

**Penjing and Bonsai, and Giacometti**  
**by Janet Selby**

What message do I want to convey? That art is a way of seeing, brought out by keen awareness, and study of the essence of nature. This keen awareness, I practice with zazen. Others cultivate awareness through other means. Art of bonsai brings together for me my love of nature, living in a small unit with no personal garden space, and my Zen practice of cultivating awareness. I want to outline the background to Bonsai coming from Chinese Art of Penjing, and show the roots of aesthetic principles inherent in all art and philosophy.

When we sit here in Annandale with zafutons and altar with Tibetan sculpture, chanting Sino-Japanese and Sanskrit, do you ever wonder about its journey to our scattered trees, aeroplanes, crunching gears and garbage trucks? As in any historic journey, each culture takes on aspects of the new environment and cultural nuances that make it more relevant to our daily lives. So with Zen Buddhism as with Bonsai.

In Australia it was considered an oddity, and described as miniature trees, until 1968 Ryde Horticultural School (I have the original notes from Aunty Doris) began lessons. Australia has a wide range of horticultural environments, whose seasons differ more than in predictable Japanese climate, where the cherry blossoms bloom at a specific date. Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne Bonsai Clubs all specialise in different trees depending on the local environment. There is an undercurrent of acceptability for Australian Native Bonsais. Banksia, melaleuca, callistemon, figs, and even eucalypts have been used as stock, with a unique rugged Australian flavour, which differs from the Junipers' and pines' ruggedness in Japanese and Chinese lands.

Being a ceramic artist, I noticed that the trend has not taken such a curve in the containers. Pat Kennedy and Roger Hnatiuk make pots relating to Australian conditions. Japanese pots look odd, not natural. I know of a lovely contorted Casuarina placed in a shiny blue pot, which refers to more feminine qualities. I began to research ceramic bonsai containers. This is what I do: I make a pot with a shape or texture based on my experience of the landscape and environment that the natives survive in, and take it to my club for feedback. They let me know its suitability and technical adjustments, and I have been refining the surfaces and shapes, up until the present. I have a long way to go.

I showed my little windswept juniper to the bonsai workshop one Sunday morning, and they commented that it looked like a PENJING rather than a bonsai. I had never heard of PENJING. They said it had a natural, unrefined quality, rather than strictly adhering to the traditional Japanese rules of bonsai. (They meant it as a compliment.)

That's Beginner's Mind at work!

Research brought me to Penjing expert, Karin Albert, whose words of spirituality and beauty gave me heart and inspiration, and some reassurance as to why I had chosen such a hobby nearly two years ago. She spent 5 years living in China learning the language, customs and art of Penjing from masters, and is helping to bring forth the beauty existing there, to the west.

## Penjing definition and history

盆栽

Bonsai.

盆景

Penjing.

Penjing and Bonsai are closely related art forms. Penjing is the older form from which Bonsai is derived. They are similar, but as can be seen in the characters: Bonsai means *tree in a pot*, which makes it more narrow a concept than Penjing, which translates as *landscape in a pot*. Many of the elaborate tray sceneries created by Chinese artists clearly defy the parameters of bonsai. They use water, rocks, and even little clay figurines to express their sentiment.

Penjing as an art form spans over a thousand years. There are records from Tang Dynasty (618-907), and paintings from Song Dynasty (960-1279) depicting scenes with miniature landscapes that would be prized among collectors today. It was during this artistic time that Penjing artists drew inspiration not only from nature but also from other art forms –

poetry and painting. More of that later.

By the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) the art had become very popular and the first manuals appeared. This influx of popularity created more commercial, gimmicky styles imitating dragons or certain lucky characters. The aesthetically sophisticated art was still there, though, until wars and revolutions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century meant large old collections, along with the masters, were all but lost. Only in the last twenty years or so have conditions in China allowed a renaissance to begin, and extend throughout the world through publications, books and demonstrations by current masters.

