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exhibition review of

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

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Félix Bracquemond: Impressionist Innovator – Selections from the Frank Raysor Collection
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond
February 13, 2015–October 4, 2015

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-raysor-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’ perspicuity. The labels and wall text are excellent, providing the visitor with essential information to understand and appreciate Bracquemond’s work.



Fig. 1, First room of the exhibition *Félix Bracquemond: Impressionist Innovator*.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 2, Second room of the exhibition.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 3, Second room of the exhibition including the prints with a display of decorative arts.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

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.



Fig. 4, Félix Bracquemond, *Le haut d'un battant de porte* (The Upper Panel of a Door), 1852.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

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.

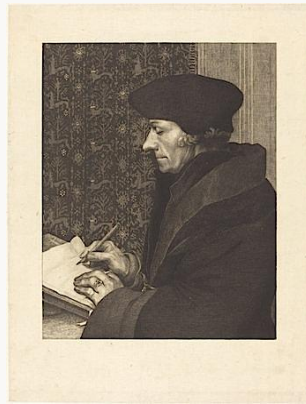


Fig. 5, Félix Bracquemond, *Portrait of Erasmus* (after Hans Holbein the Younger), 1863.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

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.



Fig. 6, Félix Bracquemond, *Charles Meryon*, 1853.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 7, Félix Bracquemond, *Théophile Gautier* (after Nadar), 1857.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

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 plumée* (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).



Fig. 8, Félix Bracquemond, *Les Taupes* (The Moles), 1854.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 9, Félix Bracquemond, *Margot la critique, ou la Pie* (Margot the Critic or The Magpie), 1854.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

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.

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).



Fig. 11, Félix Bracquemond, *Plate: Rooster, Frog, and Flower*, 1866–76.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 12, Félix Bracquemond, *Plate: Two Fish, Cricket, and Flower*, 1866–76.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 13, Félix Bracquemond, *Plate: Storm*, 1876.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

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 terrasse 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).



Fig. 14, Félix Bracquemond, *Au jardin d'acclimatation* (In the Zoological Gardens), 1868–73.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 15, Félix Bracquemond, *Une terrasse de Sèvres* (The Terrace of the Villa Brancas), 1879.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 16, Félix Bracquemond, *Une vue du pont des Saintes-Pères* (View of the Bridge of Saints-Pères), 1877.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

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 Saintes-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 terrasse 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.



Fig. 17, Félix Bracquemond, *Canards surpris* (Surprised Ducks, or The Bather), ca. 1885–89.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 18, Félix Bracquemond, *Le vieux coq* (The Old Rooster), 1882.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 19, Félix Bracquemond, *Le coq de France—Vive le Tsar!* (The Gallic Rooster—Long Live the Tsar!), 1893.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

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.

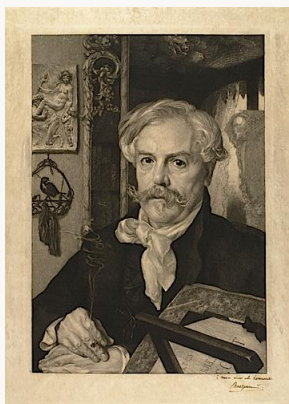


Fig. 20, Félix Bracquemond, *Edmond de Goncourt*, 1882.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

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.



Fig. 21, Félix Bracquemond, *Le Pont Alexandre III, souvenir de l'Exposition Universelle de 1900* (The Alexander II Bridge, Memory of the Universal Exhibition of 1900), 1901.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

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Notes

[1] For biographical information on Bracquemond, I am indebted to Robert H. Getscher, *Félix Bracquemond and the Etching Process* (Wooster: College of Wooster, 1974), 6–9; and to Jean-Paul Bouillon, *Félix Bracquemond, le réalisme absolu: œuvre grave, 1849–1859*, catalogue raisonné (Genève: Skira, 1987).

