

The Art of Bonsai Display (and How to Look at Bonsai on Display) by Ian Barnes Part 5

In previous parts, we have considered how to view a bonsai on display, as a way of understanding how to create a successful bonsai; how to choose the right pot, to bring together the tree and pot in visual harmony; how to select an appropriate stand, to enhance the appearance of the bonsai on display. Now we are looking at the elements of the traditional Japanese Tokonoma (or alcove) display - tree, accent item and scroll. Part 5 will consider the scroll.

The Scroll

The third element of a traditional 3-point display is the distant view element, which is the background for the composition – it is usually a two dimensional object.



Traditionally, the Japanese use a scroll painting. It must complement and harmonise with the focal element of the composition (the bonsai). It can be a painting that portrays anything that will help bring to the mind of the viewer, an impression of a landscape, a season or a mood, (eg, autumn coloured maple leaves set a season, a mountain vista indicates a location).

Scrolls are rarely used in bonsai exhibitions, however. A row of 20 or more scrolls along a section of exhibition tables could become a visual mess. At some exhibitions they are not allowed, and that includes the top Japanese shows, such as Kokufu-ten, and the European Noelanders exhibition (Mark Noelanders has said he basically got fed up with poor quality, homemade and inappropriate scrolls at the show!).



So, if we have rows of display tables, we probably wouldn't use scrolls. However, if we are creating a formal alcove display, the use of a hanging scroll is entirely appropriate.

If using a scroll in a display with a bonsai and an accent item, the scroll must be minimal in its content and composition, to avoid conflict with the other elements in the arrangement. The message in the scroll should be conveyed by subtle implication and should contribute to the whole story.

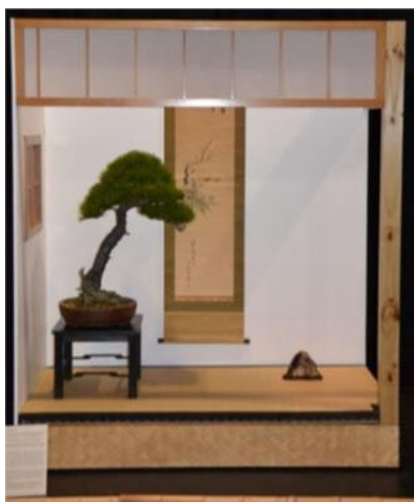


One element in the display needs to convey the season.



If the bonsai has autumn coloured leaves, the tree makes it clear that it is autumn. The accent item and scroll then don't need to convey the season. If, however, the bonsai was a juniper, the season would need to be expressed with one other accessory.

If the display is to imply a season, it is usual for one of the accessories (usually the scroll) to look forward to the approaching time of year but without leaping into the next season, thus implying the continued progression of nature.



For example, here is the Bonsai Northwest tokonoma display, from the July 2013 exhibition. The display represents "winter".



In Japan, the pine, bamboo and plum blossom are regarded as symbols of winter and are known as The Three Friends of Winter. The scroll painting creates an impression of the season, showing The Three Friends of Winter. As plum blossom starts to flower in late-winter, the scroll looks forward to the approaching time of year but without leaping into the next season.

Alternatively, the use of a snowdrop as the accent planting in a winter bonsai display will imply looking ahead to warmer days without jumping right into spring.



Similarly, a pine displayed in summer may be accompanied by a scroll with a single falling deciduous leaf to suggest the beginning of autumn. It would not be appropriate to make too large a statement about autumn here, but just enough to imply progression.

Likewise, a display set in early spring may be enhanced by the use of a scroll containing reference to young chicks, hence looking forward by just a few weeks.

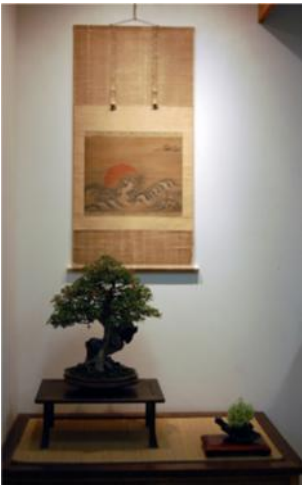


The sun and moon are also excellent indicators of time and season. The Japanese often use the rising-sun theme for new life or a new beginning in a formal New Year display. The sun seen behind clouds, or through mist, may help with time of day. A deep-orange or blood-red moon (the "harvest moon") may suggest late summer or autumn.

It is essential to avoid repetition in the display arrangement, which includes the hanging scroll.

A scroll used with a bonsai should never include trees per se because of repetition. In the earlier example of a pine in a summer display with a scroll showing a falling deciduous leaf, it would be inappropriate if the bonsai was deciduous because of the repetition of leaves. If a season display is centered on a flowering bonsai, then flowers should not appear on the scroll or the accent. Rock planted bonsai should not have stones or mountain scenes included in the arrangement, but the season or mood could be enhanced by an illustration of insects, birds or the sun in the mist, ie, natural elements which may be observed at that location.

The size and colour of the scroll are also important factors and should complement the overall display.

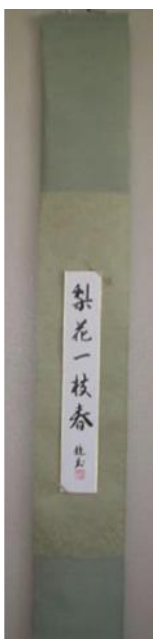


Scroll too wide, becomes focus of display.



