

IBA News & Muse
Iowa Bonsai Association Newsletter
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IBA FEBRUARY Activities

FEBRUARY 17, 7 PM, IBA MEETING

Des Moines Botanical Gardens

Topics: Who Knows? The Board of Directors had a meeting to formalize the program schedule for the year but it has not been distributed. Before the meeting date expect to receive it as an email from our President.

EIBA FEBRUARY Activities

February 13, 6 pm. Board meeting at Nothing But Noodles restaurant on Collins.

Final preparations for 2014 agenda. Soil making plans. Workshop discussions. Picnic plans (yes/no). Foster Tree program for this year.

February 20, 7 pm. Club meeting at Pierson Flower Shop on Ellis Blvd.

Agenda includes picking up club soil, pay dues, review of 2014 activities planned, discuss bringing trees out of hibernation and ready for repotting.

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

IBA and EIBA Calendars	1
Timely Tips	2
How Do I Get Smart At Bonsai?	2
Penjing: I've Got You Under My Sking	3



A Trident maple by John Pitt. The nebari is immense, almost outrageous. Nice taper, too. Pot also by John Pitt.



Trident maple in root over rock style by Wolfgang Putz.

Timely Tips

“Cold enough for ya?” Oh, wait, that is how I began Timely Tips last month! Well, it’s appropriate this month again.

One of my beloved family dogs slipped through a gate when the 50–60 mph wind gusts on January 27 popped the latch. The gate shut and latched behind him. It was 20 below wind chill. We searched for hours well after dark. After falling on the ice twice in darkness, I gave up. He was a small dog who never left the house or yard and knew little of the great outdoors. The air temp was 20 below that first night and he was a goner. But, this morning a farmer called to say he had my dog! Alive, barely, but alive. Amazing.

Long story short, I sold my dog short. I did not think he could possibly have survived 10 days, two snow storms, several nights of –10 to –20F and lots of wind chill during the days. He was just a soft house dog. I could not have been more wrong.

What does this have to do with bonsai? I have given up on a couple of nice bonsai trees that also proved me wrong. The last was a very nice K hornbeam. It failed to leaf out last spring. I left in late May for Brussels’ Rendezvous with plans to replace the hornbeam. I found one I liked for a price. Brought it home. I took it out back and placed it next to the “dead” hornbeam. I’ll be damned. That old hornbeam had popped over Memorial weekend. I had sold that hornbeam short, too. It went on to have a grand summer.

I did the same with a nice Trident that Gary Wood brought me from Oregon one February. Nice tree. I was excited to see it leaf out. April went by. Nothing. Week after week into May and still nothing. Our EIBA club came over for a meeting. I hid the leafless tree in the shed. Again, I went to Brussels over Memorial weekend and when I came home, the Trident had leafed out! Amazingly late for a maple. I still have that tree. It gets better every year.

Don’t give up this spring if you have a tree not leafing out when you think it should. This hard winter may just push things late this year. Have faith!

How Do I Get Bonsai Smart?

By John Denny

Books? Workshops? Magazines? Local clubs? Attend Shows? Find a bonsai teacher? Internet web sites? Blogs?

I have tried them all. They all work and can help you grow your bonsai knowledge. This winter, I found a couple of new ways to learn. Really good ways. I decided to learn from true experts who themselves learned through apprenticing in Japan. I do not have the time to spend several years in Japan and I don’t care to spend the money to have these fellows teach me directly by going to their place or flying them to mine.

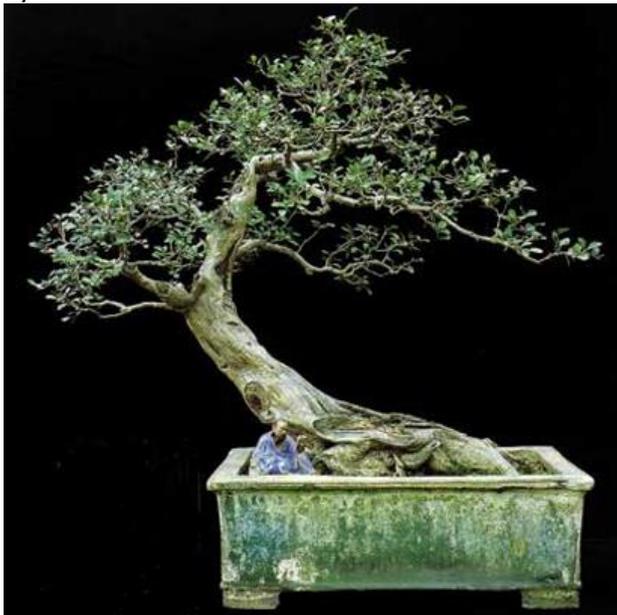
First, I viewed many of the videos created by Bjorn Bjorholm. You can find these videos at bjorvalabonsaistudio.com. Click on Videos at the top and go to “Bonsai Art of Japan” series. These videos are good quality and show experts working on trees, exhibitions, Japan in general. These videos are fun and helpful and there are a lot of them.

