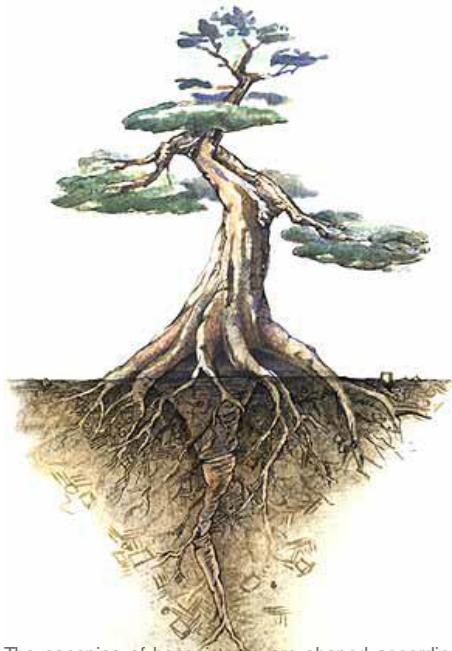


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The Essence of Style



A bonsai is not an exact replica of a full sized tree, it should symbolise it in a simplified way. A tree in nature may have fifteen or twenty main branches, but the bonsai may only have five or six. A tree in nature will seldom be perfect according to bonsai standards, but we, as bonsai artists, are compelled to attempt to improve on nature herself.

So, what are the basics of styling a bonsai?

In bonsai we apply man's ideas of proportion, design and balance to a living plant much in the same way as Leonardo da Vinci did to his paintings. General rules of proportion and branch placement, pot shape and size, and virtually every aspect of bonsai have been developed over centuries, and we use these rules and formulas as guidelines to improve our own artwork. Trees themselves don't know about these rules of proportion, and tend to grow haphazardly, putting out branches in unwanted places etc. We can break the rules but the trees that adhere closest to the rules are the ones that eventually become masterpieces, the rest will always remain trees in pots.

The canopies of bonsai trees are shaped according to a scalene triangle, i.e. No sides are of equal length, the apex representing Heaven, the middle point, Man and the lowest, Earth. An ideal height for a bonsai is between 6 and 8 times the width of the trunk base.

Bonsai trees have an ideal viewing front based on branch and root placement and angle of trunk. The top of the tree should lean toward the viewer to increase the illusion of a tall tree.

As in all design, working in thirds is always a good start. The illustration shows the proportions of an informal upright, but these proportions can be applied to almost any style.

The first third is bare of foliage, with the first branch beginning approximately one third of the way up. The lowest branch is often the heaviest and longest, and is always placed on the left or right of the trunk, never the front or back. The second branch is at one third of the remaining two thirds of the tree, on the opposite side of the trunk. The next branch should be a back branch placed at one third of the remaining distance to the top of the tree. This ratio is repeated almost to the apex, the spacing between branches becoming smaller the higher up the tree that they are. It is only at the apex that this rule does not apply. In the upper two thirds of the tree branches facing directly forward are permissible but should be short and unobtrusive, They can be used to cover ugly scars but must not spoil the view of the trunk.

The branches of a well-developed tree should imitate a spiral staircase, and if viewed from above they should be evenly spaced. There are many other rules regarding correct and incorrect branch formation and placement, but we will cover these in more detail in later issues.

A branch will divide up into smaller branches the further it gets away from the trunk until it ends in fine twigs, delicate branches and leaves. This is called ramification. It can take years to develop good ramification, and it is achieved by repeated pruning.

The lower branches of older trees bend toward the ground because of many years under the weight of leaves, snow etc. The upper branches are younger and look toward the sky in search of light. The lower branches of a bonsai are bent downward to imitate this, giving an impression of age. There are a variety of ways to achieve this but wiring is probably the most common. Wire is wrapped around a branch and then bent into position, see the illustration. The wire holds the shape while the plant grows into the new design. After a few months depending on the species the wire is removed, the branch holding the new position. More detail on wiring in a later issue.

To increase the illusion of a large tree in miniature, the foliage is trained by pruning and bending into pads which in most bonsai are flat horizontal planes situated toward the end of the smaller branches. The styling will differ from species to species of course, and one golden rule is to never attempt to style a tree in a style which one would never find in nature.

The styling of a tree is refined over many years. One may begin with a plant from a nursery that has bushy growth, with way too many branches some in the correct places and others in less desirable positions. The majority of the branches will be removed, and the remaining branches judiciously pruned back to stimulate new growth, and wired if necessary. This is where you must bring out your artistic side to decide what goes and what remains. Remember not to take the issue of rules too seriously, quite often your tree will not conform to many of the rules but may still bring you many hours of satisfaction. Your inspiration can come from many places, bonsai books, other artists' trees and the trees in the wild.

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