

HISTORY

FIRST IN CHINA

The first mention of the art of bonsai goes back to the Tsin era (third century B.C.): on the tomb of Zhang Huai, the second son of the Empress Tang Wu Zetian, there is a figure of a woman carrying a bonsai in both hands. Then, during the Tang dynasty (which ruled China from 618 to 907) and the later Song dynasty (960-1276), public records refer to a man who had learned the art of creating the illusion of immensity enclosed within a small space and all this contained within a single pot.

At the same time, between the tenth and the twelfth centuries, the Buddhist monks are said to have carried the *pen-tsai* (trees taken from the natural surroundings and replanted, just as they were, in ornamental pots) throughout the Far East.

During the Song period, many Chinese artists painted pictures of trees which, through the action of the forces of nature, had been reduced to dwarf size, and had been subsequently replanted in ornamental pots. But it was only in the twelfth century, during the Southern Song dynasty, that there appeared, little by little, by virtue of much hard work and of many slight modifications, the bonsai as we know it today. At that time, this art was the exclusive preserve of the rich, for whom it provided relaxation. During the Yuan dynasty (1276-1368), an official is said to have fled the rule of the Mongols and gone to live in Japan with some *pen-tsai* together with a number of texts elucidating the art, and this is how, so the story goes, they were introduced into Japan.

Next, the Ming Dynasty (the imperial dynasty which ruled from 1368 to 1644) placed great importance on the highly ornamental pot which contained the tree, which was left untouched. The eye of the observer would inevitably find in the landscape of China those meanings which architecture had first placed there: sand would evoke water, the wellspring of life; rocks reminded the onlooker of mountains, the framework of the earth. These stood for the creative power of the soil, but as for thought, this was pure flow, just as life was flow. It was the task of trees to hint at these truths. In every plantation, there was one particular plant which embodied Wisdom. In China, as subsequently in Japan, this role was filled by bamboo.

From the Song period onwards (960-1280), artists began to represent dwarf trees which have become so through natural causes. The trees are shown growing in pots which rival each other in the splendor of their ornamentation.

During the Tsing dynasty (which held sway after the Ming), the *pen-tsai* ceases to be a pastime enjoyed only by the nobility, and now becomes accessible to everyone. At the same time, a number of *pen-tsing*, complete landscapes of dwarf trees, were also planted in China.

NEXT IN JAPAN

From our twelfth century onwards and up to the middle of the fourteenth century (the period of Kamakura), the first references to bonsai begin to appear in Japan. There is, for example, the famous scroll of the Buddhist monk, Honen, which is decorated with bonsai and which dates roughly from the twelfth century. Later, Seami (1363-1444) created a drama based on the story of the Regents of Kamakura.

The period of Edo (1615-1867) coincided with a growth in interest in highly wrought, colorful trees grown on trays. The *bonkei* were whole landscapes on trays and bonsai trees grown in pots. In the former, one found the essential elements of nature (water, mountain, sand, vegetation). In the latter, the foreground was occupied by 'Being', that is to say, the world of creatures. The well-to-do classes in Japan gradually formed an attachment to bonsai. The trees which they succeeded in growing took pride of place in their homes. From that point onwards, the cultivation of bonsai was a hobby which spread slowly through the various social strata, the last to adopt the hobby being the common people, and that after a century or more had passed. But today the cultivation of bonsai is practiced throughout the whole of Japan.

AND ALSO IN EUROPE

Bonsai appeared in Europe in the fourteenth century, introduced by travelers who were discovering the East and had made eastern art fashionable. Booklets, with a certain amount of unconscious humor, dealt with the art of bonsai in a rather naive way, but not without poetry. They bore titles such as : 'Japanese Curios', 'Essays on Japanese Horticulture', 'Japanese Gardens'.

And then this art became forgotten. During the eighteenth century, it had been popularized to a certain extent by sailors coming back from the colonies with plants ordered by collectors, apothecaries or gardeners. It was a short while and did not last long; a momentary whim of the pampered rich!

In the nineteenth century, bonsai was rediscovered. Serious essays appeared on the means employed by the Japanese to obtain dwarf trees. Both in France and in England there developed an interest in this art so new for Westerners. Hypotheses were formulated, which proved to be sound. In 1889, J.Vallot wrote an article published in the *Bulletin de la Societe de Botanique de France* on the physiological causes which bring about the stunting of trees in the Japanese cultivation of plants.

Paul Claudel, during his period as French Ambassador in Japan, was surprised, overwhelmed, and absorbed when confronted by a forest of maples wrought into the form of bonsai. He contemplated these trees with their deciduous leaves and explained that he could not help imagining himself in one of these maple woods, and, in imagination, could hear the chirping of the birds on the branches.

Between the two world wars, the Parisian florist, Andre' Baumann, brought a number of bonsai to Paris to satisfy the demand of those people attracted by far-eastern culture. Japan was once again in fashion but that was short lived.

Today, the countries of Europe are acquainted with all forms of bonsai. Associations or clubs have been set up where amateur gardeners can meet to talk to one another about their bonsai or swap recipes. The United States also has its own amateurs and specialists in the art of bonsai. Each of them is busy trying to transform the species of his own country in bonsai.

WHAT TO STRIVE FOR IN DEVELOPING GOOD BONSAI

1. The tree should have a strong, well-shaped trunk, tapering upwards, springing naturally from the soil.
2. The tree should have a good fanning-out of surface roots from the base of the trunk, gradually disappearing into the soil.
3. The tree should have a good, well-proportioned head of branches which are well-spaced and set naturally on the trunk.
4. The tree should be as natural looking as possible in its surroundings.
5. The pot itself must be in proportion to the tree, to form an artistic unity.
6. The tree should be placed in the pot so as to create a visual balance. For example, if the base of the trunk is towards the right-hand edge, the main weight of the head should incline leftwards.
7. Flowers or fruit, on varieties which are grown to produce these, must be as near as possible in proportion. For example, a full-sized apple would look absurd on a tree one or two feet high.
8. A tree growing with its roots clasping a rock must really adhere and not merely be wrapped loosely round the rock.
9. A tree should be planted well-raised up in its pot, so that the bole can be clearly seen, if viewed at eye level, over the rim of the pot.
10. Stones and moss or other covering of the surface of the soil must look natural and well established.

This article was written by Tom Mounce of the Bonsai Society of Greater Cincinnati. It is used to aid beginner bonsai enthusiasts in the goal of achieving better bonsai.