Defining Moments in American Bonsai

Thanks to you, people who visit Pacific Bonsai Museum open their eyes, minds and hearts to a whole new world: a world of small wonders. From the phrases we hear and the notes left behind, we know visitors walk away feeling the awe of nature, the excitement of learning something new, and the delight of finding the unexpected gem that is Pacific Bonsai Museum.

2017 was a pivotal year for Pacific Bonsai Museum and bonsai in America. In only our fourth year of operation as a nonprofit organization, our collaborations led to these exciting firsts:

Natives—Curator Aarin Packard orchestrated a groundbreaking collaboration between a visual artist from Switzerland, bonsai artists known for their work with native species, a kusamono artist and kusamono ceramicist to create the first bonsai exhibition displaying solely trees that are native to North America. The resulting Natives exhibit was wildly popular and deeply appreciated by Museum visitors.

The LAB—What happens when you bring together three acclaimed artists, two passionate arts patrons and one creative curator? The LAB (Living Art of Bonsai) is a space to innovate and push bonsai in new directions. At our LAB artist summit in 2017, this group became the first to imagine resequencing the bonsai process.

Public Programs—in 2017, we offered a docent program for the very first time! A handful of our valued volunteers agreed to become docents in addition to their bonsai work. They led tours of the Museum’s exhibit, engaged with our visitors, answered questions and offered insights into the art of bonsai.

Thank you for helping us introduce people to bonsai and evolve the art form. Your enthusiasm, interest, collaboration and support makes all the difference.

Warm regards,

Kit Severson
Board Chair
Kathy McCabe
Executive Director
#256, Japanese Andromeda (Pieris japonica); In training since 2009; Artist: Vuong T Nguyen. Photo by Francesca Sarpola.

Connecting people to nature through the living art of bonsai
Defining American Bonsai: Interview with Aarin Packard

Pacific Bonsai Museum Communications Manager, Katherine Wimble Fox, sat down with Curator Aarin Packard for his reflections on the groundbreaking and eventful moments of 2017, and his most anticipated event of 2018.

Katherine Wimble Fox: The Natives exhibit has been called ‘groundbreaking.’ What new ideas were presented in the exhibit?

Aarin Packard: Natives was the first time that exclusively native trees—defined as those that are botanically endemic to the U.S.—were presented as a bonsai exhibition. It was a defining moment in American bonsai consciousness, as it presented a ‘visual definition’ of the cultural expression of American bonsai. As a curator, I see this as my role: to be someone who helps define movements in an art form and interpret that movement for the viewer.

Natives celebrated the landscapes of North America. Each display represented a specific environment, or landscape.

Everything in the display referred to that landscape: the tree, the scene shown behind, the containers, and the accent plant. In other words, as Americans, we’re using our own ‘stuff’ to create our own bonsai displays. This helped make bonsai relatable to an American audience, providing points of connection to our own cultural references. Natives was also significant because of the collaborative nature of the exhibit. We exhibited bonsai from our collection as well as those of bonsai artists from around the Pacific Northwest, so it functioned as a group show exhibiting the diversity and versatility of plant material and each artist’s style. Typically bonsai exhibits are collaborative by default, in that no one person is styling the tree, making the pot, and the stand. But beyond normal practice, for Natives, I said to each artist, “Here is the environment; now you go and create something that you think encapsulates that environment.” When we put everything together, there was this really interesting synergy from all the independent components revealing a continuity; it seems collective consciousness was on display.

KWF: How did you come up with this idea to represent specific environments or landscapes?

AP: Creating a holistic scene is a fundamental aspect of bonsai display. Traditionally, in a Japanese tokonoma (an alcove found in a traditional Japanese house used for display), a bonsai tree and accent are displayed in front of a scroll depicting a particular scene—Mt. Fuji, for example. The idea for Natives came out of a concept that I had been wanting to try; I wanted to see if I could create a tokonoma display with ‘the real things’: I wanted to take bonsai trees out of their cultivated environment, and insert them back in the environment that they came from (botanically), in front of a vista of a real mountain, with real accent plants; that is, a found, spontaneous display.

A variation on that concept that worked in the Museum was to create cohesive displays with bonsai made with native material,
paired with large painting backdrops of that landscape, plus accents comprised of native plant material from that environment—particularly those with ethnobotanical significance to that land’s indigenous people. For the accents, ceramicist Vicki Chamberlain created kusamono containers that incorporated minerals from that environment in the glaze. There was a total sense of cohesiveness.

