

The Myth of the Single Front

By Will Heath, USA



Bonsai by Vance Wood, Illustration by Will Heath

There is a prevalent idea in bonsai that a single small slice of the whole, a single artist defined view, commonly called the front, should be selected and styled for a very narrow viewing frame and displayed in such a manner that only this small view is shown.

It is too often insisted that a bonsai must have a single defined front and that everyone should believe the same way, based solely on what the artist believes is the best view.

In the following article I will show why I believe that the single front, as it is thought of in bonsai, is a myth and why we have come to be trapped in this mindset. I will define various types of fronts and I will attempt to dispel the myth that bonsai should be styled for one single front view only.

What Is A Front?

It is often explained that the front of a bonsai is the view looking at the bonsai about midway up the trunk, and at such an angle that the back rim of the pot is just barely visible. This is the precise angle that a show photograph is taken of the bonsai and as such it serves as the focal point around which the rest of the bonsai is styled.

The biggest mistake most make when talking about a front is assuming that there is only one type of front; the front that is shown when a photograph is taken. This is a flawed assumption as there are actually many types of fronts in bonsai. The front as we know it and talk so much about is just one of many possible fronts to use and it is most likely the worst of all as it is based on incorrect assumptions, as I will explain later in this article.

I have listed below what I feel are the many fronts of bonsai that we use for the reasons stated. Please excuse the coining of words and phrases below, but there are no other terms to go by.

Forced Front: Due to chop scars, improper branching, unbalanced branching, poor Nebari or other flaws a front is chosen based upon the need to hide these defects. This is very common these days as many people wish to rush a bonsai into a pot and show the bonsai before the faults are given time to heal properly and correct themselves. Another name for this could very well be the **Impatience Front**.

This is the most common front seen on bonsai that are for sale, as foliage and branching can be used to hide chops and other flaws in the tree. It is also the easiest front for the inexperienced to use, as mistakes can be simply turned to the back. The person looking to rush a plant so they can call it a bonsai, or the person looking for instant gratification, or the unscrupulous seller will mostly use this front, as it allows them to show one single acceptable view, usually the only acceptable view of their bonsai, quickly, without having to go through the normal period of corrections and allowing the plant to heal.

Container Front: Due to the shape or nature of the container a front is chosen that compliments the shape of the container. The artist then places their personal Visual Front in a manner that coincides with the Container Front.

Relief Front: Due to poor styling many bonsai will only have one single view which is visually acceptable. These bonsai are like relief sculptures in that they have one single view only that is pleasing and like relief sculptures, they virtually disappear when turned sideways. Bonsai with a

Relief Front often photograph well and are considered good by many because of the single view they present. However, as I will explain in detail below, these bonsai fail when displayed at shows.

Photo Front: Movie stars and other celebrities know that they have a side that photographs the best and go to great lengths to ensure that all pictures are taken from this flattering angle. While this is a good practice and cannot be condemned, the obvious must also be remembered, if these stars only had one good side, they certainly wouldn't be stars. It must also be said that the side a person thinks is best may not be the side others think is best.

Vanity dictates what side they feel is the best and the artist or photographer must capture the essence of the bonsai in a single photo, hence they select what they feel is the best view for such. To assume however that this view is the only view or that it will appeal to everyone is ridiculously simple minded.

The Photo Front is a point approximately half way up the trunk and is at such an angle that the back rim of the pot is just slightly in view. This angle is valid only in photographs, yet it is taught by many that this is the "front" for which the bonsai should be styled. This belief is incorrect, as this view is never seen outside of photographs, as I will explain below.

Visual Front: This is the front most bonsaists select when styling, photographing, or showing a bonsai. It is a combination of some or all of the other fronts. This front is the artist's preference; the single view they think is the best. It is the front they seek to highlight, in their styling efforts.

Where Did The Idea Of A Single Front Originate?

The Chinese originally created landscapes (Penjing) that were quite large, some represented entire empires and in order to view them in their entirety, one would have to walk around them to see everything, hence they were like scale models in that they were visually pleasing from all angles. Creations of Penjing often recreated actual landscapes such as the legendary islands of Penglai and did so with remarkable detail.

