

Ai Weiwei, Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads: Gold

The twelve gilded bronze sculptures on view in this gallery represent the animal symbols from the traditional Chinese zodiac. Chinese contemporary artist Ai Weiwei drew inspiration for the twelve zodiac heads from those originally located at Yuanming Yuan (Old Summer Palace), an enormous complex of imperial palaces and European-style gardens built outside of Beijing, China by the Qing emperors in the 18th and 19th centuries. Designed and engineered by Giuseppe Castiglione, an Italian Jesuit lay brother and artist to the imperial court; and Michel Benoist, a French scientist and Catholic priest of the Jesuit order, the heads at Yuanming Yuan originally functioned as an ornate fountain clock, each head spouting water at two-hour intervals.

Once accessible only to 18th and 19th-century Chinese elite, the Beijing garden complex was set afire, destroyed, and looted by Anglo-French troops in 1860 during the Second Opium War. The original zodiac heads were lost, and later turned up in private and public collections in Europe and Asia. Five heads remain missing, while the seven heads still known to exist (*Monkey, Pig, Rat, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, and Horse*) have since been returned to China. Ai Weiwei's *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads: Gold* engages issues of looting, repatriation, and cultural heritage while expanding upon ongoing themes in the artist's body of work that explore fakes, copies, and ideas related to authenticity.