

An Informal History of Bonsai

One of the few positive aspects of human warfare is the inevitable blending of cultures which takes place immediately upon the cessation of hostile activities. For a short but crucial period the victor is exposed to the best and worst of the former enemy, and vice-versa. In the wake of World War II American society has responded with élan to this exposure and to the widest possible variety of things Japanese. Typical of this has been the popularity of the *shibui* object, understated elegance in home design, house furnishings, and gardens, and a renewed interest in oriental arts and crafts.

Immediately after the close of hostilities in 1945 a flood of occupation forces, and, a bit later, trade representatives, began short tours of duty in Japan. In the ten years between 1945 and 1955, hundreds of thousands of Americans spent time in Japan. Persons from every walk of American society enjoyed this cross-cultural experience, one which formerly had been confined to diplomats, businessmen and the affluent. (In fact even through the war years Japan and the Japanese remained a sort of abstraction to the bulk of the American population.) Among those multitudinous aspects of Japanese culture which remained in mind was the feeling conveyed to the westerners by those small, carefully trained but artless and natural appearing trees contained by glazed or unglazed pottery containers — the bonsai.

Americans, who will celebrate the 200th anniversary of their country's founding in 1976, were faced with the living cultural artifacts of a nation which, although like the Americans in having been the result of wave after wave of migrations, had nearly 2,000 years of *in situ* cultural history. Indeed some of the bonsai were twice as old as the American nation! Little wonder that popular authors referred to the "mysterious" culture techniques, since bonsai were another facet of the "inscrutable"

orient! In addition to age which never fails to intrigue Americans, the living trees, many of which only simulate age, also convey other admirable qualities which would entrance *les nouveaux venus* of every age — endurance, natural beauty and understated strength.

Although many treasures were destroyed during the war, and many living gardens and bonsai were lost for lack of care and watering, one can only wonder at the large number of very old trees which survived. And, unlike other works of art, living treasures required great care after substantial initial investment. Since the importation of living plants involves permit procedures of some complexity very few bonsai came to the United States in the postwar years. However, the small trees are such an ubiquitous part of Japanese life that it is safe to say that tens of thousands saw, enjoyed, and cherished the idea of bonsai.

There were several day-to-day indications that bonsai had captured the American imagination. Christmas cards printed in Japan for Americans featured a dwarf tree motif. In the mid-1950's American florist and gift shops blossomed with non-living dwarf trees concocted from driftwood or weathered branches topped with a flattened gray lichen to simulate foliage. A species of *Filago*, a flat perennial herb of the Composite family, was imported from India at this time for similar use. These "ming" trees were American equivalents of similarly artificial trees popular among the Chinese for household decor often fashioned from carved semi-precious stones. One of the earliest popular articles entitled "How to Make a Tree" [living] appeared in the March 1950 issue of *American Homes Magazine*. A flood of publications to follow in the 1960's would demythologize the art for the American public. The strong economic bonds between the United States and Japan has allowed the initial cultural flow to continue through the 1970's. As more Americans were able to visit Japan and bonsai materials began to be exported local groups were formed particularly in California where many Americans of Japanese ancestry were leaders in the foundation of the California Bonsai Society in 1950. Later a national organization, the American Bonsai Society, with numerous affiliates, was organized in 1967.

Before we look at the early movement of bonsai in the West or at the earliest examples from China perhaps we should consider the development of the art in Japan, the country with the earliest leading exponents in modern times, the coiners of the term itself (derived from the Chinese word *p'en tsai*), and the

"Stories of Ladies" by Chin Ying (Ming Period 1368–1644) Top: Terrace scene with screen, lacquer table, small potted tree. Bottom: Garden with potted plants and small trees. An aptly named era (Ming means bright), it was an era of native rule first in Nanking then in Peking. Fogg Art Museum, Oriental Dept., Harvard University.

