Bonsai – Far East art of landscape miniaturization

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Abstract: Landscape miniaturization as a special art form has its roots in Far East design philosophy. Combining philosophy, painting, sculpture, architecture and gardening only recently has it made its way to the European arena with great success. Based on simplicity, asymmetry, irregularity, ambiguity and in line with large scale architecture it becomes an interesting and very popular trend in landscape architecture.

Key-Words: Landscape Miniaturization, Far East Art, Living Sculpture, Landscape in a pot, Bonsai

1 Introduction

Since the beginning nature has been a starting point for humans looking for identity. It is an ancient being in which one tries to find an answer to one's origin and meaning of life. The word 'bonsai' derives from Chinese and consists of two parts 'bon' – tray or vessel and 'sai' which stands for tree or plant [2] [5]. It defines a tree miniature or a group of miniature trees which depict a particular landscape. The bonsai art takes its root in China, even though it is commonly linked with Japan. There during the Han dynasty which ruled around 200 BC first landscape miniatures were created by the name of pun-ching by arranging few or several small trees embedded in a flat tray [6][7].

Such landscapes were diversified by hills, rocks, water reservoirs and ceramic figures which depicted pagodas, animals and people. Pun-ching masters create these miniature landscapes so highly appreciated in China up until this day. Later during the Tsin dynasty singular tree and shrub specimen planted in pots were called pun-sai [4]. Back then the Chinese were fascinated with the natural trees growing in the mountains which thanks to extreme weather conditions were shaped in a unique and dramatic manner. Gardeners tried to capture such tree picture in a miniaturized way. A true breakthrough took place in 1664 when a runaway official Chu Shun-Sui arrived in Japan with his bonsai collection and professional literature. It was mainly for his knowledge and experience that helped to make bonsai popular amongst the nobility, high rank officials and samurais. The Japanese as a flexible and open nation swiftly adapted the novelty being miniature trees. Simultaneously, they set rules of ways to shape bonsai and named particular styles which have been used up until this day. A major bonsai boom in Japan took place in Edo period (1603-1868) under the Tokugawa rule. Until today there is still a pine bonsai growing formed in first half of XVII century by the third shogun of Tokugawa family [8]. Probably it is the oldest bonsai in Japan. The story of trees and landscapes planted in ceramic pots had been promoted in poems and paintings and sketches. Tree miniature illustrations from Edo period show their creator's profound gardening experience and unique aesthetics feeling. The Japanese while looking after their bonsai patiently they have treated them as enchanted in a miniature tree microcosms, as in accordance with a saying of an ancient philosopher Lao Tsy who claimed that one can discover the world without leaving one's home [9].

Today bonsai is known all around the world. Still it was not for China but for Japan that showed bonsai to the western world. First
presentation took place on the international exhibition in 1878 in Paris and the following in 1909 in London [9]. Everybody was amazed by the miniature trees but due to the lack of professional literature this art did not stay in Europe as the Japanese had not allowed during that period any professional information about bonsai to be published. Only during Second World War did the American soldiers start to bring miniature trees and the know-how to the US and thanks to a pioneer book of Jyuji Yoshimura "The Art of Bonsai – Creation, Care and Enjoyment" published in Great Brittan the informational barrier was breached and the miniaturization art flooded the whole Europe.

![Fig.1, Composition by Wlodzimierz Pietraszko](image)

**2 Reflection of nature's Beauty**

Bonsai is not only a tree in a pot. It is also a reflection of strive to form and essence perfection. This art is based on tree picture that grows freely in nature. Bonsai differs from the natural trees. The Japanese introduced a division which helped to easily get ones bearings within this form of art. The plants have been divided based on genus, species, size, origin, final composition place and style represented by the trunk. This last division depends on the tree trunk line (or several trunks) and branch composition. Hence one can say that style in bonsai stands for form one gives to a tree to depict its natural sort. It also depends mainly on the plant material's characteristics. There are styles which expose a single tree in a pot and landscape forms – being an arranged tree group in a pot.

Style names as well as the whole professional language around bonsai comes from Japan which helps avoiding long descriptive definitions that are normally interpreted in a different way by the professional literature authors and the ones who plant the trees. The usage of such original terms proves also helpful within the international bonsai communication.

