

# Judging Bonsai

## Who Decides What is Good?

By Kath Hughes, UK

Photos courtesy Malcolm Hughes except photos on this page and facing page, top right, which are by Willy Evenepoel.

Part One. Look for Part Two and Part Three in an upcoming issue.

### Judged First-Class Trees at Various Shows.

All were judged by professional judges and placed first or second in major international shows. Are these *good* trees in your eyes? If so ask yourself why? Do not be too easily satisfied; be analytical in your evaluation.

Good? Yes, we know they are, but why? What criteria do they fulfill? Do not give up, write down your comments and by the end of this series of articles we hope you be able to look back and say “*Yes, I understand.*”



**J**udging bonsai is always controversial and a highly subjective subject. Just how do we actually do it?

We all agree that some bonsai are better, or much better, than others. In this three-part series, we will explore the various aspects of judging a bonsai, and try to design a judging system that can be used objectively to determine the quality of one bonsai, compared with another.

We will never, for as long as people remain different in their opinions on every factor from religion to what clothes they wear and what food they eat, succeed in devising a system that pleases all parties. However if we manage to satisfy the majority we will have made progress and hopefully silence those who still say, “*I gave it first prize because I liked it.*” At least they could say they like it based upon some measurable criteria that we all recognize.

The challenge of such a system is not the problem of selecting the right criteria: We all know what to appreciate in a good bonsai. Design, harmony, visual balance within the tree, visual balance between pot and tree, good health, ramification and branch development, quality craftsmanship with wiring and carving. We all know that a bonsai needs good taper to both trunk and major branches, proper branch development and refinement, good-looking nebari, and a pot that enhances the overall image.

### So what then, is the greatest challenge?

It is, to decide the relative importance of all these criteria, and form them into a system that is both simple and practical for all to use, and also containing enough depth to cover all the important aspects of what makes one bonsai better than the next one.

**Trunk taper** is very important—a major factor in creating the impression of age and the impression of grandeur in many species and styles.

**The root-base** (nebari), also species and style dependent, adds to the above qualities, and also provides the feeling of balance. It is important to remember that bigger is not necessarily better. A stronger taper or a larger nebari is not necessarily better than a smaller one. It has to be appropriate to the subject. When grading taper or nebari, we should not give a higher grade to a nebari just because it is larger. The key word is harmony: it has to be in harmony with the rest of the tree.

**Branch development** is a large category, and includes several aspects; The proper placement of branches is one.

The development of a fine network of secondary and tertiary branches is another.

Finally, the branches need to be thick enough and tapered, in other words, in good proportion with the trunk, in order to appear as mature as the trunk itself.



All these branch-related aspects can be graded under the one category, branch development.

**Pot selection & placement.** Selecting a proper pot, and placing the tree correctly in it.

All this complicated as it may be, it is not nearly as difficult as creating an innovative design and recognizing character in a specimen.

### Recognizing patterns and shapes

We are born with the ability to recognize patterns and shapes. Our brains are exceptionally good at this type of task. We are amazing pattern recognition machines. Our brain has evolved to do exactly this with great accuracy, but does the brain have the ability to apply the same recognition pattern to differentiate between a good and a poor bonsai.

This we have to learn: exactly the same way we learn to appreciate bonsai. We learn that a tree that follows the bonsai rules is good. When it breaks one of these rules it is bad. We learn that trees designed by Kobayashi, Kimura, or any great master are good.

But we are not content with just being told. We learn to search images of trees for patterns. We learn to see 'good' application of rules and 'bad' application. We learn to see the similarities in trees which are 'good' and we somehow create our own internal rules of how to decide. We can then judge a tree which we have never seen before. We can tell right away whether we have a piece of raw material or a masterpiece in front of us. We are not all equally good at this. Some become very expert at it and become instinctive experts in judging bonsai.