## Penjing as wordless poems

In poetry, words are carefully selected for meaning sound and associations. In Penjing, the artist carefully perceives a landscape's original features, but he does not reproduce them in every detail. Instead, he chooses those elements which best convey the essence of the scenery.

Also, in Chinese tradition, the artist adds lines of classical poetry to the garden. So when a Penjing is displayed, they choose words as a title, which will enhance the work by its name. Naming a work of art is equivalent of "*bringing the painted dragon to life by putting in the pupils of its eyes*". Traditionally in China, names or poems were bestowed on the display to evoke a certain sentiment expressed.

### *Penjing Poem by Ding Henian, in Yuan Dynasty (1279 – 1368)*

*The small container fills with water is placed in front of the winding balustrade.*

*The old Zen master, placid, relishes the creation of forests and springs.*

*The energy held by two cupped hands swallows the Bohai Sea.*

*The momentum of a fist-sized rock quells the Himalayan Mountains.*

*Apparently mist and clouds are generated by this tiny space.*

*Certainly Sun and Moon are in the sky framed by this pot.*

*Do not utter amazement at this absence of aspiration.*

*A single hair can represent the universe.*

## **Aesthetic Principals**

I'll outline some principles that are inherent in Penjing and Bonsai. I find that in studying these points, it makes sense in all aspects of our lives, not only to the art that we perceive and create, but also to each breath and encounter. See what you can relate to, with these points:

*from Karin Albert (translator), Penjing: Worlds of Wonderment book and web site:*

<[www.venuscomm.com/Penjingdef.html](http://www.venuscomm.com/Penjingdef.html)>

**1. Learning from nature increases open-mindedness**, produces relaxed accepting attitude, not to imitate nature, but capture its essence. Implicitness and suggestiveness evokes associations, which cannot be seen in reproductions of nature.

### **2. Opposites:**

**Distinguish major and minor.** Highlight the prominent feature but harmonically include minor components.

**Dense and sparse.** A balance between the two, as in music, a rhythmic change. It is in the placement of some trees closer together – dense, and others further apart – sparse, which shows the experience of an entire forest.

**Refinement and roughness.** Blending, Needs both. If rough only, it would not be interesting. If it consisted of minute detail – refinement – it lacks strength and spirit. A balance is needed.

**Firm and soft co-exist.** Strong masculine or soft feminine trunks straight and square or curved and feminine.

**3. Mutual arising of solid and void** - emptiness and presence. It is said that 30% emptiness creates liveliness. Qi is created in the void, and complemented in the solid.

**4. Interconnectedness - Eying and echoing.** What really matters is the way everything blends together into one harmonious, united landscape. No one part exists in isolation, by itself. A sense of inter-relatedness is known as “*gupan*” or looking at one another. Each design element appears to eye all the other parts and perceive its relationship to them. How to do this? Direction of trunks contour texture, colour, slope, are all echoed in each other.

**5. Balance and Harmony - light and heavy.** A balance through asymmetry, gives visual weight. A stone is heavier than a tree, a near object is heavier than a far object. This produces equilibrium in profound harmony.

As bonsai artists we study a tree's essence, habitat, whole environment, then study the aesthetics of beauty that would suit. There comes a time when intuition tells us when a tree looks 'right'. The rules are written and followed for generations.

Yet, if a tree looks odd or has not followed the guidelines, yet it can be acceptable if it has its own character. Australian 'style' of Bonsai is yet to be written about effectively, although there is a website of Native Bonsai enthusiasts -

([www.farrer.riv.csu.edu.au/ASGAP/bonsai.html](http://www.farrer.riv.csu.edu.au/ASGAP/bonsai.html))

There is a difference between Australian Natives and other cultivated species. The art of cultivation and horticulture has been going on for a very long time outside Australia. Our natives have had a long time existing on this continent without interference. This is its character, and is sometimes difficult to work with. They can be unreliable, and being untamed, don't take to being wired or pruned. But, not all species respond in this fickle way. If we study the wind-blown coasts with their dwarf melaleucas, we may learn from this environment that the coastal ti-tree is very tough, or that the Port Jackson Fig can be a very fast grower with the right moisture and humidity. (Certain Australian figs are given to beginners, as they are apparently hard to kill!) This is a peculiarly Australian direction and I would like to see a book and exhibition on Australian Style trees, landscapes and containers, shown to the world.