Nowadays within the European modern art of tree forming there is a trend to move away from the classical style and go towards more eclectic forms. Most probable is due to a fact that Europeans plan to crate more dynamic and stronger forms as they drop the classical approach and static way of showing nature so commonly used in Japan. This peculiar mannerism is a transition phase just like trends in architecture that come and go.

**2.1 Single tree forms and its reflection in landscape.**

**Moyogi** – irregular straight style. Its main feature is a harmonic sinusoidal curve on the trunk line. The back of every curve is a place where side branches are situated, while treetop is in straight line with the trunk tree axis. Tree gains an optical balance based on that. In Europe this style is represented by hornbeam, especially when it is situated next to fast growing trees. In such situations the tree part that receives the most sunlight grows the most. When facing variable light conditions the tree trunk is twisted. This is an effect of variable surrounding conditions adaptation.
Kengai – cascade style. A tree needs to be deeply rooted in the ground in order to hang from rocky cascades, hence bigger than normally pot is used to anchor and balance the tree composition. The lower part of the cascade should be beneath the pot. A tree planted in this style has the most balanced proportions as the treetop, tree trunk, the middle of the lower pot brink and the lowest point of the tree situated above the ground are in one line. Such trees can be seen in mountain areas. Normally they grow on rocky cascades where under difficult conditions they are shaped in a characteristic manner: trunk is directing down and branches seem to be looking for light. It gives one a feeling that nature is fighting gravity.

Shakan – leaning style. The main feature of this form is a lightly or sometimes strongly bent tree trunk. The treetop is formed regularly in a wide based cope shape. The main point here would be the visual balance of the tree weight [8]. One can accomplish that by forming and situating branches low on the trunk. Trees are subject to such shape while under strong winds or if exposed too little sunlight. This style symbolizes a great will to live. While the bottom trunk almost lies on the ground the top is directing upwards which stands for fight for survival.

Chokkan – classic straight style. The main tree element is solid, straight trunk narrowing upwards. Branch arrangement should reflect a wide based cone. The closer to the top, the branches become shorter. Branch arrangement depicts a natural tree; branches directed upwards (young tree characteristic), branches leaning downwards (e.g. snow weight) and umbrella-like branches. Working on the right branch shape is connected with special aging techniques: Jin, Shari, Saba-miki, which allow the tree to look more naturalistic and breaks the straight trunk rhythm.

Bunjin – literate style. This style derived from Chinese school of landscape painting called Nanga [9]. These artists used the patterns as seen with trees growing under extreme conditions. These are highly present at the sea side or in places where trees compete to gain access to sunlight. Such trees are ascetic; they have a long, thin and aged trunk with very few branches.

Hokidachi – broom style. Plants formed in line with this style reflect their nature and simplicity which underlines their unprecedented beauty. The style name derives from the treetop shape that is similar to an Japanese broom faced upside down. The original models used to be pasture trees where lower branches would be eaten by animals which eventually would lead to forming of a regular treetop.

Fukinagashi – wind style. It is inspired by trees which grow in mountain areas or places subject to strong winds. One can observe in nature that tree branches usually direct one way – imposed by the wind. There are two style varieties; trees formed in a way that seem they were subject to constant wind blows or trees formed by an unexpected, strong blow.

3.2 Landscape forms and its reflection in landscape.

Landscape forms are mainly known from experiencing the nature. The biggest part while creating landscape forms is played by practice to arrange plants used for such group. This is a challenge for landscape architects as miniature
landscape creation rules are similar to the ones used in large scale architecture.  

**Ishizuke** – rock style. The style name literally means ishi – stone and tsuki – fixed at. It is inspired by trees that grow on the stone surface. Their roots embrace the stone or even grow into the stone clefts. While designing a bonsai in this style one has to keep in mind the natural order; evergreen trees should be planted higher than the deciduous ones. Important part is also played by harmonizing rock's size, shape, color and texture with the tree species and tree form.  

**Yose – uye** – forest style. In other words it means a group of trees planted in a big, shallow vessel. Forest style reflected in miniature and woodland you can come across flatlands and coastal areas. While using this style one needs to capture the place appearance as well as the atmosphere. The number of trees can vary but it cannot be less than 7. One should take only odd numbers into consideration in order to avoid symmetric compositions. They are set in accordance with the Lo—Shu scheme within Fibonacci sequence.  

