



With the drought and debate about climate change, these days everyone is going green. Robijn Alexanda takes a look at a living oriental collectable.

Thinking of collecting something oriental?

Consider Bonsai

Bonsai is often referred to as 'the art of living sculpture' and is distinguished by the pruning, shaping and stylistic skills the artist brings to creating a miniature tree. This highly stylised art form combines aesthetic principles with horticultural science and practice.

Growing bonsai is becoming increasingly popular, especially for those who have limited space, but does require a degree of patience and understanding. The principal goal of each bonsai artist is to seek out and enhance the natural form and intrinsic essence of each individual tree or forest type.

Trees are powerful and profound symbols in the art and religion of many cultures. Trees can symbolise the link



1 Azalea, c. 1948, h 46 cm

2 Chinese juniper, c. 1973, h 60 cm



between earth and heaven and can depict the cycle of life and death. The roots are symbolic of our existence and of our past. The tangled roots flow into one trunk and then spread to many branches. The branches are the rich variety of life and point upward and outward. Living with a tree and caring for it invites us to stand up, find the axis of our life, plant our roots in the ground and touch the heavens with our highest endeavours.

A history of miniature trees

Although possibly older, there is painted evidence of small trees in containers, probably used for religious or medicinal purposes, created during the Tang dynasty (618-907 AD) in China. The tomb of Prince Zhang Huai, who died in 706, has two murals; one shows servants carrying a miniature landscape on a board and the other a potted tree. Copies of these murals are on display in the Shanghai Botanical Gardens. Miniature potted trees, called *penjing* in China, became very popular in the markets during the Southern Sung period (1127-1279) along with a surge in nature worship that was reflected in all the arts. The most famous are the literati scroll

paintings of an idealised imaginary landscape. The painting scrolls could be horizontal or vertical and always included trees, water, rocks, mountains and a reference to the imaginary inhabitants with a building, boat or bridge. In the asymmetric composition, there was no fixed viewpoint but rather an emphasis on line and space to suggest distance and balance. Colour was limited, paintings were often mono- chromatic, with a variety of subtle or dramatic brushstrokes.

The idea of an art related to nature with simplicity and minimalism appealed to the Japanese, and these characteristics were imported from China and absorbed during the Kamakura period (1195-1333). Initially, bonsai was practised in temples and among the upper classes but by the Edo period (1600-1868) had widespread popularity, particularly among the increasingly affluent merchant classes. Landscape painting, ceramics and bonsai expressed spiritual concepts, sympathetic with indigenous Japanese Shinto beliefs.

At the beginning of the 19th century, a method of shaping potted trees by wiring branches was devised in China and introduced to Japan in the early Meiji period. This paved the way for

- 3 Pyracantha, c. 1975, h 89 cm
- 4 Cedrus deodora (Himalayan cedar), c. 1984, h 59 cm
- 5 Kunsia, c. 1980, h 92 cm