When bonsai was first introduced to Japan so was Saikei, miniature landscapes, which once were very popular but then they were forgotten as the Tokonoma (Art Alcove) and the bonsai displayed there gained center stage. Saikei were forgotten but the idea lived on in Japanese gardens such as the famous dry garden, "Ryoan-ji" which contains 15 stones. The remarkable thing about the composition at "Ryoan-ji" is that not all of it can be seen by the viewer from any one viewing angle. This garden is designed to be different from every angle, to be viewed from more than one position.

The Tokonoma in Japan is the major cause for the prevalent belief today that a bonsai should have a single front that is perfectly positioned for viewing. The thought that a single front only is displayed in a Tokonoma is a flawed one however, as I will go into detail later in this article. Let me just state here that it is hard to imagine that the Japanese, who have created such remarkable three-dimensional gardens, would somehow forsake this way of viewing beauty for a single two-dimensional single front of a bonsai. The Japanese are famous for having bonsai in their gardens and these creations are extraordinary in that they are indeed visually pleasing, no matter where one may be in the garden. I think this way of thinking indeed spills over into the bonsai displayed in a Tokonoma.

Does Everyone See The Same Front?

Take a world-class bonsai; photograph it from six or eight different angles and then line up these pictures and show them to two separate groups of people. One group would consist of experienced bonsaists and the other group consisting of people who are only vaguely aware of bonsai, those that know what a bonsai is, maybe that have wandered through a show or thumbed through a magazine before.

Now ask each member of both groups to select the front of the bonsai. Ask them to write down their choice and not to share their thoughts with the others.



Bonsai and photographs by Walter Pall

I have done this informally with pictures of Walter Pall's Juniper shown above and the results were astounding.

The first group consisting of experienced bonsaists did not all select a single front. Instead the selections were about evenly distributed toward three of the six views presented, but no view went unselected as the front. Amazingly, the majority was not with the front that Walter eventually chose to use in photographs.

What does this tell us? It tells us that each experienced viewer had a different way of seeing things, different preferences that were developed individually based on that single persons own life experiences. The best view they see is what brings out the best in the bonsai to them, what best said bonsai to them based on their training, understanding of the art, and what pleases them. The second group was even more interesting as were their questions that ranged from, "What do you mean by a front" to "Oh, I thought they were all different trees."

This second group, consisting of inexperienced people had results that were remarkably even for each possible front. There was no real significant preference for any of the views, most thought all were great and had a hard time choosing one single front.

As suspected, the fixation on a single best front is largely confined to experienced bonsaists and most likely this prevails because this is how they were taught and not because it is some immutable law of bonsai.

I am currently doing a more controlled experiment along these lines and invite every reader of this article to email me at will@artofbonsai.org and state their personal choice of a front, from the photographs above and include a brief explanation why they chose that one.

Drawings, Paintings, and Photography Misrepresent Bonsai.

Many newcomers to the art of bonsai see the majority, if not all of their first bonsai, in books meant to instruct. While these books have a valuable place and serve to impart knowledge to the curious they all have a basic flaw in common.

The drawings, illustrations, and pictures in these books are all two-dimensional. The artist or photographer carefully selected one single view of the bonsai to be photographed with great care, being certain to capture the one slice of the whole that they considered to be the best. Of the 360 degrees of a bonsai, only 1 degree is shown. This is what I call the Photo Front.

To the inexperienced, this portrays a flawed view of bonsai. We have all heard many people state that, after being acclimated to bonsai in books, they could not believe how big they actually were in

reality. This same sort of misconception also happens with the three dimensional aspects of bonsai. Until a person sees a quality bonsai up close, the role that all of the other sides of a bonsai play, when viewing one in person, is not apparent.