**KWF:** Did the Museum add any significant new pieces to the Museum’s collection in 2017?

**AP:** Yes, we acquired a mountain hemlock donated by the Asahara family who owned the Oriental Japanese Garden Center here in Federal Way. It was trained by Joe Asahara and sat in front of the Garden Center for 57 years before the family closed the store last year. The donation represents a wealth of local history, touching on the history of incarceration of people of Japanese ancestry as well as American bonsai history.

**KWF:** Is this piece currently on display?

**AP:** Not at the moment. After we acquired it, it contracted root rot and lost some of its branches. I used a new treatment developed to arrest the spread of root rot calling for the application of large amounts of fertilizer (rather than a fungicide). The treatment worked. The tree stabilized and will be allowed to recover and grow freely—with lots of sunlight, water, and fertilizer—for the next year or two before we evaluate its foliage to see if it’s ready for styling.

We also acquired a lodgepole pine from the Bill Philip collection that had been styled by Michael Hagedorn. We advanced its design in the fall of 2017 and repotted it in spring 2018; it should be back on display in the next year or two.

**KWF:** For 2018, what are you most excited about?

**AP:** We are most excited about the LAB and its potential, like *Natives*, to redefine the process in which bonsai displays are created. Again, we are aiming for holistic expressions of American bonsai. It’s a collaboration between three American bonsai artists (who gathered with us at an Artists’ Summit in 2017), and again we are using native plant material, featuring an American environment: this time the iconic American architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright. All of the artists have been given leeway to work without constraints. So on one hand we are working to define what American bonsai is, and on the other hand, the whole concept of being American is based on freedom and space to do whatever.
“On one hand we are working to define what American bonsai is, and on the other hand, the whole concept of being American is based on freedom and space to do whatever.”
Portland, Oregon-based bonsai standmaker Austin Heitzman and Pacific Bonsai Museum’s Communications Manager Katherine Wimble Fox discussed Austin’s career, current trends in the American market, and what he’s excited about in 2018.

Katherine Wimble Fox: Austin, How did you become a bonsai standmaker?

Austin Heitzman: I relocated to Portland as a furniture maker because there is an active craft scene here. I have always kept and done bonsai as a hobby, so when I arrived I became aware that there was also a significant bonsai scene in Portland (and the in Northwest in general). Being in tune with that, I put it out there that I was interested in exploring what kind of market there was in America for bonsai stands.

After discussing some ideas with Michael Hagedorn (a Portland-area bonsai professional), I developed some stands to test the waters, which caught the attention of Ryan Neil (Bonsai Mirai), and since then every year it has grown. This year, it is the predominant thing I do; it’s no longer just a side-thing.

There are plenty of people who are very serious about wanting to elevate their collections by putting them on display, either for just their own enjoyment, or through competitions. When you put a tree on a stand it takes it out of the context of the cluttered garden and makes it something individual, something to appreciate, and shows it at its finest.

KWF: I’m curious about this idea of the American market. How would you define that?

AH: We have a scene in America now that is young, but advancing. Bonsai is a very interesting art form in that it doesn’t export well. You can’t take your treasured tree and take it to Japan to show, and bring it back. That’s not something that is done. So it focuses the market in each region. In America, there are a lot of native trees that are very adaptable to bonsai culture. There are a lot of wild regions with a lot of very ancient, very interesting yamadori (wild trees that are collected and used for bonsai) that are driving an expressive art form. We have such vast, and seemingly inexhaustible, resources of native bonsai material that seems to be driving the local market.

I get plenty of inquiries about traditional stands, following Japanese display traditions that emphasize center, balance, and calming. But most of what I see is an interest in something with the spirit of Japanese display, but adapted to work with American aesthetics. This comes out of American furniture history, and emphasizes more asymmetric, unbalanced, dynamic movement. For better or for worse, we’re a fairly unsettled culture—always on the move—and I see the bonsai market as a reflection of that.

Also, I think Americans embrace change a little more readily than the Japanese do. In Japan, bonsai is very formalized art form, whereas, in the U.S., we feel free to explore without the encumbrances of tradition. Each year, it seems a new tree comes out on the scene, as the next new thing, that no one has really tried to develop in a bonsai culture. It is really exciting to see how bristlecone pines, for example, are being collected and styled. No one has a bristlecone that is that far advanced as a bonsai, so it will be very interesting to see over the next decades what these trees are going to become. It is all very new.

