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exhibition review of

Félix Bracquemond: Impressionist Innovator—Selections from the Frank Raysor Collection

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The role of printmaking in the avant-garde art of Europe in the late nineteenth century is still underappreciated today despite the diligent efforts of recent print historians. Scholars compile individual biographies and catalogue raisonnés, yet the fuller context and influence of these often powerful images is incomplete. The recent monographic exhibition at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) on the seminal French printmaker Félix Bracquemond (1833–1914) addressed these issues in a direct and refreshing way. The exhibition explored Bracquemond’s interaction with Japanese art, with porcelain manufacture, with the innovative painting of the time, and with the reproductive printmaking of both contemporary and old master paintings. (http://vmfa.museum/exhibitions/exhibitions/felix-bracquemond-impressionist-innovator-selections-frank-rayso collection/)

The exhibition was co-curated by Mitchell Merling, Paul Mellon Curator and Head of the Department of European Art, and Kristie Couser, Curatorial Assistant for the Mellon Collections. The curators thoughtfully selected eighty works from the extensive collection given by Frank Raysor, a longtime friend and patron of the VMFA whose ongoing gifts have transformed the museum’s graphic holdings. The exhibition is installed in the Mellon Focus Galleries in roughly chronological order (figs. 1–3). A number of the Bracquemond prints are juxtaposed with examples of the artist’s dinner service to detail his unique engagement with the decorative arts. Other prints are shown in multiple stages of development, helping the visitor to understand some of the subtleties of print techniques. Most of the etchings are in pristine condition, a tribute to both the collector’s judgment and the two curators’ perspicacity. The labels and wall text are excellent, providing the visitor with essential information to understand and appreciate Bracquemond’s work.
Félix Bracquemond was born in Paris in 1833.[1] He began to investigate etching around 1849, partly influenced by Joseph Guichard, a pupil of J. A. D. Ingres and the director of the art school at Lyon. Although largely self-taught, Bracquemond had precocious success as a printmaker. One of his early masterpieces, the 1852 *Le haut d’un battant de porte* (The Upper Panel of a Door), received favorable mention when it was shown at the Paris Universal Exposition of 1855 (fig. 4). As a helpful label notes, Bracquemond reportedly observed this display of birds and a bat nailed to a barn door while walking in the village of Villers-Cotterêts. Nonetheless, the artist transformed this finely wrought etching from a simple still life of profiled wings into a sober representation with deeply religious overtones. A fine impression is included in the exhibition, although it would have provided a useful comparison if the later published state of 1865 with its inscribed poem also was included.

Bracquemond first exhibited his work at the government sponsored Salon in 1852, and was regularly accepted over the following twenty years. However, he was refused at one crucially important exhibition, the infamous Salon of 1863. The refusal of two works by Bracquemond in 1863 is curious in light of the fact that the etchings had been commissioned by the Minister of State as reproductions to be sold by the *Chalcographie du Louvre*. Prior to photography, printmaking was the most common way of reproducing painting, particularly with engraving. One of Bracquemond’s commissions was to reproduce Holbein’s famous *Portrait of Erasmus* as
well as a second work by Peter Paul Rubens (fig. 5). We can only guess as to the reasons why the jury rejected Bracquemond’s reproduction. In any event, Bracquemond’s works were then banished to the Salon des Refusés where he kept company with such modern artists as Edouard Manet and James McNeill Whistler. The Salon jurors rectified their error by including the work in the 1864 Salon. Bracquemond’s work was shown in eight consecutive Salons between 1864 and 1872, and he was awarded prestigious Salon medals in both 1868 and 1872. Later, the Portrait of Erasmus was included in the first Impressionist exhibition, giving it the distinction of being the only work shown in the Salon, the Salon des Refusés, and the first show of the Independents. The portrait is not included in the VMFA’s exhibition, perhaps the most notable print omitted from the otherwise outstanding selection.

Bracquemond was a key political figure in the etching revival of the 1850s and 1860s. Along with the publisher Alfred Cadart and the printer Auguste Delâtre, he founded La Société des Aquafortistes in 1862. The Société published a monthly portfolio of prints over its five-year existence, including work by the most progressive artists of the time: Manet, Henri Fantin-Latour, Charles Meryon, Whistler, and Bracquemond himself. The Société and their publications received favorable reviews and publicity from all of the most enlightened and influential critics of the period, including Charles Baudelaire, Philippe Burty, Thoré-Burger, and Théophile Gautier. Félix Bracquemond also was an important teacher, generous with his advice and assistance on etching to other artists including Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, Gustave Courbet, Théodore Rousseau, Edgar Degas, and Fantin-Latour.

