



Bonsai Now

A new approach to bonsai display is helping Americans embrace this ancient Japanese art form.

BY DANIEL MOUNT

IN AMERICA, we like our nature big. Think of the Grand Canyon or the vast tallgrass prairies of the Midwest; the giant redwoods of California; or the seemingly eternal expanses of the Everglades. Given this context, it's easy to understand why an appreciation for bonsai (pronounced BONE-sigh), the art of shrinking the grandeur of nature into small portable art works, has been slow to take root here.

Bonsai has a mysterious history some trace as far back as the Second Millennium BCE in China. Over the centuries, it developed into what today is known as *penjing*, which translates to "tray plant." Penjing came to Japan in the beginning of the Early Heian period in the 8th century. The Japanese refined the art, making it distinctly their own.

Over the years, bonsai became an esoteric art form practiced solely by nobility and scholars. Strict conventions on proportions and shapes were developed to express Buddhist principles of harmony and to echo famous landscapes. By the 1800s, it had become a widely popular artform and hobby. As the Far East opened up, bonsai entered the American consciousness. In California, John Naka, revered as the founding father of the American bonsai movement, was an early proponent of creating a distinctly American style. As early as the 1950s, he collected wild junipers from the local mountains and trained them into

An American bonsai at the Pacific Bonsai Museum made with a subalpine fir expresses the ruggedness of the mountains of the American West.

bonsai, one of which is on display at Pacific Bonsai Museum (for more on the history of bonsai in America, see the box on page 21).

Today, the American Bonsai Society lists over 20 public gardens where you can view bonsai in America. From the tropics of Florida to the temperate climates of the West Coast and even the Midwest, you can find a place to view bonsai (for a list of gardens, see box on page 22).

A NEW FLOWERING FOR AN ANCIENT ART

Among these, the collection of the Pacific Bonsai Museum (PBM) in Federal Way, Washington, just south of Seattle, stands out. It is one of only two museums in the United States devoted solely to bonsai—the other is the National Bonsai and Penjing Museum at the U.S. National Arboretum in Washington, D.C.



Above: Visitors view the “Badlands” display, part of the PBM’s 2017 “Natives” exhibit, which incorporates bonsai and paintings by artist Luna Tinta. Right: PBM Curator Aarin Packard and Assistant Curator Scarlet Gore tend an over-100-year-old American larch created by Nick Lenz of Massachusetts.

But more importantly, PBM—originally called the Weyerhaeuser Pacific Rim Bonsai Collection—has been a trendsetter.

A visit to PBM within the heavily forested former Weyerhaeuser campus is like coming upon a secret and sacred clearing among the giant conifers. The space is an outdoor gravel-floored maze of stucco walls and niches, which allows the bonsai to be displayed in small related groups. These plain walls act as frames and backdrops so visitors can view each bonsai as a unique work of art. The gallerylike setting contains no cultural references, liberating the individual bonsai from the confines of history and allowing viewers to see each work on its own merits.

The collection was begun in 1988, overseen by George Weyerhaeuser, Jr., heir to the Weyerhaeuser timber company and civic leader. Under the direction of the founding curator David De Groot, the acquisitions team, led by Sharon Muth, traveled the globe in search of bonsai, with their primary focus in Asia. What they created was one of the most geographically diverse collections in the country. Bonsai from Japan, China, Taiwan, Korea, Canada, and



the United States would all be on display when the gates first opened in 1989. The original design by the firm Hoshide-Wanzer Architects and landscape architect Thomas Berger is still used to great effect. Not only was the visual context of the collection a step forward, but also the collection’s ethos. Thirty years ahead of its time, the collection embraced bonsai within the United States, transitioning from traditional Japanese concepts of meaning and style, and incorporating it into contemporary global culture.

A UNIQUELY AMERICAN BONSAI EXPERIENCE

Curator Aarin Packard arrived at PBM in 2014, having previously served as assistant

curator at the National Bonsai and Penjing Museum. According to Packard, his interest in bonsai came about from a happy confluence of events that started while growing up in California, where his father tended a small collection of bonsai in their backyard. “When I was a senior in high school, a couple of friends got bonsai for Christmas. That made it cool,” recalls Packard.

“At Pacific Bonsai Museum, our mission is to connect people to nature through the art of bonsai,” says Packard. “Most bonsai collections exist within another organization. We are only bonsai, which gives us the focus to do things that larger organizations cannot. It allows me as a curator with a mu-



A stunning California juniper collected in the mountains of California and trained by Harry Hirao, one of the founding fathers of the American bonsai movement, evokes a windswept mountain top.

seum background to curate collections in a way that is more consistent to an art museum than a garden. It treats bonsai more like an art object than a horticultural curiosity.”

Packard’s goal is to teach visitors of all ages how to appreciate bonsai, including how line, shape, form, color, and texture combine to give them their beauty. “Bonsai takes a huge organism and brings it down to human scale. Kids especially gravitate to miniaturized forms because it’s something on their level and taps into their imagination,” observes Packard. “We have the freedom to bring bonsai into a modern conversation instead of remaining in the past historical context that is commonly used for interpretation. We engage other artists to reinterpret bonsai or use them as teaching tools to convey universal principles of design,” he adds.

This philosophy is reflected in some of the museum’s recent exhibits, such as 2017’s “Natives,” which linked bonsai made from American species by American bonsai artists with landscape paintings by visual artist Iuna Tinta. Each painting represented the bonsai’s indigenous ecosystem.

