

# **Bonsai and Art**

**by Fred Truck**

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International Bonsai Magazine runs a feature in each issue in which the great Bonsai artist, Masahiko Kimura instructs an apprentice in the fundamentals of the trade. The following essay imagines a similar situation, an artist and his student, discussing the cultural differences between East and West in the quest to make better, more aware art. We begin:

## **Is bonsai art?**

The short answer is no.

The tools, techniques, materials and formal concepts of bonsai are no more art than brushes, paints, canvas and easels are.

Bonsai done by an artist is art. When Kimura does bonsai, it is art. He knows the traditions of Japanese bonsai, but he also knows the sculptural traditions of Western art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He works with conifers instead of stone or steel.

## **Who is an artist?**

Anyone can learn the basic techniques of art. Go to art school. After a few years of agonizing, devastating personal criticism and a huge amount of work (lots of socializing included) you'll graduate. You'll get a degree. You could even get an MFA.

Are you an artist yet?

No.

You have to do the work.

## **What does the term "bonsai artist" mean?**

Here is what happens today. If you want to learn about bonsai, you go to Japan and student yourself to a Master. Then, after a few years of agonizing, devastating personal criticism and a huge amount of work (with not very much socializing included) you'll graduate. It is painful and difficult work.

What will you have learned?

You'll have learned how to work in the bonsai business. Bonsai is not an art in Japan. It's a business. The techniques you learn will enable you to mass produce bonsai so you can

generate enough turnover to keep the nursery afloat financially. If you have time, you might try something on your own, but most of your time will be devoted to caring for client's trees.

Occasionally, out of this system, someone like Masahiko Kimura might rise to the level of being a great artist. It takes great strength of character to do this, because you will certainly be criticized, laughed at, and ostracized for years until very slowly, you are accepted. People may finally see the value of your work. There is no guarantee this will happen. But if it does, it takes years.

The student system in Japan for running a bonsai business does not produce artists, but it does produce managers and skilled businessmen with some vision. There are resemblances between the system of bonsai education in Japan and the classic artist's workshop in Renaissance Italy. That system didn't produce artists either, but it educated potential artists as to the possibilities.

This comparison masks a problem. The problem is that in making it, one assumes the purpose the Japanese and Western art education systems is the same.

The purpose of the Western art education is to instill in potential artists the confidence and vision necessary to make art expressing the experiences of its maker. The purpose of the Japanese art education system is to create those who copy the forms and techniques of the ancestors absolutely perfectly.

In bonsai, there are a number of stereotypical forms for trees to take, such as upright, slanting, root-over-rock and so on. The Master will take a tree and execute a slanting tree. Then the students are given trees and they must imitate what the Master did to perfection. If you, as a student, make a tree that differs from the Master's, you will be severely criticized.

This structured, rule-based approach to education permeates all areas of the bonsai business in Japan.

### **Ok. How are artists made??**

No one really knows. There don't seem to be identifying personal characteristics. But often there is a pattern of development. Artists know who they are. Usually this knowledge comes from the process of living. Something tells this person that their responses and perceptions of people and events and the world around them is where they want to do their work. Deciding exactly which art form they want to devote their energy in is a process that might take a very long time, or it might take two weeks. They might learn their craft in school, they might pick it up from others, or maybe no one teaches them. They do it naturally without a lot of thought.

The main driving force for any artist in any medium is The Vision. Through the process of living, the artist develops a view of life that is highly internalized. Understanding this makes it possible for the artist to articulate The Vision. Thus, the work begins.

## **But, this has nothing to do with bonsai!**

That's right. The process of living can be done anywhere people live. If our imaginary artist has the opportunity to do painting, and painting connects with The Vision that artist has, being a painter may happen. If bonsai is part of the culture, the artist might do that.

The art form the artist chooses to work in is really the last consideration. Understanding how he or she perceives life and responds to it—The Vision—has to come first or the resulting career may be very confusing and frustrating. Or, a complete failure.

At some point, early on, the artist-to-be will make connections with established artists. This happens because they recognize the neophyte's potential. Their response to him or her governs the next few years in the neophyte's development. They will either try to help, or they will actively hinder the neophyte's path. Either helping or hindering is good. Ignoring the neophyte completely is not so encouraging.

## **Ok. Given a person with an artistic inclination and The Vision, as you say, what happens when such a person does bonsai?**

Well, the first thing that happens to a neophyte artist is that a tremendous amount of technical information and horticultural practice must be absorbed. The tree has to remain alive.

Second, as this information is being absorbed, the neophyte artist will run smack into The Rules of Bonsai.

## **Aren't the Rules of Bonsai just general guidelines that may be regarded or disregarded at will?**

Yes, they are. But The Rules, such as the height of a tree is determined by multiplying the diameter of the trunk above the roots by 6, have a social aspect that is rarely discussed. Other members of the bonsai community enforce the rules through criticism of your work. This is the resistance Masahiko Kimura met early in his career. The enforcement of the rules, informally but effectively, is characteristic of Japanese culture in general.

## **But, we're American!**

Yes, but you are forgetting that bonsai is an imported cultural practice. Bonsai did not originate here, but in Asia. Those who imported it to our country also brought this element of social control.

This has led to a number of perplexing problems. Here in the West, we pride ourselves on our individualism. Although we are all members of many different groups, we want to be recognized apart from the group, for ourselves.

In Japan, this is not the case. I have done several solo photography shows and two man art shows in Japan. Particularly in the case of the two man shows, in which the other photographer was Japanese, the Japanese people themselves always said to me: Ah, you are the artist. We Japanese don't have artists. We are Japanese.

I was offended they said this when my friend, a fine photographer, was standing right next to them. He too is an artist deserving of their admiration.

On the other hand, American students to Japanese bonsai businesses, bring back what they've learned but assume they can now become or now are bonsai artists. A few may be, but most aren't because they have neglected to learn the basics of Western art, what it means to be an artist here, and how truly difficult that is.

These Japanese-trained bonsai specialists have picked up on the notion, prevalent in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that anyone could be an artist. Just go ahead and make a few marks. They didn't take the time to understand the context in which those anti-art ideas arose and what they really mean.

What they mean is: Your talents (if you have them) don't excuse your participation in daily life. Work is good, and is not something to be avoided. Do not hold yourself apart.

The best way to participate in daily life here, as an artist, is to engage people, socialize with them, but in your art, make your own rules.

The most pointed criticism of bonsai is that almost all bonsai are "cookie cutter" bonsai. Trees that look like a triangle on a stick. This is the effect of following the rules. The trees all look alike, and this goes as far as to say the deciduous trees look just like the conifers. From the Western point of view, this reduces bonsai to craft. It's just like paint by numbers. It is a devastating criticism.

If you make your own rules, this won't happen, but at the same time, you may find your opportunities to participate in bonsai shows limited. If you make the choice to combine Western traditions with Asian bonsai and make your own rules that most likely will become your main source of satisfaction. At least you did it your way.