The newcomer sees the examples portrayed in books, photographs, drawings, paintings, or other two-dimensional venues and they attempt to duplicate what they see. Basing their efforts on a single view of a bonsai; a two-dimensional view, they take their stock and style only one side, the single front often talked about in the books, and they end up with exactly what they were duplicating, a two-dimensionally styled bonsai that lacks real depth and which is only visually pleasing from one single narrow view.

This is how many of us learned bonsai. Through books, Internet, magazines, paintings, drawings, and even demonstrations where the artist performing the demonstration did a single-front-only bonsai, just like they were taught to do.

Keeping this in mind, we must finally realize that styling a bonsai for a Photo Front only is fine only if you never plan on showing the bonsai in a live setting. The Photo Front is acceptable for photography only and offers no visually pleasing view in any other venue, as we will see below.

Bonsai and Bonsai Photography Are Not The Same Thing.

With the popularity of bonsai on the internet, in various bonsai magazines, and a rise in photo contests for bonsai, we have seen more bonsai than many of the masters in the past might have seen in a lifetime.

We are no better for it because what we see in these venues is strictly two-dimensional bonsai, photographs that can only show one degree of a three hundred and sixty degree piece of art. These photographs, while a form of art on their own, can not by even the wildest stretch of the imagination, be called bonsai. Instead they are bonsai photography. Like any other form of photography, they capture one slice of the whole and can not by themselves be called bonsai art any more than a photograph of a Frank Lloyd Wright building can be called architecture, or a Magritte painting of a pipe can be called a pipe.

Bonsai, being closely related to sculpture, shares many of the same attributes and also many of the same limitations. A painting can be photographed, being a two dimensional object and many of the original qualities are retained in the picture. However, when a bonsai or sculpture is photographed, you leave out three hundred and fifty nine degrees of what makes it what it is.

This fact is realized by many of the leading bonsai magazines and shows around the world. They call their contests "photo contests" and not "bonsai contests" for this very reason.

The Fallacy of the Single Front at a Show.

In Bonsai Today issue #101, on page 51 in an article by Marco Invernizzi titled "Transforming a Scots Pine" Marco says, "Have you ever wondered why Japanese bonsai lovers at bonsai exhibitions are not content to observe trees from the front only? They want to see them from all sides, and you will often find them squatted under a bonsai trying to see all the details." He goes on to say, "The real beauty of bonsai can be found in the details and in the naturalness of the planting. Sometimes in our passion to see results, we end up with a tree that has all its branching and foliage arranged to be viewed only from the front. As soon as you look at another angle, you see large gaps or tangled branches."

Marco makes a very valid point here, he realizes that regardless of what front we try to force onto the viewing public, they will see what they want to see from the angle they are most comfortable with. We can style for a single front all we want, but the fact remains that the viewing public will seek out and view multiple fronts.

In the illustration below I have produced a diagrammatic view from above, of the typical setup at a bonsai show where the bonsai is placed on a long bench with others.

This bench typically is set against a background or wall that serves the purpose of keeping viewing limited to the front of the display. I have also diagrammed the Visual Front that most artists style for, as well as the viewing path and actual views of the viewers.

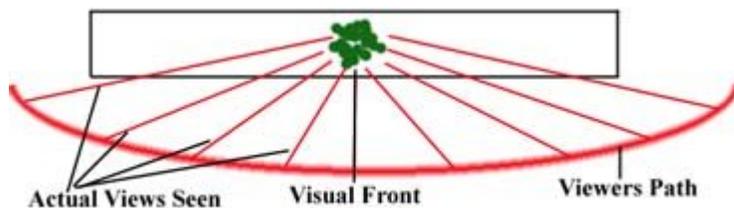


Illustration by Will Heath

As we can see, the effort of the bonsaist to limit the viewing range to the single Visual Front fails miserably at a show. The bonsai is viewed from many angles which may or may not include what the artist created to be the Visual Front. Unless the artist styled the bonsai to be visually pleasing

from more than one angle, the viewer may walk away with a less than favorable impression of the work.

