

**Clarity and Ambiguity in Félix Bracquemond's View of Reality: *Le***

***Haut d'un battant de porte (The Top of a Door)***

Art History Senior Seminar Final Paper

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# Clarity and Ambiguity in Félix Bracquemond's View of Reality: *Le Haut d'un battant de porte (The Top of a Door)*

“Art is an agent for circulating human thought, and a science based on rigorous observation of physical laws”.<sup>1</sup> As this quotation suggests, Félix Bracquemond's (1833-1914) work, based on his rigorous observation and excellent execution, serves as an effective means to communicate his thoughts, intentions, and view of the reality. *Le Haut d'un battant de porte (The Top of a Door)* is etched with the strong artistic individuality and personality of Félix Bracquemond who never stopped searching for technical perfection, seeking beauty and balance in things, and looking for truth in reality. The creative process and numerous states of this etching, from start to finish, not only reveal the evolution of the work itself, but also provide a unique perspective and insight into the mind of the artist. This essay will investigate the complex subject matter and the significance of this work through a biographical approach, visual analysis, and examination of the artist's creative process and intentions. The investigation demonstrates that this etching is not only unusual for its clarity, but also for its ambiguity. The seemingly contradictory yet complementary characteristics – clarity and ambiguity – coexist in this work. It is the coexistence and interaction of clarity and ambiguity that makes this work more significant and intriguing.

Félix Bracquemond was a prolific and versatile French painter, printmaker, and designer of decorative and applied arts of the nineteenth century. He was best known for his etchings, especially for his animal subjects in his time. He was also one of the most influential figures of

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<sup>1</sup> Paraphrase by Getscher, et al, of an excerpt from Félix Bracquemond's book *Du dessin et de la couleur* (On Drawing and Color), Ohio: The College of Wooster, 1885, 268-271.

the nineteenth-century etching revival in France and a pioneer of French *Japonisme* who was the first to integrate Japanese motifs in the decorative arts and gained great success in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> He received all the medals from the Salon, a bronze medal for engraving in 1868, a silver in 1872, a gold in 1881, and the medal of honor in 1884. He also exhibited in three of the eight Impressionist exhibitions in 1874, 1879, and 1880.<sup>3</sup>

Born in Paris in 1833, Bracquemond grew up in modest circumstances. He had to work as a commercial lithographer to earn his living in fifteen years old when his father passed away and left his mother with five children; during this period, he developed interest in art and began his etching career. The same year, he started taking drawing classes at night and taking painting classes from French painter Joseph Guichard (1806-1880), who was a pupil of Ingres.

Bracquemond was primarily self-taught in etching. He learned techniques from the *Encyclopedia* by Diderot (1713-1784) and studied from the old masters' works in the Louvre, where he met many contemporary artist friends. Bracquemond devoted himself throughout his life to etching as well as promoting the revival of etching as an individual artistic medium since his first attempt at etching in 1849. He had been constantly exploring and experimenting with new techniques and styles in printmaking, providing guidance to the novice printmakers, and offering help and encouragement to the contemporary artists like Manet, Degas, Millet, Rousseau, Pissarro and others who were trying their hands at etching. Bracquemond co-founded the *Societe des Aquafortistes (Society of French Etchers)* in 1862 and the *Societe des Peintres-graveurs (Society of French Painters-Engravers)* in 1889, which were the earliest formal organizations of etchers

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<sup>2</sup> *Japonisme* is a French term to describe the popularity and influence of Japanese art and design in Europe in the late nineteenth century.

<sup>3</sup> The biographical resource on Bracquemond is given in Jean-Paul Bouillon, *Bracquemond Family*, Oxford Art Online, revised 2003, <https://doi-org.uc.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T010781>, 10 April 2022.

and painter-printmakers and played an important role in promoting printmaking and helping to publish, present, and promote the works of the major painter-printmakers of the period.

Bracquemond made his debut at the Salon in 1852 with a portrait of his grandmother in pastel, which had won recognition from the French writer and art critic Théophile Gautier (1811-1872) who became Bracquemond's friend. The next year, he exhibited a portrait of himself in pastel (figure 1a) at the Salon, which was later etched by his friend Paul-Adolphe Rajon (1843-1888) (figure 1b). In the portrait, he portrayed himself as a determined etcher with his left hand holding a bottle of etching liquid, right hand resting on his chest, and etching tools placed in the foreground. This self-portrait seemed to serve as a visual statement of his dedication to etching as early as 1853. Being talented and diligent, Bracquemond etched almost 900 prints, both original and productive, including many portraits of his contemporary artists and friends, esteemed masters, landscapes, and still lifes showing his passion for the nature and his understanding of animals and their lifestyles.<sup>4</sup>

Bracquemond's oeuvre demonstrates the diverse subjects, techniques, and styles he had tried, as well as the extraordinary craftsmanship and striking individualism he had been aiming for. In his early etchings in the 1850s, Bracquemond showed great interest in perfecting details, creating precise textures and contours, and constructing elusive subject matter and ideas. A useful example can be found in *The Top of a Door*, which was among Bracquemond's earliest and most celebrated etchings. In his etching, he depicted four dead creatures including three birds and a bat nailed to a barn door. It was first published by French printer Auguste Delâtre (1822-1907) in 1852 when Bracquemond was just nineteen years old. This etching gained immediate recognition in the Parisian art world, and even more recognition after it was exhibited

