

Why judge bonsai? All in the Eye of the Beholder

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Photos courtesy Malcolm Hughes

Part Two. Part Three coming soon. Part One was published in Q2, 2014;



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The reasons why we exhibit our trees are as various as are the types of trees we own. Some of us are club members and the pinnacle of our ambition is to see our club exhibit prove itself against other club exhibits. Many of us are individualists looking to own the very best tree; maybe we spent vast sums to import it from Japan, or perhaps we nurtured it for many, many years from a seedling or a cutting, or like most of us, purchased first or second rate potential material, and hopefully proved ourselves by producing a masterpiece. Whatever your method, our aims are very similar—an Award of Merit, a First in its Class, or maybe even Best in Show.

It takes a long, long time to get there even if we spent lots on money. Do we know how to exhibit that tree to full advantage? Is it properly prepared for showing? Is it in the correct pot? Or even is the pot clean and weed free? What about a stand to display it on—is it the right size and color? Do we need a scroll and an accent plant to display with it—if so what is the right kind? Oh, so many things to think about before we are ready to display.

This is just for individual trees standing alone on a bench or in a Tokonoma. What if is to be part of much larger display for your club or even part of a National exhibit? This adds further dimensions—what about the relation to all the other trees exhibited, size, color, direction of movement, proximity to each other—all these are more things to puzzle over. It seems endless and overwhelming when you think about it for the first time.

Making rules for doing all these things can be incredibly restrictive. Rules are not flexible by their very nature and if you are too rigid, creativity cannot flourish. However judging without some form of rules is 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



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bonsai 'culture'. Bonsai should teach us balance, and as experience grows the many exceptions and variations gradually invalidate the rules and, by the same experience the rules become less needed. The same thing applies to judging; rules are inflexible, so maybe what we require are guidelines that we can learn from until we reach that pinnacle of experience where recognizing good from bad becomes as much a learned reflex as driving your car—you do not have to think what gear is appropriate or when to apply the brakes—it has become automatic. So does judging bonsai—you just need those guidelines and lots and lots of practice.

In the near future we are going to give you those guidelines and plenty of time to practice. For now just test yourself. How much do you know already? How good is your 'Bonsai Eye'?

Bonsai exhibitions range from international events to local society shows. They range from purely local club shows, where the trees are judged against each other but at a fairly basic level, to reward members for improving standards and to try to raise the level of the club exhibit to a higher quality. The actual standard of display and presentation can often leave considerable scope for improvement.



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Look at the images on these pages and be the judge. They are actual club exhibits at local shows, the standard varies enormously. Be critical and decide which trees should not have been displayed and why? Which displays lacked form and presentation and why, what's wrong? They are all in some way inappropriate.

What has ruined the chances of the trees in photos 1 to 3? A tree that should not be there? A very misguided positioning of



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something? Or even an extraordinary choice of color. It's the trees you are meant to look at.

In photos 4 and 5 could we squeeze any more on and oh, those drapes? Quality of trees? What happened to the backdrop, didn't they buy enough?

That's somewhat better in photos 6 and 7 but the feature trees at each end are so untidy—get your scissors out. Some lessons in tree trimming are sorely needed.

Look at photo 8. Don't try and squeeze that extra one on, each tree deserves its own space. Same problem in photo 9, and how on earth did that larch get there?

Photo 10 looks like a beginners' stand. Why on earth did they enter?

Photos 11 and 12 are not exactly bonsai, but should you try and exhibit so much? The accent in photo 11



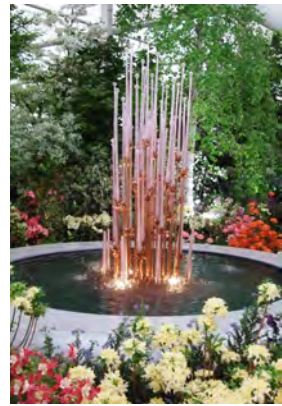
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was displayed with a beautiful juniper but isn't it a little bit 'twee', or even Beatrix Potter?

Now let us look at some displays, recognized as 'Good' or 'Excellent' at local or even national horticultural shows. This is where your trees are part of an exhibit that will be judged against a whole range of horticultural exhibits that can range from flowers, vegetables or even horticultural sculptures on a grand scale. Here, the judges have a great deal of experience of display techniques, but how much do they know about the art of bonsai?

The exhibits are judged by a panel of judges who each have an expertise in different categories of plants. This does not make them all experts in bonsai but they are all experts in displays and exhibitions. The judging panel will have a bonsai expert in the position of advisor to the rest of the panel. That panel is presented



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with all kinds of exhibits that seemingly have nothing in common aside from being a great eye catching spectacle for the general public to admire in their thousands.

Why do we compete in this strange competitive field? Well in the U.K. and many other countries, horticultural shows are a huge part of the Summer Season, visited and admired by millions. Bonsai in most countries lacks public exposure; in many instances it is ignored by the media, so how do we get public acclaim by exhibiting at these events where, if we reach the right standard, we can win Gold Awards, worth at least £500.00 each, monies not acquired easily elsewhere. It is well worthwhile learning the skills of not just displaying trees, but displaying them to their greatest advantage.

What a selection we have in photos 13 to 20—these are all from Royal Horticultural Society displays in the U.K. and both of the bonsai stands won a Gold Award.

What do you make of this Bonsai in a display garden? Photo 21. What do you judge, the bonsai or the oriental garden? They are not good bonsai, are they? You will surely be pleased to know they only got a bronze award.

Judging takes so many forms it would be useful to have basic ground rules, something to steer your judgements in the right direction. Long lists of checkpoints with marks out of 5, 10 or even 20, takes hour upon hour to complete; you could still be judging two days after the Show is over! We have to practise; expertise has to be learned and decisions made quickly, even when we have to judge each bonsai exhibit of single



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trees with stand, accent plant, scroll or maybe even a shohin composition.

What are we looking for now in photos 22 to 24? Perfect trees of course, but what else? Is that the correct accent to go with that tree? Should a flowering lowland accent be displayed with a mountain tree? Is the stand the right size or color? Is that scroll even vaguely appropriate? So many questions, so many things that can mar perfection.

Lastly, back where we started with bonsai trees; no hidden extras to confuse the issue. Photos 25 to 33. Are they good enough for exhibition? If not, why not?

Next time we'll try and give you some answers and hope that this assists you in a better understanding of the judging process or even make you into proficient judges. 🌲

Ed. Note: The next installment in this series on judging bonsai will be a set of guidelines that clubs and individuals can download and use to evaluate and judge trees in local shows. The emphasis will be on criteria that will allow for efficient and impartial appraisal within a reasonable amount of time. Dr. Malcolm Hughes, the writer of this third article on Judging Bonsai, is a judge of long experience not only in the UK but internationally. In the UK, he is one of very few, fully accredited Royal Horticultural Society Judges of Bonsai.