We must also take into consideration that the benches at a bonsai show are all of the same height, usually not high enough to be at the "eye level" at which it is commonly taught we should style our bonsai to highlight. Indeed, the benches are usually set up below this viewing plane. We must also remember that the viewing audiences at shows are all different heights. They range from the above average in height to the short. It is impossible to display the bonsai at the exact eye level height at which many artists style their bonsai for optimum viewing.

In the illustration below I show two different Visual Fronts, the Visual Front that the artist styled for, and assumed it would always be viewed at, and the actual Visual Front view of a person of average height at a typical bonsai show.

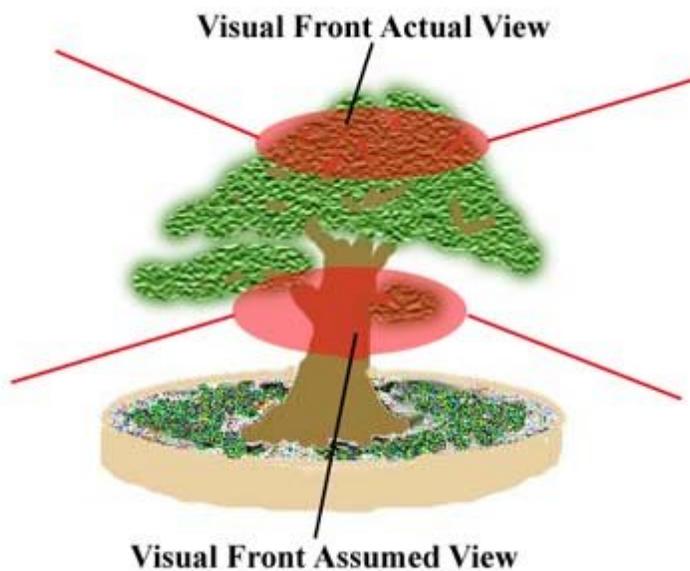


Illustration by Will Heath

As we can plainly see, the angle the bonsai was styled for does not exist in reality; it exists only in books and the artist's mind. In order for bonsai to be viewed at their best, they need to be styled to be viewed from multiple angles; they need to be visually pleasing from more than just one single, narrow view. Like sculpture, bonsai should be visually pleasing from all sides.

Now, let's look at a different type of show setup such as was used in a museum here.

<http://www.bonsaiexotique.com.au/index.html> (At the bottom of the page) I personally believe that

shows such as this will become more and more prevalent as time goes by and as artists start to display their talent in creating bonsai that are visually pleasing from all sides.

As bonsai gains its rightful place as an art form, displays in museums and similar venues will become more common and, as this happens, the front as we know it will gradually disappear. In the illustration below I show a top view of a display as used in the link above. Here the Visual Front loses all meaning as there is absolutely no way to force a viewer to use only that one narrow angle of viewing. In such a display, there indeed is no front, except that in the artist's mind. All sides can be viewed equally and therefore, to succeed, all sides must be visually pleasing.

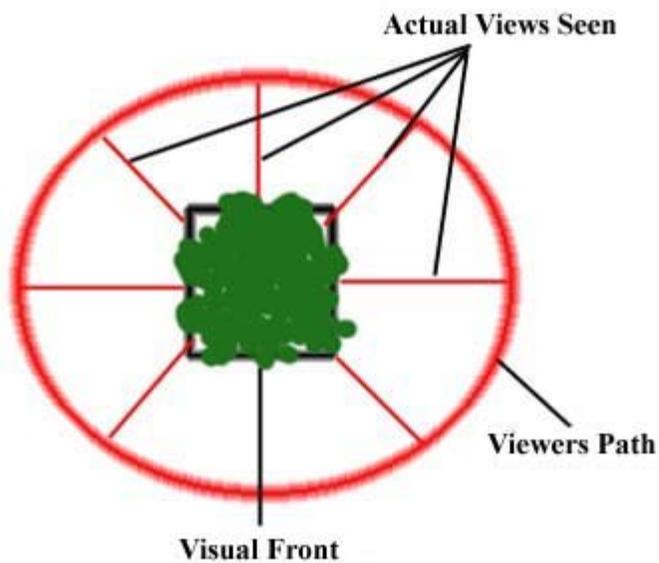


Illustration by Will Heath

In another illustration below I show the viewing angle of such a display where the Visual Front has no meaning at all and where the height of view we have been taught to style at also loses all value. It is easy to see that the single front as we have been taught to find and develop is indeed a myth.

