

18. The Twelve Zodiacal Animals

Lengths: 8.0 to 17.5 cm. (3 1/8 to 6 7/8 in.)

Heights: 9.0 to 12.0 cm. (3 1/2 to 4 3/4 in.)

Yuan dynasty

Late 13th-early 14th century A.D.

The twelve animals are hand modeled in an expressionistic manner to capture their individual characteristics, with a touch of quirkiness and a bit of the grotesque thrown in for good measure. Fabricated from earthenware clay, their forms were first worked out by hand and their various anatomical features created by scraping, pinching, twisting, gouging and incising the clay, with varying degrees of light-colored pigments added to their surfaces after firing. Aside from the rather sleek dragon and coiled snake with head held high, the animals are a rather portly group, either standing on their short legs or nestled on the ground, and each has an extremely alert, expressive and engaging face.



Three figures from a similar set of twelve—a horse, ox, and tiger—in the Yunnan Provincial Museum were reportedly excavated in Dali in Yunnan and are attributed to the Yuan period (figs. 1-3). Thermoluminescence dating of a figure from the present set and of another from a set formerly owned by Kaikodo support a Yuan period date of production at the latest for these engaging figures. Their sculptural style is rather unusual in the history of Chinese ceramics whereas there is something in their appearance that brings to mind the gargoyles of Gothic architecture in the West and the imagination is tickled by the prospect of some influence from that quarter, and the dating is just right for such an influence to have occurred.

The houses of the zodiac in Chinese lore and philosophy were thought of as "Twelve Earthly Branches." These branches, as in the Western zodiac, were symbolized by a set sequence of animals: the rat, ox, tiger, hare, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, cock, dog and pig. While this concept is of great antiquity in China, the representation of the symbolic animals in art did not begin until around the 6th century. The representations, interestingly, were in the form of hybrid creatures comprised of human bodies surmounted by the heads of each of the twelve animals (figs. 4-5), a tradition that continued through Tang dynasty. It is possible that such were meant to represent masked priests or shaman evoking the presence of the powerful zodiacal spirits during religious ceremonies or festivals. During the Tang period these mortuary figures were comparable in style to the unglazed earthenware or *sancai*-glazed figures prevalent at that time. During the Song, new manifestations of the zodiacal emblems became fashionable: male figures in official caps and gowns were depicted holding images of the animals much like tablets of office, in clasped hands held forward as exemplified here by *yingqing*-glazed figures from a Song period tomb located in Jiangxi province. It would appear that ceramic animals arrived on the scene during the Yuan period but perhaps as a local phenomenon, centered in Yunnan province.¹

1. For further references to zodiacal figures in Chinese art, see *Kaikodo Journal* XIX, Spring 2001 ("A Natural Selection"), no. 62, *Kaikodo Journal* XX, Autumn 2001 ("Worlds of Wonder"), no. 78, and *Kaikodo Journal* XXIII, Spring 2007 ("The Aesthetics of Change"), no. 66. Also see Judy Chungwu

Ho in "The Twelve Calendrical Animals in Tang Tombs," in George Kuwayama, ed., *Ancient Mortuary Traditions of China*, Los Angeles, 1991, pp. 60-83.

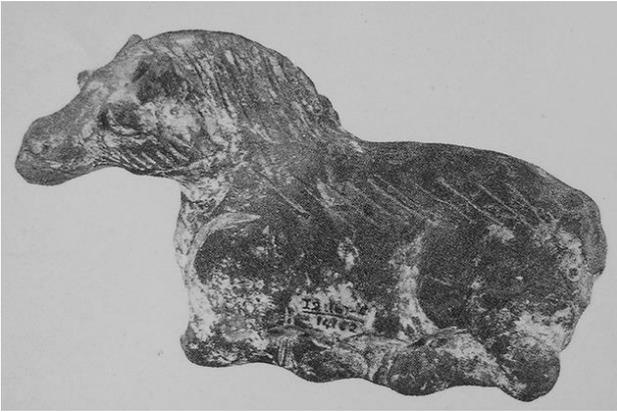


Fig. 1: Small earthenware horse, Yuan dynasty, late 13th-14th century A.D., Yunnan Provincial Museum, after *Zhongguo taoci quanji*, vol. 29 (*Yunnan taoci*), pl. 63.



Fig. 2: Small earthenware ox, Yuan dynasty, late 13th-14th century A.D., Yunnan Provincial Museum, after *Zhongguo taoci quanji*, vol. 29 (*Yunnan taoci*), pl. 64.



Fig. 3: Small earthenware tiger, Yuan dynasty, late 13th-14th century A.D., Yunnan Provincial Museum, after *Zhongguo taoci quanji*, vol. 29 (*Yunnan taoci*), pl. 65.



Fig. 4: Glazed stoneware rat, ox, and monkey from a set of zodiacal figures, Sui dynasty, early 7th century A.D., after *A Journey into China's Antiquity*, vol. 3: *Sui Dynasty-Northern and Southern Song Dynasties*, Beijing, 1997, no. 214, pp. 210-211.



Fig. 5: Painted earthenware ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, and snake from a set of zodiacal figures Sui dynasty, early 7th century A.D., after *A Journey into China's Antiquity*, vol. 3: *Sui Dynasty-Northern and Southern Song Dynasties*, Beijing, 1997, no. 18, p. 77.



Fig. 6: Ceramic figures from a zodiacal set, *yingqing*-glazed porcelain with iron painting, Northern Song period, 11th-early 12th century A.D., after *Chugoku Koseisbo Bunbutsu Ten*, ("Exhibition of Chinese Treasures from Jiangxi Province"), Gifu, 1988, no. 58, p. 67 (detail).