

How to Appreciate Bonsai

Bonsai are created to condense a vast natural landscape into a compact “living sculpture.” Keeping this in mind, together with the simple steps below, helps the viewer to perceive the artistic expression of each tree.

First, note the bonsai’s “face”: most bonsai are conceived with a clear front and back side. After determining the highlights of the tree he or she is working with, the artisan will pot the plant so that these features face the front, then guide the tree’s growth with the intention that it will be viewed from this aspect. Details that help ascertain the “face” might include branches that spread out like welcoming hands; or a shape recalling a modestly bowed head.

Second, observe that the artisan’s line of sight is oriented to be level with the bonsai’s roots, or the base of its trunk so that the miniaturized tree appears to stand tall. From this vantage point, the viewer can take in not only the figure of the bonsai as a whole, but also individual elements such as the spreading roots and the lower trunk that rises from them; gracefully shaped branches; the hues of foliage; and the solemnity suggested by deadwood on branches and trunks, known respectively as *jin* and *shari*.