and placed the "wrecked." car up against the damaged area of the trunk. A car wreck in miniature. Another friend, who had become bored standing guard over the club's bonsai at an exhibition on a particularly warm spring day, began nonchalantly placing small purple plastic "smerfs" into a forest planting which was sitting nearby. Bonsai blasphemy without a doubt, but an interesting thing started to happen. The young children, who were reluctantly being forced to accompany their parents through the exhibit, and had largely ignored the forest planting all afternoon, suddenly stopped, gathered around it and began discussing the smerfs and where they belonged in the forest. Are purple smerfs and matchbox cars good bonsai? Hardly, but they did do something which could not have been done more effectively in any other way. They made the planting relevant and meaningful to those that were viewing it.

The use of figurines in bonsai is a difficult road to travel, because what is considered to be in good taste and relevant will vary from individual to individual. So difficult, in fact, that most bonsai artists choose not to even confront the issue. Artistic safety resides in peer approval. But most art is created for the masses and not for peers. The untrained public knows nothing of styling rules. They react at a much more basic level to our artwork.

Relevance is essential. Remember that the primary focus in bonsai is the tree. If a figurine can be used just as effectively as an accent piece accompanying the tree, then perhaps it is better to do so than to place the figurine directly in the planting. If the figurine must go in the planting then remember the rule about "less" being "more". There is nothing wrong with HO scale railroad, it just has very little to do with bonsai.

To the untrained eye a tray full of plant material and figurines may evoke images of a Chinese village, a car wreck or a forest of smerfs, but someone trained in the art will realize that they all draw focus and attention away from the trees themselves. Don't muddy the water. As elements are added to the overall bonsai composition it becomes more and more important to remain focused on the prime objective... the tree.

A carefully chosen and appropriately placed figurine can do much to direct focus when viewing a bonsai. It can enhance and expand feeling that the planting was designed to invoke. To do so, the figurine must be relevant to the overall composition in the same way that the choice of an appropriate display container is relevant. Again, what is relevant will be a matter of personal opinion. That's OK. Art itself is a matter of personal opinion.

We select our containers very carefully. They are chosen for shapes and colors that will

enhance, but not overpower the aspects of a bonsai planted into it. We spend hours laboring over the proper selection of an accent plant, a stand or a scroll to accompany the bonsai. The same care and consideration should be given to the selection of a figurine.

We strive to make our trees as perfect and realistic as possible. The same effort should be expended in selecting a figurine. They should be of very high workmanship. A well made figurine, like a well made pot, will be more effective than something of lesser quality. Partly because there is a plentiful supply of them, oriental figurines seem to be included in plantings more often than not. A Chinese scholar reading a book under the bough of a plum tree or a peasant fishing by the side of a stream seem to be in harmony with this art form so firmly rooted in oriental culture. This is fine, but certainly not mandatory. A deer resting in a grove, a brown bear emerging from the forest or a gorilla hiding in the deep grass are also valid placements although considerably more western.

As the art of bonsai grows in popularity, the guidelines governing it are growing and changing. Figurines will no doubt be a part of bonsai's future although what their role will be a dozen or a hundred years from now is difficult to speculate. For now their popularity is growing and should an artist, either classical or contemporary, choose to include one in their composition, here are four guidelines which may prove helpful in their selection.

First: The bonsai is the primary objective. Figurines, rocks or any other element placed directly into a bonsai container should enhance the overall effect of the composition. Otherwise they should not be included.

Second: Overall effect is more important than specific placement. If the same artistic result can be achieved by including the figurine as an accent to, rather than directly in the composition, then it is preferable to do so.

Third: Quality is critical. Figurines used should always be of first class workmanship and as realistic as possible.

Fourth: Cute is a four letter word. Like the bonsai itself, the figurine selected should make as simple and straightforward a statement as possible. i.e.- a bear is OK. A dancing bear juggling balls is not. Relevance, simplicity and naturalness are of key importance.

[These are some captions for illustrations from the original article, they did not come through on the doc file I received, but the text explains the concepts involved eloquently.]

This forest of Trident maples is planted on a limestone slab. The composition is certainly solid enough to stand on its own merit, but the addition of the moose expands the plantings overall relativity to the viewer. In an instant it conjures up images of the Canadian Rockies or the boundary waters wilderness of Minnesota..

An old beggar man sits by the side of the road in the cool shade of a maple tree, his begging bowl held at the ready for whatever the passing fortunes may bring him.

The panda used in this composition instantly transforms a rather ordinary pot full of dwarf bamboo into a hillside in China. The result is delightful, but care in selecting the right combination of figurine and bonsai is critical. Insofar as the world of bonsai is concerned, "cute" is a four letter word. It is easily possible to go too far. Always remember that the figurine (like the bonsai itself) should make as simple and straightforward a statement as possible; i.e., A bear is OK. A dancing bear juggling balls is not. Relevance, simplicity and naturalness are of key importance.

The inclusion of stones and a Grizzly bear in this raft planting of a young Shimpaku juniperper forms two functions. Not only does it create emotional impact for the viewer, but as the bear steps over a portion of the raft, it forces more knowledgeable bonsai viewers to notice how the artist has treated the exposure of trunkline along the soil surface. Without the bear it might have been overlooked.

