



SOMERSET BONSAI SOCIETY

Bonsai Newsletter March 2023



A collected Scots Pine, on its way to becoming a classic Bunjin.

Welcome to the March meeting report. By popular demand this month's presentation is on a somewhat "niche" topic, in bonsai circles.

Literati style bonsai, also known as "Bunjin" style in Japan. Do you have any bonsai that you would describe as "literati"? Have you ever thought about creating a bonsai in the literati style? Are you unsure what a literati style bonsai looks like? And finally, do you have any tall spindly trees that you don't know what to do with? If the answer to the last three questions are YES, then you are in luck because John will cover all of those topics in his talk, and some more!

John started by saying that, people would be amazed by how many different species can be styled as literati. It is not just Pines and Junipers. In fact, most trees that are suitable for bonsai can be turned into literati and John had brought along a number of different species that he was training as literati.

First up was a Silver Birch in a cream-coloured round pot, commissioned from Dan Barton. The first thing to consider when choosing material for literati, or Bunjin, style is the trunk. You are looking for a thin, delicate trunk, with a slight gradual taper. There are no size limitations on the style. You can have small, shohin/mame, size right up to Kifu and even "patio" size trees. What is important is keeping the tree in proportion = thin trunk, delicate branches, small shallow pot.



John and Michael having a good old natter, probably about pots!

Pots are important for all bonsai and with literati; the wrong pot can render the rest of the design ineffective. John read out a quote that he had saved on his phone about the Japanese attitude to Nanban pots:-

"Nanban – this category contains all our irregular, odd shaped Nanban or handmade styles and Wabi-sabi or imperfectly perfect style bonsai pots. These pots are not your clean and smooth sided ones that you tend to see in the marketplace. They tend to have a more rustic and "old school" quality to them. Sometimes it is important to break with tradition and stand out from the crowd".

However, this does not mean that we cannot use traditional bonsai pots. As long as we understand that "less is more" in Bunjin circles! If you look at the image above you will see a selection of Nanban style pots, on the table in front of John. You can also search for Nanban bonsai pots on the internet but keep in mind that not every "Nanban" pot is actually a Nanban pot.

John went on to explain that, recently Thor Holvira, the Swedish bonsai potter had written an article on his Blog about Nanban pots and stated that the term "Nanban" translated as "Barbarian south" and was used to describe ceramics that came from "a country to the south of Japan". Quite a vague term and one that is not easy to define, even for the Japanese! Later it came to describe ceramics from south east Asia and especially Korea. Later still it referred to European imports, not just in ceramics but all artworks. Today it can be used to describe a pot that exhibits a "Primitive elegance" in the way that it has been made.



Geoff eyes up the line-up of potential Literati bonsai.

Next, John described how he had styled a *Pinus Thunbergii* Var. *Corticata* into a chuhin size Bunjin. The *Corticata* cultivar is known for its "Cork bark", which it develops on the trunk. Different cultivars have different types of cork bark on their trunk and unlike other Pines the age of a tree is shown by the lines on the "Cork wings" rather than the rings on the trunk. Unfortunately, *Corticata* have a will of their own and often prove temperamental when being trained. They lose their branches and shape very easily and don't like the cold. However, John is persevering with this one, hopefully it will continue to thrive and will eventually be repotted into a rough textured round pot. The next tree was a *Sabina juniper*, planted in a double pot. These pots are often seen in Japanese nurseries and are a relic from the atomic bombs that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki during the Second World war. In the ruins of these cities, people found

ceramics that had been fused together by the intense heat. Kitchen ware, cups, bowls, garden pots and bonsai pots were joined together in unique ways and in later years some of these were used to pot up bonsai as a reminder of the tragic events. John explained that Sabina junipers, a Mediterranean species, don't always do well in our cold weather. That said, they do make nice bonsai with their delicate foliage and dead wood and this example is pretty much finished.

Nigel spending some of his hard-earned money on pots made by Chris Jeffreys from Spectre Ceramics.



