

Artistic Foundations of Bonsai Design by Andy Rutledge

Summary by ARTURO CID

There is a web site that offers a very educational book by Andy Rutledge that I summarized in a newsletter a few years ago but merits repetition:

<http://www.andyrutledge.com/book/index.html>

I found the site very informative. His title is “Artistic Foundations of Bonsai Design” and I will summarize the content in this article mainly because it will make me read it again and it may be a short version for someone who may put off reading the small book but may be encouraged by my review to read it and see the great pictures and drawings.

- Design succeeds if it is evocative, provocative, natural, cohesive, interesting, dynamic, descriptive, clever, and has rhythm and flow.
- Line, form, color, and texture are the building blocks of a meaningful design.
- Line and Form: A vertical line can show strength, confidence or express loneliness while a slanted line can show movement or drama. A curved line can express calm, stable, or lazy flowing feeling.
- Emphasis: The Artist can use emphasis to make a point. A photographer may blur out the photo except the main character so that the viewer will focus his undivided attention on that character.
- Size: The tree and trunk ratio in Bonsai are usually 1:3 to 1:12. Leaning the tree forward also makes the tree bigger as do branch proportions with decreasing inter-nodes going up the trunk. Age can also be conveyed by angling the branches downward, showing well developed surface root structures, exaggerated trunk girth, sparse foliage and open composition, signs of damage, deadwood and rough or corky bark (in some species)
- Telling the story we want to tell needs the proper *environment*. Display companion scrolls and companion plants that come from the same environment you wish to exhibit are helpful. Bonsai stands are elements of formality. Pot size and shape can be effective in indicating environment.

In the chapter toward more artistic design he talks about how, in order to portray the image of a great tree in nature, *we must follow simplification of branch and shoot arrangement*. In nature this is quite chaotic. We also need to form foliar pads to provide emphasis on the outline and disguise the out-of-proportion of tree to leaf or needle size that we sometime encounter.

Another artistic tool that is important is *branch placement*. The 1-2-3 branch order is right, back, left or left, back, right or right, left, back. This is the mechanism for inducing a specific flow that carries the viewer's eye into and around the composition. Poor branch order or bar-branches (same level on opposite sides) causes the viewer's eye to stop.

As an artist it is your responsibility to invite the viewer into the composition and lead them through it, *leading them to the good stuff* and away from the badness in your design. Once they see the goodness in your Bonsai composition and not the badness (there is always badness in there some where) they will like what they see and the flaws will appear diminished.

Sometimes a tree will have one outstanding feature. It is important as part of the design to accentuate this promising feature. It can be deadwood, or color, or surface root structure. It is also important to *disguise flaws* by working to *direct the viewer's eye elsewhere*.

Make sure you maintain *Design Integrity*. Maintain all of the compositional elements of your Bonsai towards communicating a consistent message. Know what trunk form or branch placement convey certain meanings and which species are best suited and how to use the environmental factors to complement the tree.

Make sure you do not run into *problems of communication*. There can be inconsistency of age and strength like a black Japanese pine with large trunk, aged bark, powerful surface roots significant taper but we have grown branches that are long and thin and shaped with flowing curves looking immature and feminine.

You can have *conflicting messages* like a gracefully curved trunk but branches that come straight off the trunk in a horizontal line and stay straight, or, a thick, tapering trunk that ends in a conical apical structure indicating a young tree. Old trees, especially deciduous trees, generally have rounded crowns.

Other mistakes to try to avoid are compositional such as touching tangents: Two lines or outlines of different origins touching (like crossing branches) creating a distracting feature. Odd new angles (unless used as a focal point) and inconsistent mainlines. Examples are seen in trees that have straight trunks half the way up and then start curving introducing a change in consistency.

Avoid planting position *errors* since the position of the tree in the pot, the rise of the trunk from the soil, the inclination of the tree, and the planting level of the tree are all among the very first elements noticed when someone views a Bonsai. The pot should be placed in the center of the stand.

Avoid symmetry. Symmetry is seldom found in nature. Regularly spaced trees in a group planting give a picket-fence appearance. The same goes for horizontal lines of branch arrangements going across the trunk.

Bonsai succeed or fail based on their artistry. Good Bonsai speak to us communicating the artist's message.