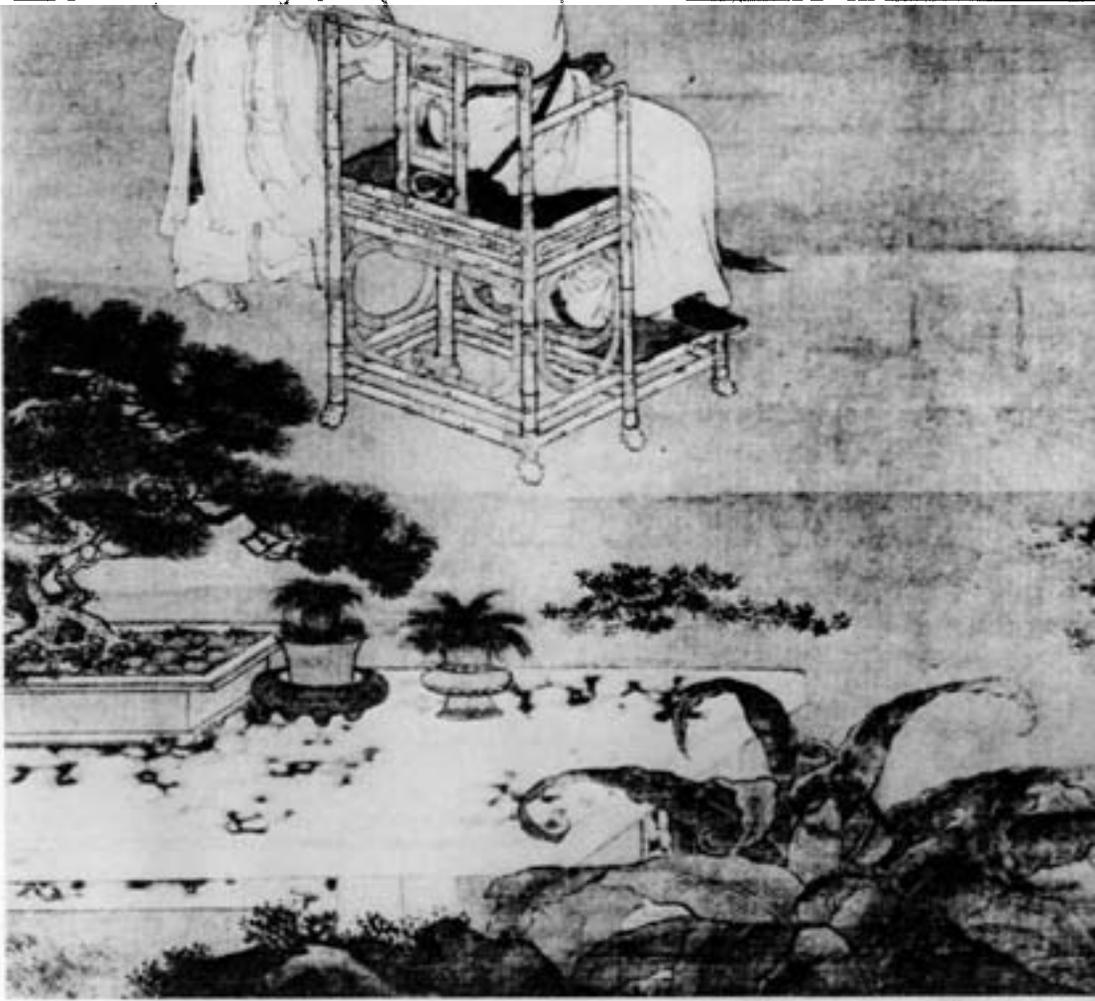


country which has the largest current number of practitioners. (An early use of the word *bonsai* appears in the *Seiwanmyoen-Zushi* published in Osaka in 1875.) For, as we shall see, while many styles of training trees and schools of culture have developed into cults in Japan, and while the culturing of the trees there is centuries old, there is evidence that the art was flourishing in China before the Sung Period (960–1279).