KWF: When one of these new trees comes on the scene, and you are called on to make a stand for it, what is your process like? Where do you start and how do you make choices?
AH: I start with the tree. I always ask the client for photos of the tree and the pot. I try to get to know the tree. I feel like every tree has a story, has a character. I try to get to know what are they doing? Where are they? How are they moving? What are they trying to say? And then I take that understanding of the tree and put that into the stand. How does it fit in within the context of history and aesthetics? Is there anything from furniture history that ties into to the tree, to its movement, to its place, or to its pot, that can be applied? What would tradition point to and how might this be different? Sometimes it requires something that doesn’t differ that much from tradition, and other times it invokes something radically different. It all boils down to figuring out what is best for the tree, to make it look its best, given how far the client is willing to go.

KWF: Are you looking to complement or contrast what’s going on with the tree?

AH: Usually I am trying to complement. In the U.S., our native wood choices are rather limited. Stands generally need to be dark (as they represent the earth, and need to ‘ground’ the bonsai with visual weight) but among the American hardwoods, there aren’t a lot of dark woods. I don’t like to embrace dyes, for the most part; I feel like they make the wood look artificial.

For a recent project, I used fumed oak: a very traditional, turn of the century technique popular in the Arts and Crafts movement using oak that has been exposed to laboratory grade ammonia. The fumes of the ammonia react with the tannins in the wood, which darkens it.
this is a dangerous process for the woodworker who must be wearing protective gear). The tree was a cedar, rather shaggy, a little coarser; the atmospheric fumed oak was the perfect complement.

For another project, I designed a stand for a Japanese maple tree with maple wood (see photo, right). I used another chemical process with dissolved steel wool (iron) in vinegar which gets sucked up in the wood, making dark streaks running throughout.

KWF: Where do you source your wood from?

AH: We’re in a very ‘doug fir’ part of the world, so if you go in the woods, that’s what you get, whereas in the City of Portland, I can get walnut, plum, cherry, Japanese maple, etc., so mostly I source wood from milling city street trees that have been felled as a consequence of development.

KWF: It’s fascinating that you’ve turned this unfortunate consequence into a positive.

AH: It is a sustainable way of going about it (for now). It’s nice to be able to get the variety, and it’s nice to leave the forest be, and instead cut what we’ve invasively planted on our own, so it’s a system that works out for everyone.

KWF: How American.

AH: Yeah, I guess so!

KWF: You will be participating as part of the inaugural design team for the LAB project this year. Are you excited about that?

AH: Yes! The LAB is interesting because it changes the formula that I usually use. I usually work on a commission basis, and aim to please a client, so I am able to help, guide, assist, suggest, but in the end, it’s not my stamp of approval I’m going for. But with the LAB, I’ve been given carte blanche to produce something interesting and innovate without limitations. It is a really wonderful opportunity to develop something in bonsai display that has never been done before. That I am going to be the lead of the process, rather than the caboose, is an extra treat.

KWF: So will you need to invent a design process that is entirely new, since you won’t be starting with a tree?

AH: Yes, it has definitely put me out of my comfort zone, which is always a good thing in any art form. To strip away the ingrained patterns, to have the slate wiped clean and make it up, keeps it fresh and paves the way for real innovation. Something could come out of this that is going be very applicable to display in the future. You don’t know where you’re going to end up, which is very exciting.

Furniture maker Austin Heitzman
“It is a really wonderful opportunity to develop something in bonsai display that has never been done before.”
2017 marked an exciting year of programs and partnerships for Pacific Bonsai Museum. We kicked-off the year by launching a brand new program: museum docents. After inviting several of our current bonsai volunteers to become docents (thank you!), we launched the program in March 2017. Here at the Museum, docents lead tours, greet visitors, create a comfortable space to ask questions, and give visitors a new way to experience the collection.

The docent program started just in time for the opening of our Natives exhibit. Opening day offered panel discussions with the artists, an art-making station, and tours.

The Museum welcomed an array of artists from around the world in 2017:

- Contemporary artist Iuna Tinta traveled from Switzerland to join us for the Natives exhibit opening;
- Kusamono artist Young Choe held two workshops at the Museum and offered a public lecture;
- Ceramicist Ron Lang led a bonsai pot critique of the Natives exhibit; and
- Bonsai artist Tyler Sherrod took part in our first-ever members’ open house in the Museum’s Chop Shop.

