

A Brief Exploration of the Literati Style

By Will Heath



Five Needle Pine by Qingquan Zhao

Like the style itself, the name used to describe it takes on many forms and the usage changes from region to region. The word Literati is used by many practitioners and is a Latin name originally attributed to the Japanese Bunjin due to the lack of an exact English equivalent. Bunjin is in turn a translation of the Chinese Wenjen, the word used in Chinese to denote those scholars who were practiced in the arts.

I will not dive deeply into the long and varied history of the Wenjen or Bunjin style of bonsai or the history surrounding the scholars who created such after their break from traditional methods. I will also not explore in depth the style of painting which preceded the bonsai development into the style commonly called Literati. There are already many detailed histories of the Literati, the Wenjen, Literati painting and Literati bonsai in publication, some which are listed as references and in the

further reading notes at the end of this article. For the purposes of this article, I will briefly touch upon some important points to consider when thinking about this style.

It should be noted however that the Bunjin and Wenjen, although belonging to an elite class of scholars and artists, were not always looked upon with awe by the community as a whole at that time. Their break from standardized tradition upset many and their works were seldom understood, indeed the Literati style of painting was often referred to as the "scrawls of drunken monks." As often happens when an artist breaks away from the common or from what people are used to seeing and are comfortable with, they were ridiculed and often dismissed. We can see this in the arts to this day, in this aspect, not much has changed.

What is Literati Style?

Of all the terms used to describe a Literati style bonsai, the words "refined elegance" have no doubt been used the most. While the words are indeed fitting for this style, they can also be used in conjunction with many other styles of bonsai. Literati style bonsai do have an air of refined elegance that lends greatly to their subtle beauty and while many claim that appreciating Literati bonsai is an acquired taste, I differ in this opinion and instead feel that quality Literati bonsai appeals to experienced, inexperienced, and non-bonsaist artistic sensibilities immediately.

I have had many opportunities to observe and listen to the comments of the inexperienced and the beginners of the art while they viewed bonsai at shows and events. Most were awe struck at Literati style bonsai and seem to "get it" almost immediately. It didn't matter that they may have never viewed a tree like it in nature, it didn't matter that it were truly unlike all the other bonsai on display, what mattered is that the Literati style bonsai spoke loudly of refinement and elegance and the viewer liked the image as presented.

Traditionally Literati bonsai have trunks that twist and turn in multiple, often dramatic curves, usually have slender trunks which have no lower branches to speak of, and have an obvious lack of Nebari in most cases. Closer to an informal upright than any other style, it escapes from classification as such because of the lack of Nebari and lower branches. But there is something else, the foliage of a Literati often is purposely sparse, just enough to sustain the tree and keep it healthy. John Naka once said of this style, "It is a dream, an abstract. It is an extremely advanced, significant bonsai design." These words of John's capture the essence of the Literati Style Bonsai. John Naka wrote an article titled, "Characteristics of Bunjin Style" which was published in the Golden Statements Magazine (March/April 1993) and quoted recently by Eric Schrader at the Bonsai Society of San Francisco's web site. In this article about Literati, John made some other interesting definitions of the style, some of which I have listed below.

- It has shape or form but there is no definite pattern.
- It has no pattern, it is irregular and seems disfigured.
- It is like food that has no taste at the beginning but the more you chew the more flavor comes out. When you first look at Bunjin style there is nothing exciting about it, it is so skimpy and lonely. But the more you observe it the more the tree quality and natural traits will come out. You will feel something from inside of your mind, and not only through the surface eyes.
- It looks like it is struggling for its survival, or a form of agony. The tree itself should not be in this condition, in reality it should be healthy. The shape or form may indicate struggle but not health. It seems to be a very cruel method but it is only concept. Its appearance should not be too serious nor easy, it should be free, unconstrained, witty, clever, humorous and unconventional. A good example for this is a study of any of nature's tree that has survived some sort of problem or disaster.
- To avoid uselessness, the ultimate final form or shape is a very important technique.
- It should portray a simple abstract painting, Senryu, Haiku, poem, music and song.
- Shape or form is from wind, weather, not too rugged but more graceful.



Pinus pentaphylla by Steve Tolley

Literati Origins and Inspiration

Here we have the origins of the style influencing the form. Literati painting was born of minimalism philosophy and the attempts to duplicate these painted trees with real trees in the form of bonsai

stayed true to its parent, Literati bonsai were tree forms reduced to the bare elements. Like quick strokes of a calligraphy brush, the literati bonsai portrays the fullness of a tree with few, precise strokes.

Chinese and later the Japanese put great value on the art of calligraphy and the techniques used in calligraphy naturally carried over into the ink and brush paintings, in fact, the same strokes used for one were often used in the other. Coupling calligraphy techniques with minimalism philosophies produced trees, in these paintings, that expressed everything about a tree in a few simple strokes of the brush.

Many people are quick to link Literati style bonsai with these ancient ink paintings by the Chinese but what is not as well known is that cascading trees were just as prominent as subjects as the trees we recognize as Literati, if not more so, but that and the discussion as to why the more common cascade in these paintings took a backseat to what we now call Literati Bonsai is another article.