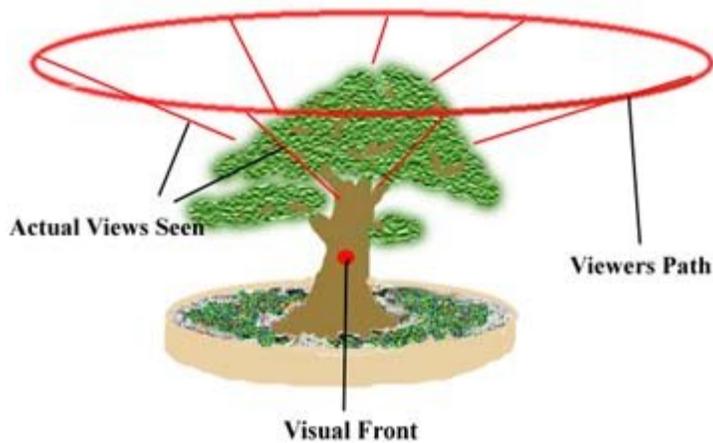


Illustration by Will Heath

The same inherent problem exists when a bonsai is displayed in a traditional Tokonoma setting. While original Tokonomas were built to display a bonsai at a level viewed from a position of a person seated on the floor, the visual view presented was still highly variable due to the fact that no two bonsai were displayed in the Tokonoma at the same height. The varying heights of the viewers also made it impossible to ensure the display was viewed at the same height, as the artist would prefer.

In the illustration below I show that, like any other form of display, the Tokonoma could be, and most likely was, viewed from many different angles. The truth of the matter is that unless a person viewed the bonsai dead on at the exact height, multiple fronts were required, for good viewing. I also find it highly unlikely that the traditional Tokonoma owners did not see and take advantage of the different moods presented by a bonsai when viewed from other angles.

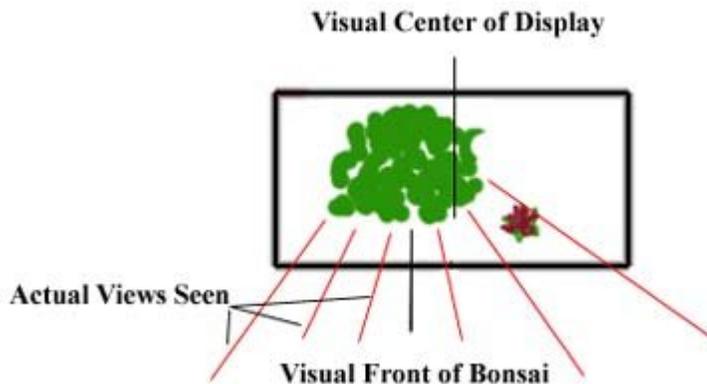


Illustration by Will Heath

The Myth Is Busted.

Like the Tooth Fairy, the Easter Bunny, and Santa Claus, sooner or later we all must come to grips with the realization that what we have been told and what has been stated as fact, many times, just is not true.

The single front that has been taught in books, on the internet, and defended by many practitioners of bonsai just does not exist in any manner except in the mind of a few bonsaists. It has no place in the world of bonsai and it serves no purpose outside of the art of photography.

The fact is that this idea is only held by bonsaists and is not even considered by the majority of the population that may view bonsai in galleries, arboretums, gardens, shows, or in other venues. To these people, there is no front; there is only a three-dimensional bonsai, which can be viewed from whatever angle or position at which they happen to come across it.

We, as artists, need to leave this concept behind and style our creations to be viewed in the actual manner that they will be, in the round, in three dimensions.

Original Article at http://www.artofbonsai.org/feature_articles/mythofthefront.php