

The Australian Journey: Looking Back – Looking Forward

This Weekend

Well, what a fantastic weekend it has been! I wonder what your highlights are? I have many.

I have experienced the some of the most stimulating bonsai presentations in a long time. The presentations by Ryan Neil have been outstanding. He may still be young in bonsai years, but long may his enthusiasm last. Who has seen such energy in demonstrations? His clear and often detailed descriptions of how something is done were coupled with why they are done that way. Ryan several times said he talks too much, but I never felt that was the case. The low levels of ego, coupled with the desire to teach is something I hope he cultivates as the years go by. They can so easily disappear.

I was particularly impressed with the way Ryan promoted the use of plant species native to one's own place of living; wherever that might be on the planet. I can empathise deeply with his love of pines, which he grew up with. Ponderosa pines are magnificent trees in his part of the world. For me it was lodgepole and jack pine. Ryan, I'm not sure that the jack pine might have a wider distribution in North America than the ponderosas!

For me, I loved the way Ryan adapted his knowledge gained in his Japanese apprenticeship, to the his life back in America. The kinds of questions he asked himself about and where his bonsai journey was taking him, and his part in that journey. Thank you Ryan for an exceptional but short time with us.

Not all was smooth sailing though. Ryan challenged my thinking deeply. I've wrestled with wondering about the ways that culture puts boundaries around, or just characterises what each of us means by 'true bonsai' and 'quality bonsai'. I found myself at odds with some of his ideas. This wasn't bad, but was unsettling in a healthy sense.

And then there was the awarding of the first Centenary Bonsai Prize, with the accolades, certificate and money going to [Ian Hearn](#) for his *Juniperus procumbens*, Japanese garden juniper. What a beautiful tree he has bequeathed to the National Collection for all to come and see. Now, Ian and others can set their sights on 2023 for the awarding of the second Centenary Bonsai Prize. There is still time to acquire, or re-shape or refine the next winning tree! So get started planning as soon as you get home.

Probably like many of you, I hadn't seen the work of Averil or Andrew before. And weren't they engaging? Two very different approaches to tree styling, but with outcomes with great promise for beautiful and attractive trees as they grow into their new forms in years to come.

Averil is very much a traditionalist in her bonsai work and showed us how she works to create two attractive trees: the black pine and the juniper. I recall Averil saying at the end, that she was keen on learning how to work with Australian native species. I so wanted her to work on the casuarina.

And then there was Andrew! I had no idea what to expect, and that is just as well. What an engaging and brave 'extrospective'. So

fitting to this weekend of the Australian Journey. Thanks for sharing, Andrew.

Some of your ideas that I've particularly noted were the central value of bonsai to networking and good friends. How they are an important part of the journey to producing good bonsai.

I very much liked seeing your ginkgo, with its deeply pendant major branches. I saw ginkgos in Kew Gardens, London, a number of years ago and was very impressed when I looked at the closely. They had major branches that went steeply upwards as they left the trunk, rising many metres, then turned downwards, cascading 8-10metres before either terminating or turning back up. This same growth form I've seen on some of our very old white cypress pines, the *Callitris glaucophylla* or *C columellaris* depending on your taxonomic view. This form can be very characteristic of some trees, and can be worth exploring in a bonsai form too.

Leigh Taafe: a start on a major re-styling. Some comments on possible use of 'literati' or not to describe the tree.

I shall remember the buzz of interest coming from you the attendees at this wonderful weekend. Your enjoyment, learning and humour during the weekend made it all so rewarding for the many hard working members of the Canberra Bonsai Society who have worked for so long in the lead up, and then worked through the weekend to ensure things ran smoothly..

Timeline

The theme of the conference was 'The Australian Journey'. Jennifer Mottlee's construction of the timeline of bonsai development and practice in Australia captured so many people's attention. Jennifer now has much new information and promises of more to incorporate into the timeline. We will all be looking forward to seeing the

timeline go live on the website. Thank you Jennifer, thanks to all those who helped you get this far for this weekend, and all those who have contributed during the weekend too.