[2] Walter S. Carter quoted in Fitz Roy Carrington, ed., *Prints and Their Makers: Essays on Engravers and Etchers Old and Modern* (New York: The Century Co., 1912), 222–23.

[3] Joel Isaacson, *The Crisis of Impressionism: 1878–1882* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Art Museum, 1980), 54.

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. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 3, Second room of the exhibition including the prints with a display of decorative arts.

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Fig. 4, Félix Bracquemond, *Le haut d'un battant de porte* (The Upper Panel of a Door), 1852. Etching.

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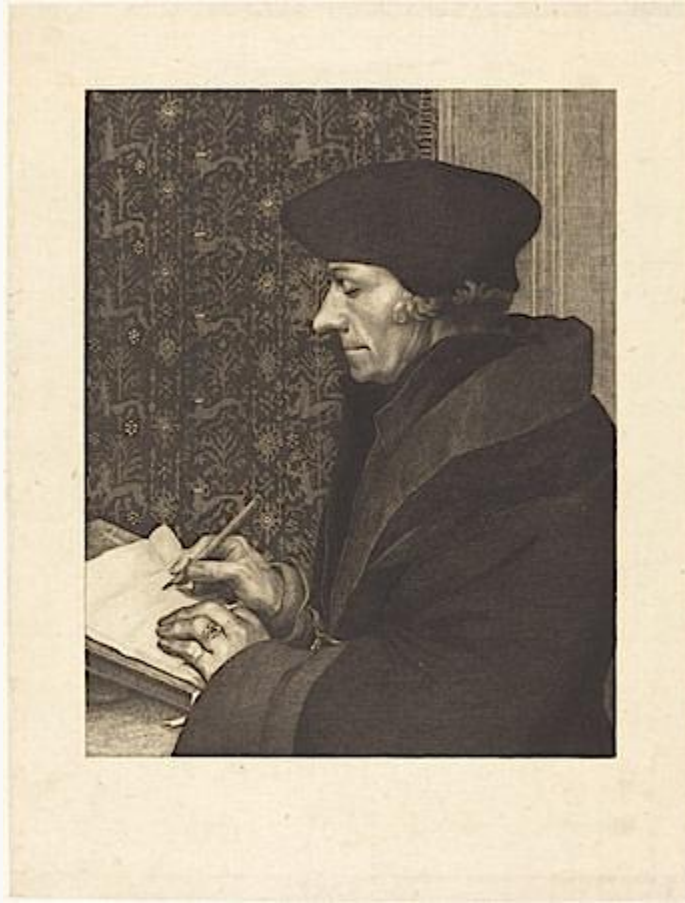


Fig. 5, Félix Bracquemond, *Portrait of Erasmus* (after Hans Holbein the Younger), 1863. Etching. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 6, Félix Bracquemond, *Charles Meryon*, 1853. Etching. [\[return to text\]](#)



