

The Garden of Perfect Brightness—3

Destruction, Looting, and Memory (1860-present)

by Lillian M. Li

Opium War:
The Final Act

Plundering
Paradise

Collecting
Loot

Relics &
Controversy

Ruins &
Memory

Sources
& Credits

RELICS & CONTROVERSY

The Controversy Surrounding the 12 Zodiac Animal Heads

The saga of the 12 zodiac animal heads looted from the European section of the Yuanmingyuan offers a lively illustration both the breadth of the present-day international market in Chinese antiquities as well as the rise of nationalistic Chinese demands for repatriation of stolen art. The most significant items at Christie's Hong Kong sale in 2000 were a bronze monkey head and ox head from the water-clock fountain at the Hall of Calm Seas (Haiyantang 海宴堂) palace. The monkey originally spouted water between three and five o'clock in the afternoon, while the ox spouted water between one and three in the morning.



These looted monkey and ox heads, originally part of the zodiac animals that graced a fountain in the Yuanmingyuan, were auctioned in Hong Kong in 2000 and purchased for a new state-owned museum in Beijing devoted to celebrating traditional culture and retrieving lost relics.

[ymy8025] [ymy8026]

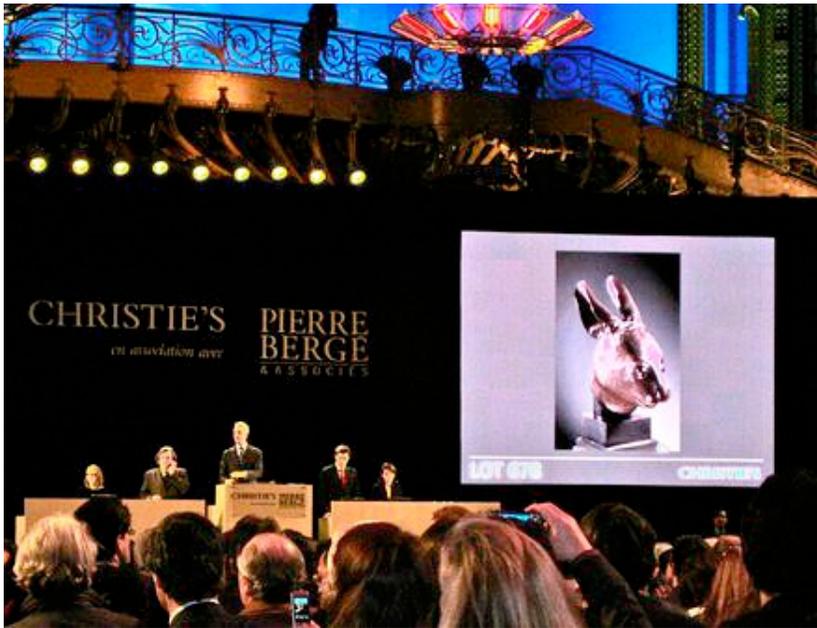
The auction of the monkey and ox heads stimulated Chinese interest at all levels in seeing the stolen zodiac animals returned to China. The Poly Art Museum in Beijing purchased the two sculptures (and also the tiger head, from a different source) for a total of about \$4 million. This state-owned museum was founded in December 1998 and opened to the public a year later, under the auspices of the State Administration of Cultural Heritage and the Beijing Cultural Relics Bureau. ^[10] In 2003, the head of the zodiac pig was purchased for \$770,000 from a New York collector by Stanley Ho, a Macau gambling magnate, and donated to the Poly Art Museum the following year. Later, in 2007, Stanley Ho purchased the horse's head for around \$8.9 million from a Taiwan collector (who had paid \$400,000 for it at Southeby's in London in 1989), and donated it to the Capital Museum in Beijing.

