

# BONSAI CONTAINERS AS CERAMIC ART

by  
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## The Concept of Bonsai as Art

While it is not the intent here to attempt to explain the full history and philosophy of the art of bonsai, it is likely that without some background this paper on bonsai containers may be intellectually unsatisfactory. An essay by the much respected Japanese bonsai master, Kyuzo Murata, differentiates between bonsai and *Hachiuye*, or potted plant:

"Bonsai is a living plant transferred to a pot or tray or rock or stone so that it can continue to live semi-permanently. It has not only a natural beauty of the particular plant but the appearance reminds people of something other than the plant itself. It could be a scene, a forest or part of a forest, a lone tree in the field, a seascape, a lake, a river, or a stream or a pond. It is also possible that a certain appearance reminds a person of the wind blowing through the branches.

In Japan, the meaning of bonsai is to create a natural scene on a tray, using plants as the main materials. When you take a *Hachiuye*, or potted plant, you can only see "prettiness of the plant or flower". It does not remind you of anything else...

Bonsai should not be a mere sketch of a scene, or a three dimensional exhibit from a photograph of a scene.

It is perfectly all right to use nature as the subject, but the goal should be a sketch which has been refined and trimmed in your mind before you start creating. Only then can you call it art...

Bonsai is a strange art wherein one can produce a feeling of the reality of nature by manipulation, over a long period of time, of trees, stones, rocks, trays or pots. And every bonsai is original. It goes on for ever and ever."<sup>1</sup>

As will be described later, it is important to note that the bonsai container, be it ceramic or stone is an integral part of bonsai. The tree cannot be called bonsai by itself. Nor can the container alone be bonsai.

## The History of Bonsai

The precise origins of bonsai are unknown but it is very probable that ancient cultures in Egypt, India, Assyria, Greece, Rome, and notably, China, as long ago as 3000 B.C., practiced potted plant culture for food and medicinal purposes.<sup>2</sup> Other ideas regarding bonsai development propose that it was an extension of the garden planning practiced in the Hsia, Shang and Chou Dynasties (2205 -255 B.C.), and/or the rock landscapes in containers developed in the Tang (618 -907) and Sung (960 -1280) Dynasties.<sup>3</sup>

The names used to describe the culture of miniature trees and landscapes in the various Chinese dynasties has undergone many changes, and are the roots of the modern practices of *pen jing* (China), *bun je* (Korea) and bonsai (Japan) container culture. Undoubtedly, these containers were transported to Japan from China by way of Korea by Buddhist monks, merchants, ministers and students. The same written Characters in all three cultures refer to a tree or trees planted in a pot.<sup>4</sup> The earliest documentation of artistic art trees was 1195 in Japan, and of artistic pot plants in China in 1280. (see Appendix A). The art form has developed inexorably to the current Chinese *linguan* (or clip and grow) method of training *pen jing*, and the Japanese method incorporating the philosophical principles of *sabi* and *wabi*.<sup>5</sup> While this paper primarily is concerned with bonsai, it is evident from the literature that the development of the ceramic bonsai pot has paralleled and been an integral part of the development of ceramics in general.<sup>6</sup>

## The Tradition of the Bonsai Container

As indicated above, the Japanese term "bonsai" means literally "pot" (bon) and "living tree" (sai), or "tree in a pot". Thus by definition, the container, whatever its form or composition, absolutely is necessary to complete the bonsai whole. In modern bonsai, and in *pen jing* as well, the container or pot is almost always ceramic. The few exceptions are when certain bonsai styles call for use of stone slabs or trees clinging to rocks.

