

Journal of The Ottawa Bonsai Society

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NOTES FROM YOUR STEERING GROUP

How do you fight the winter blahs? A good number of OBS members came out to our February 21st meeting to hear and talk about tropical bonsai.

After two announcements by Yvon Bernier on the Intermediate Level Course on Forest Style bonsai scheduled for March 5th, and the Development Workshop for Beginners scheduled May 7th, we moved to the program.

Loretta MacDonald was unable to attend the meeting so Barney Shum filled in with a presentation on General Care of Indoor Bonsai. Barney covered all the general points thoroughly with special emphasis on regional considerations, such as low indoor relative humidity normally encountered in our Ottawa in winters.

He warned of “desert-like” blasts from hot air registers, typically located under windows of homes with forced-air heating systems. After pointing out that it is generally agreed that the benefits of misting last only about 20 minutes, he asked rhetorically, if we really thought our sub-tropical plants would feel they were growing in a jungle if we misted only once a day. A handout contained practical suggestions to mitigate our less-than-optimal growing conditions as well as useful tips for watering, fertilizing, repotting, design maintenance, and effective elimination of stubborn pests (“effective elimination” struck a very responsive chord). All very timely Barney, as indoor bonsai of older members are starting to respond to longer days and newer members are thinking about starting some indoor bonsai. The presentation led naturally to a short discussion on Members’ indoor bonsai and related experiences.

During the break there was a draw for three Royal Honeyball Orange seedlings that Michel Gauvreau donated. Michel told us that he started the trees three years ago from seeds that are a cross between Duncan grapefruit and Dancy tangerine. Niko, Tom, and Yvon took home the prizes. Nice touch, Michel for our tropical theme.

Barney wrapped up the evening’s program with a slides from his personal collection of show-quality trees. We tried to examine how each tree exhibited design principles, as outlined in the reprint that was distributed

from the March 2003 issue of the Journal. Taking a leaf from the practice of the late John Naka, Barney sprinkled in a few not so high quality examples, just to keep us on our toes. As you can imagine, discussion was lively and the presentation was enjoyed by all. You really have “the knack”, Barney.

Grouping of Ficus Benjamina



NOUVEAU MEMBRE / NEW MEMBER

Nous souhaitons la bienvenue à :
A warm welcome is extended to :

Joe Imbesi

Ottawa Bonsai Society
P.O. Box 4254, Station “E”
Ottawa, Ontario
K1S 5B3

Société de bonsaï d’Ottawa
B.P. 4254, succursale E
Ottawa (Ontario)
K1S 5B3

Ottawa Bonsai Society Events Calendar



NEXT MEETING

Monday March 21 at 7:00p.m.

There will a live styling demonstration on four junipers!! These four trees were the subject of design alternatives study back in the January meeting and now is the time to style them. We will compare the end result with the drawing we made back in January!!

Atelier pour débutants sur la formation d'un bonsaï, le samedi 7 mai, édifice #72, Ferme expérimentale centrale, de 9h30 à 15h30.

Cet atelier s'adresse directement à ceux et celles qui ont suivi le cours pour débutants au mois de novembre. Durant cette session, les participants recevront les conseils de membres chevronnés de la SBO et procéderont à la formation de leur propre bonsaï à partir d'un plant de genévrier San Osé. Ce plant, un pot approprié de même que le terreau et le fil pour ligaturage seront fournis. Les instructeurs mettront leurs propres outils de bonsaï à la disposition des participants qui n'auraient pas les leurs. Autant les participants que les instructeurs devraient apporter leur lunch – l'endroit dispose d'un frigo et d'un four à micro-ondes. Le coût de cet atelier est de 55 \$ par personne. Il y a une limite de 15 places !

Les membres intéressés devraient s'inscrire auprès de Yvon Bernier : (819) 684-0586 ; fax (819) 684-7365 ; ycbernier@infonet.ca

Bonsai Development Workshop, Saturday, May 7 in Building #72, Central Experimental Farm, from 9:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.