Next I read all the posts by Peter Tea who just finished apprenticing in Japan. His blogs are loaded with superb close up photos of what he is doing. He explains to readers exactly what he is doing on the trees he is working on and what his teacher is teaching him. His writing style is easy and simple. Ignore the misspellings. All that knowledge is free! It just takes a lot of your time. I thought it was well worth it. His blog is at peterteabonsai.wordpress.com. Look for his index and pick the topics you want.

Currently, I am working my way through videos of Ryan Neil. Ryan apprenticed for 5 years with Kimura who most consider the best bonsai artist in the world. These videos are taken of Ryan while he gives lectures, does demos on trees, gives judging critiques, etc. Ryan is sharp and a good presenter. Find him at bonsaimirai.com. Ryan moves quickly in some of these videos and you have to work to keep up. Its worth it! Have fun!

PENJING—I'VE GOT YOU UNDER MY SKIN

By Ivan Hanthorn



Classic penjing in antique pot with scholar figurine

Penjing. Chinese bonsai. Or so it is simplistically often described. Actually, penjing is a rich historical botanical art form of many schools and types that in its earlier history was the parent of bonsai and which has continued to evolve into a strikingly different art genre than bonsai and yet so clearly shows its family relationship with bonsai. [Like siblings and cousins at a family reunion—as you look around you begin to see so many shared features.] Like bonsai, which was so Japanese in its essence but is now studied and enjoyed around the world, penjing, so thoroughly Chinese, is now enjoying an increasing audience and serious study around the world.

During this winter I have read everything about Penjing published in English and available. That might sound impressive until one realizes that there are not that many books published about Penjing in English. There is a little more in German. In Chinese, several more, but surprisingly not as much as would be expected. On the internet as in most general books about bonsai, the references to penjing tend to be short, redundant excerpts from something you have read elsewhere. To the above I would note an exception; two articles posted in *The Art of Bonsai Project* website (artofbonsai.org). Together they are probably the most accurate and succinct descriptions of penjing to be found anywhere in English, so they make a great departure point if one wants to learn more about the amazing and delightful realm of penjing. (See references below.)

However, before going any further in this direction, perhaps I should address the basic question: why?

- 1) It is hard to avoid references to penjing in reading about bonsai; unfortunately the references are usually short and often loaded with incorrect information.
- 2) The IBA has added penjing as a show category for the annual fall bonsai shows for anyone who wishes to exhibit their penjing efforts. We will use the standard penjing subcategories of pot penjing, landscape penjing, and land-and-water penjing. More details on this will appear before the next fall show.

- 3) John Naka, the godfather of American bonsai, told us in his forward to Shen *et al.* Chinese Bonsai and Potted Landscapes (which was reviewed in this newsletter a year ago) this: “[Shen’s book] should be on the reading list of all bonsai connoisseurs. For the first time, the historical origins of bonsai are traced...dating as early as the eighth century. ... No bonsai enthusiast should overlook ...important and accurate account[s] of bonsai history” (i.e., accurate and thorough explication of penjing”).

I got into this flurry of penjing literature consumption tangentially from thinking about a bonsai style to which I compulsively gravitate whenever there is an exhibit of various styles of bonsai, in real presence or in photographs; to wit, the bonsai style called *bunjin* in Japanese and *literati* by those who acknowledge the Chinese origins of the style. Literati is not a Japanese style. It is very Chinese, with its narrow vertical thrust with minimalist structure (all of which are Chinese aesthetically). Thus it is, in Japanese terms, the bonsai that “breaks the rules.” The style is the signal flag of the cultural importance of Chinese studies in Japanese culture in the latter half of the Tokogawa Shogunate, when all things Chinese were considered excellent guidelines. Consequently Confucianism and penjing were abroad in the land of Zen and bonsai. To understand the origins and significance of this phenomenon on Japanese material culture and even on bonsai leads one quickly to further reading in Japanese Bunjin Painting and Chinese Southern Sung painting (the origin of all things “literati”). Nineteenth century Japanese Bunjin aesthetics particularly looked back to the Southern Sung painters, poets, scholars, and even the penjing as portrayed in text and painting for inspiration. The aesthetic was a leisurely turning away from the business of life, for contemplation and appreciation of nature. Southern Sung style was the poster image for latter day Japanese bunjin creative efforts. The basic picture to me seems simple to understand, but the facts are entangled and voluminous to cover.

For now, I will simply note that the Chinese Southern Sung pictorial style (1127–1279) was contemporaneously appreciated by the Japanese court, and therefore the Japanese social hierarchy. Consequently the great majority of Southern Sung paintings surviving in the modern world are in Japan, not China or anywhere else to which foreign imperialists took their ill-gotten booty. The Southern Sung scroll paintings more than any other Chinese or Japanese painting style portrays the paradigm image of misty mountains clothed in conifers with meaning imbedded in the nothingness of high elevation nature. The imagery plucked a cord in the Japanese soul. It was absorbed and remained at the core of Japanese aesthetics.