During this same time Bracquemond remained active as an etcher, a period particularly well represented in the exhibition. A nice array of etched portraits from the 1850s includes images of the artists Charles Meryon and Alfred de Curzon, and the critics Charles Baudelaire and Théophile Gautier (figs. 6, 7). The Baudelaire etching was based on a self-portrait caricature by the critic, and the Gautier portrait was from a photograph by Nadar, the pioneering photographer who would later lend the Impressionists his studio for their first exhibition in 1874. Bracquemond was apt to draw upon paintings, prints, drawings, and photographs for inspiration in his graphic work.
Some of Bracquemond’s most vivid images of animals and birds also derive from this period. The 1854 Les Taupes (the Moles), a variation on the theme of the Upper Panel of the Barn Door, or La volaille plumeée (The Plucked Fowl) are meditations on both quotidian life and on the omnipresence of death (fig. 8). Dating from the same year, the eccentric etchings Margot la critique, ou la Pie (Margot the Critic, or The Magpie) and Le corbeau (The Raven) are both riveting aviary portrayals, with texts that add universal commentary to their images (fig. 9).

From 1856 we have Bracquemond’s earliest images of his signature motif, Le canard (The Duck) (fig. 10). The flying ducks appear to announce the contemporary satirical poem by Edmond About, playing on the double entendre of the French word canard for both a bird and a deception. Bracquemond became sufficiently associated with these waterfowl that posthumously he was referred to as “the Michelangelo of ducks.”[2] Seven prints in the exhibition testify to this artistic predilection.
By the early 1870s Bracquemond occupied a position of recognizable status among printmakers and critics by virtue of his regular acceptance at the Salons and his association with the leading contemporary artists. It was precisely this veneer of artistic respectability that Degas sought to add to the Independents when he asked Bracquemond to show in the first Impressionist exhibition in 1874. Bracquemond's contributions to the first show consisted of five sets of framed prints totaling 32 images. One set included some of the aforementioned portraits of artists and critics. A second set included six reproductive etchings after such old and modern masters as J. M. W. Turner, Albert de Belleroy, Ingres, Rubens and Hendrik Leys. Though the artistic godfather of the French avant-garde, Edouard Manet, declined to show with the Independents, a viewer was reminded of his presence through Bracquemond. Manet was represented in the 1874 exhibition with a reproductive print by Bracquemond of his painting *Le divan*.

As mentioned above, the *Portrait of Erasmus* was also displayed, in two different states within the same frame. It is difficult to believe that Bracquemond's inclusion of these was coincidental—they had been present in the first officially sponsored exhibition of rejected works, and now were in the renegade, un-juried exhibition of the Independents.

Moreover, the inclusion of the first and definitive states of the plate was unusual, possibly unprecedented for the time. Today we are accustomed to this display of process, as ably demonstrated in this exhibition. At the time, presenting different stages in the development of the plate would have reminded the viewers of the experimental nature of the enterprise, alongside the "studies" of Paul Cézanne, the "sketches" of Degas, and the emphatically unconventional finish of the works of Claude Monet, Pierre-August Renoir, and Camille Pissarro.

Bracquemond’s other frames included principally landscapes, including the 1868 *Les Saules des Mottiaux* (The Willows of Mottiaux). Several had already been shown in the earlier Salons, and critics greeted their appearance here warmly. These landscapes only just begin to reflect the Impressionist landscape painter's developments in recording the essentials of a specific lighting condition. Bracquemond’s complete engagement with this principle would occur only the Fourth Impressionist exhibition of 1879.
As is well documented, in the 1860s Bracquemond became familiar with Japanese aesthetics through exposure to both Japanese prints and Hokusai’s thirteen bound volumes of the *Manga* (Random Sketches). The Grand Japanese Pavilion at the 1867 Universal Exposition in Paris reinforced the public’s enthusiasm for the exotic world of East Asian art. Manet and the progressive artistic circles drew on various formal elements of the prints including the bright color, broad flat areas of tone, and seemingly arbitrary cropping of compositions. Bracquemond responded to the vivid design elements of Japanese imagery, particularly that of Hokusai, in both his etchings and in his asymmetrical designs for porcelains.