THE HISTORY OF BONSAI IN THE U.S.

Bonsai were first displayed in the U.S. at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition in 1876. They were seen again at the Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition in 1893, as well as in expositions in Atlanta (1895), Buffalo (1901), St. Louis (1904), and Portland (1905). But the biggest show by far was at the San Francisco Panama–Pacific International Exposition in 1915, where the Japanese put together a large display of high-quality bonsai. Japan had opened its borders to the rest of the world only a little over 50 years earlier. The arts of Japan flooded into the West and had a huge impact on American and European art. The Western world was smitten with all things Japanese.

As early as 1883, the Domoto Brothers Nursery was importing and selling bonsai. Most of their pieces would come from the Yokohama Nursery in Japan, which created bonsai for export. A few wealthy private collectors also began importing bonsai from Yokohama. Lars Anderson, Ambassador to Japan, upon his retirement imported a large collection of bonsai, some as old as 200 years. Some of this collection can still be viewed at the Arnold Arboretum in Boston, where they were donated upon Anderson’s death in the 1930s. Ernest Coe, a landscape architect, was also an early collector of bonsai. His collection was donated to the Brooklyn Botanical Garden in the 1920s, where some specimens are still on display.

But the hot spot for bonsai in America before the Second World War was Los Angeles, where a small group of Japanese Americans were creating bonsai as well as importing Japanese plants and bonsai. These early bonsai artists, like the master Tameichi Doi of Los Angeles, strictly adhered to the Japanese conventions of creating bonsai.

After the Second World War, American enthusiasm for bonsai greatly increased. Doi became an important teacher to a new generation of Japanese Americans wanting to learn the art of bonsai. GIs returning from occupied Japan brought a new enthusiasm for the craft as well. This led to the formation of many local bonsai study groups and organizations. By the late 1960s, when the American Bonsai Society was founded, bonsai had become a national passion. —D.M.

TOP BONSAI COLLECTIONS IN NORTH AMERICA

Pacific Bonsai Museum,
Federal Way, WA.

The National Bonsai and Penjing Museum at the U.S. National Arboretum,
Washington, D.C.

The Bonsai Exhibit Garden at the North Carolina Arboretum, Asheville, NC.

The Bonsai Collection at the Chicago Botanic Garden, Glencoe, IL.

The Lars Anderson Bonsai Collection at the Arnold Arboretum, Boston, MA.

Golden State Bonsai Federation, Bonsai Garden at Lake Merritt, Oakland, CA.

The James J. Smith Bonsai Gallery at the Heathcote Botanical Gardens,
Fort Pierce, FL.

The Bonsai Collection at the Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Gardens,
San Marino, CA.

For other public bonsai collections, visit the American Bonsai Society website at www.absbonsai.org.

The scheduled 2020 exhibit “World War Bonsai: Remembrance and Resilience” focuses on how the culture of bonsai was affected by the Second World War on both sides of the Pacific. Although its live opening has been delayed by the pandemic, it features a 70-year-old black pine that was started from a seed by Juzaburo Furuzawa while he was in an incarceration camp during the war. “We are looking at how that incarceration experience shaped bonsai,” says Packard. “It is timely in that it touches on social justice, prejudice, and racism.”

EXPERIENCING BONSAI ACROSS THE COUNTRY

Using American species with American landscapes as inspiration, U.S. bonsai artists have been taking this Japanese art form forward since the 1950s. Nationally, public gardens have also been collecting and adapting to bonsai in innovative ways. “We have stepped away from all foreign cultural references, and in place of them we look to nature as the example,” says Arthur Joura, curator of the bonsai collection at the North Carolina Arboretum in Asheville. “For us, bonsai is about the human experience of nature.” The arboretum’s Bonsai Exhibition Garden dis-



This dawn redwood is in the bonsai collection at the Chicago Botanic Garden.

plays about 50 of the collection’s 100 bonsai. The pieces draw inspiration from traditional bonsai but take the form of a contemporary Southern Appalachian-influenced garden.

Steven Schneider, curator of the Lars Anderson Bonsai Collection at the Arnold Arboretum, the oldest intact collection in the country, says its most recent acquisitions, donations from Bostonian Martin L. Klein, contain many North American species started from seedlings by Klein. Schneider intends to keep this venerable collection current and exciting by supplementing it with new acquisitions.

American bonsai have a strong presence also at the National Bonsai and Penjing Museum in Washington, D.C. There are 55 bonsai in the collection, all created by American bonsai artists. According to curator Michael James, about half of the bonsai represent North American tree species.

At the Chicago Botanic Garden, curator Chris Baker’s goal has been to break the traditional mold when it comes to design, aesthetic, and species choice. His intention is to

give visitors a comprehensive picture of the art of bonsai by displaying both classic Japanese bonsai with newer American ones. The garden’s 300-piece collection is about one-third native American species. The oldest is an American tree, a limber pine estimated at 600 to 1,000 years old, collected by Harold Sasaki in Estes Park, Colorado.

CHANGING PERSPECTIVES

“At PBM, we are not trying to necessarily create bonsai practitioners, but bonsai appreciators,” says Packard. “We want visitors to understand how important nature is and create an appreciation for the natural world.”

In early China, there was talk of a magician who had the power to shrink mountains and lakes and trees so that they could fit into a small bowl. The new American bonsai, by taking inspiration from our grandest landscapes, is continuing this magical tradition.

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