Also unique is its place in time – each season, each drought, each northerly dry wind, each cold snap affects the tree and condition of growth (or not). So even down to each day or morning, each moment is unique in the life of a tree. And us. This tree wouldn't be here without me. I wouldn't be here now without this tree.

That's why a bonsai is never really finished. It can be ready for display at one exhibition, but next time, it will be different. It will have grown and evolved. You don't buy stock then train it and leave it. Join a club to maintain and develop the trees. Like bring up a child, it is a 'work in progress'.

### **Literati (Bunjin) Style**

It is a tree with a tall and sinuous trunk. The foliage only grows near the summit of the tree. This styling is somewhat an exception to the rigorous rules of bonsai because it does not have specific rules. The elusive quality becomes the external form, and is actually the embodiment of a specific state of mind. Some elements which are depicted are:

- Aloofness – tall, slender trunk reveals a lonely, elite, withdrawn feeling, towering above the mundane.
- Sparseness – less is more, a few simple, clean lines.
- “ya” refined elegance – poise, loftiness of spirit, distinguished gracefulness.
- plainness – unassuming, unpretentious kind of beauty, plain, subtle, austere quality which shines from within showing inner strength.

The Japanese term "bunjin" is derived from the Chinese "wenren." which is a term that came into widespread usage during the Song dynasty (960-1278) to refer to scholars (often government officials) who engaged in literary and painterly arts. These men saw themselves as embodying a particular lofty attitude toward the arts, particularly a dedication to the "amateur ideal" and a naturalistic approach. They disdained and denounced the widespread commercialization of art (i.e., they didn't like professional painters and took exception to their overly contrived or artificial scenes). Thus, the term "wenren" came to embody an extremely cultivated (but non-commercial!) artistic sensibility that purported to "get back to nature." In a sense, the "wenren" ideal was a rejection of the profound forces of commercialization sweeping through Chinese society at that time.

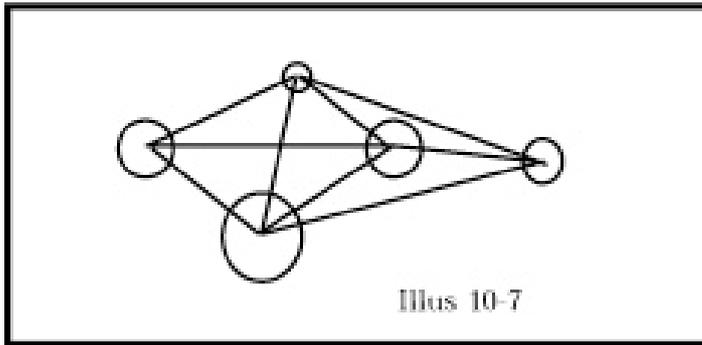
The slender trees of these "wenren" painters had an abstract, calligraphic quality that was the inspiration behind cultivating bonsai in this style. It is not meant to represent the natural world but expressionist statements, revealing the artist's temperament and sentiment in a lyrical and succinct quality.

### **Forest Style.**

The **forest**, or grove style is one of the classical bonsai styles. The forest is made up of multiple trunks planted together in a single bonsai container. The combined planting creates the image of a forest of trees.

- The forest should have trees of varying heights and thicknesses.
- Each trunk's thickness should be proportional to its height.
- The trunks are carefully arranged so that they appear to be naturally spaced, some near to one another and some far away.
  - Avoid lining up the trunks in rows and aligning in a straight line when viewed from the front and from the side.
- Planting an odd number of trees makes this effect easier to achieve.

