



SOMERSET BONSAI SOCIETY

Bonsai Newsletter - January 2025



Ade's Alder bonsai

Welcome to the January meeting report. To start the year off, we were lucky to have Amelia Williams back. Some of you may remember her excellent talk in April 2024 on Roots and Repotting. This time Amelia gave us an insight into the world of Penjing.

So, what is Penjing? Penjing is the Chinese art of creating potted landscapes. "Pen" translates as pot and "Jing" as landscape. Amelia explained that she first encountered Penjing, when she attended the Bonsai Club's International Convention in 2015, in Guangzhou, China. Penjing is a very different approach to "bonsai". It is still a tree in a pot but with added extras to create a landscape. Whilst that sounds simple enough, there is often a huge complexity to the creation of good Penjing. As with the more familiar styles of bonsai, "simplicity hides great skill and technique". Amelia explained that we would not have enough time to go into all the rules/guidelines of the various schools and styles but we would get time to try our hand at creating our own Penjing.

Although we defined Penjing as a potted landscape, if you look for images of Chinese Penjing you will see marble slabs, copper and bronze trays and a variety of other receptacles being used to contain the other elements. Penjing holds a very important place in Chinese culture and reflects the wide variety of natural landscapes that can be found across China. As a side note, I think that one of the reasons that Penjing is not so popular in the West is that we find it difficult to connect with the images we see in Chinese Penjing. The landscapes appear alien with soaring mountains and outlandish rock formations but if you Google Chinese landscapes, you will see that what they are doing with their Penjing is replicating the landscapes that they have seen on their travels or where they grew up.



Hunan Zhangjiajie National Forest Park in China

The art of Penjing is documented in Chinese literature as far back as the 1st century CE and there are images of small potted landscapes to be found on tomb wall paintings from the early eighth century. Originally, it was closely associated with religion and then came to be seen as a status symbol and it was these tray landscapes that made their way to Japan, to eventually become the bonsai that we see today.



Amelia had brought a huge selection of Penjing related items for members to create their own masterpieces.

There are a variety of Penjing styles but to simplify things they can be divided into; Tree Penjing, Water Penjing and Land and Water Penjing. The water in Penjing doesn't have to

be actual water it can be inferred by the use of sand, gravel, rocks or by using a marble slab/container.

There are many schools of Penjing, often representing the natural landscapes of the area. The most famous one is probably the Lingnan School, which has a very simple approach to creating "Tree Penjing" using the "clip and grow" method. The style is free form and simplistic and has a very naturalistic look. Often using a single tree placed to one side of the pot with a single figurine. The main species used in the Lingnan School are; Apricots, Camelias, Elms and Orange Jasmin.

The Shanghai Style/School is a more formal style with the trees being shaped to look like an idealistic representation of a natural tree rather than allowed to grow as it wishes. It is often said that the Shanghai Style influenced Japanese bonsai in the early 19th Century as it uses iron wire to shape the trunk and branches, along with pruning to produce foliage pads. Species used in this style include; White and Black Pines and Podocarpus.

The Zhongzhou School places emphasis on creating "aged looking" trees that show the effects of weather and time on their trunk and branches. Branches are curved and often styled into six pads around a twisting/curved trunk. Elms are often used for this style.

The Yangzhou or Yang School could be considered as an extension of the Lingnan Style but with much more ramification in the branches and an emphasis on aged trunks. Twisted trunks with well-defined foliage pads, shaped to look like clouds. Elms and Boxes are commonly used for this style.

The Sichuan School looks very simple but is in practice quite difficult to get right. It uses rocks, often carved into naturalistic shapes and younger trees to represent the mountainous scenery of the area. Cotoneaster and Box trees are often used because of their small leaves, planted on the rocks and then the rocks arranged on shallow trays or marble slabs.



Peter gets down to some serious Penjing design.

The Windswept style of Penjing, as its name suggests, seeks to replicate the ancient, wind-blown trees that you see at the coast or on higher ground. This is clearly a style that we can relate to. If you have ever been to the coast or on the moors you will have

seen trees like this. This style exudes character and age, think “the Willow from the Harry Potter film” or some of the drawings from “Arthur Rackham’s illustrations”.



Cathy and Paul, competing for best Penjing.

Amelia ended her talk with two videos of Chinese Penjing collections, showing the variety of trees and accoutrements that are used to create Penjing in their homeland.



Amelia gives Pam “the apprentice” some tips.

The second part of the evening gave members a chance to create their own Penjing using their own materials or those selected from Amelia’s huge stock of pots, trees, rocks and figurines. I will let the images speak for themselves and hopefully they will give you inspiration to try Penjing for yourself.



In the foreground, some of Amelia's Penjing resources!



Stephanie's beach inspired Penjing



Roger's "Jurassic Park meets Chinese garden" Penjing.



Paul's "Zog the Penjing dragon"



Zac went for a minimalistic "Zen Garden" vibe in his Penjing



Peter's "Lakeside" Penjing



Cathy mixed a Welsh hillside with a Zen Garden. Very RHS Chelsea!



Paul, on the other hand went for a traditional Sichuan Style Penjing



Dale's compact but engaging design



Pam's Minion inspired Penjing.



Nigel's Penjing with bridge, the Sichuan Style proving popular



Tree of the Month competition – “Winter Image”

During tea break, we had our Tree of the Month judging,



Bob's Chinese Elm.



Richard M's Western Red Cedar.



Zac's Hawthorn

And the winner of the people's vote is: Bob. Well done Bob, on your way to winning again this year!

If you would like to read the judges' comments on all the entries then [click here](#).

Well, that's all for now. February will be our auction night and our following meeting will be on the 12th March (a Spring workshop) so lots of repotting, pruning and maybe a bit of wiring!

The tree of the month will be back, with "Shohin" as the topic.

Til the next time, stay safe and "keep doing bonsai".

Alistair