A group of horses pauses in a grove of Chinese elms to drink from a forest stream. The concept was “borrowed” and then modified from an original creation by Chinese penjing artist Qing Quan Zhao. Note the radical difference in the quality and workmanship of the two panda figurines at left. This is a critical distinction to understand. Figurines MUST be exceptionally well made and realistic. There is no room for purple “smurfs” in a bonsai container. As we create our bonsai we seek to summarize and focus an image of the natural world about us. We apply high standards in doing so. In situations where the use of a figurine seems appropriate, we should ascribe to the same high standards of quality and realism. If a figurine can be used just as effectively as an accent piece accompanying the tree, then perhaps it is better to do so than to place the figurine directly in the planting. When done thoughtfully the entire composition will become more than the sum of its parts.

Partly because there is a plentiful supply... oriental figurines seem to be included in plantings more often than not. This seems to be in harmony with this art form which is so firmly rooted in oriental culture. However it is certainly not mandatory. A deer resting in a grove, a brown bear emerging from the forest or a gorilla hiding in the deep grass are also valid placements although considerably more western.

The fawn, hides from the many dangers of the forest and awaits his mother’s return. The argument that figurines draw attention away from the tree is not necessarily a valid one. The same might be said of an accent plant, pot, scroll or stand. While it is true that the viewer’s eyes may initially focus on the figurine, a few seconds later the viewer will re-consider the entire planting and at that point will begin to make personal judgements about the overall composition presented, including the suitability of any figurine placed in it. While size, number and placement of trunks are important aspects that should not be overlooked, it must also be remembered that the artist’s intent is to create a feeling. From this viewpoint, counting the total number of trunks becomes secondary.

Another grass planting this time on a piece of limestone “tufa.” The bonsai contains dwarf bamboo and dwarf horsetail along with a very serious looking silverback gorilla. The whole composition suggests a mountain side in Africa’s Kilimanjaro National Park.

About The Author

"One must have more than a simple classical understanding of the principals of bonsai design if one wishes to grow and develop in the art. It is certainly important to honor our Japanese teachers by understanding the time tested principals upon which classical bonsai design is based,... but it is even more important that each student strives to bring new insights into what they do," he said. "One must learn and understand when to apply the rules as well as when to bend them. Bonsai is an art... and all art forms, by definition, are interpretive."

During his twenty-five year involvement with the art of bonsai, Mr. Clark has spent seven of them serving as a vice president of the National Bonsai Foundation in Washington D.C. as well as two terms as president of the Minnesota Bonsai Society and as Chairman of the 1987 International Bonsai Conference which was held in Minnesota. He also served two years as the managing editor of Bonsai Magazine, the official publication of Bonsai Clubs International and is the author of Outstanding American Bonsai, a book, published by Timber Press in Portland, Oregon.

Randy Clark has been involved in growing and teaching bonsai for more than three decades. He owns and operates The Bonsai Learning Center in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Bonsai Here and Beyond the Outerbelt

Unless otherwise noted, The Columbus Bonsai Society meets the third Sunday of every month at 2:00 pm. at the Franklin Park Conservatory. Board meetings are held the first Tuesday of the month at 7:00 in the Franklin Park Conservatory library. The meetings are open to members.

April 17 - Club meeting at Franklin Park Conservatory. A Korean Hornbeam forest planting demonstration by Jose Cueto.

April 19 - Dawes - Pesticides and fertilizer

May 7-8, 2005 Michigan All-State Bonsai Show, Fredrick Meyers Gardens Grand Rapids

May 15 - Club Meeting at Franklin Park Conservatory. A mini Mugo Pine workshop.

May 17 - Dawes - Soil creation

May 28-30, 2005 5th Annual World Bonsai Convention, Washington, D. C.

"<http://www.bonsai-wbff.org/wbc5/main.htm>"

June 4&5 - Dawes show

June 18-19 - 30th Annual Columbus Bonsai show. It's not to early (NOW!) to start thinking about what you want to show. Just think, you have months to get it ready for looking its best - pot, wiring, best accent plant, best display stand. At this point you have the time to do it up in traditional style.

June 21 - Dawes - Tropical Plant Repotting

July 17 - Club meeting is a Field Trip to the Cincinnati Krohn Conservatory

July 19 - Dawes - Jining/leaf pruning

August 21 - Club meeting at Franklin Park Conservatory. Elections. Tropical subjects w/cutting exchange

August 16 - Dawes - fertilizer making

September 18 - Picnic

Sept 20 - Dawes - Road trip/Demo

October 16 - Club meeting at Franklin Park Conservatory. Guest artist Keith Scott. Tentatively a Scotts Pine/Juniper Demo and tree critique.

Oct 18 - Dawes - Over-Wintering

November 20 - Club meeting at Franklin Park Conservatory.

Nov 15 - Dawes - Pot selection/Orientation

December - Holiday dinner

And a final word -

From Tom Pillichody -

A worried young newbie named Ray,
Feared El Nino from old Monterey,
He sheltered from rain
And didn't complain,
But the mud slud, and swept them away!

Columbus Bonsai Society
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President - Daniel Binder
Past President - Ken Schultz
1st Vice President - Mark Passerello
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1 year Board - Jose Cueto
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3 year Board - Denny Sackett
Librarian - Merida Weinstein
Newsletter Editor - Zack Clayton
Refreshment Coord - Vacant

email to: ColumbusBonsai@hotmail.com

Some of you have wondered why we have a hit or miss coffee table recently - please notice that the refreshment coordinator position is still vacant.