In addition to these five animal heads that have been repatriated to China, two additional heads appeared on the Paris market in 2009, when the bronze rat and rabbit were auctioned by Christie's for the estate of the French designer Yves St. Laurent. The Chinese government protested the auction and argued that these stolen objects should be returned to China. When the auction house ignored this plea, a Chinese bidder, at first unidentified, successfully bid \$18-million each for the two heads. The buyer then refused to pay up, stating that "every Chinese would have done the same as I did. It's just that I got the opportunity. I have fulfilled my duty." He later identified himself as an adviser to China's National Treasures Fund named Cai Mingchao. After this incident, Pierre Bergé, the partner of Yves St. Laurent, said he would keep the two zodiac heads in his own possession.

As of 2011, the remaining five heads—the dragon, snake, sheep, rooster, and dog—had not been located.



This zodiac horse's head from the Yuanmingyuan, auctioned by Sotheby's in September 2007, was purchased by a Chinese billionaire in Macau and donated to China.



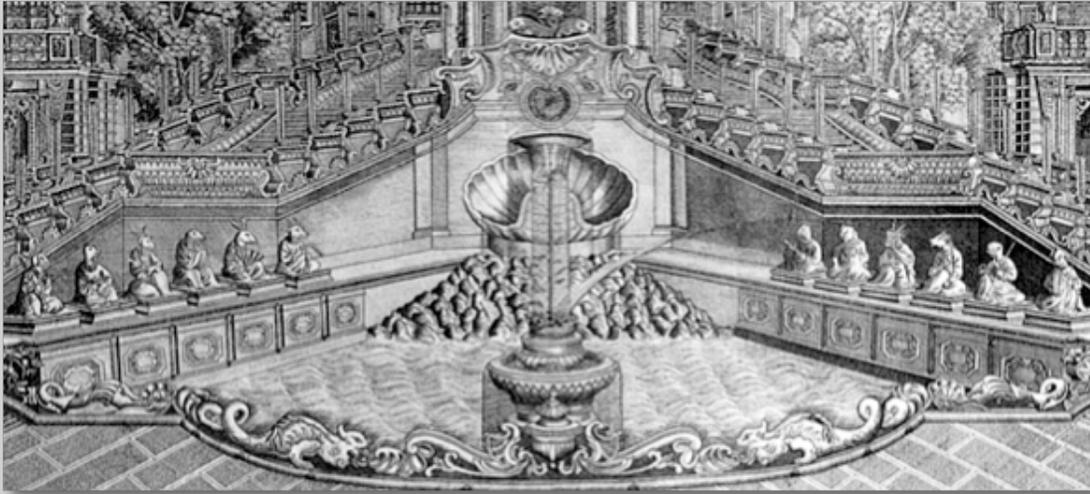
Christie's auction of the rat and rabbit zodiac heads, offered for sale by the estate of Yves St. Laurent in February 2009, received extensive critical coverage in both the Chinese and international media, including dissemination of these two photos. The heads were purchased by a Chinese bidder who subsequently refused to pay.



A Chinese cartoon depicts the bodies of fountain figures bidding at the Christie's auction to retrieve their heads.

Studio Yuan Jiao Man's Space
on Blog QQ.com, 2009

The Fate of the Zodiac Animal Heads



Worldwide debate surrounds the Haiyantang fountain zodiac animal heads (pictured in above detail) as items looted from Yuanmingyuan. According to one website as of March 1, 2009 they are accounted for as follows:

Rat: *was in Yves Saint Laurent's collection. Sold for \$18 million at hammer price (\$20 million with fees) to an anonymous bidder in Paris in February 2009. Chinese bidder, Cai Mingchao, won't pay for YSL auction statues.*

Ox: *bought by the China Poly Group in 2000 for \$954,000, now at the Poly Art Museum in Beijing.*

Tiger: *bought by the China Poly Group in 2000 for \$1.99 million, now at the Poly Art Museum in Beijing.*

Rabbit: *was in Yves Saint Laurent's collection. Sold for \$18 million at hammer price (\$20 million with fees) to a telephone bidder in Paris in February 2009. Chinese bidder, Cai Mingchao, won't pay for YSL auction statues.*

Dragon: *unknown.*

Snake: *unknown.*

Horse: *was in a private collection in Taiwan. Purchased by Macau gaming magnate Stanley Ho in 2007 for \$8.84 million and donated to China. Currently at the Capital Museum in Beijing.*

Sheep: *unknown.*

Monkey: bought by the China Poly Group in 2000 for \$1.05 million, now at the Poly Art Museum in Beijing.