We have seen that this 'Australian Journey', had a long lead-in time over many, many centuries. It leads right up to this very minute. Unlike a journey from point A to point B, this journey has no defined ending. That doesn't mean that it can't end, only that it also has the prospect of just continuing as long as there are people with an interest in the bonsai. Even if there are breaks in the journey, such as happened in China during the Cultural Revolution, or in Japan during WWII, the journey can be restarted if there is an interest and a will.

One of the highlights of the recent Australian Journey has been the development of the National Bonsai and Penjing Collection. Since 2008 when it first opened in its temporary quarters in Commonwealth Park, we've gone from scenes like these:

To scenes like these:

- Beautiful interior display space
- Fascinating patterns and colour in materials
- Spectacular 'borrowed landscapes'
- Facilities for night time events
- Structural quality of materials
- Magnificent trees from great artists from across the country
- Beautiful spaces to display trees

May 2013 marks a time of major change at the NBPCA. For the past five years we have had the greatest of fortunes to have Grant Bowie as our Interim Curator. Grant was patient as always, and was one of the early and very strong supporters of the concept of the 'national

collection'. He worked tirelessly and with great skill in building bonsai community support and belief in the Collection, as he also searched for trees for the displays: both donated specimens as well as loaned ones. The brilliance of his success is seen in the displays at the National Collection.

It was great sadness that we found out that Grant would not be able to continue in the job he loved and had done so brilliantly. We are ever thankful for the amazing things he accomplished.

But time moves on. The Journey is not over. The National Arboretum set out to find a new Curator. The NAC management stood by its early commitments that the Collection needed a full time Curator. They advertised across the country, and several most worthy candidates put their hands up. It was no easy decision to choose between those shortlisted. This is good for the Collection. It is good for the bonsai community to know that there is such depth available and willing to support the Collection. And it is good that the person chosen knows that they are amongst such a strong group of colleagues.

And so, on our Journey, we welcome Leigh Taafe to the very exciting but also very challenging job of being Curator of the National Collection. We wish you all the best and I'm sure that everyone here will continue to support the Collection and you as its leader.

Looking Forwards by Understanding the Past

It is always risky to presume to guess what the future holds. Risky because the odds are high that what is suggested won't turn out to be true. However, it is also always interesting to speculate from what we know to what could be coming up. So, being a bit of a risk taker, I'll venture a little way onto that path, as if I actually could read the future.

I start by acknowledging the bonsai past. Realising that what I know of the deep past comes from either what was written or painted, or what others have written about what was written or painted. Of the very near history of the Australian Journey, I have what I have experienced personally, as well as what I've learned from oral history.

Perhaps what is most impressive is what was summarised by the words of Hideo Marushima. Hideo is described as Japan's leading authority on the history of bonsai and suiseki. He wrote that anyone can identify a bonsai in old paintings from hundreds of years ago. But what has changed is *bonsai appreciation*. That is, at different times, different places and between different individuals, there are differences in what is considered 'good' bonsai.

As Peter Del Tredici, senior horticulturalist at the Arnold Arboretum and author of bonsai books, has written, styling appreciation has changed, and even ancient specimens can be cast aside as no longer of interest to bonsai growers and owners. Remember the Chabo Hiba I mentioned in my introductory comments? How even centuries old trees were freely shipped out of Japan and to the West, only to die from the ignorance of their new owners. When times change, they can change dramatically. But before we think too poorly of those who acted this way, we should consider that we have many times been admonished by Japanese masters saying that Westerners place much more importance on the actual age of trees than they do. For them, the tree should look old, rather than actually needs to be old. That doesn't deny the genuine reverence for age that comes with those steeped in Confucian ways.

The Rise of the use of Native Species

For decades now, bonsai masters, both from overseas and at home, have variously extolled the use of, admonished us for not using, and encouraged us to use local species for bonsai. This has been because on the one hand the species are already adapted to the growing conditions of climate of the region, so are relatively easy to grow. And on the other hand, the high potential for bonsai artists to be motivated by the sheer inspiring beauty of local plants. Whatever your predilection for bonsai may be: formal, informal, staid, colourful, trunk thicknesses or textures, when you see native species in the wild or in established gardens, they are inspiring to your work, in the way that bonsai artists have been inspired through the millennia.

