Penjing 盆景 or penzai 盆栽, has a long and rich history with numerous styles, schools, and meanings. Penjing has been practiced in China since at least the Han dynasty (206 B.C. – 221 A.D.). In penjing, trees and landscapes are often shown in miniature and suggest a place in nature. They are sometimes called “three-dimensional paintings” (Yunhua, 1987). Penjing can suggest moods and even ideas. At Lan Su, visitors can enjoy many forms of this art and learn about its diversity and history. This guide will present a few of Lan Su’s penjing and describe this ancient art.
This pine is trained in the literati style. Chinese Scholars are also called literati, making this style a suitable inclusion in this Chinese Scholars Garden. In the literati style, sparseness and a curving trunk give a feeling of lift, austerity, and transcendence. Poetic images of trees from literati paintings are often used as examples for styling this type of penjing. This pine is from the Pacific Bonsai Museum in Federal Way, WA. It was donated by Lan Su volunteers Ellen Bartholemew and Michael Babbit in 2022.
Pomegranate trees are a favorite for Chinese penjing, with their stems easily taking on a crooked and aged look. It's also much beloved for its unusual blossoms and fruits. This tree is planted in a pot that says "Protecting virtue and following the Tao."
This landscape depicts two friends meeting under an old tree. Three trees are grown on a large stone, giving the landscape a feeling of old age. It is an example of a "Shumu Penjing" (樹木盆景), a penjing with trees as the main design element. This Shumu Penjing was donated by Jim Duffy in 2022.
These three small bamboo penjing sit in the garden's Scholar’s Study. The bamboo, or 竹, with the plum tree 梅, the orchid 蘭, and the chrysanthemum 菊 make up the Four Noble Ones (a.k.a. the Four Gentlemen, 四君子). They are iconic cultural motifs that embody of Chinese scholars. These bamboo penjings were donated by one of Lan Su’s Head Gardeners, Zach Stanley, in 2022.
The Kingsville Boxwood (left) is estimated at over 40 years old and is styled in the Yangzhou style, characterized by twisting branches, “Roaming Dragon Curves,” and foliage pads, “Cloud Layers”. It comes from Stanley Chinn, who immigrated to the United States after working at his uncle’s penjing nursery in China. His penjing now help make up the core collections at the National Bonsai and Penjing Collection in Washington D.C. as well as the Montreal Botanical Garden in Canada. It was donated to Lan Su by his friend Tony Meyer in 2022. The Trident Maple (right) is trained in the root over rock style and was donated in 2022 by Jim Duffy.
In the penjing artist Zhao Qingquan’s book, *Forest Penjing: Enjoy the Miniature Landscape by Growing, Care and Appreciation of Chinese Bonsai Trees*, he writes that of the different penjing types, forest penjing possess the strongest vital energy and offer the most realistic impression of nature (Qingquan, 2022). This forest of eleven trees was introduced to the garden around the gardens beginning, about 2000, by the local artist Mark Vossbrink. Its age is estimated at around 30 years old.

Somehow I ended up beneath pines sleeping in comfort on boulders there aren’t any calendars in the mountains winter ends but who counts the years
- Tai Shang ying-che (The Ancient Recluse), Tang dynasty poet, birth year unknown
Penjing often show opposites side by side, and the harmony of opposites give a feeling of wholeness. In this penjing, the old tree blossoms in new flowers every Spring. The flowers are abundantly fragrant purple cascading clusters. It’s styled in the hollow trunk style and its estimated age is about 75 years old. It was introduced around the beginning of the garden, year 2000, by Mark Vossbrink.
Penjing is often used to express emotions through miniature representation of natural scenes. In this scene an old tree that has fallen but is still vigorously growing and reaching towards the light. Its estimated age is 30 years old, and it was donated by Jim Duffy in 2022.
This bamboo penjing is in the shuihan style or "water and land style". Miniaturized landscapes are a very old form of penjing, occurring since the Han dynasty (206 B.C. – 220 A.D.), and were often magical representations of heaven 天 in Taoist and Buddhist practice (Stein, 1987). The penjing was created by Lan Su Head Gardener, Zach Stanley, and Gardener, Yasmin Mayer in 2022.
DWARF FAN LEAF BAMBOO 無毛翠竹

(PLEIOBLASTUS DISTICHUS)

The months and years compel our lives
here the mist and clouds abound
how many times will I again know
the welcome of Chulin Temple
- Chu Fang, Tang dynasty poet,
(birth year unknown- 788)
Chinese Elm 榔榆

(Ulmus parvifolia)

The poetic name for this penjing is *Thinking of Home*. In this miniature landscape we can imagine we hear wind in the trees, the gurgling of water, and the chirping of birds. The trees are Chinese Elms and are trained using the Lingnan (嶺南) school technique “clip and grow,” instead of using wire or other means of styling. The penjing is in again the Shuihan Style ("水旱" Water & Land Style), with water, shui, and land, han. The stones (英德石) are Yingde stones from Guangdong province. It was created by Lan Su Head Gardener, Zach Stanley and Robert Cho of Asia Pacific Gardening in Kent, WA in 2022.
Trident maples, native to Eastern China, are one of the most frequently used deciduous trees for Chinese penjing and Japanese bonsai. Although the two arts can look similar, there are differences emerging from different cultures and histories. The introduction of dwarfed tree culture to Japan from China was perhaps during the Southern Song dynasty (1280 – 1368), or the late Heian period in Japan (794 – 1192), (Qingquan, 2015). This penjing has an estimated age of 40 years old and was donated by Jim Duffy in 2022.
This mountain penjing has the poetic name *Holding up Clouds*. It's in the *shanshui* style, or "mountains and water". Both the stonework and the marble tray were imported from China, the plants are Plumosa Ferns, a common plant to see in "Shanshui Penjing" (山水盆景) which means "Mountains & Water penjing". Mountains are an extremely common theme in penjing and conjure sites of spiritual retreat.

Taiyi isn’t far from the Heart of Heaven
its ridges extend to the edge of the sea
white clouds form before your eyes
blue vapors vanish in plain sight
around its peaks the whole realm turns
in need of a place to spend the night
I ask a woodcutter across the stream
- Wang Wei, Tang dynasty poet (692-761)
This forest penjing depicts a scholar reclining and drinking tea. The forest is made of Silver Birch, native to China’s western provinces. The trees are characterized by smooth silver bark and golden fall color. The penjing is grown on a piece of slate rock from Eastern Washington. Its estimated age is 30 years old and it was donated by Jim Duffy in 2022.
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