Bonsai: Nature in Miniature

The 1914 Arnold Arboretum expedition to Japan led by Ernest H. Wilson produced, among other things, some excellent photographs which clearly show the natural inspiration for many of the forms of bonsai — that most specialized kind of Japanese horticulture. Pictures such as these can help put the hobbyist in touch with the source of his art and can be of particular importance to bonsai enthusiasts who wish to follow the Japanese models for bonsai but who do not have the experience of the Japanese landscape. The first part of this article is devoted to the relationship between nature and bonsai, and the last part of the article will relate some specific bonsai styles to such scenes as Wilson photographed in Japan in 1914.

A bonsai is a conscious attempt to suggest a natural scene. The first bonsai — and still the ideal of bonsai — were a part of nature. They were naturally dwarfed old trees dug and brought home to grow in containers in the collector's garden. Though the trees were of interest in themselves, their real beauty lay in their capacity to suggest the total landscape from which they had come. The gnarled and bleached old tree, potted and growing in the serenity of a garden, not only gave evidence of its struggle to survive but also suggested by its form the cliffs to which it had clung, the valley below the cliffs, the river in the valley, and perhaps the wind which had so tortured its branches.

All of the forms of bonsai have a natural model. Each different kind is intended to take the viewer back to the great tree, the forest, or the island-dotted vista which inspired it. If a particular creation cannot transport the viewer into the total landscape, it is esthetically less than it should be.

As the practice of the art of bonsai has spread from Japan to other parts of the world, its direct connection with the landscape which inspired its traditional forms has lessened. Although this separation has been remedied somewhat by relying on native plants and landscapes for inspiration, especially in semi-tropical and tropical areas, most bonsai hobbyists still prefer to emulate the classical styles and scenic compositions of the Japanese.
Fig. 1. Pinus parviflora. Slopes of Adzuma-san. Uzen Province. Photo: E. H. Wilson, 1914.
The result is that many bonsai are created in the image of other bonsai, copies of copies, and not in response to an immediate environment.

Photographic studies of the Japanese landscape can help the bonsai enthusiast recapture the source and spirit of his art and understand that the rules of bonsai are derived from nature — that, in fact, faithfulness to a natural model is the first rule of bonsai. Without a knowledge of the natural model, the bonsai hobbyist is likely to be a technician bound by convention. With a knowledge of the natural model, he has a context in which he can understand the “why” of the techniques he has learned. This will give him a basis to make his own judgements with confidence, and show him what a large range the bonsai artist has for expression if nature is his teacher and he has eyes to see.

**Single Trees as Models**

The most basic style of bonsai is the formal upright. A bonsai trained in this style has a perfectly vertical trunk with clouds of foliage sweeping alternately left, right, and to the rear. The three Japanese white pines (*Pinus parviflora*) in Fig. 1 are good examples of the kind of trees which a bonsai in the formal upright style means to suggest. The trees tower over the landscape, each magnificent in its own right.

In contrast to the formality of the pines in Fig. 1, the *Pinus thunbergii* in Fig. 2 is more sinuous and graceful though no less impressive as a single tree. These qualities in a bonsai would classify the tree as an informal upright. The growing top of the tree is more or less directly above the base of the tree (upright), but the curving lines of trunk and branches are “informal.”

**Multiple Trees and Forest Plantings**

Bonsai plantings which contain more than two trees are called *Yose-ue*. Look again at Fig. 1. The relative heights of the three trees and their place in the composition of the photograph could serve as a model for a *Yose-ue* planting and suggest such a landscape as Wilson saw.

A group planting, however, need not suggest an entire landscape. The three Japanese red pines (*Pinus densiflora*) in Fig. 3 are more impressive planted together than either one would be alone. Two or three small trees which are undistinguished by themselves may look quite handsome in composition. Visible proof of the age of the trees in the photograph is supplied by the vestiges of dead limbs which project from the trunks.