The introduction of Buddhism to Japan about 550 is very important in considering the history of *bonsai* for it was in the centuries immediately after that the cultural flowering of China during the T'ang period (618–906) flowed to Japan. Zen Buddhism was to become a popular religion and forever after to touch the weft of Japanese life. With Zen comes the perfection of the miniature and the associated ideals of self discipline and the emulation of Nature. Potted trees kept small could serve as objects of contemplation as well as decoration. Within the temples small landscapes and gardens were used symbolically to represent Horai-san, the sacred Taoist mountain of eternal youth. Trees and shrubs in the ground were pruned for natural effects so that via miniaturization a natural contemplative scene could be achieved. P'en tsai may have originated from transferring small trees from small landscape dramas and/or by artful pruning of larger potted trees used as relief against the traditional oval, rectangular and square motifs of courts, furniture and most man-made construction. Strong cultural exchanges between Japan and China began early — during the Fujiwara Era (794–1192). Earlier the Japanese had been awed by the wealth and sophistication of the Chinese Court. The customs and religion of China were adopted in part by the ruling classes of Japan.

Among early Japanese art works still extant which show dwarf trees is the scroll *Tsurezure Gusa* by Kenko Yoshida (1283–1351) and the fifth part of the twenty-scroll *Kasuga Gongen Kenki* by Takakone Takashima executed in 1309. Much later, in 1890, Tomioka Tessai (1837–1924) painting in a style reminiscent of earlier Chinese artists of the T'ang Period (618–906) produced a scroll depicting two trees in the natural style.

In the Japanese literary realm the earliest reference to *bonsai* occurs in a document dating to 1095 in which the cultivation of *bonsai* is related as an elegant activity for the samurai. Thus, only four hundred years after Buddhism was made a part of the state religion (in 685), the technique of *bonsai* cultivation received official approbation for the ruling class. In his collection of essays entitled *Tsurezure Gusa*, Kenko Yoshida criticized



Unsigned work from the Sung Period (960–1279). Pinus sp., p'en tsai on garden table. The Sung was a time characterized by a rise in commercialism and education. The Sung artists depicted the nouveau riche of their time. From The Pageant of Chinese Painting. Otsuke Kogeisha, Tokyo, 1936.

the bad taste of enjoying deformed trees and disproves that this form was preferred by those of his time. In the *Noh* drama *Hachi-no-ki* of the Muromachi Period (1334–1573) the author Zeami (1363–1443) develops a story about the fifth ruler of the Kamakura government who, wandering as a monk, is welcomed to the humble house of a discredited samurai. The latter is willing to sacrifice a cherished bonsai to warm the visitor. As a consequence the official is restored, and three flowering trees,

the apricot, cherry and pine, are established as bonsai favorites — as these were made as gifts from the ruler to the filial servant. There is also the legend of Hikozaemon Okubo, an elder statesman, in the government of the third Tokugawa Shogun, Iemitsu (1623–51), who threw down his most cherished bonsai while admonishing his ruler. In modern times post-World War II Prime Ministers have been bonsai enthusiasts following the lead of Count Okubo of the 17th century and Kujoji Itoh of the late 19th century.

Records from the Edo Period (1615–1868) testify to the vogue of potted trees, and of such a kind as to rival the tulipomania of the 17th century Europe or the pteridomania of Victorian times. According to the knowledgeable Chuzo Onuki prices for potted trees went beyond bounds: “As an example, according to a publication of this period named *Koshienyawa*, certain trees were bought and sold at exorbitant rates according to the number of buds growing on them.”

Variegated forms of plants requiring potted culture became very popular at this time and aided the focus on the use of pots for trees and shrubs.

In the late 19th century the Meiji Restoration marked the beginnings of modern Japan. The country was opened to world trade and industrialization. Urban centers were born. Also at this time the influence of the literati painters, an aesthetic movement in the arts which interpreted nature in terms of human values and which was influenced by earlier Chinese art, was being felt. Small potted trees were natural objects for the expression of the *Nanga* forms and tastes. Although this school was centered in Kyoto and Osaka, the traditional cultural capitals of Japan, by the time of the turn of the century, members of the new political and cultural class centered in Tokyo were vying with each other in garden-making and bonsai culture. (This forms a parallel with the rivalries among the *nouveau riche* of New York society at about the same time.)