We were thrilled to have such talent at the Museum and for our community to learn from some of the best artists in the country.

We also continued some of our favorite programs from years past. We presented the ninth Stone Images exhibit, in conjunction with the Viewing Stone Study Group of the Puget Sound Bonsai Association, and the 4th annual A Bonsai Solstice: a winter evening event for visitors to take in the unique beauty of the bonsai illuminated by serene candlelight.

Pacific Bonsai Museum is excited for what the future holds for our programs and what we can offer you, our vibrant community. Looking ahead, we plan on expanding our docent program and launching an education program that opens up a world of art and nature to young people in our region. And, as always, we are committed to being a space for all in our community to gather, connect, and enjoy the living art of bonsai.
THANK YOU!

VOLUNTEERS
Dick Benbow
Yesica Cardona
Elsa Durham
Ann Hobson
Gary Kiyonaga
Pat Negron
Lynn Paietta
Victrinia Ridgeway
Millie Russell
Francesca Sarpola
Joel Schwarz
Ladd Smith
Tim Taylor
Gary Wharton

CHAMPIONS
Greater Tacoma Community Foundation

VISIONARIES
Millie & Craig Russell
Kit & Gary Severson

PATRONS
4Culture
Christine & Karl Anderson
David Asahara & Joan Bloedel
Caffe D’arte
City of Federal Way
Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Matching Gifts
Mary & Bill Gates
Ki Ham
William W. Philip
Michael & Karren Smith Family Fund
Judy Wagner

CONTRIBUTORS
Mike Andrews
Conor & Jacque Boyd
Doug Bradley & Linda Breeden
Patrick & Jennifer Buckholz
Jeanne Burbidge
Shamra Clark
David De Groot
Albert Foster
Phyllis & Mark Griggs
Mark & Nancy Haley
Debra Hansen & Donald Walls
Karl Holmes & Catherine Pettinari
Hunt Family Charitable Fund
Grace Kanda
Kathy & Bob McCabe
Kathy McGoldrick
Thomas Messmer
Michael Pollock & Roslyn Stone Pollock
Puget Sound Bonsai Association
Carol & Bob Sangster
Seattle Garden Club
Ladd & Andrea Smith
Sheri & Jeffrey Tonn
Carl & Connie Wooldridge

SUPPORTERS
Jessica & Justin Adair
Janice Anderson
Joan Barnhart
Linda & Jim Brant
Geoffrey Bucks
Colonial Dames
Susan Doten
Dean Runyan & Elizabeth Evans
Anthony Fajarillo
Scarlet Gore
Craig Hamamoto
Your gift to Pacific Bonsai Museum helps cultivate the next generation of bonsai art enthusiasts, care for our growing bonsai collection and keep our outdoor display barrier-free for all who seek a connection with nature. Thank you!

**SUPPORTERS (cont.)**
- H Hasche-Kluender
- Mike Pellicciotti & Jaime Hawk
- Jacob Henry
- Howard Kantner
- Marge Kinoshita
- Daniel & Emily Kozie
- Diane Lasch
- Robert & Nancy Laws
- Patricia, Catherine & Kevin Maskell
- Ray Norris
- Ron & Bonita Nowicki
- Bill & Claudia Packard
- Michael Ramey & Paul Kronst Ramey
- Victrinia & Eric Ridgeway
- Wayne Schoech
- Timothy Haigh & Christopher Smith
- TACT Corp., Ltd.
- Brian & Jessica Therrien
- Tonya Tromblee
- Halee & Terry Turner
- Dirk VanWoerden

**FRIENDS**
- Alyssa Villablanca
- Frances Whitt
- John Wott
- Anonymous
- Advancing Leadership
- Bonnie Jean Anderson
- Animal Supply Company
- Daniel Bateson
- Cynthia Baylis
- Bill Brouhard
- Brian Cairns
- Ron Cascisa
- Roger Case
- Victoria Chamberlain
- City of Puyallup
- Laurie & Wayne Clark
- Annette Clark
- John Conn
- Michael Dodge
- Jason Eider
- Gwil Evans & William Cook
- Ferguson Architecture