Leaving evergreens for a while, John showed a Loose Flowering Hornbeam that he has been styling as a deciduous Literati. John purchased this at a wholesale bonsai emporium and was drawn to its lack of lower branches. A lot of people would dismiss this tree but John could see further into its existence and the potential to have something different. The tree has very nice trunk movement and even its penchant for losing branches will not affect the overall design, as they do back bud on their trunks so you can replace lost branches. These trees also produce "Hop" like flowers and develop striated bark. The pot is another Dan Barton commission, a rugged pot with a crazed glaze that is ideal for this type of tree.

The free movement that defines the Literati/Bunjin style means that a tree does not have to climb into the sky. It can be a "reverse" Literati, what you and I might call a cascade or semi-cascade. John asked if anyone has purchased the book by Zhao Qingquan on Literati Style Penjing. In his opinion this is one of the best books on styling bonsai that you can buy. The artistry behind the bonsai, shown in this book, should make any budding "Bonsai artist" think hard about how they style their own trees. Well worth getting a copy if you can.

The next tree is one of these. Caragana is a member of the Pea family and there are two varieties; The Siberian Pea tree and the other is the Japanese variety. So, are these nice trees to work with? Well, the answer is a resounding NO, says John. They are worse than Berberis as they are covered in fine, needle like thorns and are a nightmare to wire and prune. Unlike Hawthorns, these thorns die off when the tree matures so they get easier to work with as time goes on. They produce yellow, pea like flowers and command a high price when grown as bonsai.

A Japanese Pea tree in the reverse Literati style.



Back to evergreens for a change and a White Pine, Zushio, which had been grafted onto a Cork Bark Black Pine which John then grafted onto Black Pine root stock at the end of the 1980's. John's aim was to get a nice rugged trunk then work on the branches and design. Another "top tip" for styling Literati – always have the branches pointing downwards from the trunk rather than coming out and then bending down. This gives the design a much more aged appearance but does require branches to be wired when they are still thin; otherwise they may break at the trunk.



A Black Pine/
Zuisho White Pine
Literati – 30 years
in the making.

Next, John worked on a few of the more unusual species that he uses for bonsai: a Forsythia, a Persian Ironwood tree and an Acacia.



Just for Ade, John brought along a Forsythia that he is training in the Bunjin style.

John explained that he has always liked to work with unusual species, and that all too often we choose the same species for bonsai and miss the opportunities presented by working with lesser-known ones.



Even an Acacia tree can become a Bunjin bonsai.

Tree of the Month

Having "Binged" on Bunjin for a couple of hours, it was time for tea & biscuits and the Tree of the Month competition.

The theme was "Literati" of course and there were a variety of entries:



Nigel's Chamaecyparis



Richard M's Scots pine.



Richard P's Cedar



Michael's Fuji Cherry

And the winner was: my collected Scots Pine, see image at the start of this report as I forgot to take a photo of my own tree and had to do it at home afterwards!

[Click here](#) if you would like to read Ade's critique on the entries.

After the break, John spent some time styling a number of starter trees in the Literati style. Small Scots Pines, Rowan, Spruces, Larches and even a Ceanothus were pruned and wired into shape. After a few years of growth, they would be ready to be potted up into suitable Nanban pots.



The final tree was a Cedar that John had used for a demonstration at the Bristol Bonsai Society, back in November 2022. During the demo, John shortened the tree by four feet and heavily wired the trunk. However, as it was late in the year, John decided to wait until the sap was flowing before bending the trunk to the required degree. The trunk will need some more heavy wire and the attention of some "branch benders", as demonstrated in the image below. In view of the current weather conditions this will probably be done towards the end of April. We look forward to seeing the result in a few years' time.



Once again, the clock had beaten us and it was time to pack up. I hope this brief summary of John's excellent presentation has inspired you to look at potential bonsai material in a different way. It may not be suitable for a heavy trunked, formal upright but you could make a nice Bunjin out of it!

Next meeting, 12th April, we have a workshop, focusing on "problem trees" and the Tree of the Month theme will be "Spring trees". I wonder how many of those trees will turn into Literati!

Until the next time, take care, stay safe and keep doing bonsai.

Alistair