The early 20th century saw the formation of bonsai promotion groups with publications, auctions and exchanges. In October, 1927, bonsai from the Imperial Household Collection were exhibited at the public ceremonies held to honor the accession of Emperor Hirohito. This symbolic act reinforced in the public's mind the beauty and desirability of bonsai just as the Emperor Meiji's encouragement of the art had fueled the fad in an earlier era.

Perhaps one of the best sources for the verification of craft or custom is the record of the early travellers. In the case of the

Orient, which was truly opened to the West only during the 19th and 20th centuries, these records are a staple of historical research.

Among those curious and delightful accounts of Japan published early in this century, the daily record kept by Marie Stopes is one to read. Her observations rendered the incongruity of upper class life in Japan as measured against that which she knew in England: "He has also a fine collection of dwarf trees, and I watched one of his gardeners pruning a mighty forest of pines three inches high, growing on a headland jutting out to sea in a porcelain dish." This and other observations of the home of Count Okuma contain a subtle humor which as we look back on the Victorian parlor clutter and love of the material, sound outrageously judgmental. We must assume that Miss Stopes found the typical English drawing room of her day as incongruous. Later during a short illness, while describing the simple beauty of her room appointments, Miss Stopes mentions "a little bent and twisted tree" which grew in "a flat earthenware bowl."

When one thinks of travellers in the modern sense, Robert Fortune of the mid-1800's serves as a model. He travelled far and seemed to miss nothing along the way. But this detailing which in other men might be cause for skepticism has been largely verified by later visitors. Fortune's observations are most important since he was looking for plants to send back to England, and searched out nurseries and gardens. Cultivation of *Acorus* was observed using porcelain pots, and which with the addition of rocks containing mineral crystals formed an imitative landscape (the modern term in Japanese is *senkei*). Fortune characterizes the garden containing these as having "a novel and striking effect." This early phrase contains much of the essence of bonsai. He goes on: "In Japan, as in China, dwarf plants are greatly esteemed; and the art of dwarfing has been brought to a high state of perfection."

In the fall of 1843, Fortune visited Ning-po, continuing his voyage up the eastern coast. In visits to gardens of some of the Mandarins in this city he noted dwarf trees. Among these were also trees formed to resemble animals — a form of oriental topiary. The presence of bonsai in China at this time may be explained as indigenous. Trading from the east coast to Japan had been common for a thousand years, which may be another way in which dwarfing of trees became common in geographical regions of both countries. Fortune also observed culture techniques for dwarf trees and commented on the species used by

the Chinese. Fortune's acute observations on technique, long overlooked in the West, could be a succinct *vade mecum* for any fancier.

