

KEMPINSKI KORNER - BONSAI AS ART
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Five Ways to Design a Tree

Five artistic approaches to shaping living bonsai material

People often describe bonsai as nature in miniature. I find that explanation incomplete. No bonsai develops naturally. Every bonsai reflects human intention. We cut roots, remove branches, shorten trunks, redirect growth, select buds, restrict roots to containers and spend years—or decades—guiding a plant toward an artist's image. Even a bonsai praised for looking “natural” presents an interpretation of nature. The more interesting question may not be how closely bonsai imitates nature, but what the artist chooses to emphasize. Five approaches offer dramatically different answers. Let's look at them separately.

The Refined Tree

The refined approach most familiar to Western enthusiasts familiar with Taiwanese or Japanese bonsai emphasizes a strong trunk and organized branch structure supporting a carefully refined canopy. Artists usually work within recognizable forms—formal upright, informal upright, slanting, cascade, semi-cascade, literati and others. Many derive from trees observed in nature, yet mature refined exhibition bonsai rarely resemble wild trees exactly. They present edited, idealized interpretations.



Wire positions trunks, primary branches and finer growth; repeated pruning develops dense ramification. Evergreen foliage forms controlled masses, many with flat bottom surfaces while deciduous trees reveal intricate branch networks in winter. Negative space supports the design by separating foliage masses, revealing branches and clarifying the trunk.

Containers reinforce this refinement. Antique Chinese container shapes support the form. Those imported into Japan centuries ago became especially valued, including those associated with the Kowatari, or “Old Crossing,” tradition. Western artist even replicated these standard forms.

Defined standards for taper, branch placement, apex, silhouette, pot selection and display make this approach effective to teach and have produced magnificent trees. But refinement carries a danger: technique can overwhelm individuality. At the extreme, we get what I call “helmets on sticks”—immaculately groomed foliage masses atop predictable trunks.

Naturalistic: Hiding the Artist

Naturalistic Bonsai presents an intriguing contradiction: it may look less manipulated than almost any other approach while requiring extensive manipulation to achieve that appearance. Walter Pall has become one of its most articulate advocates. His premise is simple: rather than study bonsai to learn what a bonsai should look like, study actual trees. Real trees do not necessarily grow triangular canopies. Their branches cross, compete for light, rise, die, break and form irregular masses. Mature trees develop asymmetry, bulges, scars and other features conventional instruction might call faults. Naturalistic design embraces these observations.

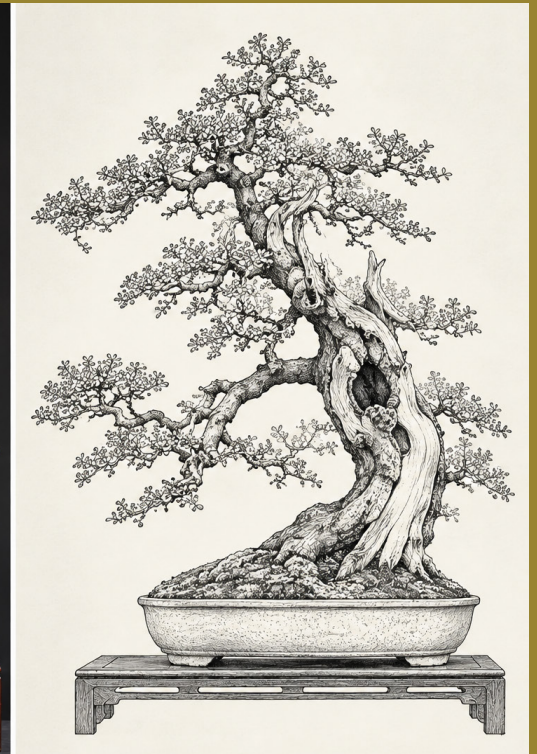
That does not mean placing an untrained tree in a pot and calling it naturalistic. The approach can

involve extensive wiring, pruning and other artificial techniques. Every important branch may have

been deliberately positioned. The artist simply tries to erase the human fingerprints.

