

# War, looting and wounded Chinese pride: the hidden meanings of Ai Weiwei's zodiac animals at the Cleveland Museum of Art



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## The Cleveland Museum of Art



Viewers interact with Ai Weiwei's installation of monumental bronze sculptures of Chinese zodiac creatures at the Cleveland Museum of Art.

Marvin Fong, The Plain Dealer

([http://www.cleveland.com/arts/index.ssf/2009/06/sherman\\_lee.html](http://www.cleveland.com/arts/index.ssf/2009/06/sherman_lee.html)),

long a bastion of **conservative cultural thinking**

([http://www.cleveland.com/arts/index.ssf/2009/06/sherman\\_lee.html](http://www.cleveland.com/arts/index.ssf/2009/06/sherman_lee.html)), is

finally catching up to the present in the world of contemporary art – and it's exploring work with red-hot political and social content as never before.

One sure sign is the new international touring exhibition of 12 large **bronze sculptures of Chinese zodiac creatures**

([http://www.cleveland.com/arts/index.ssf/2013/07/zodiac\\_creatures\\_by\\_chinese\\_di.html](http://www.cleveland.com/arts/index.ssf/2013/07/zodiac_creatures_by_chinese_di.html))

by **Ai Weiwei**

([http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/a/ai\\_weiwei/index.html](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/a/ai_weiwei/index.html)),

the dissident Chinese artist, blogger, filmmaker and globally famous thorn in the side of

the Communist Party.

The **Ai show** (<http://www.clevelandart.org/events/exhibitions/ai-weiwei-circle-animalszodiac-heads>), on view through Jan. 26 in the museum's big, skylighted atrium, is an extraordinary event. It appears at first merely to be a simple and playful salute to animals that most Americans encounter on placemats in Chinese restaurants – the dog, the tiger, the monkey, the dragon, the ox, the rat and so on.

But it also offers a glimpse at the career of one of the most important and controversial contemporary artists in the world. And it raises fascinating questions about the relationship of East and West as well as the history of artworks looted by invading armies during wartime.

None of this is apparent on the surface, however.

Ai's 12 sculptures specifically depict the oversized heads of the zodiac animals, which are mounted atop slender columns that resemble knotty tree trunks or perhaps jets of water spraying up from a fountain.

The sculptures, which stand roughly 9 feet or higher, are lined up in two groups of six along the north facade of the museum's neoclassical 1916 building, the white marble palace that borders the south side of the atrium, the centerpiece of the museum's \$350 million expansion and renovation.

Many visitors seem to be experiencing the Ai show as a kind of indoor garden folly.

They pose next to the zodiac animals for snapshots while reaching between the dragon's fangs as if it were the **"Bocca della Verita"**

([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bocca\\_della\\_Verit%C3%AO](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bocca_della_Verit%C3%AO)) in Rome, the ancient sculpture nicknamed "the Mouth of Truth." The Roman carving is said to bite off the hand of anyone who tells a lie while reaching inside its parted lips.

Ai, who wants his work to be approachable and easily appreciated, would be delighted. But there's far more going on here.

Ai is a deeply thoughtful conceptual artist drenched in Western theories that reach back to the World War I-era Dada movement, the absurdist "found objects" of Marcel Duchamp and the media savvy of Pop artist Andy Warhol.

Ai is also a master of communication with an amazing ability to flout authority and broadcast his message through social media, even while the Chinese government cracks down on him hard on **charges of tax evasion**

(<http://www.cnn.com/2012/09/27/world/asia/china-ai-weiwei-tax->



View full size ([http://media.cleveland.com/ent\\_impact\\_arts/photo/ai-weiwei-roosterjpg-199033bb32f6c8c.jpg](http://media.cleveland.com/ent_impact_arts/photo/ai-weiwei-roosterjpg-199033bb32f6c8c.jpg))

Ai Weiwei's rooster is an invention based on a lost original by Italian Jesuit artist Giuseppe Castiglione, who created the original 18th-century menagerie on which Ai's zodiac animals are based.

*Marvin Fong, The Plain Dealer*

## FYI

**Gallery:** Cleveland Museum of Art

**What:** "Ai Weiwei: Circle of Animals"

**Where:** 11150 East Blvd., Cleveland

**When:** Through Sunday, Jan. 26.

**Admission:** Free. Call 216-421-7340 or go to [www.clevelandart.org](http://www.clevelandart.org)

**evasion-appeal)** he says are trumped up.

The government held him incommunicado for 81 days in 2011 on the eve of his departure for the opening of the first zodiac sculpture installations in New York and London. The government also revoked Ai's passport.

