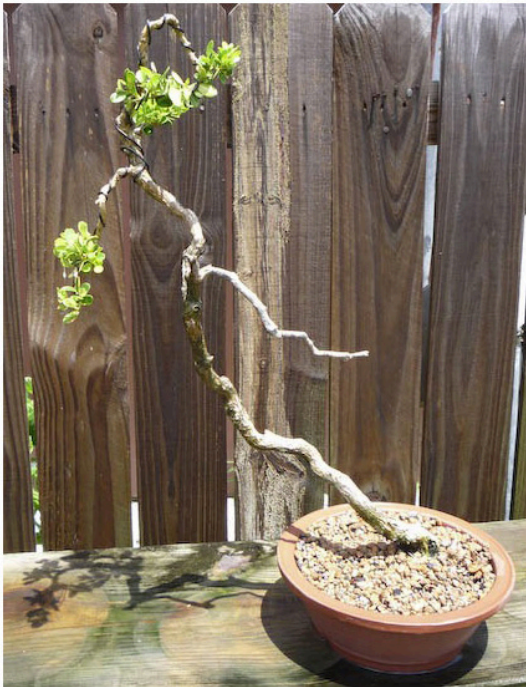


My Thoughts on Bunjin

by Jim Osborne

Bunjin is probably the most miss-understood of all the bonsai styles. Actually, it is not really a style at all but more of a feeling. All good bonsai should evoke some feeling in the viewer, and this is especially true with bunjin. In most other styles, you look at the roots first, then the trunk. In bunjin, you look at the trunk, the branches and roots come second. Bunjin is all about the trunk, in other words, the line of the tree.

Bunjin can trace its beginnings back to China, over 1,300 years ago. One can easily see a kind of abstract shape in bunjin, which brings to mind the art of calligraphy and landscape paintings of the Southern School of China. I learned that the men, who painted in this way, were from the ruling class and turned their backs on the government and courts in order to dedicate their lives to things like poetry, philosophy, calligraphy and painting. They sought freedom for the individual man of culture. These men became known as the “literati,” meaning educated ones. The literati felt that in their wild landscapes the entire man was revealed, even more than the mountains he painted.



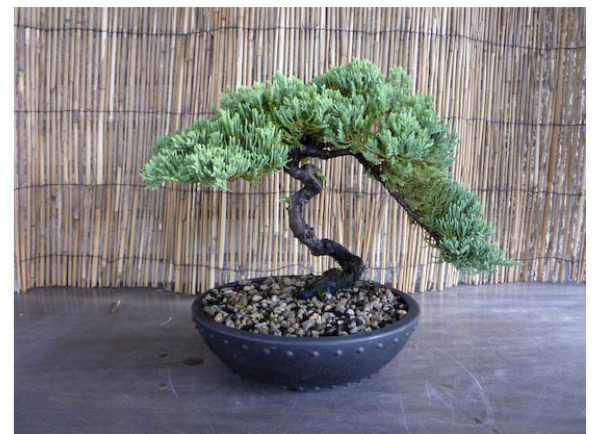
Bunjin bonsai reflects this freedom. In other bonsai styles crossing branches or trunks would be considered incorrect. In the bunjin style, such crossings are not only permitted, but it can give a powerful tension and drama to the design of the tree. Look at the landscape paintings of the literati. Crossing branches, and odd twists and turns of the trunk are prominent features of their work.

According to Frank Nagata, former dean of the Southern California bonsai masters, “Bunjin is the last of the bonsai styles for the student to appreciate.” As I’ve stated, bunjin is not really a bonsai “style”. There are few rules, and everyone makes what they feel is right. However, if it’s not done correctly, the tree just looks funny. Therefore bunjin is very difficult to do.

It is even hard to describe what makes a bunjin bonsai, because it is more of a spirit that invests the tree than some thing physical. There are some rules however. The most important of which is that the trunk is tall and slender with little or no taper, and it is never straight. The trunk should have interesting twists and turns. In some bunjin, the apex can be a 180 degree turn in the trunk itself. The branches on bunjin are asymmetrically arranged and few in number. The first branch being, in most cases, two thirds up the trunk and

sparsely greened. Most bunjin have very little or no surface roots at all.

