

Enchanted Forests in the City

The agony and the ecstasy. Is bonsai an art or a craft? The passion of an artist and an artisan in Tokyo takes bonsai to the world, and helps bring the world to Tokyo.

A YouTube video shows bonsai master Kunio Kobayashi pruning an ancient yew tree at a contest in Italy. The tree is fairly large for a bonsai—about half a man's height. Kobayashi, who is short and stocky, sometimes strains to tackle it.

But he never hesitates, and the Western audience is fascinated. People hold up their phones to film as he delves into the foliage, snipping, sawing, wiring the branches, even pounding the trunk with a chisel to create areas of dead wood. People gasp when he makes final adjustments—with a chainsaw. His vigor may surprise many who, when they think of bonsai, might otherwise picture very old people, pottering about slowly.

bonsai encompasses everything: beauty, happiness, hardship and even pain

A spry 70 years old, Kobayashi was born and bred in downtown Tokyo. He has the old-fashioned showmanship and swagger the Japanese call *iki*. It is with this energy he has spread the word of bonsai to international audiences.

Speaking at his popular Shunkaen Bonsai Museum in Tokyo, Kobayashi says bonsai encompasses everything: beauty, of course, but also happiness, hardship and even pain. For example, using dead wood in a tree connects with our drive to survive. Kobayashi says that ever since its introduction to Japan from China a thousand years ago, bonsai has been about “respect for life.”

Formal bonsai is a world of tradition, regulated by rules. Trees are divided and judged in categories, including size and shape, and must conform to established ideals. Competitions are held worldwide. “To appreciate traditional bonsai,” says Kobayashi, “look for four factors: Character. Harmony. Elegance. And Essence—the tree must express the essence of its species, so a pine must have about it the air of a pine.”

Having won the nation's top prizes—including the Prime Minister's Award—many times over, and built a thriving business, Kobayashi says he now wants to focus more on his art. “I'm not so interested in money, or competing,” he says. “I'm an artist.”

Another aspect of Kobayashi's work is teaching. He trains apprentices who apply through his website, and says he has taught around 100 so far. They stay on-site at the bonsai museum for periods starting from one month (the shared accommodation is one reason he takes only males). Many are from Europe, but most are from China. “They're very keen to learn about soil management and other techniques,” he says.

“small shape, large feeling”

He recognizes the irony in teaching Chinese students what is originally a Chinese art. But he says, “Today's bonsai is uniquely Japanese. The Japanese aesthetic is about subtraction—not addition. Consider in the West, you find churches with frescoes almost on every wall” he says. “But the Japanese temple is almost bare. And poems like haiku are so short.”

Kobayashi takes a thick felt pen and on a big piece of paper writes four characters that mean, “small shape, large feeling.” The craftsman's job is simple—to bring out the towering essence of a tree. The “tree-ness” of a tree, one could say.

Everything else is just performance.

Healing Trees

“Some people say there's a healing aspect to small bonsai”

Bonsai's appeal is universal, but one of the most popular styles among the young is miniature bonsai—trees around 15 centimeters high. Hideo Noguchi is a former fashion agency staffer who became a bonsai artisan about eight years ago. He sells his trees every Saturday at the Farmer's Market @ UNU in Tokyo's trendy Aoyama. “Since I was working with foreign models all the time, I wanted to give something Japanese to the world,” he says. He adds that bonsai's foreign popularity has helped feed their resurgence in Japan. “Some people say there's a healing aspect to small bonsai,” says Noguchi. “In Tokyo many people reside in small spaces with little or no garden. You can bring them inside and have them near you.” A major part of his business is in export to Europe. His biggest seasons are spring and autumn, when the trees are most striking. His most popular tree is the Japanese maple.



Small bonsais are also popular, as they reflect the living styles of many Tokyoites.



The museum's largest bonsais are arranged in lines at the main building.