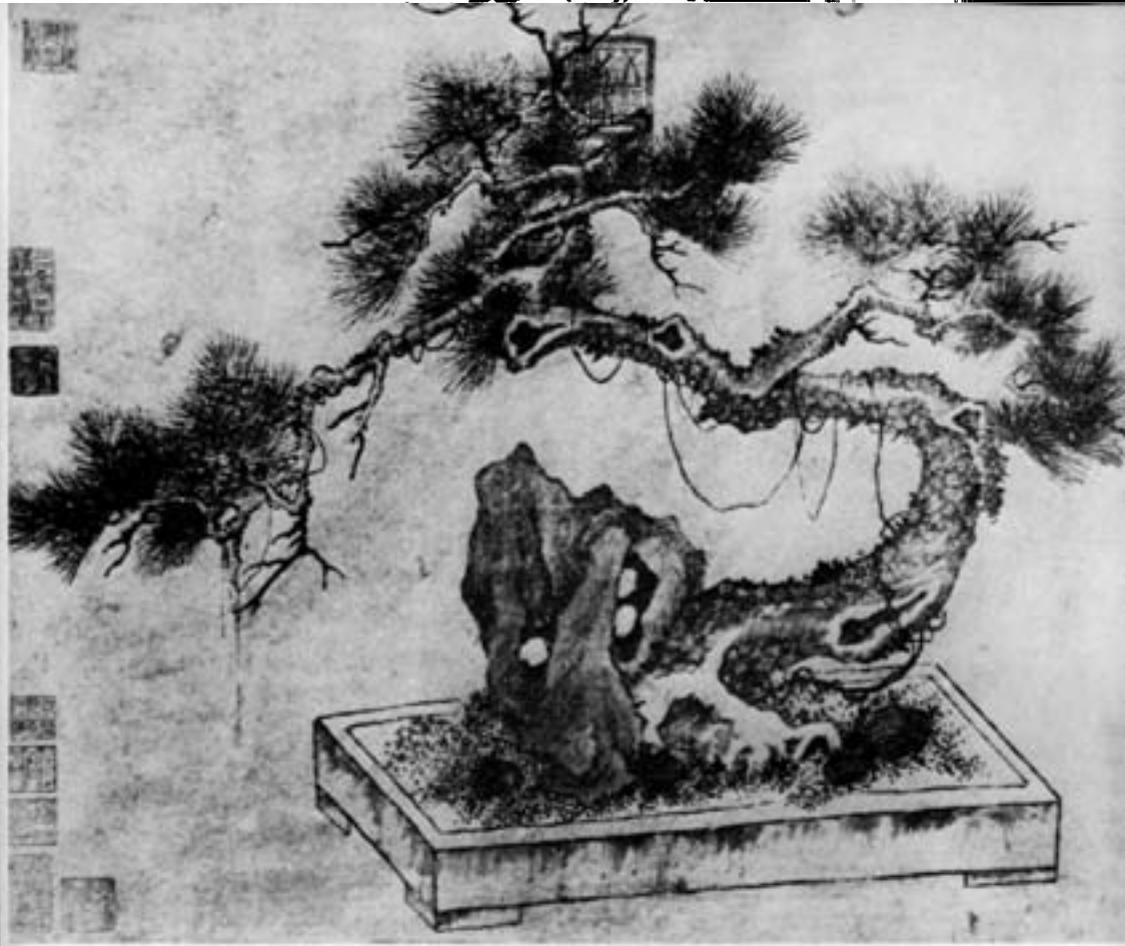
In the introduction to the narrative of the U.S. Expedition to Japan, Francis Hawks mentions the wonderful dwarfing skills of the Japanese: ". . . may be seen, in the miniature gardens of the towns, perfectly mature trees, of various kinds, not more than three feet high, and with heads about three feet in diameter. These dwarfed trees are often placed in flower pots. Fischer says that he saw in a box four inches long, one and a half wide, and six in height, a bamboo, a fir, and a plum tree, all thriving, and the latter in full bloom."

In the West little notice of bonsai was taken until the London Exhibition of 1909 when an exporter, Mr. Sato, brought a display collection from Japan. Later he held private showings in New York. This entrepreneurial activity may have been spurred by plants presented as gifts to officials by the Japanese, or by individual specimens brought back by devotees of the grand tour. Previous to this in the United States Leonard and Company of Boston had a four-day auction of over 450 plants imported by Yamanako and Company. These plants were advertised as "3 year acclimated" and were sold in antique Chinese and Japanese containers. In 1911 the Ernest Francis collection came to New York (now at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden) and in 1913 a collection of dwarf trees was exported to the United States for Ambassador Larz Anderson (later given to the Arnold Arboretum in 1937).

Many of the imported trees were doomed, since the literature available in western languages was sparse until the postwar period. (The stringent Federal Horticultural Board Embargo earlier in the century had dampened the enthusiasm for plant importation.) Short general articles appeared in the *Gardeners' Chronicle of America* in 1922, in the *Journal Horticole et de Viticulture de Suisse* in 1909 and in the *Tribune Horticole* in 1932. A perceptive article on the Larz Anderson Collection written by Elinor Guthrie appeared in the June 1937 issue of *House Beautiful*.

