



Photo: Stefan Postles

## PROFILE Thorhammer Beowulf, Australian National University

At markets, hardware stores and gift shops, you'll find bonsai. The ancient Japanese art seems entrenched in Western culture.

ANU PhD student Thorhammer Beowulf has been creating bonsai for several years and has seen its appeal broaden significantly.

"People everywhere are doing bonsai; you can go anywhere and find bonsai for sale. Admittedly they are all not *Mona Lisas* and most are just saplings in pots and not the kind you would find in the Imperial Palace in Japan but they are constantly coming up – in films like *Star Trek* and James Bond, in advertising. Bonsai has become quite ubiquitous in Western culture," Beowulf says.

Beowulf's thesis on the art and aesthetics of bonsai is, as far as he knows, the first such study in the world. The only other academic research done on bonsai was on the Chinese influences of bonsai in 1996.

His PhD, through the ANU school of humanities, will delve into the history, anthropology and theory of bonsai, to see how and why bonsai has evolved and how this has affected its worldwide appeal.

"When you say bonsai, people already have a mental picture. It is so well recognised that it is included in dictionaries around the world," he says.

"What I am trying to find out is how an

ancient Japanese art form has become so well recognised throughout the world."

Beowulf is halfway through his PhD, which he is doing part time.

"I am doing cross-cultural studies of bonsai, looking at case studies, and also looking at them from the point of view of people who do bonsai to find out why they do what they do," he says.

"There is a historical and theoretical context to look it. Bonsai is now also used in political ways, which is also very interesting. In 1976, during the US bicentennial celebrations, Japan gave the US National Arboretum 53 bonsai, one of which was a

tree that survived the Hiroshima bombing. In this way bonsai is being used as a gift of reconciliation and has been used in a role of international diplomacy. The Australian government in 2008 also inaugurated a national bonsai collection and it shows how governments are becoming involved in bonsai.

"There are a lot of cross-cultural networks established through bonsai. If you type in bonsai into a search engine you come up with tens of thousands of pages on the subject from around the world."

Beowulf's research has attracted interest from Japan, Europe and North America.

**Keeli Cambourne**