Rooster: unknown.

Dog: in 2003, a Hong Kong auction house claimed to be selling the dog from the Summer Palace water clock, but consultants from the Poly Art Museum said the craftsmanship didn't match the other four the Poly Group has recovered.

Pig: purchased by Stanley Ho in 2003 (from a NY collector) and donated to China. Currently at the Poly Art Museum in Beijing.

[ymy2010]

Source: [Yuanmingyuan \(Old Summer Palace, Imperial Summer Palace\) > 圆明园](#)

Replicas and Recreations of the Zodiac Animal Fountain

The looted zodiac heads have inspired not just patriotism, but also considerable entrepreneurship in China. Replicas of the zodiac statues—sometimes just the heads, sometimes in their original full figures—are displayed in public places including the Yuanmingyuan Park that now exists on the site of the old imperial complex. In 2010, a large-scale recreation of all 12 heads created by the prominent and controversial Chinese sculptor Ai Weiwei went global and has been on tour internationally, including an installation in New York's Central Park, since then. On-line coverage of these now world-famous 12 animals is extensive, and patriotic Chinese consumers can choose from a variety of replicas including a set of heavy gold seals.



The zodiac animal sculptures have been reproduced with the full bodies and placed on display at the Yuanmingyuan park.

Wikipedia Commons

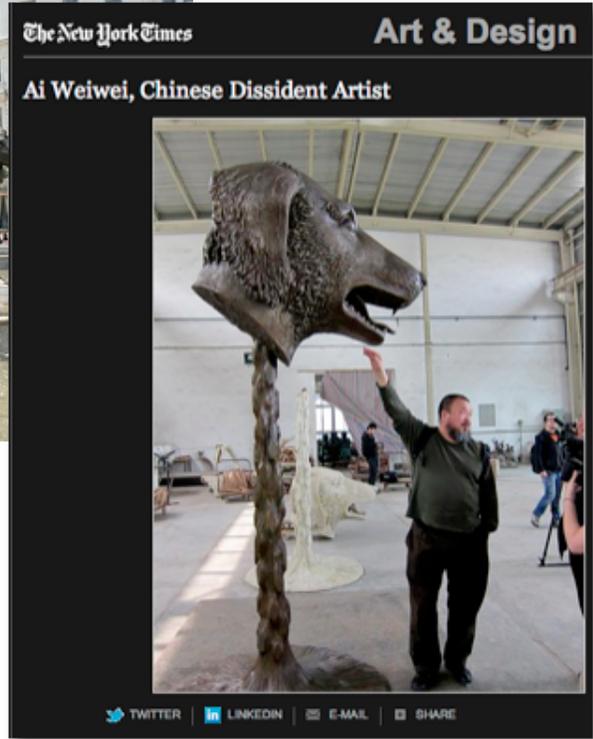


Another recreation of the zodiac animal sculptures—in precious jade—is on display in Xi'an, northern China, near the site of the Terra Cotta Warriors of the First Emperor.



The popularity of the zodiac animal heads continues with set of gold seal reproductions displayed in Beijing in March 2011.

Photo by Su Dan, China News Agency



Sculptor Ai Weiwei's huge replication of the Yuanmingyuan zodiac heads toured Europe and the United States in 2011, including an installation in New York's Central Park (above). The full run of his "Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads" appears below.

