

A Western Philosophical Approach to Bonsai

By Paul Rathjen



***“Do not follow in the master’s footsteps,
but follow the light that guides him”***

Bonsai, as I see it, is a piece of living art that takes its inspiration from nature. I think many bonsai instructors have placed too much emphasis on following the “rules” that seem to be dictated by the traditional Japanese bonsai instructors. If you study photos of the annual exhibit of the Nippon Bonsai Association, only about 10% of the best bonsai selected exemplify those rules that we are so zealously taught. Evidently, most Japanese are guided by the light, while we are still following the rules!

Of course, there is an enormous amount of technical knowledge we can learn from the hundreds of years of study and development that have taken place in Japan. But we should not confine our creativity to the imitation of their work. For example, there is a strong oriental appearance in Japanese bonsai because their design is likely a reflection of the beautiful trees found growing in their landscapes, or stylized in their paintings. By the same token, there are thousands of magnificent old trees in this country that can and should serve as a source of inspiration to develop an American style of bonsai. It is not necessary to copy from the Orient when we have so much of learn from our native plant material.

In all the classroom training I have had, and in nearly all the workshops and discussions with the “masters”, there was always emphasized the importance of branch arrangement. The placement of the ‘First’ branch dictated the branch structure of the entire rest of the tree, and all branch arrangement must follow the rules. But, looking at hundreds of photographs of bonsai masterpieces, I discovered that most of the trees seemed not to follow the rules at all. I began to believe that we had been giving way too much importance to branch placement. If we agree that one of the main goals of a good bonsai is to give the impression of age, then we should look at the elements usually associated with age. These seem to be a large diameter trunk with good taper, heavy exposed roots, and the overall shape or silhouette associated with an old, full tree. In other words, silhouette rather than branch arrangement should guide the design of bonsai.

If we view bonsai as an art form, then balance and proportion should be our guidelines. Art is generated by inspiration, not rules. And remember that art is a form of self expression, so your bonsai should be your own interpretation of nature, not a conglomerate of someone else’s rules.