Some bonsai have the ability to move us emotionally, to convey a message, to make us feel they are something special. Thus we say, "*That tree is good.*" But why, because we like it? Is that good judgement, can we be sure that this response isn't simply a learned reaction? Appreciating a bonsai takes training. It is generally not the case that someone who has no training can appreciate and distinguish *good* from *bad* bonsai easily. It is possible that what we call artistic training is essentially training for pattern classification? Since most of us were trained by looking at the same books and by similar examples of good and bad bonsai, our opinions will often be similar to other bonsai enthusiasts, and we will judge the new artist by the rules we have learned overtime.

In appreciating bonsai we must, of course, realize that there is more to it than just pattern recognition; we can never know to what extent our preferences are biased by the pattern-recognition training we have received in the past. Are we prepared to even listen to someone who comes from another bonsai culture? If we listen, do we understand what he or she is saying? Probably not, probably we want to stay in



our comfortable well established and defined bonsai world rather than constantly having to question what we are thinking. We do not realize that what we think are *natural* rules just evolved accidentally and became a generally accepted code. How will we ever know the true difference between elitism perpetuated through pattern recognition and the intrinsic value of a bonsai?

### Truth, Beauty and the Eye of the Beholder

Bonsai competitions are a means of knowing where our trees stand in the league. How can they be improved and what can we work on harder to excel our skills? Bonsai exhibitions range from international events to local society shows. They provide a window

on bonsai from the public perspective; however the knowledgeable enthusiast and the judges are likely to cast a more critical and maybe clinical eye on the trees.

Many people don't want their trees to be judged, their over sensitive egos could get hurt. Well, fine, keep on thinking your trees are great, that is your privilege. On the other hand, your tree, your pride and joy could be more than a little amateurish to the more knowledgeable eye. Fine, so you love your trees and in your eye they are great, but in your heart you know they do not compare with the best. So why be so misguided as to enter them in a competition? Just for the sake of exhibition? Well, if you say so, but do not think they are not being judged.

### People's Choice.

These were judged top trees by the general public at major shows; in some cases they were also award-winning trees. But why did the public make this judgment? I do not think you will have trouble answering this one. We have all seen it at our local shows. If it is in flower, has berries, or brightly colored leaves or even something strangely exotic/artistic, the public go for it. This is human nature not good judgement; it looks pretty like a beauty queen or an extraordinarily pretty actress who can't act but gets rave reviews.



Judging comes in many forms. It may surprise you when I say that just about every bonsai exhibit is judged. How is that? In the end, the trees that are to be exhibited are selected from many—what is that but judging? How does this happen? Someone will have to tell someone else which trees to take to the show and which ones to leave at home and they will have to give reasons. The owners are often the poorest judges of their own trees—human nature is like that. It is accepted that a mother will always defend her child and she would always feel that he is better in every respect than how others may see him through more objective eyes. That is human nature and we forgive her. It is to be expected that in general bonsai folks think somewhat

higher of their own trees than they really should, and that they believe that the bonsai of their nation is in generally better than they are, when looked at objectively. This is human nature and we forgive it. Some feelings may get hurt along the way, but it happens. Hurting of feelings is not often considered; in fact it is generally not even talked about but accepted as necessary collateral damage.

What I really ask is, why are otherwise reasonable, intelligent, cultivated and learned people often utterly unreasonable about judging their own tree? I suppose once again it is human nature to be unable to judge yourself with impartiality, but would you expect the gap between objectivity and personal perception to be so wide?

## Judges Are People Too!

These were all chosen by one or more judges to be the best tree, but did not reach that award because they were marked down by other judges. Why the disparity? More difficult to explain, but compare them to works of art. Which would be judged as best, a Picasso, a Constable or a Rembrandt? This is personal choice, not judgement. All may be equally good as works of art but not in the opinion of all judges. The same applies to bonsai: all the judges will know they are very good, well designed, healthy specimens, but they are not classic bonsai as they have been taught to expect to come out of Japan. In the same way a Picasso is not a classic scene as taken by the photographer and painted on canvas, so to many it is seen as not as good. It might however fetch even more when sold at auction. Some judges are extraordinarily passionate about something that is *different*.



