

Phoenix Art Museum

News Release

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Phoenix Art Museum presents works by renowned, controversial Ai Weiwei

Ai Weiwei: Circle of Animals / Zodiac Heads: Gold opens October 3

PHOENIX (September 25, 2015) – Phoenix Art Museum will present an exhibition of the works of Ai Weiwei, the internationally renowned Chinese artist and activist. *Ai Weiwei: Circle of Animals / Zodiac Heads: Gold* features 12 gold-plated Chinese zodiac sculptures, as well as 18th century Chinese bronze works drawn from the Museum's collection, which provide historical context for the original works that inspired the artist. The exhibition will be on view October 3 through January 31, 2016, in the Art of Asia Gallery.

"It is an honor to bring the works of this acclaimed artist and social activist to our community in Phoenix," said Amada Cruz, the Museum's Sybil Harrington Director. "The Museum's permanent collection of Asian Art is distinctive for both its historical value and regional diversity. An exhibition of the works of Ai Weiwei magnifies the strength of our collection by giving voice to the contemporary artists of the region working today."

The twelve zodiac head sculptures, known as the Circle of Animals, were created by the artist in 2010 and were his first major public sculpture project. The sculptures, (which include the rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog and pig) were created in two versions: a larger, bronze version and a smaller gold-plated version. The exhibition at Phoenix Art Museum will feature the smaller, golden version of the sculptures.

The artist drew inspiration for the sculptures from those that once graced the Qing dynasty fountain, located in an 18th-century complex of imperial palaces and gardens, located just outside of Beijing. The original 12 sculptures were designed by two European Jesuits who served in the court of Emperor Qianlong. During the Second Opium War in 1860, the original bronze sculptures were looted by British and French troops. Although some of the objects have since been returned, today they serve as symbols of cultural theft, inspiring Ai Weiwei to recreate the gold-plated sculptures as a subversive commentary on the nature of looting and repatriation.

"For Ai Weiwei, the Zodiac Heads became the fodder for the re-interpretation of cultural objects from his own historical knowledge and artistic fantasy," says Dr. Janet Baker, curator of Asian Art at Phoenix Art Museum, who organized the exhibition. "He re-works all twelve creatures; both those that are known to exist from the originals and those that do not. He makes stylistic references to the existing heads, even as he introduces influences from past dynasties for some, and a quality of scientific realism for others. Ai's mixture is itself affected by the work of the craftspeople who cast the bronze sculptures. In this way, the artist is able, in his own words, 'to produce something that is a copy of an original but not an exact copy – something that has its own sensitive layer of languages which are different, and that bears the mark of our own time.'"

As an artist, Ai Weiwei is no stranger to controversy and art as an act of subversive creation. As both an artist and social activist, Ai Weiwei has been openly critical of the Chinese government's stance on democracy and their long record of human-rights violations. As a result of his criticisms and investigation of the government's corruption and cover-ups, he was held for 81 days at an undisclosed location in 2011. Following four years of house arrest, Chinese authorities returned his passport, enabling him to flee China for Germany, with his wife and son, where he continues his artistic practice today.

“Ai Weiwei uses his rapier wit and perceptions of the world via Twitter and blogs, to goad the Chinese government, but this serves only to enhance his standing as his nation’s public conscience,” says Dr. Baker. “By now, Ai is an institution, a global brand that represents the power of art in the face of tyranny, obduracy or epic stupidity.”

Ai Weiwei: Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads: Gold, was curated by Dr. Baker. It will be on view through January 31, 2016. Following its Phoenix premiere, the exhibition will travel on to The Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, and the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, Australia, and Tucson Museum of Art. This exhibition has been made possible through the generous support of Heather Sacre and Jim Carona, Asian Arts Council, GFWC Desert Jade Women’s Club Endowment, Marilyn A. Papp, and The Marilyn A. Papp Chinese Painting Endowment Fund.

About Phoenix Art Museum

Phoenix Art Museum has provided access to visual arts and educational programs in Arizona for more than 50 years and is the largest art museum in the Southwestern United States. Critically acclaimed national and international exhibitions are shown alongside the Museum’s permanent collection of more than 18,000 works of American, Asian, European, Latin American, Western American, modern and contemporary art, and fashion design. The Museum also presents festivals, a comprehensive film program, live performances and educational programs designed to enlighten, entertain and stimulate visitors of all ages. Visitors also enjoy vibrant photography exhibitions through the Museum’s landmark partnership with the Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona. To learn more about Phoenix Art Museum, visit PhxArt.org, or call the 24-hour recorded information line at (602) 257-1222

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