

History of Omiya Bonsai Village

Bonsai is an art form with centuries of history, but in Japan the arts of miniaturizing trees became increasingly popular around the turn of the twentieth century. Bonsai specialists in Tokyo sought greater space than was available to them in the cramped and crowded capital. Rapid industrialization, accompanied by rampant pollution, had made the city an increasingly unsuitable environment for cultivating sensitive “living artworks.”

Omiya, a city in Saitama Prefecture, located 30 kilometers north of Tokyo, became a popular recreation spot with the opening of Omiya Park in 1885. A collective of Tokyo’s foremost bonsai artisans agreed that Toro, on the outskirts of Omiya, would make the perfect location for a village-like community of bonsai gardens. Environmental conditions were favorable in Omiya in those days, with cleaner air and better-quality groundwater than the rapidly growing capital. Another factor in Omiya’s favor was the soil. Debris from eruptions of Mt. Fuji in the distant past contributed to the area’s red clay earth, which had a low mineral content. Any flora planted in it would grow healthily, allowing for small amounts of the soil to be used for this art form centered on the miniaturization of nature.

Following the widespread fires and destruction of the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, many bonsai artisans were even more eager to move away from the capital, and in 1925 Omiya Bonsai Village was established where it remains today. Previously underutilized land became a thriving hub of bonsai cultivation, providing a home for as many as 35 nurseries in the years leading up to World War II. Omiya Bonsai Village’s significance was acknowledged by the local government, which in 1942 officially named the district “Bonsaicho” (literally, “Bonsai town”).

The outbreak of war, however, led to a temporary decline in bonsai culture. The government-sanctioned anti-luxury movement deemed bonsai an indulgence, and many bonsai artisans were conscripted into the military. Most of Omiya Bonsai Village’s nurseries were forced to close. The few daring bonsai cultivators who remained continued their work in secret, through to the war’s end in 1945.

Japan’s postwar recovery and rise as an economic superpower that peaked with the “bubble economy” of the late 1980s paralleled the rising fortunes of both Omiya Bonsai Village and the art form itself. Omiya’s artisans worked to promote bonsai, through

festivals and other means, and the trees became coveted possessions of wealthy politicians and businessmen. As Japan's stature on the world stage grew, bonsai became internationally known, even symbols of the nation.

Today, with the economy no longer booming, bonsai has become a niche pastime. Throughout these changing times and into the twenty-first century, however, Omiya Bonsai Village has kept the art vibrant and internationally appreciated.