My bonsai friends and people who know me know that bunjin has long been my favorite style. I do not really know why this is. Perhaps, it is because of the true freedom that one can enjoy when creating a bunjin bonsai. I do not have to concern myself with all the rules of the more conventional styles. With bunjin, I am free to create as I see fit, as long as I take into mind the spirit of the tree. I have found that with bunjin, you either love it or are indifferent to it. Most people look at a bunjin and don’t see too much. They think that it must be easy to create, because of the simplicity of the design. Whatever the reason for my love of the style, it gives me great pleasure to create and enjoy them.



People often ask me what is the difference between a bunjin bonsai and a literati bonsai. Nothing, they are one and the same. New-comers to the art of bonsai learn about the heaven, earth, and man triangle and the arrangement of the branches; first branch second branch, back branch, ect. Then, just when they are beginning to feel sure of themselves, they see a tree that breaks all the rules, and they feel uncomfortable. They don’t like it. When the novice no longer has to think about the rules in bonsai, then maybe they will at some point develop a taste

for bunjin. It has been said that bunjin or literati bonsai is the most sophisticated of all the bonsai styles and sometimes the uninitiated may see them as artificial.

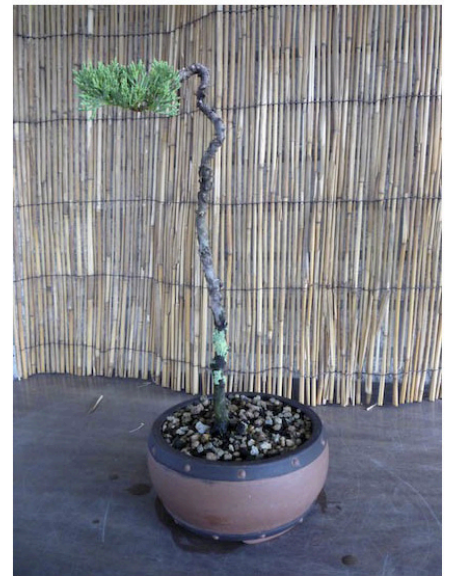


The great John Naka says this about bunjin, “The bunjin style of bonsai is so free that it seems to violate all the principles of bonsai form. The indefinite style has no specific form and is difficult to describe, however, its conformation is simple, yet expressive. No doubt its most obvious characteristics are those shapes formed by old age and extreme weather conditions.”

What type of pot can be used for bunjin? As with the style itself, less is more. A round, drum, or a nail head pot could be a good choice for the bunjin bonsai. Another good selection would be a natural-looking crescent or boat shaped pot. In most cases, the pot will seem somewhat undersized. As in any bonsai, the tree and pot must harmonize with each other. The same rules for color and glaze apply to bunjin as in any other design.

Thinking about trying to create your own bunjin bonsai? What type of plant material can be used? Just like other bonsai, you have many choices. The most often used material is some type of pine, because they can be found growing in nature in a bunjin style. Juniper would be another good choice, but really you are only limited by your own imagination. Whatever you choose, it should be a material that will allow the harsh pruning and sparse foliage that is the hallmark of bunjin. It should also be something that does well in our southern climate. Bunjin are mostly grown in small pots, which is something to consider in the heat of our summers.

I love this style. It is a challenge to create, and I find that it epitomizes the very spirit of what we as bonsai artist try to create. Bunjin is about the struggle for survival against great odds. It has great age, and displays fantastic movement, and as such, great drama. It tells a story. It surely evokes a feeling in the viewer. It clings to life, year after year, despite itself, in the most adverse conditions. What is not to love about this wonderful style? What more could one want from a bonsai? This fall, I will create a huge black pine bunjin bonsai. I will post pictures on the GNOBS forum of the process.



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