**Saikai** – landscape style. The style name originates from Japan and stands for "a landscape on a plate". It is an art of recreating a particular landscape as a miniature. There are three different style types. The first one is keto – bonkei. Its main feature is the usage of keto – dark brown clay mixed with peat from decayed plant substances and loam. Secondly there is bonseki, where sceneries are created with white sand on a black, covered in lacquer tray. Neither ground nor plant is used here. The third type is hako—niwa. This is art of creating miniature garden in all types of vessels with usage of artificial or natural resources.  

3 Landscape aesthetics.  
In order to design and create a landscape miniature one needs to get acquainted with the Far East design philosophy and with landscape aesthetics in particular. The Japanese in contact with powerful elements live in a close-knit relationship with nature and they have built their mind frame based on fragility, vanity, passing of time, to which philosophical and religious systems gave a metaphysical character. One of the value theories originated out of such basis, namely aesthetics.  

**Suggestion and being incomplete** – this rule is the highest value in terms of art work in the Japanese culture. Within art, most culture areas, as well as in daily customs one can find ambiguities standing for being incomplete. The latter gives the audience the possibility to fill the gaps with his or her own object or activity imagination [6]. While creating a masterpiece the author is supposed to suggest in a subtle way such potential matters by means of masterpiece construction that captures ideas but does not restrain interpretation. One has to bear in mind that a perfect completion of the masterpiece limits the interpretation, hence decreases its value.  

Irregularity and asymmetry. The emphasis put on the beginning and the completion disables regularity and perfection. Based on the oldest preserved literature and artistic sources one can conclude that the Japanese avoided symmetry and regularity, believing that they create limitations and obstacles for the power of suggestion. Irregularity was
obtained by avoiding even numbers as well as common usage of the numbers 7 - 5 - 3 (e.g. while designing a stone group). Furthermore, irregularity is strongly connected with the Buddhist Zen philosophy and triangular forms with marked angle direction. They are made of so called three lines: sky line (vertical), earth (horizontal) and human being (diagonal that connects the above mentioned). The artistic creation based on asymmetry or even imperfection is characterized by dynamics. A masterpiece built in such way has an enclosed energy and creates a sort of tension that unites the structure.

Fig.6, Asymmetry. Project by Katarzyna Pietraszko

**Simplicity and impermanence.** Usage of most economical means in order to reach the set aim comes from the Zen philosophy which influences the Japanese aesthetics most. Simplicity is an aesthetical rule, far safer than abundance. Having decided to use it and being in line with the suggestion rule, the Japanese lost a part of possible artistic effects in order to gain possibility to create universal are works, not subject to variable trends. Apart from love to simplicity and objects' natural characteristics there is one more very typical of Japan aesthetical approach – impermanence. It is also known to a general definition of beauty as a glimpse on a object can stimulate the sense of beauty. Simplicity reached by working on each and every detail and creation of natural atmosphere.

**4 Conclusion**

Bonsai treated as a living sculpture can be a reflection of tree sorts in nature: from single specimens to dense forests situated in between meadows or at a mountain slope. The art of landscape miniaturization is a special field of knowledge as it links elements of philosophy, painting, sculpture, architecture and gardening. The artist working on a living plant follows the general rules of aesthetics: sense of beauty, simplicity, asymmetry and suggestiveness. He also has to show the capability of combining and balancing various forms, textures, colors and spaces. In order to create landscape miniature one also needs natural science knowledge, ability to see different forms one comes across in nature as well as changeability of plant form. This art should be considered from a perspective of Far East design philosophy, environmental psychology and nature aesthetics.

The basis of bonsai art is eastern way of world perception. Asian way of life constantly aims at human harmony with nature and the entire outer space. The mutual interaction between a human being and bonsai has a deeper meaning originating from Buddhist Taoism philosophy. In European culture the art of miniaturization exists for a short period of time and with great success finds its place in conceptual art. It has been also adapted by landscape architects fascinated by the possibility to design nature sceneries rescaled to a size of a pot.

**References:**