If this same person had not been so biased in his or her views, that tree would never have reached selection for a show, let alone be on the Show Bench. I have come to the conclusion that this phenomenon most frequently occurs when the people concerned have had very little or no exposure to quality bonsai. They have not seen major bonsai exhibitions and only judge bonsai from photos or the standard of their local club. Bonsai trees, regardless of quality, look best in real life. It is very difficult to take a good picture of a bonsai because a photo is two dimensional and flat; the impact of three-dimensionality and depth perception is lost. How often have you seen photos of your trees and been disappointed; you really thought your tree was better than that! Often when people think they *know* certain trees from pictures and then see them in reality in an exhibit, they are amazed at how much more impact they have in reality.

Now they have certainly seen their own trees and those of their friends in reality and as we have established, it is human nature to see your own trees in

a rosy light and rate them higher than perhaps they deserve. But a bonsai designer/creator needs to have a vision of the future of the tree he or she is creating. Sometimes that vision is so strong in the mind that the reality is not seen. The result is that often, trees are compared that should never be compared, and consequently, otherwise reasonable people come to strange judgments.

## Improving the quality of bonsai

If we are all so subjective and biased in our views and if we are going to go on with competitive bonsai shows who is going to judge our tree? The majority of enthusiasts want their trees to be judged and judged impartially. We need to encourage those who are hesitant to exhibit their trees. How are we to do this if so many see judging at present to be biased and unfair? The initial responsibility for motivating and guiding these individuals will most often rest within the bonsai clubs who are in regular contact with their members and have the greatest knowledge of the trees owned



## Recognizing Show Quality!

Now these are from private collections. Why have they reached this stage of development but are not deemed to be in the show-class? Look more closely—wonderful trees—better than many of us will ever achieve, but are they prepared for showing? Are they weed-free? Are they fully trimmed and immaculate? Are the jins and sharis perfectly clean and algae free? I know you cannot see this but do they have wires cutting in that should have been removed before exhibiting? I assure you they do. Do the layers of the branches reveal themselves clearly? All these are significant points to having a tree ready to put on a show table and hope to receive acclaim. And at this point I will not even mention how to display the tree; the correct pot, the accompanying accent or companion stone as well as the right stand on which to present the tree.

by their members. The major benefit of putting bonsai into a competitive exhibition is to encourage people to work on developing their trees to a higher standard and thereby enhance their collections. Thus we must produce some system that will give people confidence to exhibit competitively.

The answer would seem to me, to lie in producing criteria or guidelines for judging bonsai. I hesitate to say rules because rules are incredibly restrictive, rules are inflexible, thoughts cannot blossom, creativity cannot flourish. However judging without some form of rules equals chaos. Balancing rules against innovation is a pervasive problem in all of life. As ageism is pervasive and entrenched in our society so elitism is pervasive in bonsai culture. Bonsai must teach us balance, and as experience accumulates, the many exceptions and variations gradually invalidate the rules and by the same experience, the rules become less needed.

So our challenge is to try and produce guidelines that will be accepted and used by most. I would not dare to suggest all. If we can provide a universal set

of criteria or guidelines and the means of using them at ground level, i.e., in local shows, and if it is seen to *work* and is treated with respect, then hopefully we can move on to getting the method accepted at national or international level. 🌲

**About the Author.** Kath Hughes is a bonsai enthusiast from the UK and serves on the BCI Board of Directors. Kath started her bonsai journey in 1977, chaired Midland bonsai society for 8 years, then founded South Staffs Bonsai Society. She is an organiser of events in the UK, including BCI Convention in Birmingham, 1991; EBA events in 1987 and 1999; Best of British Bonsai events in 2009, 2011 and 2013, producing 2 books from this event; and administrator for Federation of British Bonsai Societies (FoBBS) for 10 years. She has also organized bonsai tours in Europe and Japan, and lectures on bonsai topics to clubs. Kath is married to Malcolm Hughes, president of FoBBS, past president of EBA, and Royal Horticultural Society accredited judge for bonsai.