*Fig. 2. Pinus thunbergii. Village of Shitogo behind Yakushima. Photo: E. H. Wilson, 1914.*
Fig. 3. Pinus densiflora with torii at base of Kirishima. Photo: E. H. Wilson, 1914.

Top: Fig. 4. Pinus densiflora forming pure woods. Northern slopes of Fuji-san, Yoshida, Shrega Province. Photo: E. H. Wilson, 1914.

Bottom: Fig. 5. Remarkable cliffs of gray sandstone with Pinus thunbergii, near Matsushima. Photo: E. H. Wilson, 1914.
Such remains of dead limbs, called jin, are often left or created on bonsai to enhance the illusion of age.

Wilson's photograph of a Japanese red pine forest (Fig. 4) contains two of the elements which one expects to find in a bonsai forest planting — the illusion of depth and triangular groupings of the trees. Depth in the photograph is an illusion too. The trees in the background are not small; they are simply farther away from the photographer than the trees in the foreground. That same illusion of depth can be created in a bonsai forest planting by placing the tallest trees toward the front of the container and sharply decreasing the height of the trees toward the rear of the planting.

Nature arranged this forest, and the bonsai hobbyist can take a lesson from the triangular scheme of composition which appears in the photograph. The tallest tree is forward in the composition and forms a triangle with the tall trees on the left and right of the main tree. Other trees in the picture fill in between the principal trees and form triangular sub-groupings with the ones on the left and right, uniting the entire composition.

Islands and Rocky Cliffs

Ishi-tsuki is a style of bonsai which combines plant material and stones into compositions which present a miniature landscape, the rocks serving as landscape features as well as the container for the plants. Two of the most popular features of the terrain to reproduce are rocky cliffs and small islands.

Fig. 5 shows a group of sandstone cliffs at a seashore. The photograph is a good guide for selecting the appropriate material to reproduce the scene as a bonsai composition. The rocks have a vertical orientation and are angular but smooth — evidence of the work of waves. The plant material is sparse, weathered, and tenacious. Notice the Japanese black pine (Pinus thunbergii) clinging to one of the cliffs as if it had been planted there and trained by some bonsai master. The composition would be displayed in a shallow, water-filled tray — a bonsai sea.

The photograph of the island (Fig. 6) as an ishi-tsuki model is equally instructive. The stone used to represent the island

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Fig. 6. Pinus parviflora. Lake Towada, Northern Hondo. Photo: E. H. Wilson, 1914.

Fig. 7. Larix gmelini showing effects of strong winds from Sea of Okhotsk. Photo: E. H. Wilson, 1914.
should be horizontally oriented and rough-textured in contrast to its placid sea. The plant material can be copious, varied, and lush. Since the silhouette of the composition is important, the “trees” on the island should have an open appearance so that each is distinct against the background of sky and water. Ornament is appropriate in such a composition; the small house in the picture is a pleasing addition to the scene.

Special Landscapes
The trees which grow in winds blowing constantly from one direction reflect that pressure in their shapes. The grove of Dahurian larches (Larix gmelini) in Fig. 7 clearly show in their wind-swept branches the direction of the prevailing winds. This is one way in which nature contorts her natural forms, and is the inspiration for the wind-swept style of bonsai. A bonsai in this manner is trained so that its trunk and branches sweep in one direction, bent by the pressure of an imaginary, but constant, wind.

Conclusion
Although a grove of American beeches can be as instructive to the bonsai hobbyist as a grove of Japanese red pines and the coast of Maine as suggestive of scenic bonsai as Japan’s Inland Sea, it is nevertheless valuable to examine the wellsprings of the art of bonsai. Such an examination can help to recouple the link between nature and bonsai. That done, the hobbyist can hopefully see new forms and material around him. Or, if he chooses to follow the Japanese models, he can do it with understanding. Either way his art will be less detached, less artificial, and nearer to the goal of nature in miniature.

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