Unlike most ceramic containers, designed to create an "internal space" <sup>7</sup>, the ceramic pot is rather designed to clasp its partner, the tree. The pot is always secondary to the tree, the former selected to complement and enhance the latter. The relationship is likened to that of a frame to a painting or clothing to people.<sup>8,9</sup> In bonsai, however, the relationship is much more symbiotic, as "the pot for the tree is naturally an integral part of a bonsai..."<sup>10</sup> The choice of container...is very much an aesthetic matter, inevitably governed to a large extent by taste and fashion."<sup>11</sup>

According to Stowell:

"Although the form and color of the container are important, neither should detract from the expressiveness of a bonsai. The container should harmonize with the bonsai - complement color and mood --and be in pleasing proportion to the tree."<sup>12</sup>

So what we have with bonsai pots is the possibility of great variation in shape, size and color, all the while complementing similar variations of bonsai trees. But unlike ceramic art in general where the medium is the artist's only limitation of expression, the bonsai potter's expressiveness is limited somewhat by the traditions of bonsai art. A sampling of these traditions follows (See Appendices B-F for detailed descriptions):

1. Colors acceptable for the majority of trees are brown, gray or terra cotta. <sup>13</sup>
2. Dull unglazed pots in subdued colors are best for most evergreens, but always may be used for deciduous bonsai.<sup>14,15</sup>
3. Glazed pots are used mostly for deciduous or flowering trees, the color dependent upon the color of leaves, fruits, flowers, berries, seed pods, etc.<sup>16,17</sup> Glazes may be whitish beige, chestnut, willow green, cobalt blue or even black, <sup>18</sup> but there is great leeway here for the bonsai potter. Containers with bright glazes will complement brightly colored trees, while smoothness or roughness of bark point toward a corresponding pot surface. <sup>19</sup>

Tomlinson Writes:

"Very bright or pale colored pots are usually inappropriate, but sometimes a well chosen color creates a striking complement to a tree with distinctive coloring. Glazes can produce very subtle color combinations ...and there are some discreet but lustrous effects in more subdued hues that correspond well to the colors of nature. There are interesting effects of color and texture such as speckling and crackle glaze."<sup>20</sup>

4. Shapes of trees (styles of bonsai) determine height,width, depth, length and overall proportions of pots. <sup>21,22</sup>
5. The value of pots ranges as follows:
  - poured - least expensive
  - press molded and thrown - medium to high priced
  - hand formed- high priced
  - antique- most expensive and difficult to identify. May be of Chinese, Korean or Japanese origin. <sup>23</sup> (See Appendix G)

It is worthwhile to mention here that there is a budding movement among some U.S. and European bonsai potters to open up the traditional concepts mentioned above. To the traditional observer these pots, if not the entire bonsai created with them, can seem truly bizarre and uninviting. Some, however, seem to have a creative spark worthy of further exploration (See Appendix H).

## Practical Considerations

Because bonsai containers, whatever their composition, must be able to support the living tree within, some critical practical considerations must be taken into account by the bonsai artist, and, by inference, the ceramic artist who makes the pot. The following recommendations are taken from an excellent article on bonsai pots selection by Banting:<sup>24</sup>

1. The pot must have at least one drainage hole, usually more.
2. The pot should have at least three feet, providing for drainage, air circulation and stability. Footed pots are preferred over arched cuts in the base.
3. There should be minimum warpage of the clay body, although some warpage is desirable for uniqueness or for complementing a particular tree.
4. The bottom of the pot should be level without raised dams around the drainage holes, so as to facilitate rapid drainage and prevent water from accumulating in the pot.
5. The pot should be made of stoneware because of its durability. Earthenware is susceptible to breakage by spalling due to ice in the clay body, and porcelain is too fragile and usually too ornate.
6. The pot should not have a chipped or cracked clay body so as to avoid distraction from the tree and the destruction of the roots of the tree growing into the cracks.
7. If the pot is glazed, it should be only on the outside and just inside and below the rim, not down the inside of the pot or the bottom of the pot. This provides porosity for water retention and some air circulation.
8. The thickness of the walls of the pot should be in proportion to the overall dimensions of the pot.