"Circle of Animals," then, is deeply connected to Ai's personal history as a persecuted cultural figure in China. It also can be appreciated as a revelatory exploration of the many ways in which the West has influenced China, and vice versa, in a centuries-old relationship saturated by mutual admiration and fraught with conflict.

The key to this layer of meaning is that Ai's zodiac heads are based on sculptures looted in 1860 during the **Second Opium War**



Daphne, 2, gets to know Ai Weiwei's rabbit sculpture at the Cleveland Museum of Art.

*Marvin Fong, The Plain Dealer*

([http://www.princeton.edu/~achaney/tmve/wiki100k/docs/Second\\_Opium\\_War.html](http://www.princeton.edu/~achaney/tmve/wiki100k/docs/Second_Opium_War.html))by French and British troops from the Yuanming Yuan, the Chinese Imperial Garden of Perfect Brightness, in Beijing.

As a result of their history, the 12 zodiac heads have taken on huge cultural significance in China as symbols of the "century of national humiliation," from roughly 1840 to 1945, during which foreign powers dominated the Chinese mainland and controlled numerous port cities.

The deep, deep irony is that the heads were in fact not Chinese at all. They were designed by Giuseppe Castiglione, an Italian Jesuit artist and missionary to China.

Castiglione (1688-1766) was part of a team of Europeans who designed palaces in the vast Garden of Perfect Brightness in the 18th century for the luxury-loving Qianlong Emperor in a hybrid style based on Italian Baroque architecture.

The zodiac creatures were part of an elaborate fountain in front of the garden's Palace of the Calm Seas, or Haiyan Tang, according to the catalog to the Ai exhibition. The bronze zodiac heads were set atop carved stone sculptures of seated human figures.

Castiglione is famous for having painted numerous portraits of the Qianlong Emperor and Empress in a style that blends the Renaissance of the West with the formal elegance of the East.

The Cleveland Museum of Art, amazingly, **owns two**

### **Castiglione portraits of the Chinese royals**

Giuseppe Castiglione, the Italian Jesuit artist who painted this portrait of the Qianlong Emperor of China in 1736, is credited as the designer of the Chinese zodiac creatures that inspired Ai Weiwei's "Circle of Animals" installation now on view at the museum.

*Cleveland Museum of Art*

([http://www.clevelandart.org/art/1969.31?](http://www.clevelandart.org/art/1969.31?collection_search_query=castiglione&year_operator=1&year=&year_era=1&year_end=&year_end_era=1&op=search&form_id=clevelandart_collection_search_form)

[collection\\_search\\_query=castiglione&year\\_operator=1&year=&year\\_era=1&year\\_end=&year\\_end\\_era=1&op=search&form\\_id=clevelandart\\_collection\\_search\\_form](http://www.clevelandart.org/art/1969.31?collection_search_query=castiglione&year_operator=1&year=&year_era=1&year_end=&year_end_era=1&op=search&form_id=clevelandart_collection_search_form)

[ZwblN1uSllGdwVFE4i2ma5uNhLkk&form\\_id=clevelandart\\_collection\\_search\\_form](http://www.clevelandart.org/art/1969.31?collection_search_query=castiglione&year_operator=1&year=&year_era=1&year_end=&year_end_era=1&op=search&form_id=clevelandart_collection_search_form)),

along with portraits of 11 imperial consorts – all dating from 1736.

In the context of the Ai exhibition, it's a shame that the Cleveland museum's West Wing, which will house its collection of Chinese art, where the Castiglione portraits are normally displayed, won't open until late December.

The foreign troops in 1860 left the Garden of Perfect Brightness in ruins – a state in which it remained for more than a century, long enough for the young Ai to visit frequently during sketching tours as an art student in Beijing.

In recent decades, the looted zodiac sculptures have become a political cause in a resurgent China whose explosive economic growth has been driven, at least in part, by bitter memories of foreign colonization.

As author Colin Jones puts it in the exhibition's catalog, the zodiac sculptures "have become to China what the **Elgin Marbles are to Greece**

([http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1883142\\_1883129\\_1883001,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1883142_1883129_1883001,00.html)):

the nation's most sought-after national treasures and a reminder of past ignominy at the hands of foreign power."