In 1866 the industrialist Francois-Eugène Rousseau invited Bracquemond to decorate an extensive dinner service. Bracquemond responded by adopting animal motifs from Hokusai’s *Manga* for the dinnerware that came to be known as the *Service Rousseau*. The VMFA exhibition includes a selection of plates from the set of two-hundred pieces that constitute the service (figs. 11, 12). Bracquemond simultaneously produced etchings with many of the motifs drawn from Hokusai and these are juxtaposed with the porcelains to great effect. *Roosters and Ducks* is a particularly delightful example with its menagerie of various fowl. The donor and the curators deserve special credit for their inclusion of the *Service Rousseau* porcelains as well as the *Service Parisian* and later sets (fig. 13).
Bracquemond contributed four prints to the fourth impressionist exhibition in 1879. As a group, the etchings demonstrate a remarkable change in the artist’s approach to landscape. Influenced by the modern subjects and atmospheric effects employed by the impressionists, Bracquemond’s etchings are among the first to attempt to absorb their progressive concern for color and the ephemeral quality of light in a scene of contemporary life. The four prints are all exhibited in the current show, including *Au jardin d’acclimatation* (In the Zoological Gardens), *Une nuée d’orage* (The Storm Clouds), *Une terrace de Sèvres* (The Terrace of the Villa Brancas), and *Une vue du pont des Saintes-Pères* (View of the Bridge of Saints-Pères) (figs. 14, 15, and 16).
The Au jardin d'acclimatation (In the Zoological Gardens) represents a scene of daily life, a visit to the gardens of the Bois de Boulogne (fig. 14). The etching is printed à la poupée, successively adding tone[r] to the plates by hand in sequential printings. (In this case the label concentrates on the subject rather than the startling technical innovation of reviving an eighteenth-century printing technique.) The remaining three prints all concentrate on capturing the transitory aspects of ephemeral lighting and weather conditions. Une nuée d'orage (The Storm Clouds) went through at least eleven states, Bracquemond modifying the sky and the clouds until satisfied with the natural illumination. Both this and Une vue du pont des Saints-Pères (View of the Bridge of Saints-Pères) are indebted to Bracquemond’s admiration for Rembrandt as well as the inspiration of Japanese woodblock prints. Une terrace de Sèvres (The Terrace of the Villa Brancas) is, in many ways, Bracquemond’s most impressionist print (fig. 15). As Joel Isaacson has said, the artist chose “a typically impressionist motif: The study of the human figure in open air—a relatively rare subject for him—deliberately accentuating the effects of light.”[3] Here, the printmaker depicted his wife Marie making a sketch of her sister on the terrace of the Bracquemond home in Sèvres.

The last part of the exhibition is devoted to Bracquemond’s late prints. He repeatedly returned to his favorite subjects, images of birds and animals, throughout the second half of his career. Some of the examples in the exhibition are delightful, playful images of ducks, including a rare early state of Le point d’interrogation (The Question Mark) and Canards surpris (Surprised Ducks, or The Bather), that seems to be a waterfowl variation on the theme of Diana and Actaeon (fig. 17). Two outstanding prints of roosters, Le vieux coq (The Old Rooster) and Le coq de France—Vive le Tsar! (The Gallic Rooster—Long Live the Tsar!) mark the apogee of Bracquemond’s ability to convey the subtle tactile distinctions between comb, hackles, feathers, and down (figs. 18, 19). The latter was produced for the publication L’estampe originale on the occasion of an alliance between France and Russia. He also returned to the theme of mortality in one of his most powerful representations of the animal kingdom, the 1894 Jeannot lapin (Jack Rabbit). As the exhibition label relates, Bracquemond labored over the burst of light in the sky, from the early states where the sunlight is crisply delineated to the final state with its soft light penetrating through a veil of clouds.
Between 1879 and 1882 Bracquemond produced his greatest portrait, *Edmond de Goncourt* (fig. 20). In one of the artist’s largest etchings, the celebrated writer is placed in his library, surrounded by objects that give evidence of his engagement with Japanese art, prints, and the decorative arts. The impression in the show is dedicated to Bracquemond’s friend Alphonse Lemerre, a French publisher of literature, art, and history who was known as “Prince de l’édition” (Prince of the Edition, or Prince of Editors). The etching is one of several in the exhibition with personal dedications to Bracquemond’s artistic and literary friends. *Le point d’interrogation* (The Question Mark) is dedicated to Lepere, perhaps the superb wood engraver and etcher Auguste Lepere.
In the 1900 L’Exposition Universelle in Paris, the sixty-seven year old Bracquemond exhibited five prints, including *Le point d’interrogation* (The Question Mark) and *Le coq de France—Vive le Tsar!* (The Gallic Rooster—Long Live the Tsar!) (fig. 19). The jury awarded him the Grand Prize for etching, a fitting tribute to one of the most important contributors to the printmaking revival of the nineteenth century. The following year Bracquemond celebrated the fair in one of his final prints, *Le Pont Alexandre III, souvenir de l’Exposition Universelle de 1900* (The Alexander II Bridge, Memory of the Universal Exhibition of 1900) (fig. 21). It seems a fitting end to an exemplary exhibition devoted to exploring the long and illustrious career of Félix Bracquemond.

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Notes


Illustrations

Except as noted, all illustrations are by Félix Bracquemond and are from the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of Frank Raysor.

Fig. 1, First room of the exhibition Félix Bracquemond: Impressionist Innovator. [return to text]

Fig. 2, Second room of the exhibition. [return to text]
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