In summary, there is much to consider by the artist who is creating a bonsai container. This esoteric branch of ceramic art has deep roots in ancient cultures as does the ceramic vessel in general. However, in addition to deep roots, the total bonsai, tree and pot, is enveloped in the two fundamental Chinese and Japanese zen concepts of art - *sabi* and *wabi*. The potter who would pursue the creation of bonsai containers would do well by becoming familiar with these concepts and their characteristics.<sup>25</sup> Once ingrained in the potter, these concepts, when applied and recognized in the completed bonsai pot, undoubtedly will add a significantly enhanced appreciation of the bonsai. Successfully accomplished, the pot will communicate to the viewer in its own right, but never at the expense of the tree.

## REFERENCES

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## APPENDIX A

### CHRONOLOGY OF CONTAINER TREE DEVELOPMENT by Dan Chiplis

- 9000 B.C. Some communities at threshold of ability to produce their own food.
- 6000 B.C. In area of fertile crescent, domestication of plants and animals begin. Slightly later, corresponding development occurs in southern Mexico and China.
- 4000 B.C. Egypt supports complex urban civilization with productive agriculture.
- 3000 B.C. Chinese growing pine, apricot, plum and bamboo as potted ornamentals.
- 2500 B.C. India develops *Vaamanfanu Vrikshaadi Vidya*, "the science of dwarfing trees" to enable Hindu physicians transportability of trees.
- 2000 B.C. Egyptians grow large trees in "containers" cut into rock.
- 1400 B.C. Egypt, Assyria, Greece, and Rome practice pot culture to a high degree of sophistication.
- 50 B.C. Mica panes used on structures by Romans to protect the prized potted citron and orange from cold injury.
- 25 A.D. Chinese legend exists describing Fei Jiang-feng, a "magician" who collected mountains, trees, and living creatures in planters.
- 265 A.D. Chinese artistic pot plants, called *punsai*, well established in China.
- 600 A.D. Artistic pot plants believed to enter Japanese culture from Korea and China with Buddhism.
- 618 A.D. Chinese artistic pot plants called *pun-wan*.
- 1180 A.D. Ibn al-'Awwan of Muslim Spain writes horticultural treatise which includes information on container plant culture and soil mixes.
- 1195 A.D. Earliest Japanese documentation depicting artistic pot trees.
- 1280 A.D. Chinese artistic pot plants called *Shea tzu ching*.
- 1368 A.D. Modern Chinese term *punjing* first used for artistic pot plants.
- 1400 A.D. Roman orangeries, called *stanzone peri cedri*, are artificially heated.
- 1500 A.D. In ancient Mexico City, the Aztec *chinampas*, the so-called "floating gardens," are highly developed. "*Chapines*" similar to modern peat pots are used to start seed.
- 1500 A.D. Cypress and orange trees grown in large containers by Italians become integral part of French, English, and Danish gardens as Italian Renaissance influence spreads.
- 1775 A.D. Oldest American flower pot company, A.H. Hews and Company, selling hand thrown clay pots.
- 1865 A.D. William Linton of Baltimore invents machinery to manufacture clay pots in molds.
- 1880 A.D. Elegant naturalistic style of Japanese bonsai developed.
- 1900 A.D. Chinese develop *linguan*, or "clip and grow" method of training *punjing*. Literati style thus begins.
- 1910 A.D. Bonsai first exhibited in western country at the Japan-Britain Exposition.
- 1946 A.D. *Saikei*, "living landscapes" using stones and very young trees, developed in Japan. Bonsai popularized to all Japanese classes. Bonsai first goes to America via occupation forces.
- 1960 A.D. "Green Revolution" in nursery industry. Trees and shrubs produced in containers reduce shipping/handling costs and extend planting season to entire year.
- 1965 A.D. Interior Plantscape industry begins, creating an improved business and working environment.

From Chiplis, Daniel, "Chronology...", in Potomac Bonsai Association Clippings, 29.1, Feb./Mar. 1999.