This is a workshop aimed specifically at those who have taken the Beginners' Bonsai Courses given last November. Participants will receive assistance from experienced OBS members to begin developing their own bonsai using nursery grown San Ose junipers. The plant material, a suitable pot and the necessary supplies will be provided. The team of instructors will make their own bonsai tools available for sharing among those participants who may not have their own. Participants and instructors should bring their lunch; the room is equipped with a fridge and microwave oven. The cost of this workshop is \$55 per person. There are only 15 places available!

Interested members should register with Yvon Bernier : (819) 684-0586 ; fax (819) 684-7365 ; ycbernier@infonet.ca

BONSAI design (part 2)

Special thanks to Walter Pall from the Hanford Bonsai Society for this excellent article!

Contemporary: The term "contemporary bonsai" was first used by Yuji Yoshimura. He called everything that was not included under the classical and neo-classical style since the latter half of the 19th century as contemporary. There is not just one contemporary style, but there are several, not yet defined really, but definitely existing and different. It is important to note here that the classical, neo-classical and contemporary styles coexist already since quite a while. One cannot say that one period, like the classical ended and the next, like the neo-classical or contemporary followed.

The style which is used by the most progressive artists at the moment could also be called modern style. A typical artist is Kimura. Ernie Kuo insists that Kimura is working in a classical manner, but only with modern techniques. Luis Fontanills makes it clear that Kimura himself has announced to be a contemporary artist with an avant-garde statement:

"But in the future, the bonsai art must be expressed in a new way, with a more expanded concept. We young bonsai artists must not be afraid to break with tradition, for the objectives are the same. If not, bonsai will evolve as a mere curiosity, but not an art. Because we are breaking with the tradition of many centuries, our bonsai may not even seem very attractive. Perhaps the critics do not realize that the break goes only to the form, but not the substance, since our spirit in cultivating bonsai continues to be the same: goodness, beauty and peace."

Some call Kimura the crown of classical bonsai, they say that he has created classic trees. Kimura has designed many classical bonsai in the seventies and eighties but can hardly be called a classical artist anymore. Many of his contemporary pieces are landmarks for the major part of contemporary bonsai that he has coined. These trees can be called classic (note: not classical), as they will be the leading pieces for this present period.

Luis Fontanills says:

"What attracted me most to Kimura's work ... was his most exploratory sculptural work (he also works within the classical genre). I felt a connection to his living sculpture, and did not see it as strange; then again I have grown up with modern art since I was a child. He has pushed the limits of bonsai and has created an expressionistic/abstract style that has become popular (much deadwood and movement) because it is dynamic and powerful. He is part of the avant-garde movement in bonsai. This type of expression/style is here to stay. It does not mean that the traditional/classical style will disappear, but it will be enriched by it, as the avant-garde is enriched by the past."

A good contemporary artist is seen as one who is creative and dares to break new grounds, who uses old rules only if he sees fit. The deliberate breaking of classical rules is getting widespread among many artists in Europe and also some in America, it is regarded as a matter of course. The trees are much more expressionistic or more impressionistic than they used to be, they have a tendency to become extreme according to old standards.

Contemporary does not mean one uniform style. History will tell which one of the many present trends will become a style by itself. The "Kimura Style" is best known: very powerful conifers, with enormous thick trunks compared to the height of the tree. A proportion of 1:3 (trunk width vs. height of the tree) has become normal, which used to be considered grotesque. These trees can be called "sumo bonsai" because of their forceful and somehow exaggerated appearance. The use of deadwood is dominating. Many trees seem to exist of 90 % deadwood. The forms are fantastic, unreal, although often naturally grown deadwood is used. The crowns are quite small, emphasizing the power of the trunk and the deadwood. The whole crown is stepping back in importance. It often seems to be there just to show that the tree is alive. The crown decorates the powerful trunk and the overwhelming deadwood and not the other way round. In the classical style the crown was the most important part which was held by an impressive trunk and often decorated by deadwood. The crown is often styled according to silhouette. It is not so important anymore where the branches are exactly. If there is no branch where one should be, a branch is bent down, sometimes in awkward contortions which are covered by foliage. The number one branch becomes less important. It is more important that the foliage is in the right position. The crown often is shaped like a canopy in a mushroom-like form with layers being just suggested.