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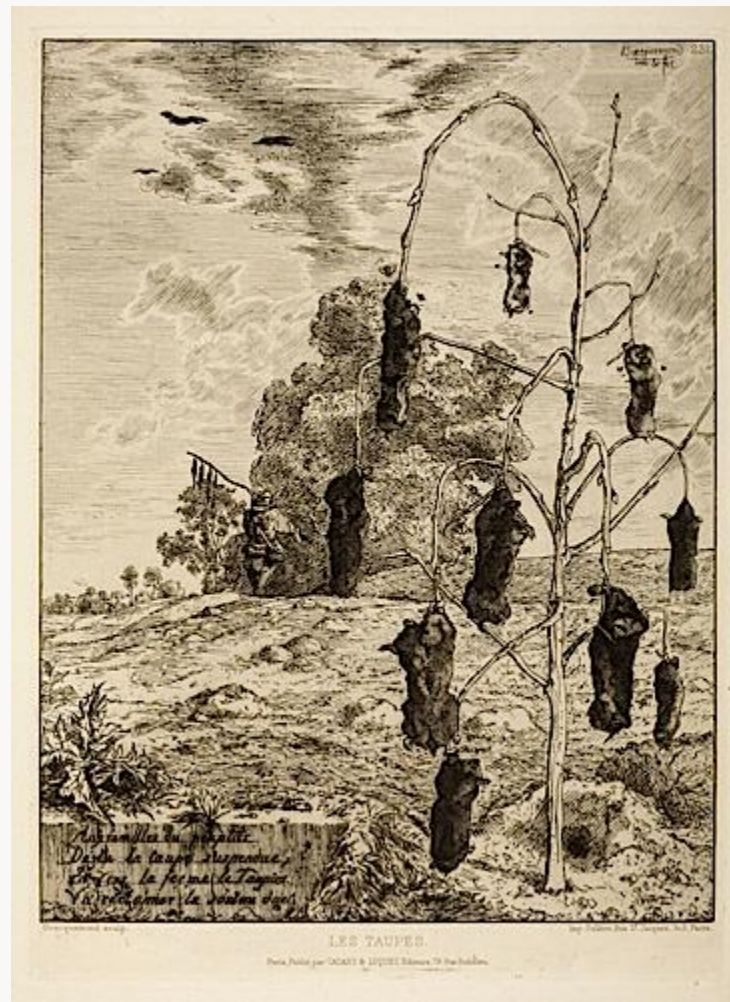


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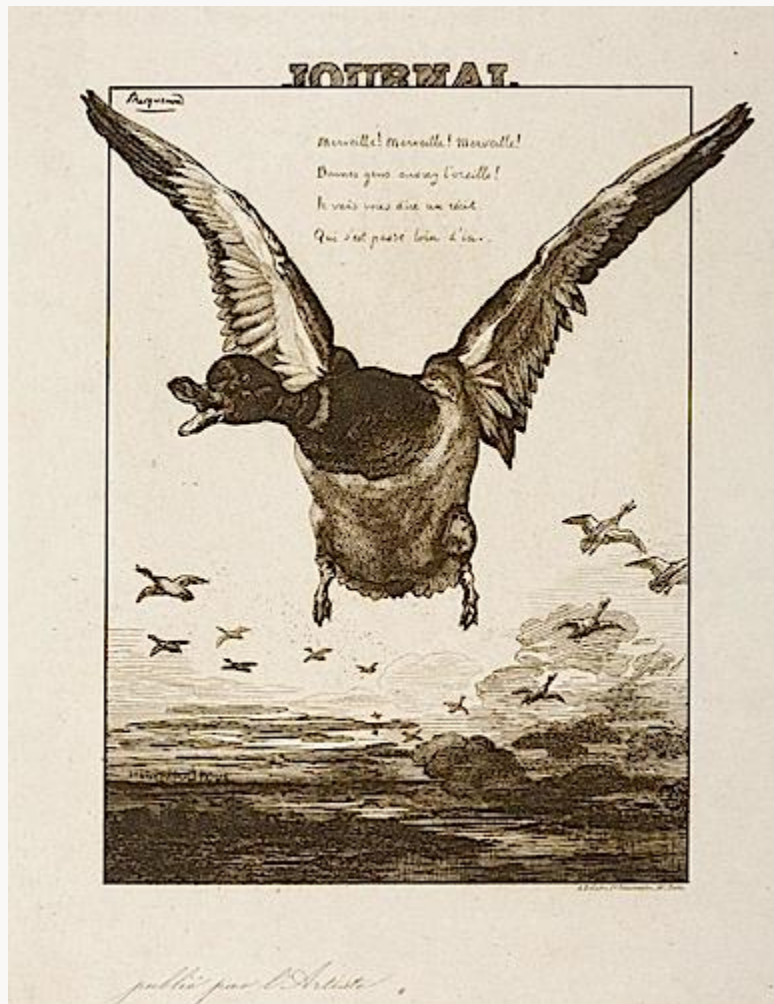