Early Japanese bonsaists begun to use the trees from popular paintings as portrayed in famous art books of the time such as Kaishien-Gaden as inspiration in designing bonsai and the Nansoga or painting style of bonsai begun. Nansoga was the term used to describe the Southern Song (Sung) Painting style or Southern Chinese Folk Painting style and so the first literati bonsai were called Nansoga. John Naka once wrote that most bonsai styles and words describing them have been based on this book as well.

The question of the origin of Literati bonsai is a little like the question of what came first, the chicken or the egg. We know that many of the first attempts at creating bonsai in this style were attempts to duplicate the trees featured in the paintings as mentioned above, but were the paintings simple minimalistic impressions of trees in nature or more so, inspired copies of such? An interesting discussion on Literati trees in nature took place here at AoB (<http://www.artofbonsai.org/forum/viewtopic.php?t=199>) in which it was suggested that the collecting of firewood in China resulted in many trees taking on the appearance of Literati. If one thinks of people reaching as high as they can and tearing or breaking off branches for firewood, it is not difficult to imagine the trees appearance afterward. Certainly there are other examples of natural Literati such as the trees by seashores, those that struggled at one time against competitors that long since disappeared, or many of the naturally growing Scots Pines in Europe, however it may very well be that the shortage of fuel in ancient China led man to unwittingly create trees that resembled the style, maybe more so than the environment did at the time.

There are some that would say that Literati represents an Expressionism art form rather than a minimalistic, stating that such trees strive to express subjective feelings and emotions rather than to depict reality or nature objectively, however I lean more toward the minimalistic school of thought, as with all bonsai, realism is a must for success.

It would seem that minimalistic trees in paintings were used along with those examples in nature as inspiration to create a style of bonsai that has endured for many centuries. A style that is considered by many to be the pinnacle of bonsai design, the elite style that represents all the grace and beauty that is possible in the art of bonsai. From the brush of one artist into the pot of another, it is truly a style that speaks of the history of our art form.



Five Needle Pine by Qingquan Zhao

Design Considerations

It is often said that when a piece of stock offers no other alternatives that a Literati should be made with it. John Naka himself once said, "Material for bunjin style can be started from an old "don't know what to do" type bonsai."

I personally think that this flippant characterization of the Literati style does more harm than good because, as with all styles, the stock must fit the design planned or else the tree is forced into becoming what it is not. This is what "listen to the tree" means, the tree knows what it can become

and to try and force it into a mold usually leads to mediocre results at the best. To say that stock that you can not figure out what do do with is suited for Literati is like saying that stock that you can not make a formal upright with should automatically be good for a cascade.

John, in his "Characteristics of Bunjin Style" article does list out some very useful considerations for designing a Literati, some of which are:

- Remove the useless part and excess branch drastically. Leave the least amount and indicate or exaggerate its natural beauty and characteristic trait.
- No matter how casual the methods, the tree still should be well conformed.
- Bunjin style is the art of space. Significant space should offer tremendous imagination.

There are other considerations when creating a Literati, such as:

- Taper. It is often said that taper is not an important consideration in Literati, but this is untrue in most cases. As with all trees taper plays an important role in the overall visual effect and in perspective.
- Nebari. Although Nebari can add to a Literati in some cases, the style can be successful without Nebari of any sort.
- Trunk. Emphasis should always be on the trunk, the viewer must see the trunk and the trunk must be the center of the design.
- Feminine in nature, the Literati should have the appearance of a slim, graceful trunk, but yet still speak of refined age.
- Foliage on a Literati should be sparse, speaking of a life of etching out survival against the elements. Lush, overabundant foliage should be avoided. The foliage should be enough to support the tree, but with plenty of empty space.
- There are no rules or even guidelines for the overall form, no branch placement rules, and no formula on how to twist and bend the trunk. The Literati's final image should speak of grace, elegance, balance, and form. It is the final image only that will tell if the design is successful.
- The design should be three-dimensional, Literati bonsai need the depth given by a good "in the round" design. The pots we use for Literati are usually small, somewhat shallow, and often round, all of which work very well for a bonsai designed in the round.



Literati drawing by John Naka, from the Jim Smith collection.

Challenges

Be it called Literati, Bunjin, Scholar Style, Wenjen, Nansoga, or the Southern Song Painting Style, there is little doubt that it is one of the most fascinating of all styles and also one of the hardest to successfully create. Hanging in the realm between nature and vision, realism and impressionism, dream and reality, it captures our imagination and in doing so, encompasses all that bonsai is and was meant to be.

Not a style to create with discarded stock, but instead a style that calls for a specific tree, a tree that has buried in it the soul of those ancient scholars, those who went outside of the traditional norm and strived to release the inner beauty of a tree with as few strokes as possible. The artist today, working with live trees instead of paper, with cutters and pliers instead of brushes must also release the soul within a tree, using as few strokes as possible. We do this by removing all of the unnecessary elements, leaving only those that can be molded into the dream John Naka once talked about, the dream, the abstract vision that is Literati.

Further reading:

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Kaishien gaden - The mustard seed garden painting manual, Japanese edition published 1753

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"The Origins of Literati Style" (<http://www.artofbonsai.org/forum/viewtopic.php?t=199>)

Reed College (<http://academic.reed.edu>)

University at Albany (<http://www.albany.edu/>)

Encarta (<http://encarta.msn.com>)

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