

Internationalization of Bonsai

Bonsai is one of a handful of icons that signify Japan to the world. The journey to this emblematic status began in the late nineteenth century, as the country opened up to the world after more than two centuries of self-imposed isolation. At the world expositions, or expos where nations were showcasing their achievements in cultural, industrial, and other spheres, Japan was eager to put itself on the global map. Japan participated in the 1873 Vienna Expo to considerable acclaim, and five years later bonsai were presented as part of a Japanese garden built at the third Paris World's Fair (1878). Few Europeans would have previously seen bonsai, including those who had traveled to Japan.

The fourth Paris World's Fair (1889) made bonsai the talk of sophisticated Parisians, who were charmed by the trees loaned by some of Japan's foremost private owners. This coincided with France's "Japonisme" boom, in a country that is still today one of the most receptive to contemporary Japanese culture.

World War II temporarily dampened the pace of bonsai's internationalization, but during the postwar recovery through the 1950s, the artisans of Omiya Bonsai Village worked to regain momentum. Their activities caught the attention of officers of the Allied Occupation, then began drawing politicians and dignitaries, both Japanese and foreign, to visit Omiya.

At the 1964 Tokyo Olympics an exhibition of bonsai was opened in Tokyo's Hibiya Park for the 15-day duration of the games, introducing the art form to many foreign visitors. International awareness of bonsai was further expanded at the World's Fair-style Expo '70, held in Osaka. A major exhibition of bonsai was held throughout the six months of Expo '70, presenting around 2,000 trees gathered from around Japan. In 1976, the word "bonsai" was added to the Oxford English Dictionary, confirming that this art form had truly entered the global consciousness.

The internationalization of bonsai continues into the twenty-first century. The World Bonsai Convention, first held in Omiya in 1989, draws enthusiasts in a different world city every four years and has been hosted by the United States, Germany, China, and other nations. As Japanese pop culture captures imaginations the world over, bonsai motifs appear on fashion catwalks and even in hairstyles, and the 2020 Olympics will likely further raise bonsai's global profile.