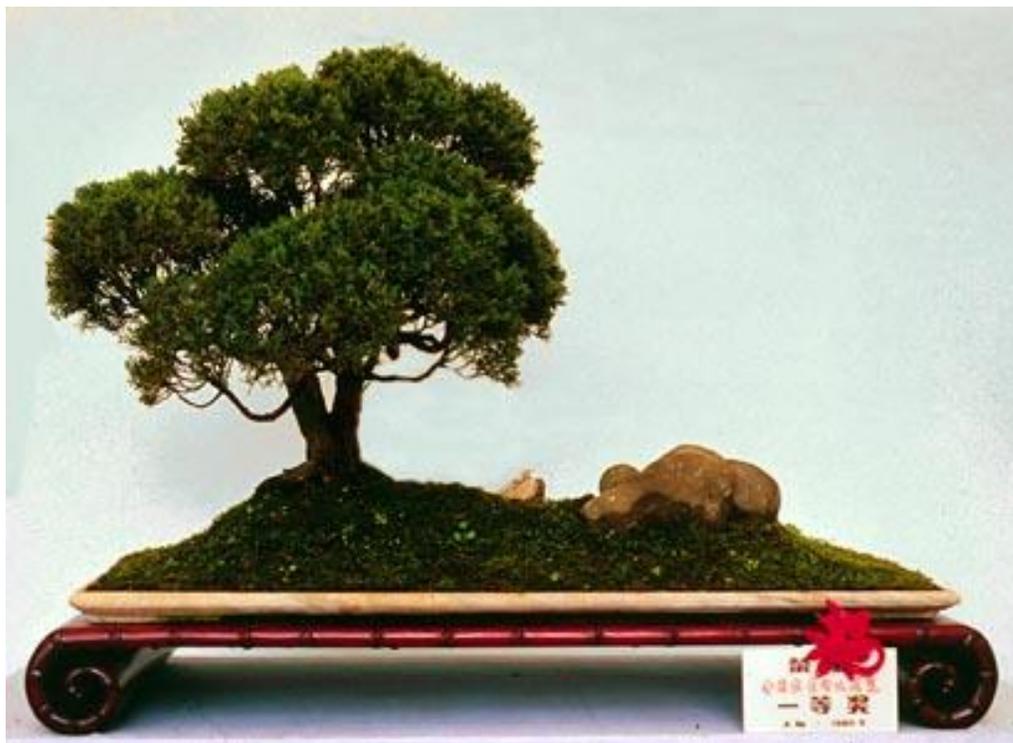
Mountain Market in Clearing Mist, signed Xia Gui (active ca. 1195–1230) Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279) Album leaf; ink on silk.

During the Song Dynasty (960–1279) the ancestral form of penjing reached a relatively high artistic level. This is exhibited in painting and in text. During the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) there was an increased appreciation of the beauty of form, imbued with the qualities of poetry and painting. Penjing had become a fully developed art form, a vehicle of new, sophisticated artistic concepts. During the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) penjing became even more popular, with a great amount of literature about penjing. Since the time of the Song Dynasty, the aesthetic principles of painting were utilized in the shaping of trunk and branch structures throughout the development of penjing trees. To fully appreciate landscape penjing one should see them as three dimensional paintings using cultured trees, rocks, and representational objects (e.g. boats, people, houses, bridges, etc.) to create inspired scenes, rather than two dimensional paintings with pigment on paper or silk. Painterly, rather than sculptural, in artistic feeling.

There were historically a number of different schools of design in Chinese penjing. Most were regional in their development and popularity. China has long been an immense country in geographical size, with varying climates and topographies, so consequently the available plant materials for use in penjing varied widely, from cold hardy material in the north to tropical material in the south. The plant material as well as social and geographic distance affected style. Over time most of these schools of design reached a static state of definition that by the 20th century seemed ossified to those social elements of post-imperial China working for modernization of a very traditional society.

Nantong School (Two-and-a-Half Curve), Sichuan School (Dancing Dragon), Suzhou School (6-3-1), Lingnan School (South of the Mountain Range, “Clip and Grow”), and other schools of design continued to be followed by some practitioners in a formalistic practice of penjing. Yet in the conflict with those who desired a more naturalistic influence on design, stilted forms and grotesqueries faded away. The unresolved dialog between the formalists and the naturalists reflected the general diminishment of this ancient art form in the turmoil of the 20th century. With the outbreak of the “Great Cultural Revolution” in 1966, China entered a decade in which radical efforts were made to obliterate all historical objects, forms, and reminders of traditional Chinese culture. Penjing was on the brink of extinction. (This phenomenon is eerily similar to the state of bonsai in Japan at the very end of WWII, when bonsai seemed on the brink of extinction, and it well might have been except for a very few historical “divine accidents.”)

The subsequent affirmation of penjing by the government and the people of China as an enduring symbol of Chinese culture gave a new energy to this ancient art form. It is now much more naturalistic in form. Contemporary practitioners are not bound by one school of design, but can be inspired by many of the historical forms. More importantly, it no longer is the preserve of a wealthy leisure class but is popular with a mass audience.



Shimpaku Juniper in a Landscape Penjing, unknown artist. The Chinese have formulated fewer rules about the creation of penjing than their Japanese colleagues, and the artist enjoys a greater freedom of expression.

This article will continue in the next issue of this newsletter.