Naturalistic Bonsai therefore makes human intention especially visible by attempting to conceal it. The artist may preserve or exaggerate irregularities, allow branches to overlap for depth, avoid clearly separated foliage pads and create several convincing viewing angles.

The goal is neither messiness nor neglect. A successful tree may require as much work as the highly refined bonsai. The difference lies in the result. Refined bonsai often invites admiration for the artist's precision; Naturalistic Bonsai tries to make us forget the artist was there. Ironically, one of the least artificial-looking bonsai approaches may require the most carefully concealed artifice.



Lingnan: Drawing With Branches

In Guangdong, the semi-tropical part of China, the emphasis changes. Lingnan (meaning south of the mountain ranges) penjing relies on fast growing tropical trees and clip-and-grow technique. A branch grows until it reaches suitable thickness, then the artist cuts it back and selects a new shoot moving in another direction. Repeated over many years, this produces taper and abrupt directional changes without relying primarily on wire.

The resulting branch becomes a sequence of lines. Its relationship with empty space is crucial. A branch moves outward, changes direction, divides and pauses visually. The eye follows it as it might follow a brushstroke.

Excessive ramification can obscure that design, so removing foliage and secondary growth may clarify rather than diminish the composition. Negative space moves from a supporting role toward a central one: the branch defines the void, and the void makes the branch readable.

Lingnan philosophy has sometimes described this as drawing from nature and then exceeding it. Nature supplies inspiration; the artist extracts and intensifies its movement rather than reproducing one particular wild tree.

Containers can participate more freely through shape, glaze and color.

Where Refined bonsai asks us to admire precision and Naturalistic Bonsai asks us to believe nature created the image, Lingnan asks us to follow the tree through space.



Cloud Pieces: Building With Foliage

Yangzhou penjing takes another path. Traditional Yangzhou artists developed elaborate training techniques using palm fiber. Historical descriptions identify eleven different fiber methods for manipulating trunks and branches and the famous principle of “one inch, three bends.” Branches and foliage could then form extremely thin, horizontally arranged cloud pads. This gives the tree an unmistakable appearance. The pads can look almost architectural—broad horizontal platforms floating one above another. So different is this approach it has its own style names not familiar to most western bonsai enthusiasts. If a tree features 1 to 3 layers of these flat pads, it is called Platform Style. If it features more than three layers, it is called Ingenious Cloud Style. They hardly pretend to reproduce the literal appearance of an ordinary tree in nature.

And that makes Yangzhou’s Cloud Pieces trees particularly interesting

The tools helped shape the art. Fiber doesn’t manipulate a branch exactly as modern metal wire does. Generations of working within those limitations encouraged artists to develop specialized bending techniques and extraordinarily controlled horizontal foliage.

The trunk still establishes the tree’s basic posture, and its construction can involve considerable manipulation. Yet visually the cloud pads frequently dominate the finished composition. Negative space follows naturally. Extremely thin foliage masses require separation. Instead of carving openings from a continuous canopy, the artist creates alternating layers of foliage and emptiness.

The result can resemble a living structural composition deeply rooted in traditional Chinese landscape painting and philosophy, where the goal is to capture the spirit of nature rather than its literal form.





Ingenious Cloud Style

Total Abstraction: When the Tree Stops Looking Like a Tree

The previous approaches retain some connection to our expectations of a tree. They also generally retain another convention: the bonsai pot or slab. Refined, Naturalistic, Lingnan and Cloud Pieces may differ dramatically in design, but the finished tree normally remains rooted in a recognizable bonsai container or planted on a slab.

Total Abstraction asks whether any of those conventions matter at all.

Here the artist can use trunk, branches, foliage, deadwood, container and nonliving materials as elements in a larger artistic statement. Even the traditional pot becomes optional. A tree might occupy a sculptural container, emerge from an unexpected object, grow without any visible container, or use a hydroponic system in which a transparent or concealed reservoir makes the roots themselves part of the composition.

Once the pot loses its traditional role, the boundary between bonsai, sculpture and installation art becomes considerably less clear. The tree becomes artistic material—and the container can become artistic material as well or disappear altogether.