- Mark Fields
- Natalie & Robert Findlay
- Alexandra Follett
- Kyle Funakoshi
- Janet Gibson
- Dave Grant
- James Grayson
- Bryan Green
- Howard Greisler
- Kathy Hacker
- Cindy & David Hackett
- Lawrence & Judith Highton
- Alexander Hoffman
- Jim Hsu
- Japan-America Society of WA
- H. David Kaplan
- Mildred Kimball
- Gary Kiyonaga
- Jay Kletsky
- Edward Kuehn
- John Kundrat
- Christina Leinneweber
- David Lichter
- RADM John Lockwood
- Ian MacKay

Visitors enjoy A Bonsai Solstice.
Photo by Timothy Aguero Photography
THANK YOU!

Alexandria & Charles Manalo
Will Mason
Michael McLeod
Trevor Menagh
Microsoft Matching Gifts
Diana Neely
Noal Nyland
Gerald O’Keefe
Lynn Paietta
Anthony Pancotti
Ashley Powell
Ken & Carol Roberts
Connie Ruhl
Cindy Russell
John Salsbery
Joel Schwarz
Caroline Sherman
Bob Shimon
Linda Shotwell
Laura Hudson & Robert Sims
Barbara Snapp
Roger & Marga Snipes
Ramona Soule
Joan Stassel
Russell Stevens
Marilyn Stevenson
Susan Sullivan
Tacoma Destination Map
Stuart Grover & Pamela
Transue
Joyce Tsuji
Tim Turner
Vern & Connie Van Houten
Kathryn Van Wagenen
William Waldman
Richard Weiner
Kayla & J. Corydon
Weyerhaeuser
Gary Wharton
Janet Yu

FANS
Anonymous
Katherine Barnes
Andrew Barnett
Loretta Barrett
Vanessa & Ryan Berg
Dan Braun
Steven & Sandy Britton
Ann Bunk
Art Chen
Mason Cobb
Danny Coffey
Nonna Crook
Michelle Danson
Akshay Darbari
Jack Firestone
Billy Gillespie
Randy Ginn
Sally Good
Tripat Grewal
Jean Hagedorn
Brian Heltsley
Kathy Hibbard
Dawkins Hodges
Todd Jensen
Monica Jeppesen
Tim Johnson
Matthew Kearney
Ingrid Kizen
Alice Krause
Therese Law
Aaron Maki
Kristine McLean
Richard Miller
Grace Miller
Mary Montante
Terraly Nelson
Rick Passon
Shawna Peterson

Joanne Raiton
Dennis Rongers
DeLionel Ruffin
Nelson & Elizabeth
Santiago
Arlene Scaroni
Eric Schikowski
Jeff Sczechowski
Eric Smith
Susan Spoden
Sue Staehli
Maddie Strode
Steve Swoboda
Rick Tompkins
Sadafumi Uchiyama
Hansie Wong
Kunfeng Scott Wu
Visitors enjoy A Bonsai Solstice.

Photo by Timothy Aguero Photography
33,724 VISITORS
From 49 states and 31 countries

150
Bonsai in collection

41
Tours given

846
Volunteer hours

REVENUE
- 33% Foundation grants $130,513
- 12% Individual gifts $46,895
- 9% Gifts in-kind, earned income & other $36,684
- 1% Donated assets $4,000
- 45% Endowment payout $181,000
Total Operating Revenue: $399,092

EXPENSE
- 34% Collections, grounds & facilities $218,944
- 24% Exhibits & public programs $154,919
- 24% Development & Marketing $155,087
- 19% Administration $122,934
Total Operating Expense: $651,883

NOTE: The Museum also recorded other income of $97,734 from donated land, $29,500 in pledges restricted to future years, and $300,000 in transfer from reserves as well as $299,274 in other expense from land lease, depreciation, and asset disposal. The release from reserves is part of the Museum’s plan to allow fundraising to ramp up over time.

Right: #262. Japanese Yew (Taxus cuspidata); Artist: Isao Omachi; In training since (unknown). Photo by Francesca Sarpola.
Connecting people to nature through the living art of bonsai.

MAILING ADDRESS:
PO Box 6108
Federal Way, WA 98063

PHYSICAL ADDRESS:
2515 S 336th Street
Federal Way, WA 98001

+1.253.353.7345
info@pacificbonsaimuseum.org
pacificbonsaimuseum.org