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Deadwood, Jins and Sharis

In bonsai speak jin is not something that is added to tonic to make it taste better, and a shari is not a traditional Indian item of apparel. They are both terms given to areas of deadwood found on many bonsai. A Jin is a section of exposed deadwood found at the end of a branch on a tree, bonsai or full-sized. A Shari is a section of trunk that has been stripped vertically exposing the heartwood of the tree down to the soil and roots.

Jins and sharis are found on old trees that have withstood many decades of survival in very harsh conditions, windswept trees on a bare and exposed coastline or trees from a mountainous environment where years of icy winters have burnt the branch ends.

As bonsai artists we try and imitate these effects using our artistic abilities to enhance the perceived age of our trees. We are essentially telling a story with our tree, leaving some clues for the viewer but at the same time creating an artwork that employs all the aspects of a well considered design. In simple language, jins and sharis are ornaments and must be used conservatively. Rather have one jin than ten. (I am desperately trying not to throw in the obvious pun about working on one? s trees whilst under the influence of alcohol at this point:) Not all tree species are suited to deadwood techniques. Many of our indigenous trees have wood that is simply too soft to jin. A jin on a softwood tree like a ficus or commiphora would rot within six months here in Durban. Sealing exposed wood with Flowers of Sulphur (a yellow powder available from most surviving pharmacies) helps prolong the deterioration of jinned wood but eventually the jinned areas will need to be reworked. A bonsai is an ever-changing natural sculpture and requires constant attention.

Junipers are probably the best species for driftwood techniques. Once the bark has been stripped the exposed wood is has a white almost luminous quality that contrasts starkly against the dark bark and green leaf pads. The areas that have bark can then be brushed with a wire brush. This will stimulate new growth. The final step would then be to lightly brush olive oil onto the bark. The olive oil works like furniture polish and the juniper? s deep maroon bark will offset the white jin or shari. A true masterpiece.

To create a jin or a shari one needs to strip off the bark to expose the wood beneath. Tools for the job vary according to the size of the material one is working with, and the amount of wood one intends to remove. Pen knives, chisels and pliers are generally sufficient for most of us but I have seen power tools, drills and routers used on large trees. The wood of the wild olive is so hard that power tools are almost a necessity, and it is great fun to carve away at a big lump of deadwood with a Dremel tool. The most important point is that the removal of branches and bark can be quite a brutal process and one needs to carry out the procedure with as little additional damage to the tree as possible.

Artists who work a lot with big trees have found that electric power tools rapidly burn out. They recommend pneumatic tools. Another advantage with pneumatic tools is that if the cutting bit jams the tools immediately stops whereas an electric tool keeps on trying to turn and does additional damage.

Avoid uncontrolled bark stripping by cutting a boundary line where your bark ends with the knife. Then simply peel the bark off. Remember, there are no prizes for speed.

What one does now with the exposed end will depend on the design or the story to be told. A tree on an exposed coastline will have had its deadwood sandblasted by many years of wind so the ends of the branches will be smooth and rounded. It may also have a shari on the side facing the wind. The shari on this tree would definitely be very smooth lower down where the sandblasting would be the most extreme. The living bark will be in the most sheltered area away from the wind. One would not use moss in a scene like this, but a small clump of miniature grass would increase the sense of desolation.

A tree that has been struck by lightning will have a jin that has sharp splinters echoing the drama and sheer power of nature. Snow may build up on a branch eventually causing it to break peeling off a section of bark. One may also use a sharp jin in this instance.

Jins that are old are seldom white in colour, they will become discoloured over time. One can use a variety of techniques to discolour newly exposed deadwood. Rubbing some soil onto the wood is often enough, but using a cigarette lighter to char the ends of a jin on a lightning strike would be a good touch.

Driftwood is a term that is used for trees that have more than two thirds of the wood exposed. It is not a bonsai style in itself but it can be used for many of the established styles. Foliage is kept to a minimum, the one or two small leaf pads being feed by a single vein that winds a contorted path up and around the masses of deadwood. The results are magnificent but the technique should not be attempted by a novice. It is too easy to cut in the wrong place and the only thing you will create is firewood.