Fig. 10, Félix Bracquemond, *Le canard* (The Duck), 1856. Etching on *chine collé*. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 11, Félix Bracquemond, *Plate: Rooster, Frog, and Flower*, 1866–76. Glazed earthenware. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 12, Félix Bracquemond, *Plate: Two Fish, Cricket, and Flower*, 1866–76. Glazed earthenware.
[\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 13, Félix Bracquemond, *Plate: Storm*, 1876. Porcelain. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 14, Félix Bracquemond, *Au jardin d'acclimatation* (In the Zoological Gardens), 1868–73. Etching on *chêne collé*. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 15, Félix Bracquemond, *Une terrasse de Sèvres* (The Terrace of the Villa Brancas), 1879. Etching.
[\[return to text\]](#)



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Etching. [\[return to text\]](#)



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Fig. 18, Félix Bracquemond, *Le vieux coq* (The Old Rooster), 1882. Etching [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 19, Félix Bracquemond, *Le coq de France—Vive le Tsar!* (The Gallic Rooster—Long Live the Tsar!), 1893.
Etching. [\[return to text\]](#)

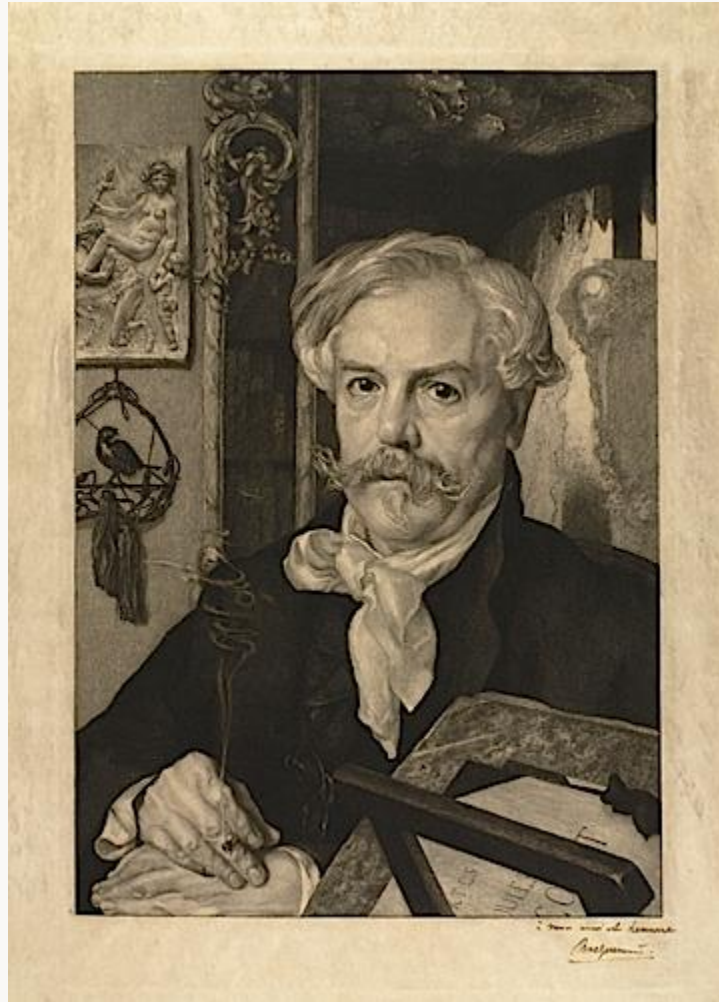


Fig. 20, Félix Bracquemond, *Edmond de Goncourt*, 1882. Etching and engraving. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 21, Félix Bracquemond, *Le Pont Alexandre III, souvenir de l'Exposition Universelle de 1900* (The Alexander II Bridge, Memory of the Universal Exhibition of 1900), 1901. Etching. [\[return to text\]](#)