In the United States, one important pioneer of this experimental direction was the late Nick Lenz. Long before contemporary bonsai artists began talking about abstraction and installation, Lenz willingly challenged assumptions about what belonged in a bonsai composition.



He experimented with unconventional containers, unusual planting surfaces and objects that traditional bonsai display would never tolerate. Plastic doll heads, ceramic Army tanks and other deliberately incongruous objects could appear among his trees or emerge from the soil. Some of these compositions approached the theater of the absurd, using humor, irony and surprise to force viewers to reconsider what they expected from bonsai.

Yet Lenz provides an interesting bridge rather than a complete departure from representational bonsai. For all his experimentation with containers, accessories and presentation, his trees generally still looked like trees. He often disrupted the world surrounding the tree rather than abandoning the recognizable tree itself.

The next step occurs when the artist begins altering not merely the pot, surface treatment or objects surrounding the tree, but the visual identity of the tree itself.

Laurent Darrieux's COSMIC bonsai offers one example. Influenced partly by his experiences in Taiwan,, especially Min Shan Lo's approach to free flowing trees, Darrieux developed trees whose trunks and branches twist, loop and reverse direction in fantastic ways.



COSMIC asks: What might a tree look like if it didn't grow on Earth?

Different gravity, radiation or weather might produce unfamiliar forms. Branches need not follow terrestrial expectations: trunks twist, branches corkscrew and visual collisions replace conventional structure. A permanent canopy or final configuration becomes less important as continuing growth creates opportunities for transformation.

COSMIC represents only one route into abstraction.

Other contemporary artists experiment with carved deadwood, metallic treatments and techniques inspired by kintsugi. Rather than disguise damage, they emphasize scars and deadwood through color and texture, turning the trunk into sculpture.

Others challenge the assumption that bonsai requires a conventional container at all. Exposed



root system and means of sustaining the tree visible parts of the artwork—or seemingly make the means of support disappear.

Installation and conceptual art push the idea further. Makoto Azuma's *Exobiotanica*, for example, sent a bonsai into the stratosphere. The tree remained recognizable, but its impossible environment transformed our perception of it.



My own experiments take abstraction in another direction: I sometimes design trees specifically so they don't look like trees. The bonsai can become figurative sculpture.

I have designed trees whose trunks and branches suggest the writhing tentacles of a Kraken. The living plant becomes a mythological sea monster. The viewer recognizes the horticultural material, but the subject lies elsewhere. Trunk and branches provide line, movement and texture as bronze or clay might for a sculptor.

I have also used trees to interpret art and

literature. My *Roger Rescuing Angelica* composition draws on the episode from Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, later depicted by numerous artists. Rather than placing figures around a conventional bonsai, the tree's form and movement participate in the narrative.

That distinction matters.

Bonsai display has long used accessories to establish associations: a scroll can suggest a season, an accent can imply a landscape and a figurine can introduce human presence.

But in those cases, the tree remains a tree and the pot remains a pot. Total Abstraction can overturn both assumptions.

The tree itself can become the monster, the figure, the movement, the emotion or the story. Its container can become sculpture—or vanish from view.

Once we accept that possibility, almost any artistic source becomes available: mythology,

Once we accept that possibility, almost any artistic source becomes available: mythology, literature, painting, music, architecture, science fiction or geometric form. The artist might exaggerate deadwood, distort proportions, introduce unexpected materials, eliminate the conventional canopy, abandon the conventional pot or create growth patterns impossible in nature.

Naturalism—and even the familiar physical presentation of bonsai—no longer supplies the measuring stick.

Human Intention

These approaches differ radically, yet every one begins with the same act: a person makes decisions for a plant. Even Naturalistic Bonsai—the approach most determined to convince us that nature created the tree—depends on deliberate manipulation.

That brings us back to the fundamental question. Perhaps we should spend less time asking: “Does this bonsai look like a tree in nature?”

And ask instead:

“What did the artist intend—and did the tree make us see it?”

That question leaves considerably more room for bonsai to function as art.

