

Let's talk about...

Style and Design
Understanding the Basic concepts for the 5 Classic Styles

“No two Bonsai are the same”!

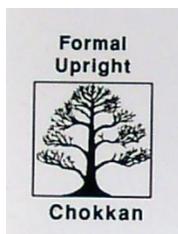
*...they could be the same species,
even the style portrayed could be the same,
but each will have its own quality and uniqueness
and will be a personal expression of
your creativity and of nature!*

In the art of Bonsai there are many styles and each one describes a tree that can be ‘found’ in nature. In Japanese Bonsai some are known as the ‘Classic Styles’, which cover various trunkline angles for a **single tree**:

1. Formal Upright
2. Informal Upright
3. Slanting
4. Semi Cascade
5. Full Cascade

There are also **variations of these styles** e.g.: windswept, broom style, exposed root, root-over-rock, rock planted, literati or bunjin, weeping style, etc.

Following is a closer look at the **5 classic styles**:



Formal Upright: “Strong, vertical trunk. The branches are placed uniformly up the trunk in all directions. The name indicates a tree that grows “straight and tall”. This can be seen in nature when a tree is allowed to grow in ideal conditions in a wide-open area, with no shortage of sun or water. There are no harsh conditions or adverse weather patterns. The design should have an even tapered trunk from the base to the apex of the tree creating a more realistic representation of nature. The spread of the branches is almost symmetrical in appearance and the silhouette should be balanced. Finding the right material that will meet these criteria can be challenging. However, it is one of the best styles for “beginners”, as these guidelines form the basis of the other styles as well.



Informal Upright: “The trunk curves, which become smaller as you reach the top of the tree, define the movement and can be graceful or sharp.”

This is probably “the most commonly seen style in nature and in bonsai” and suitable to many species. In nature trees are most often affected by environmental factors: wind, shade, lack of moisture, snow, that cause the trunk to curve and change direction during early growth stages. However,

this style is still basically upright and the silhouette is well balanced. For example, if a line is drawn from the top of the tree to the center of the base, it will be vertical or a few degrees to either side. The apex should tip slightly toward the viewer in a ‘welcoming gesture’. This last aspect actually creates an optical illusion that one is looking at a much larger tree. The first branch should be on the side, and branches should be on the outside of each curve. Also, pronounced bends of the trunk should move from left to right when looking at the front of the tree. One of the most important guidelines is that “branches should not come DIRECTLY from the inside of a curve, which is unsightly and causes trunk swellings. And lastly the overall shape should be triangular with unequal sides.



Slanting: “The slanting style is defined by the angle of the trunk which follows through from the base to the apex. The branches grow in all directions and strong roots are visible in the direction of the incline giving the feeling of ‘anchorage’ for the leaning tree.” This is an interesting style since, unlike the two previous styles, we are showing a definite affect from “nature”. Environment and time leave their marks on trees.

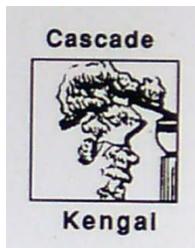
When a tree is exposed to wind, it will grow ‘slanting away’. IF growing in the ‘shade’ it will lean away from the object blocking the sun to reach the ‘light’. The slant of the trunk may be to the right or left. The trunk itself may be straight or curving. The branches are shaped in a slightly downward direction. The branches opposite to the slant should be ‘stronger; longer’, as in nature, these would receive more sun. Branches on the ‘slant side’ would go first downward and out, as they would be ‘reaching for the sun’. The appearance of the roots ‘on the opposite side should appear to anchor the tree’ and spread out form the trunk base.



Semi-cascade: “This style juts out, as if above a cliff or by the side of a river or lake. Usually the semi-cascade does not fall below the pot rim and has a ‘strongly horizontal mass’ in relation to the base of the tree. It appears to skim between heaven and earth as it defies gravity, as no other style.” By definition, if a straight line is drawn from the base of the trunk to the tip of the ‘tail’, the angle is between 45 degrees above and a few degrees below the horizontal line. This style is the most difficult in

regard to roots and achieving ‘balance’. Because gravity is exerting a much greater

‘pull’, the tree must have a sturdy trunk and/or strong surface roots to anchor the tree and give a feeling of ‘stability’. Generally, the tree would be planted toward the center of the pot or just slightly opposite. For branch placement think of an upright bonsai bent over in a horizontal position and the tip of the ‘tail’ is the apex. Once the ‘shape’ of the trunk line is selected the branches follow the same general design. Try and avoid a ‘flat appearance’ and pot selection will also affect the appearance of this style to a great extent.



Full Cascade or “Hanging” style: the trunk and branches hang down over the edge of a pot. This represents a tree growing on a mountainside leaning out towards the light. Its own weight, plus snow or rock falls, contribute to the trunk growing downward.” Of all the styles, this one asks the most of trees to “adapt and survive environmental hardships”. It is a design from sheer ravines and towering cliff faces. It can have grace with dramatic beauty and immense character. This styling

technique makes it possible to turn suitable nursery stock into an attractive ‘bonsai-in-training’ fairly rapidly. Generally, the basic trunk design falls below the horizontal. By definition, if a line is drawn from the base of the trunk, to the tip of its ‘tail’, the angle formed is between 30 and 90 degrees below the horizontal. The trunk should rise out of the pot for a short distance, but far enough so that when it bends to form the ‘cascade’, it is able to clear the rim of the pot. When it comes to shaping the trunkline angles, soft or sharp, are essential remembering that major branches form on the outside of a curve. The cascade may be designed *with* a ‘head’ (as a “mist rising above a waterfall”) or *without* (i.e., **one-line** vs **two-line** cascade in regard to the trunk). In many respects it may be helpful to think of a cascade as an upside-down informal upright.

Above are only the guiding principles in understanding the basic concepts of each of the 5 classic styles in Japanese bonsai. Once you have a grasp of the above, and can visualize them in nature, you will be better prepared to begin the design process. This starts with the evaluation of pre-bonsai or raw nursery material and finding the bonsai “inside”.