Prediction 1

So, my first prediction for the future is that the interest in the use of Australian species as bonsai will continue to grow. In the near term, it will continue along an exponential curve upwards. As more people become actively interested, and the details of 'how to' become well known, artistic bonsaiists will then work with confidence in creating magnificent pieces of art.

Those who have seen bonsai in South Africa or Brazil, Canada, the United States or India, will know that the interest in using local species is wide spread. The Chinese used local species, as did the Japanese, and now other peoples are doing the same. As skill levels increase and artistic endeavour burns in the hearts of artists, then one sees ever more diverse and fascinating miniature trees and the stories that they tell coming to the fore. The essence of bonsai is not in the use of just black pines. It is in the artistic expression of meaning and spirit. That is what sustains the long practice of bonsai.

Yes, we will continue to see the 19th and 20th century's classics in styling and species continuing to be produced, but I predict there is a high probability that the *proportion* of such trees will become less and less.

Prediction 2

The second prediction I foresee is that there will not be one 'style' for these native trees as bonsai. There are so many possibilities. Almost too many, such that much work is need to determine what works well and what can be used, and to what new exciting purpose. There are over 3000 species of trees in Australia, and probably twice that number of shrubby species and myriads of variations on each of these. Over 600 different ones have already been tried, though most still need serious work to determine their utility.

Already we are seeing the gradual shift in styling with native species. Many specimens now on display, as mature bonsai of Australian species, apply shapes taken directly from the classical Japanese lexicon. That was just the way it was done 20 or more years ago. Looked at from a distance, you wouldn't guess that they were native Australian species. From the shape, you would expect a pine, cedar, maple, or elm. But on coming close you see that it is something quite different: a banksia, callitris, wattle, or casuarina. In most cases, it has been an un-intended trick on your eyes and aesthetic sensitivities, rather than a deliberate artistic statement.

Then there are the trees that are mixtures of the classical styles but with some nodding to the fact that a new species is being worked with. Some of the special qualities of the species, or the habitats they come from, are starting to intrude into the styling of the bonsai.

And then there are those specimens that depart completely from the classical form and start to take inspiration from the local environment. The forces that are at work locally, to produce robust beauty, despite the rigours of drought and fire, are beginning to show up in good bonsai. These trends, I predict, will only continue and the quality of what is produced will continue to improve.

Prediction 3

My third prediction for the future of the Australian Journey will be that there will be more artistic experimentation with bonsai.

Already, in the wider world of planet Earth, we have bonsai that are making artistic statements that are more than just 'look at my beautiful tree'. We have the delightfully entertaining trees of Lisa Tajima (Pop Bonsai). Whimsical, a deliberate artistic comment against the old traditions and their overbearing rules. She sought her own form of self expression.

Thor has told me of how these ideas are catching on in Japan with a whole new young generation of people developing a new interest in the practice of bonsai. For them the classical forms are dull, staid, of a generation and time that they know little of, don't feel that they can take part in, and that just doesn't fit in with the lives they must lead today.

We also see things like the bonsai cities, or car-crash bonsai, which are each new, and come from quite different aesthetic and social places. Their needs for artistic expression don't come out of the traditional bonsai world, but they are no less significant or important in the bonsai journey.

Here in Australia there has been early exploration of new ideas in bonsai. Not extreme, but certainly early were the attempts by Len

Webber, that Sydney bonsai grower and teacher in the middle of the last century. His rainforest bonsai never took off with his colleagues, but his spirit of trying to capture the essence of rainforest in bonsai form was strong and valid. Many people have been moved and inspired by our rainforests, both the wet tropical form as well as the dry rainforests of the interior. But capturing these in bonsai form still eludes us.

More recently, we have the wonderful piece by Thor Beowolf with his prize-winning piece in the Woollahra Small Sculpture Prize for 2012 with the *Carbon Capture Machine*, based on a fig and surrounding paraphernalia. All there to tell a story.

I see the world of bonsai in Australia expanding into a greater diversity of art expressions. I realise that this will leave many of you here today quite cold or even alarmed. However, some will find it challenging, and will want to be part of it. But throughout all this potential change, there will still be room for the 'beautiful' in bonsai.

Thanks for time. Thanks for a lovely weekend.