## APPENDIX B

### THE DIMENSIONS OF THE POT

The approximate length of the container can be determined in one of two ways. Firstly, if the main feature of a tree is its height, the pot is often chosen to be about two-thirds to three-quarters of this height. If, on the other hand, the main feature is the horizontal spread of the branches, the pot is chosen to be approximately two-thirds to three-quarters of this length.

The depth of the pot is sometimes chosen to be the same as the thickness of the base of the trunk. However, this last dimension is often difficult to apply exactly and is obviously not used in the cascade styles where the greater depth of the pot is needed to balance the mass of foliage. As a rough guide, a pot depth that is 1/2 to 2-1/2 times the thickness of the trunk would be suitable. With full-cascade, the depth of the pot should never be the same as the length of the cascade.

### SHAPES AND DESIGNS OF BONSAI CONTAINERS

The following table outlines some of the features that influence the visual strength and formality of a pot. A strong tree would have a large, heavy trunk, branches that are angular and heavy, roughly textured bark and heavy surface roots.

	<b>STRONG</b>	<b>LIGHT</b>
<b>FORMAL</b>	Rectangular or square Straight, perpendicular sides Straight line at top of container and at bottom Picture-frame sides (particularly suitable for driftwood style) Wide conspicuous lip Rolled rim Reversed or rolled corners Conspicuous leg e.g. cloud legs or conspicuous straight legs	Oval or round Straight sides slanting out at top Inconspicuous leg
<b>INFORMAL</b>	Rectangular, square, petal or flower, hexagonal, octagonal, round, oval Convex sides - slanting in at top and bottom Straight sides slanting out slightly at top Concave sides - slanting out, top and bottom Flared out lip Rolled rim Conspicuous leg e.g. cloud legs or very ornamental	Oval, round, free-form Concave sides slanting out at top only Flared out lip - narrow base Inconspicuous leg Legs slanting out with or without light design. Narrow, pointed feet - light, lyrical and humorous

Pots may also be active or passive in feeling. This is a slightly different feature to the visual strength of the pot as it is possible for a pot to be light and delicate while also being active in design.

Generally, the more conspicuous the rim and legs are, and the more ornamental the shape of the container is (e.g. flower shape or greatly flared), the more active the pot will be. Containers that are passive in feeling are usually more self-contained having the rim and feet included in the basic design of the pot.

The following table lists some of the pot shapes that may be used for particular styles (see Chapter 7 for a discussion of the tree styles).

APPENDIX B Continued...

POT SHAPES

STYLE	Pot shape often used	Pot shape occasionally used
<b>FORMAL UPRIGHT</b>	Shallow to medium rect. Shallow to medium oval	Shallow round, square, irreg. round Shallow irregular oval
<b>INFORMAL UPRIGHT</b>	Shallow to medium, rect., oval Shallow irregular oval	Very shallow round Hexagonal, octagonal, square., irreg. round
<b>SLANTING</b>	Shallow to medium oval, rect, Irregular oval Shallow round Irregular round	Shallow octagonal, hexagonal or square.
<b>SEMI CASCADE</b>	Semi-deep round, square, octagonal hexagonal.	Semi-deep irregular round, deep round, octag, hexag., square shallow to medium rect., oval or free-form
<b>FULL CASCADE</b>	Deep round, hexagonal, octagonal or square	Semi-deep round, hexagonal, octagonal, square
<b>WINDSWEPT</b>	Slab of rock, shallow free-form. Shallow oval or rect.	Shallow round, square, hexagonal, octagonal
<b>LITERATI</b>	Shallow to medium round or free- form, hexagonal, octagonal, square	Shallow oval or recto
<b>TWIN TRUNK</b>	Shallow to medium oval or rectangular  Slab of rock Free-form	Shallow to medium round or square.
<b>CLUMP STYLE</b>	Shallow to medium round, square, hex., oct., petal, free-form Slab of rock, Shallow rectangular or oval	Semi-deep round, square, hex octagonal.
<b>RAFT &amp; SINUOUS</b>	Shallow oval, rect., free-form, Slab of rock.	
<b>TWO-TREE SETTING</b>	Shallow to medium oval, rectangular, free form Slab of rock	
<b>GROUP SETTING</b>	Shallow oval, rect. Free-form, Slab of rock	
<b>ROOT OVER ROCK &amp; CLINGING TO A ROCK</b>	Shallow rectangular or oval (Tray with holes or a <i>suiban</i> )	
<b>SAIKEI</b>	Shallow oval or rect.	