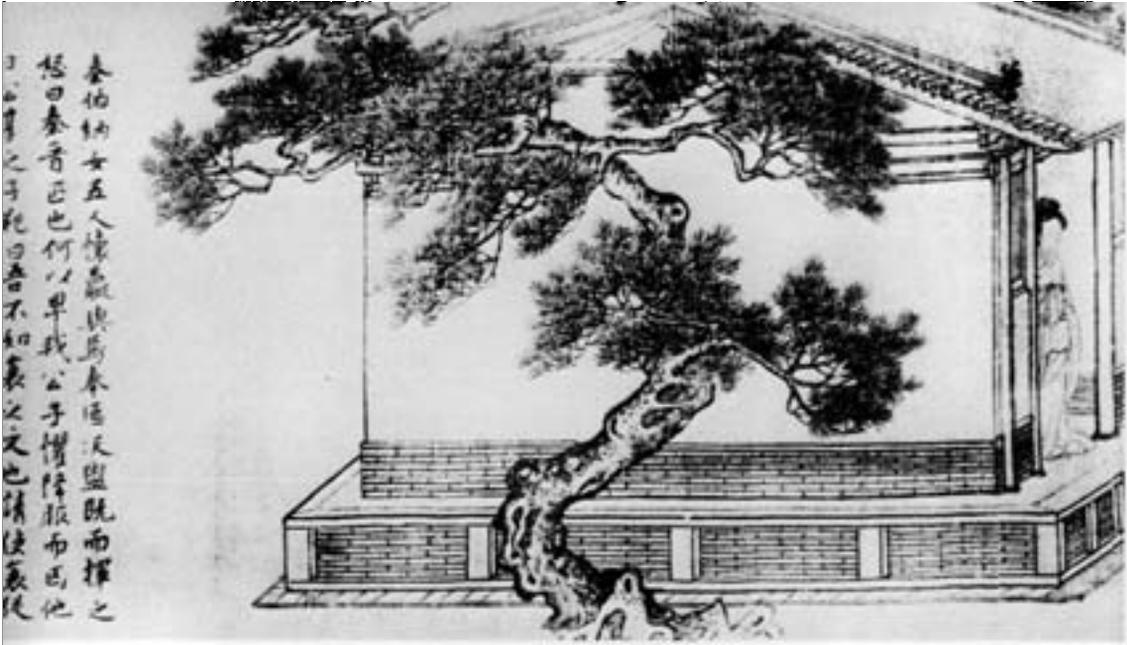
Information on techniques of growing were not readily available to the West until the mid-1950's and later. The charge of some popular writers that the techniques of dwarfing "have been clothed in secrecy by the orientals" is unfair. The lack of competent translated works was the real brake on popular acceptance by the gardening public.

But to turn to the third geographical area of interest in the



"The Drooping Pine" by Li Shih Hsin (Yüan Dynasty 1280-1368). From the collection of Mr. S. M. Siu of Hong Kong, in "Chinese Ancient Paintings Collected by S. M. Siu."

history of bonsai, we come to China. Bonsai are closely associated with Japan in the American mind. Many Japanese authors trace the word itself to growers in Azakusa Park in the mid-19th century of Japan. However we call them, bonsai or p'en tsai, it has become clear that the growing of small trees in pots has a long history in Japan and China. Further, it seems that the recent history of Japan and its close contacts with the United States has strongly influenced writers of popular works whose access to information on Chinese customs has been more limited.



Old tree, by an artist named Li Tang, the Southern Sung Dynasty (12th–13th century). From *The Pageant of Chinese Painting*, Otsuke Kogeisha, Tokyo, 1936.

