

Bonsai & the Found Object

by Fred Truck

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Generally, as the art of bonsai is practiced in the U.S., Americans have tended to import Japanese methods and display techniques lock, stock and barrel in much the same way Americans imported traditional European art forms, such as theater, the fine arts and music and literature. In the case of bonsai, because of cultural differences between Asia and the West, the act of importing the art has acquired a rebellious attitude, rejecting Western art traditions, particularly those of contemporary art.

At the same time, people doing bonsai have begun calling themselves bonsai artists, apparently desiring to be a part of the same tradition that produced Leonardo and Van Gogh. Although Asia has produced many fine artists, the term “artist” is not native to Asian culture but is of Western origin. As it is done in Japan today, bonsai is a business.

Can contemporary Western critical thinking play any part in an Asian tradition that is, by some people’s reckoning, 3000 years old? If you are living in the West there is no way contemporary art criticism can be avoided. It is pervasive. If you are living in Asia and are aware of Western traditions, the answer is the same.

In the following essay, I will discuss two different approaches to bonsai: Classical and Romantic. I will show how postmodern criticism has developed concepts that put both styles on the same footing, opening the path for bonsai to be included in any discussion of the fine arts as we know them in the West.

Bill Valavanis is a bonsai artist working in the Classical tradition. He was trained in the Japanese tradition of bonsai by Yuji Yoshimura, as well as others. In his book, **Classical Bonsai Art**, he writes in the preface: “Some consider classical bonsai art to be a static and old fashioned form. However, I feel it is important to first understand the basics of this established and historical art and have spent my entire life in its promotion.”

The “basics” Bill is referring to are often given in the form of rules. What follows here is a very attenuated description of how a classical bonsai is produced. It almost reads like a recipe:

How to Recognize Great Material for Making a Bonsai

There are rules for accomplishing this.

1. Look for a thick trunk with good taper.
2. Nebari (the surface roots of a tree) should radiate outwards in all directions from the trunk.
3. Leaf size should be small.

Etc.

In general, classic bonsai, as it is now codified and understood, is a rule-driven enterprise.

1. The width of the trunk should be one-sixth the height of the tree.
2. In most cases, the length of pot should be a little more than $\frac{2}{3}$ the height of the tree.—John Naka, *Bonsai Techniques I*, p. 82.

Of all those working in the Classical style, Bill is the best in my opinion. In spite of their adherence to the rules, his trees have a free and open feeling to them. I hasten to add that Bill doesn't blindly follow the rules. He is flexible in his application of them, and always has the beauty of the tree and pot combination at heart. To see a very small sample of Bill Valavanis' trees, go here:

<http://www.internationalbonsai.com/page/1449245>

Recently, Walter Pall, drawing on his extensive knowledge of Western art history, has shown how selection of material can lead to a more expressive, less rule-driven, kind of bonsai. Following the example of early Chinese and Japanese bonsai practitioners, he goes into the Alps and collects material shaped by nature. He then edits the tree, according to his sensibility. Conversely, he has also shown that material that can no longer be found in the wild, such as Japanese maples, can be successfully made into bonsai by following the basic rules for selection, with the understanding that the bonsaist will be cutting a larger tree down to a smaller, pot-size tree. (Walter Pall, Internet Bonsai Club Forum, 12-23-05)

In opposition to the classic style, Pall's works are often characterized as naturalistic. In art history, the great Romantic Rebellion of the late 1700s, was a move towards naturalism and away from rule-driven classic and neoclassic art practices. English speakers are familiar with Wordsworth and Byron as leading Romantics, but for German speaking cultures, Goethe and Schiller practiced an especially intense Romanticism. Pall's roots are here.

To see Walter Pall's bonsai, go here:

<http://walter-pall.de/00gallery/index.html>

I would like, for a moment, to frame a discussion of bonsai in a contemporary mode. Most of the elements of both Classic style bonsai and Romantic style bonsai will fit into the dialog I envision. There are at least two practices common to all bonsai art, whether classic or romantic or something else, that have corresponding critical language already in place in the postmodern dialog.

The found object is a contemporary art practice that ties postmodern critical language to bonsai.

What is a found object?

A found object is an ordinary, everyday item, usually manufactured that is selected by the artist to become a work of art.

Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) used the term readymade to describe two of his early found objects: a snow shovel he titled *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, and a bicycle wheel on a kitchen stool titled *Bicycle Wheel*. (Later critical language changed the term readymade to found object.) In 1917, he attempted to display his infamous *Fountain*, actually a porcelain urinal, at a show given by the Society of Independent Artists. He used the name R. Mutt, after the Mutt and Jeff comic strip. *Fountain* was, of course, refused, in spite of the fact that the Society had a regulation against censorship. What is truly interesting about this event is what Duchamp wrote about it in 1961:

"Whether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He chose it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under a new title and point of view -- he created a new thought for the object."

Marcel Duchamp was a very smart artist. He invented a special category of found object, the assisted readymade; that is, an object that has been modified. His famous *Bicycle Wheel* falls into this category. A modified object is one that has been edited.

He also used rules for selecting found objects. An important rule that is often ignored today by practicing artists is not to do readymades too often, as it becomes too easy.

Using the rules of selection, we choose a tree, an ordinary object of life. We place it in a pot, and it becomes an object of aesthetic value, no longer lumber or a shade tree. Sometimes we give it a title. We establish a point of view—the front, or several fronts. The bonsai becomes an object of contemplation.

Through editing, or changing the form of the tree, we refine the bonsai. Editing is an important feature of postmodern critical thought. Can a seedling be edited? Its direction of growth can be changed.

This essay shows what we do here and now, in bonsai or anything else, is inextricably linked to the culture we live in and the climate of opinion, whether we acknowledge that climate of opinion or not. Yes, the art of bonsai has Asian roots extending back several thousand years. We should celebrate that connection. At the same time, we should be aware of the powerful tides of Western culture. We are not acting in a void.