When slim trunks are used they have a strong tendency towards the driftwood form. The trunk forms go to extremely contorted and twisted shapes which used to be called grotesque before.

The usage of pots is going in new directions. All sorts of "weird" pots and plantings are being tried out. Traditionally trees planted on rocks are not even classified as bonsai. Now trees planted on rocks, on rusty iron constructions (Farrand Bloch) and even on statues and skulls (Nick Lenz) are considered bonsai. The trend is going away from display in tokonoma, and new ways are being found. Salvatore Liporace displayed an enormous larch sitting on a rusty oil drum. The classical accent objects are more and more often being replaced by other things.

It is clear that the new liberal spirit opens the door to all sort of nonsense. This new freedom can be used by a genius or a fool to declare anything as bonsai art now. But it opens the door, and new creations will evolve which will pass the test of art history. It will tell us eventually whether something we have not liked at all at first sight was just a mistake or a breakthrough into a new era. Such a breakthrough can be clearly visible to everyone or just be a subtle detail. It helps a lot to not have to care about a traditionalist sensei doing his critique in a traditionalist manner afterwards. Therefore it is not by coincidence that the new creations mostly come from quarters where the Japanese influence is minimal. Some even are proud to not have had Japanese teachers and feel that they are not "corrupted" by old-fashioned design patterns. At the same time a lot of "good tries" or simply rubbish can be the result.

If one speaks of contemporary bonsai art, often examples are presented of trees, pots or exhibits which seem to be contemporary, but are quite old. This is supposed to prove that there is no such thing as contemporary bonsai. Yes, it is always possible to find a tree that was done in the contemporary style, but only much earlier. There are many examples of trees which could pass as modern avant-garde bonsai. It is usually overseen that contemporary bonsai started already at the end of the 19th century in Japan and continued to coexist with the classical style until today. Also pots can be found which are quite old and still as extreme as some are nowadays. This is very interesting, but does not change the concept.

In art there are always creative people who try something. In countries with so many bonsai practitioners like Japan or China virtually everything must have been tried before. But the test is whether this from then on became a trend or a movement. Usually this was not the case. Maybe the artist was not known well enough, maybe the piece just was not good enough anyway, or often it just was not the time yet. If a new style becomes a trend, then one must consider the very early examples as important landmarks. If a trend did not evolve from this, it is just for the records. History of art is full of such examples which do not prove at all that a new style is not new. Sometimes it may happen that a style which was started and finished in a dead end some time ago, becomes rediscovered and then really takes off.

Let's take Impressionism as an example. The term impressionism, or impressionistic painting, describes a kind of painting which is flecked and somewhat formless, as opposed to that which is linear and clearly silhouetted. It applies to many epochs. The term Impressionism, however applies to a particular late nineteenth-century style... There were already Roman wall paintings which are clearly impressionistic. This shows that styles somehow are always present, but sometimes are becoming dominant for a while. Why should this not be true for the bonsai art?

For an artist to work in a specific style means more than just a decision to do so. It means a total change of mind, of a way of thinking about bonsai and doing bonsai, turning away from traditions radically. It is understandable that those who (still?) hold up traditions have great problems accepting this and are usually fierce enemies of change. History has shown that the young revolutionaries get old and then fiercely defend their revolution against new ones.

While we all know how to judge classical bonsai most enthusiasts have a problem with evaluating more contemporary creations. It only seems that these are outside the bounds of established standards; they are only out of the bounds of established rules for classical design. As Lynn Boyd points out, there are always standards, long-lasting and universal standards to judge by – even the avant-garde. A judge can move from the list of conventions (rules) onto the very long-established area of proportions, balance, texture, relationship of objects, conceptual arrangement, as what might be termed compositional elements. And Brett Johnson adds that there are well defined rules to judge abstract sculpture dealing with geometric shapes, according to which bonsai as a form of sculpture can be judged. Even if there are no rules it is always the artist who must have some standard with which to create. He may not be able to verbalize that standard, but it is still there.