A horticultural note: A pot that is much wider at the top than it is at the base is more frost resistant than a pot with perpendicular sides or incurved sides. Incurved pots are also more difficult when it comes to repotting. The root system would have to be sliced around the edges with a sharp knife in order to lift it out of the container.

## APPENDIX B Continued...

### COLOURS AND TEXTURES OF POTS

Unglazed containers are most often used for the conifer family of trees, however, being more subdued than most glazed containers, they are suitable for many different varieties of trees. Glazed containers may be used for many deciduous trees or flowering and fruiting varieties. Unless the tree is placed in a different container each season, the pot would be chosen to look well with the major colour in the favourite season. The following table outlines some of the pot colours suitable for certain flower, fruit, foliage or bark colourations:

<b>Colour of Tree Feature</b>	<b>Pot Colours</b>
<b>WHITE</b>	Light yellow, green, celadon, dull red Light to dark blue, white or very dark colours occasionally suitable
<b>YELLOW</b>	Dark green, dark unglazed, blue, celadon Off-white
<b>ORANGE</b>	Dark brown or purplish unglazed, green (glazed or unglazed)
<b>RED</b>	Light blue, dark blue, green (light or dark) Dull antique white
<b>PINK</b>	Blue, green, white or off-white
<b>BLUE</b>	Dull red, dull yellow, white, off-white, steel grey
<b>PURPLE</b>	Light green (dark green if light purple), celadon, yellowish white; pale brown
<b>VARIEGATED FOLIAGE OR WHITE BERRY</b>	Black, dark green
<b>EVERGREEN CONIFERS</b>	Brown, reddish, purplish or grey unglazed Black or dull white may be suitable
<b>JUNIPERS</b> (Particularly bright green foliage, reddish tint in bark & perhaps driftwood)	Terracotta unglazed
<b>DECIDUOUS WITH LIGHT DELICATE FEELING &amp; SILVERY BARK</b>	Soft grey (glazed or unglazed)
<b>WILLOW</b>	White or off-white - particularly in summer.















N .B. Think carefully before using pots with very bright or harsh colours.

From: Koreshoff, Deborah R., Bonsai, its art, science, history and philosophy (Brisbane, Australia: Boolarong Publications, 1984), pp.44=6.







## APPENDIX C

### SINGLE TRUNK STYLES




<b>Formal Upright</b>		Medium to deep rectangular or oval pot; unglazed or dark colors for evergreen; unglazed or glazed for deciduous trees.
<b>Informal Upright</b>		Medium to deep rectangular, oval or sometimes circular pots; color as for formal upright
<b>Slanting</b>		Medium-depth, rectangular pot; color as for formal upright and informal upright.
<b>Windswept</b>		Medium-depth, rectangular, oval, or modern sculptural pots mostly unglazed
<b>Split Trunk</b>		Medium to deep, rectangular or oval pots; colors as for formal upright and informal upright
<b>Driftwood</b>		As for split trunk.
<b>Broom</b>		Medium to shallow oval pots (only rarely rectangular or unglazed preferable; cream or light green may be used
<b>Cascade</b>		Deep to very deep pots; square, hexagonal, octagonal, or circular; glazed or unglazed depending on variety of tree
<b>Semi-Cascade</b>		As for cascade
<b>Weeping</b>		Medium depth pot; shape and color as for cascade and semi cascade
<b>Root on Rock</b>		Medium-depth pot; rectangular, oval or circular; glazed or unglazed, depending on variety of tree. If in doubt use unglazed, or neutral colored pot.
<b>Exposed Root</b>		As for root on rock
<b>Planted on Rock</b>		No pot required
<b>Literati</b>		Medium-depth, circular, square, hexagonal, octagonal, or modern sculptural pot; unglazed for evergreens; cream or light green may also be used

APPENDIX C Continued...

