



Aspiring to Broaden
Bonsai's Potential While
Preserving Its Tradition

Masashi Hirao

Bonsai master Masashi Hirao has visited 30 countries with the mission of creating opportunities for people to “meet” bonsai in a new way. To demonstrate his techniques, he has chosen unconventional venues such as bars, clubs, and streets. The editorial team of SCOPE interviewed this unorthodox master at his bonsai garden, “Seisho-en,” to find out his present aspirations.

Visiting Other Countries Made Me Realize What a Craftsman Should Aspire To

To start his demonstrations, Hirao raises his scissors high in the air and then adopts an attitude of prayer. After that, accompanied by music provided by a DJ or a band, he does improvisational styling and shaping of a tree reminiscent of a dinosaur's spine, housed in a huge pot, completing his “performance” within a given limit of 30 minutes. His unique world of bonsai has been enthusiastically welcomed by the art scene around the world, resulting in highly-rated events in 30 countries.

Regarding his unconventional style of bonsai demonstrations, Hirao comments, “During my apprenticeship under the late Master, Saburo Kato, I already felt uncomfortable about the bonsai industry's fixed notion that bonsai is a unique realm that exists completely outside the ordinary world, and desired to bring the bonsai I love to a status on par with fashion, design, and art. So, although I was only a trainee, I was giving presentations on the beauty and joy of bonsai in places that belonged to completely unrelated industries.”

After completing his apprenticeship in 2009, Hirao embarked on a “boot camp tour” abroad, visiting Spain, Argentina, Italy, the Philippines, the Netherlands, and France. Hirao recalls, “It was during my trips that I got the idea of doing

a live bonsai performance. But because I consider myself a simple craftsman and not an artist or a creator, I always strive to live up to a high standard of behavior as a person who represents Japanese culture. Even if 100 people say I'm great, if a single person thinks I'm 'not authentic,' I'm ruining the good reputation of all Japanese bonsai masters.”

His commitment paid off; news about his unique activities spread fast and in 2013, he was chosen as one of Japan's Cultural Envoys designated by the Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs. Under this program, he visited 11 countries in four and a half months, engaging in international cultural exchange using bonsai.

Commenting on his experiences, Hirao says, “Each country I visited had a completely different way of enjoying bonsai. One day, I was approached by an Italian who demanded of me, ‘Why don't Japanese people know much about bonsai?’ It's true that bonsai still has the image of being a hobby for retired people. That comment significantly changed my thinking; I decided to teach the essence of bonsai to Japanese people first, instead of teaching it outside the country.”

The Bottom Line: Bonsai Is a Way of Loving Living Things

At Hirao's bonsai garden, “Seisho-en,” which he opened in Saitama Prefecture in 2016, there is a bar counter and a lounge — his

attempt at helping younger generations and families with children to enjoy bonsai in a more relaxed setting.

In regard to teaching bonsai, Hirao says, “After I launched workshops in Japan, I felt that people had a tendency to think ‘bonsai is too hard,’ or ‘what if I fail?’ and overthink things, worrying about potential negative outcomes. Maybe it's because people see bonsai as objects and not as living things. If you approach bonsai as a living thing, you realize that it's very simple: it dies if you don't feed it, and it responds if you pour your love into it. It's difficult just because it's so simple. What's important is having a heart of love for living things.”

“Bonsai” is now a universal term. The total value of Japan's export of garden trees and bonsai plants in 2017 amounted to more than 12.6 billion yen, supported by an increasing number of bonsai growers in China, Vietnam, and other countries.

“My eye-catching performance is what people talk about, but it's a means of passing on the tradition. Bonsai will evolve only if people respect their predecessors' wisdom and skill and pass them on to the next generation. To realize that in a true sense, we must cultivate people who will carry on the mission. Presently, I have four apprentices, but I want bonsai to see more than just a temporary boom, and hope that Japan will become a country where many unexpected applications of bonsai can be found.”



Hirao giving a bonsai demonstration in Mexico



Masashi Hirao

Born in Tokushima Prefecture, Japan, in 1981. Bonsai master and owner of bonsai garden “Seisho-en.” He was apprenticed to the late Master Saburo Kato at “Omiya Kato Mansei-en.” In 2013, he was appointed a Cultural Envoy by the Japanese Agency of Cultural Affairs. Based in Japan, he is now collaborating on projects with different industries and providing bonsai workshops.

Masashi Hirao website: <http://bonsaihirao.net/>