Reducing width of scroll makes the bonsai the focus.

As a rough guide, reducing the width of the scroll simplifies the display thereby pushing the eye more to the bonsai.



Spring.

The use of very light earth tones for the cloth colour is recommended. These colours are soft, neutral and do not compete with the bonsai. Khakis, tans, golds, greys, light greens, and light browns are the most desirable colours.

Colours can go with the seasons.

Contrast of wall colour to the scroll cloth is also important.



Autumn.

The image on the scroll should not be too strong; otherwise it will become the focal point of the display rather than the bonsai.



The image should be a simple illustration relevant to the scene being created and allow the viewer some flexibility for their imagination to interpret the display. The illustration should have a significant portion of white space and minimalism in the painting.

Illustrations can be chosen to suggest a location for the display, eg, mountains. They can also be used to suggest a feeling or mood, such as coolness in a summer display.

Waterfalls are summer scrolls and the falling water can add a coolness to the display.

This painting of Nachi Falls, one of the best known waterfalls in Japan, is simple and minimal and helps to place a bonsai in the natural setting.

The blue cloth provides the imagery for the water; the gold represents the sun.

(This antique scroll is valued at Y1,000,000).

The Japanese use the sky, ocean and mountains, as well as the moon, birds, animals and insects, to tell their story. The clever use of certain animals, insects, birds or fish can depict the seasons as well.

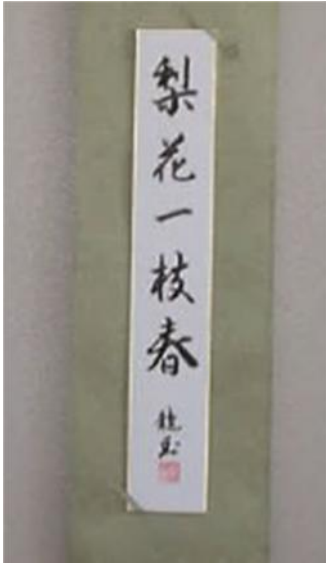


In Japan, the theme of moon and goose represents autumn, where the geese are migrating south and the moon is related to the month of September when offerings are made during the 15th night to celebrate the coming of autumn.

The illustration on the right works better for a bonsai display as it has a greater portion of white space and the geese are smaller and less detailed.



Scrolls that are illustrated with calligraphy are tricky to use in the Western context as the viewer is unlikely to be able to understand the meaning, and hence are probably best avoided.



If using a scroll with calligraphy, it is recommended to use one written in the Full Cursive style. This style is the most informal writing style and is appropriate for display with a bonsai, because it is softer, less bold and does not compete for the viewer's attention.

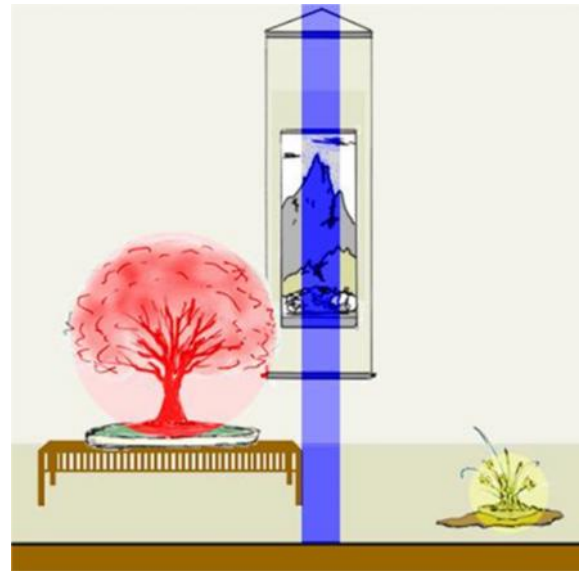
Single character calligraphy scrolls tend to attract the viewer's attention and become the focal point of the display.



Poems are better suited to display with a bonsai, particularly those that expound on nature or the seasons.

This one says "spring begins with one hundred blooms", and was custom made to accompany an Azalea about to bloom. The green cloth with an off-white flower pattern represents spring; the brick red buffer suggests the sky during a spring sunrise or sunset.

The location of the scroll in a display needs to be carefully considered in order for the display to be balanced.



If using a scroll with a bonsai and accent, for balance of the display the scroll is always placed in the centre of the display. It acts as a pivot. The visually massive main subject (the bonsai) is placed close to the scroll; the less massive accent object is placed so as to appropriately counterbalance the display.



If the display has just a tree and scroll, the scroll should be placed in the middle of the space left by the tree.

Kunio Kobayashi Tokonoma display, with only a tree and scroll.

To achieve good balance in the display, careful consideration should be given to setting the height of the scroll. The visual centre of the illustration in the scroll should be set higher than the top of the bonsai.

Consideration must also be given to any perceived "direction" that the scroll has, in order to help bring harmony to the display.

In general, the scroll's direction should match that of the bonsai, and the lower accent item should provide the visual counter-balance having an opposite directional flow. This will then contain the viewer's attention within the display space or tokonoma.



Now that we have looked at the various elements of a display, it is time to put it all together. Part 6 will consider the overall Tokonoma display.