- Branches should be arranged so that they do not congest between adjacent trees.

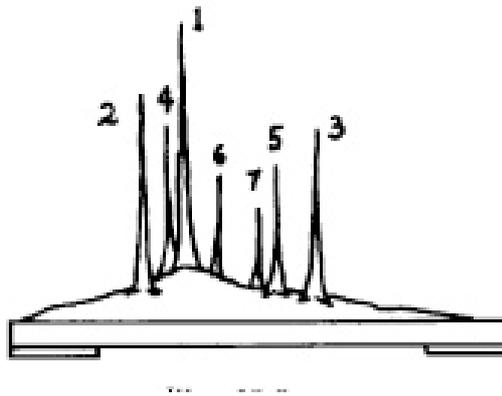


- Each branch needs to be positioned so as to receive light and ventilation.

- The tallest tree should have the thickest trunk; every other tree in the group should be shorter and have a proportionately smaller girth.

- Ideally, the taller tree is three times taller and has a girth three times greater than that of the smaller tree.

- The tallest tree should be about one-third the way in from the side of the container.



Trees grouped in a single group design should, when viewed from the front, presents a single outline in the form of a scalene triangle.

An individual standing close to the edge of a forest has a “near view” of that forest. In bonsai, the near view is created by planting the tallest and heaviest trees near the foreground for emphasis, the medium in the central area, and the smallest in the background to complete the perspective of depth and distance.

An individual far away from the edge of a forest has a distant view, with the taller, heavier trees in the central area, the smallest in the foreground and background, and the medium trees in between the others.

An individual standing close to



## Giacometti

Whilst attending the Tom Bass Sculpture Studio School, I studied in detail the works of Giacometti, currently on view in AGNSW until 26 October.

I am drawn to his work because of the spiritual search he expressed, *“I seek gropingly to grasp in the void the invisible white thread of the marvellous.”*

There is a piece by him called the Glade, or the Clearing. It is a group of figures – there are a few with groups of figures, some with five or seven figures, and my favourite with nine figures, set out on a flat rectangle. It relates directly to a forest setting in bonsai, outlined above, where the ‘rules’ are followed with each tree clearly seen from the front, etc. Yet Giacometti didn’t need to study any rules, *“I don’t create to make beautiful paintings or beautiful sculptures. Art is just a means of seeing.”*

This wonderful discovery of correlation between Sculpture and Bonsai reminded me that all art is a way of seeing, an intuition of what feels right. The masters and teachers write the books and manuals to help people how to see, as an artist.

There is a sign on wall of Tom Bass Sculpture Studio School, Erskineville. It is a quote from Constantin Brancusi: *“It is not the outward form which is real. It is the essence of a thing. On this basis it is impossible for anyone to express anything real by imitating surface appearance.”*

Also a small quote from Vincent Van Gogh: *“If one truly loves Nature he will find beauty everywhere.”*

I have asked myself how to bring relevance of this Asian art to my own practice and quote Karin Albert from a magazine article, where she has been asked for advice from enthusiasts.

*“I’ve been approached by quite a few western bonsai and penjing enthusiasts who ask for advice on how to go beyond mere copying of Asian artists to something more deeply satisfying. They want their work to capture their own personality, their unique perception of the world around them, their own sensibilities, spirituality and understanding of nature. These are great questions with no easy answers though I think the ancient practitioners pondered these very same questions. Revisiting their world with honest curiosity and open-mindedness may reveal important guidelines and establish some signposts that can help lead us onto our own paths.”*

A Bonsai artist looks for the character that lies in a tree that comes from the hardships of its environment, and shapes that response into beauty. She employs careful sight exploring the potential in its growth, the buds, the branches, the bark, seeing where the growth will be, imagining what the tree will look like in ten years time, or more, after the artist has died.

It’s like this in life – careful and thoughtful selecting, adjusting and arranging of small things now, that will have lasting effects over time.

Just make sure the buds will form, and wait patiently for the seasons to change.

## References

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