The best evidence of Chinese antecedents for bonsai comes from scrolls and screens preserved to this day. For example from the Sung Period (960–1279) we have an unsigned work with figures seated about a table and a bonsai (*Pinus* sp.) in the lower left foreground [see *The Pageant of Chinese Painting*]. Other paintings from the Sung Period include *Lady at a Dressing Table* and *Children Playing with Tops on a Garden Terrace* by Su Hon-ch'en active about 1124–1162 AD.

From the Ming Period (1368–1644) there is an anonymous work which includes a bonsai as an interior feature of a household [see *Masterpieces of Sung, Yüan, Ming and Ch'ing Painting*]. A work by Ch'on Ying depicts large artfully trained trees in porcelain tubs flanking a stair (a work executed in Japan), and those of another work by the same artist show a tree kept small but with roots in the ground. Those in the small tubs are certainly bonsai in the modern sense.

The Ming paintings *Stories of Ladies* executed by Chin Ying are delightful vignettes of court life. Two of these depict bonsai which modern fanciers would be proud to own. The first shows a terrace scene where a lady is busying herself at a long lacquer table in front of a large screen; on the terrace and used by the artist as a focal counterpoint is an unmistakable bonsai. An-

other scene shows a garden with mother, maids and children; on a table are three bonsai in the modern sense along with a bowl of potted bulbs.

Another Ming work by Tu Ling Nei-shih describes a terrace scene with a bonsai as a table ornament.

One of the best depictions of a bonsai of any age is that executed by Li Shih Hsin of the Yüan Dynasty (1280–1368). Called the *Drooping Pine* it is now in the collection of Mr. S. M. Siu of Hong Kong. Mr. Siu, a distinguished collector of art, has given permission to reproduce the photo of his treasure.

In the Ching Period (1644–1911) the artist Erh-Ch'i depicts a truly modern bonsai planted in a tray with rocks.

Due to the turbulence of Chinese political life in the late 19th century and after the death of the Empress T'zu-Hsi, evidence of bonsai as a Chinese garden art is sparse in western sources. However, Fortune's observations combined with much later observers gives us confidence that bonsai continued as a part of Chinese culture into modern times. Dr. F. A. McClure, noted botanist and teacher in China, reported on *A National Art Club Exhibit of Chinese Table Plants and Paintings* in 1930. Among those exhibited were species of *Casuarina*, *Paeonia*, *Juniper* and *Buxus*: "dwarfed in what is known in the West as the Japanese style." In the notice of an exhibition he refers to these "dwarfed plants and miniature landscapes" or "this peculiar form of Chinese art." Modern Chinese bonsai fanciers such as Mr. Wu Yee-sun of Hong Kong continue this time-honored art whose continued existence on the mainland is problematical.

There have been many reasons advanced to account for the popularity of small, trained, potted trees. The earliest records of potted trees are found in references to the ruling classes of China and Japan. At the courts in early cities, in temples and monasteries, men confined in restricted space needed reminders of nature. The trees may have carried religious sentiment but later became popular as ornamental objects. As cities became larger the need was even more pressing among those who could afford the art, especially in the river and coastal cities where rapid growth and agricultural needs denuded the natural vegetation. The merchant class emulated the hobbies of the ruling families. In modern times with mega-urbanization the cultivation of dwarf trees has been espoused by individuals from every social level, and, in many parts of the world.

The origins of bonsai may very well be traced to the T'ang Period of China. Verification in works of art go back to the Sung Period but it must be remembered it was only at that time



that artists depicted the courts, homes and gardens as a common theme. The custom, among many others, was adopted in Japan possibly as early as the Fujiwara Period (794–1192). The art has been in continual practice in both China and Japan for over 1,000 years and in Japan it is considered as an art on the same level as painting and sculpture. In the West the custom has become widespread only within recent memory.

It is difficult to define the appeal of these demanding tree forms. Perhaps the one common denominator which explains the lure of bonsai is their expressiveness of freedom. As man sees himself crowded by burgeoning populations and a rapidly narrowing ratio of square footage per person, the bonsai becomes symbolic, as it did in another context for the Buddhists, of a long-abandoned, far distant better time when man was a natural phenomenon in and not above nature.

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