

Cynthia Fang, University of California, Los Angeles

“An Aviary in the European Palace Complex at Yuanmingyuan: Tracing Path and Flight in the Early Modern World”

Abstract:

As ornithological studies took flight in seventeenth-century Italy, nearly every notable villa in Rome included an aviary. A century later, an aviary was constructed as part of the European Palace Complex at Yuanmingyuan, or the Old Summer Palace, in Qing China. This avian structure served as an important gateway to access the east and west sides of the complex. Its facades were recorded in a set of twenty copperplate engravings (1783–6). The east facade, notably, exhibits translations of architectural elements reminiscent of avian architecture in Rome. Although the aviary no longer exists, its representation is one form of evidence that provides insight to the ways in which forms, medium, and ideas of avian architecture were disseminated. What was the function of the aviary in the imperial context? Why assemble a soundscape of captive songbirds, whose chirps likely echoed within the portal? Surveying various types of aviaries in the Italian peninsula, I make a case for the significance of a European prototype. The story of the aviary at Yuanmingyuan is evidently a critical instance of the global fascination with birds, and their captivity in elite spaces, which ultimately helps us reassess early modern connections across and between cultures.

Bio:

Cynthia Fang is a PhD candidate in art history at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Her dissertation examines transalpine artistic interactions and collaboration among Augsburg and Italian centers, assessing reasons for why cabinets were designed with explicit references to architectural forms and urban centers. As an extension of her interest in the transmission of ideas as well as early modern phenomena, Cynthia has pursued separate research projects focusing on transcultural connections between early modern Europe and China in the Qing dynasty. In 2023, her syllabus, “Transcultural Art Production and Qing China (1644-1911),” was offered as a summer session course at the Department of Art History, UCLA.