**MULTIPLE TRUNK STYLES**

<b>Twin trunk</b>		As for informal upright style
<b>Triple trunk</b>		As for informal upright style
<b>Multiple trunk</b>		As for informal upright style
<b>Root connected</b>		Medium to shallow rectangular or oval pots unglazed or neutral colors for evergreens; unglazed or glazed for deciduous trees.

**MULTIPLE TREE OR GROUP STYLES**

<b>Group or forest</b>		Shallow or very shallow oval pots; colors in unglazed, or neutral colored glazed. Flat pieces of rock may also be used in place of shallow pots.
<b>Group planted on rock</b>		No pot required
<b>Landscape</b>		Shallow, rectangular, or oval pots; preferably unglazed, or if glazed, neutral colors to be used

From: Chan, Peter, Bonsai Masterclass (New York: Sterling Publishing Co., 1993), pp. 18-19.

APPENDIX D

POT COLORS

UNGLAZED *	Conifer	Broadleaf Evergreen	Deciduous	Fruiting	Flowering
Brown	R	R	R	R	R
Gray	R	R	R	R	R
Dull-Colored	R	R	R	R	R
Bright-Colored		R	R	R	R
Marbleized **	RWR	RWR	RWR	RWR	RWR
GLAZED					
Brown	RWR	R	R	R	R
Gray	RWR	R	R	R	R
Dull-Colored	RWR	R	R	R	R
Bright-Colored		R	R	R	R
Dark & Royal Blue		RWR	RWR	R	R
Multiple Colored		RWR	RWR	R	R
Imposing Colored		RWR	RWR	R	R
Painted Decoration		RWR	RWR	R	R

R = Recommended Selection

RWR = Recommended with reservations

\* Burnished or rough

\*\* Marbleized containers are not recommended with reservation because of the difficulty in using

From: Banting, Donna, "Selecting Bonsai Containers", article written for Greater New Orleans Bonsai Society, 1983, reproduced in Potomac Bonsai Association Clippings, 29.1, Feb/Mar 1999.

APPENDIX E

~ COLOR OF POT ~

Color of Fruit, Flower & Foliage	Red	Blue	Green	Yellow	Violet	Brown	White	Orange	Black
White	•	•	•		•		•		•
Violet		•			•				•
Pink		•		•	•		•		•
Red		•		•			•		•
Yellow	•	•	•			•	•		•
Blue	•			•			•	•	•
Orange		•	•	•	•	•	•		•
Green	•			•		•	•	•	•

Allowance should be made for the vast range of shades within the color bands. This chart suggests combinations, but should not limit your choice.

From: Tacktil, Phil, "Guide to Ceramic Bonsai Containers", in Potomac Bonsai Association Clippings, 29.1, Feb/Mar 1999.



**APPENDIX G**

**~ INDIVIDUALITY OF CONTAINERS ~**

TYPE OF CONTAINER	DISTINGUISHING FEATURES						
	SINK MARKS	ANY SHAPE	NORMALLY ROUND	THIN LIGHT	THICK HEAVY	GLAZED	UNGLAZED
Poured slip mold A	* Yes	Yes		Yes		Yes	Yes
Press mold C		Yes			Yes	Yes	Yes
Thrown B			Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Hand formed C	Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

All of the above sometimes have potters marks.

(X) The last two may have artists' signatures.

(Y) Some fine containers may have no markings at all

Each additional operation in manufacture will add to cost...

\* See Chart B for X and Y; and for examples of all styles and details.

From: Tacktill, Phil, "Guide ...", in Potomac Bonsai Association Clippings, 29.1, Feb/Mar 1999."

**APPENDIX H**