This requires much from the judges, as they must be flexible and have a broader knowledge base from which to draw. Because of this, bonsai in the category of avant-garde/contemporary should be categorized in an exhibition as such and judged as such. This is another reason why classification of traditional and avant-garde must continue to be proposed and disseminated; it allows the existence and validation of these more radical bonsai within the formal public exhibits.

Where will this all go? There is much talk about national (Western) bonsai styles which are evolving or which are even already there. The new liberal spirit leads some to believe that one should try hard to create a national style. But who needs that and why? There are cases where a certain tree species grows in a particular way in one country. This is about the only need for a national style or rather form. How about a "Liechtenstein Style"?

The truth is that while some countries are progressing at higher speed than others it is very unlikely that the result will be clearly national styles. This was true in arts at times when there was almost no communication between nations. Nowadays with travel being so easy and everyday communication in person or via pictures across national boundaries is normal, everybody learns from everybody else across the whole world. The result will be more liberty and more distinctive personal styles, especially in the West. Colin Lewis doesn't see a homogenizing of bonsai styles, but a diversification, as more creative souls take up the art.

There will be more artists who feel free to do what they think is right and they will have followers, thus creating new groups which style in a certain way all over the world. They may have more followers in some countries for a time, but this then should not be called a "national" style.

Ottawa Bonsai Society
Société de bonsaï d'Ottawa

2004/2005 Executive
Exécutif 2004/2005

Treasurer / Trésorier

Yvon Bernier
208, avenue des
Explorateurs
Gatineau, QC J9J 1M9
(819) 684-0586

Librarian / Libraire

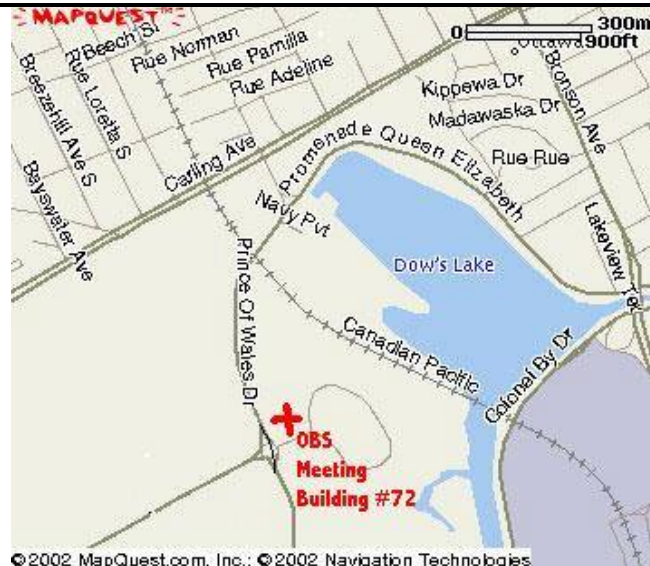
Mike O'Connor

Steering Group
Comité d'organisation

Yvon Bernier
Duart Crabtree
Vianney Leduc
Art Phelan
Barney Shum
Gordon Williams
Matt Yakabuski

Meeting Location / Lieu des rencontres

Nos rencontres se tiennent à l'édifice #72 de la Ferme expérimentale centrale. Pour vous y rendre, prenez la direction sud sur la promenade Prince of Wales jusqu'au rond-point à l'intersection National Capital Driveway et Prince of Wales (qui est aussi l'entrée principale de la Ferme expérimentale et de l'Arboretum), où vous prendrez la direction Est menant à l'Arboretum. Une courte distance plus loin, à la première fourche, Prenez la route de gauche qui mène directement à l'édifice #72 (vous verrez une affiche juste en face de l'édifice, de l'autre côté du chemin, qui dit «Friends of the Farm» .Le stationnement est situé de part et d'autre de l'édifice.



Our meetings are held at Building #72 at the Central Experimental Farm. Heading south on Prince of Wales, at the traffic circle at the intersection of the N.C.C. Scenic Drive and Prince of Wales, the major entrance to the Experimental Farm and the Arboretum, exit east into the Arboretum. After a very short distance, where the road divides, turn left to Building #72 which will be down a short distance on your left. There is parking just before or just after the building. The entrance is on the street side (east side) and there is a sign reading "Friends of the Farm".