The celebrated "marbles" were removed by Lord Elgin from the Parthenon in Athens in the first decade of the 19th century supposedly to safeguard them from indifferent treatment by the Ottoman Empire. England has since refused to return the sculptures, which reside in the British Museum in London.

As for the original zodiac sculptures, only seven of the 12 originals are known to exist. Poly Group, a corporate arm of the Chinese military, owns five of them – the monkey, ox, tiger, boar and horse. The company and the Macao casino magnate Stanley Ho spent millions of dollars acquiring them at auction in recent years, according to Jones.

### **Pierre Berge of Paris**

(<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2009/may/14/the-affair-of-the-chinese-bronze-heads/?pagination=false>), the partner of the late French fashion designer Yves Saint-Laurent, owns the rat and the rabbit, and won't part with them, according to Jones, unless China grants freedom to Tibet.

Berge tried to auction the rat and the rabbit through Christie's in Paris in February 2009. An anonymous phone bidder won them with a bid of

The Monkey in Ai Weiwei's Chinese zodiac menagerie represents a creature traditionally viewed in Chinese culture as sensitive, empathetic, opportunistic, restless, confident, entertaining, funny and generous. Monkeys are said to be good planners, designers, stockbrokers and theologians.

*Marvin Fong, The Plain Dealer*

\$38 million. Days later, a Chinese antiques dealer named Cai Mingchao revealed himself as the bidder but said he couldn't pay. He said he made the fake bids as a political protest to foil the auction, according to Jones.

The failed auction inspired Ai to create his zodiac series, according to the foreword in the exhibition catalog, written by **Larry Warsh** (<http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/04/04/ai-weiweis-new-york-project-to-go-forward-with-or-without-him/>), an art world publisher and entrepreneur who has championed Ai's work.

To complete his set of 12 sculptures, Ai had to invent the dragon, snake, ram, rooster and dog, which he did in a variety of styles based on the remaining originals and his understanding of traditional Ming and Qing Dynasty design.

In the late 2000s, Ai created two sets of zodiac sculptures -- a room-sized series in bronze with a gold patina, and the larger bronze series now on view in Cleveland.

The museum spells out the basics of this story in a free-standing plaque in the atrium, that is easy to miss. The plaque includes a quote from Ai, who points out that the Qing Dynasty resulted from a Manchu invasion, raising further questions about Chinese identity and nationhood. The museum is preparing a brochure with somewhat more information, to be distributed later.

Given their background, it's easy to see the zodiac heads as both innocuous and incendiary, playful and pointed. They're an example of Duchampian appropriation, of Chinese pop-culture imagery elevated to the level of high art, and of commentary on China's complex relationship with the West.

It's hard to see how this piece in particular could have incensed Chinese authorities, given its patriotic back story. Other pieces, including Ai's documentations of his detention in 2011, certainly fit that bill.

As displayed atop their columns in the Cleveland museum atrium, the zodiac heads have a haunting quality. Their large scale heightens their importance and gives them a looming power the original and smaller bronze heads probably lack.

Also, the presentation of Ai's sculptures as heads mounted atop slender columns emphasizes the ways in which the originals were severed from their context in the Qianlong Emperor's splendid garden. In a sense, it's as if the zodiac heads have been mounted on pikes as cultural trophies torn violently from their original context.

As a display of sculpture, the bronze heads look spectacular next to the marble stonework of the 1916 building, which stands in for the Palace of the Calm Seas.

The installation is just about pitch-perfect.

That said, it would be monotonous in the extreme if all the Cleveland museum **does with its atrium**

Ai Weiwei's Chinese zodiac animals are on view in the atrium of the Cleveland Museum of Art in an installation that hauntingly recalls an 18th century Beijing palace plundered by European troops in the Second Opium War in 1860.

*Marvin Fong, The Plain Dealer*

([http://www.cleveland.com/arts/index.ssf/2012/09/cleveland\\_museum\\_of\\_art\\_atrium.html](http://www.cleveland.com/arts/index.ssf/2012/09/cleveland_museum_of_art_atrium.html))

is to line up large sculptures along the front of the 1916 building. Additional installations of art in the big space need to explore other possibilities, including hanging objects from the skylight above.

For now, however, Ai's "Circle of Animals" represents an auspicious artistic beginning for the atrium as an exhibit area, as something more than a great public room and an income-generating party space.

It's also a very solid step forward in the museum's evolving project to bring itself up to date as an institution devoted to contemporary art after decades of giving new art the cold shoulder. On all those accounts, then, the Ai show is a moment to celebrate.