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<sup>4</sup> The main source on Bracquemond's life and career development is given in Charlotte van Rappard-Boon, *Félix Bracquemond: 1833-1914*; Martin Cleaver, trans., Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 1993.

at the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1855. Bracquemond sold the copper plate due to his financial struggles in the early years of his etching career, and it was finally acquired by the publisher Alfred Cadart (1828-1875). The impression in University of Cincinnati Art Collection was reissued by Alfred Cadart in 1865 and the date inscribed at the lower right corner was changed accordingly (figure 2). I believe that this impression is from the same state as the one in The British Museum, because they share the same inscriptions, lines, composition, and plate number “177” (figure 3).<sup>5</sup> The Scholar Michel Melot stated that this etching was unusually daring for its day because of “its realism, its clarity, its unprepossessing subject, and its large size”,<sup>6</sup> which may explain why it astonished the viewers when it was published.

Undoubtedly, this etching displays Bracquemond’s realism and clarity in its visual presentation of accurate details, fine lines, rich values, contrasting textures, and clear contours. The finest details in the individual feathers of the birds and in the woodgrain of the door are sharp. A wide range of values from solid black to bright white, and a variety of textures from downy feathers to cracked wooden door is achieved solely by building up etched lines. The complex and interwoven network of both lightly and heavily cross-hatched and contour-hatched lines on the plumages suggests the darkest values yet allows for spots of the blank paper to show through as if it were gleaming from within, creating a sense that these dead creatures were once truly alive. The noticeable lines and intricate effect of light and shade construct bold contours for the birds, creating both linear and three-dimensional effects (figure 4).

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<sup>5</sup> The impression in the University of Cincinnati Art Collect shares same plate number “177” at the upper right corner, inscription “Bracquemond sculp.” at the lower left corner, inscription “LE HAUT D’UN BATTANT DE PORTE,” and “Paris, Publié par CADART & LUQUET, Editeurs, 79, Rue Richelieu,” at the bottom, as well as Bracquemond’s signature, date, and inscriptions “Imp, Delâtre, Rue St. Jacques, 303, Paris,” at the lower right corner.

<sup>6</sup> Michel Melot, *The Impressionist Print*, Caroline Beamish trans., (New Haven: Yale University Press, c1996), 29.

In addition to the etching's clear and realistic formal elements, the subject matter also displays realism by depicting a credible scene from rural life that appears to have been observed by Bracquemond rather than constructed in his imagination. According to a manuscript of Bracquemond's son, Pierre, his father observed the scene of three birds and a bat nailed to a barn door by the wings in a northern French town. These creatures were probably killed by a landowner or farmer who thought they were preying on his game birds. This would have been a common practice in the village.<sup>7</sup> On September 19, 1853, Bracquemond completed a drawing which displays a faithful depiction of the crow featured in the upper left of this etching (figure 5), suggesting a careful study of at least part of the subject in the print. In a sense, this etching reveals an accurate communication of the reality Bracquemond had observed in his life.

What is more, the inscribed quatrain nailed beneath the dead creatures – “Ici, tu vois tristement pendre/Oiseaux, pillards et Convoiteux/A leurs pareils C'est pour apprendre/Que Voler et Voler son deux” (“Here you see, sadly hanged/Birds that rob and steal from you/The lesson that can be learned/Is that flying and stealing are two”)<sup>8</sup> – enhances the realistic sense of this etching. In the quatrain, the French word *voler*, a pun here meaning “to fly” or “to steal”, could have been popularly interpreted as a potentially moralizing word related to inappropriate human behaviors or as political commentary on the confiscation of the Orleans fortune by Emperor Napoleon III (1808-1873) by numerous museums that own an impression of this print, although I have not yet found a reference or evidence for this.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Pierre's manuscript is mentioned in Charlotte van Rappard-Boon, *Félix Bracquemond: 1833-1914*; Martin Cleaver, trans., (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 1993), 28.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>9</sup> Laura Bryan, *Lasting Impressions, Works on Paper from the University of Cincinnati Fine Arts Collection*, (Cincinnati: University of Cincinnati College of Design, Art, Architecture, and Planning Galleries 1999), 9.

One cannot deny the striking realism and clarity exhibited in this etching in its formal treatment. However, this print also demonstrates Bracquemond's idealistic touch in its composition and a purposeful ambiguity in both the creative process and the resulting interpretations of the work. The first trace of idealism can be found in the perfect balance of the composition. Each bird is depicted frontally, with its wings outstretched and nailed to the door, forming an inverted triangle. They as a whole create another larger triangular composition. To echo the outstretched wings, Bracquemond altered the metal hinge of the door in the upper right corner from a simple horizontal hinge in the first state of the etching (figure 6) to an elegantly outstretched hinge in the third state (figure 7). This alteration reveals Bracquemond's decorative talent as well as his intentions in his early work.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to the verbal pun in the quatrain, Bracquemond included a visual pun in this etching. Seen from a distance, the birds are hanging frontally on their outstretching wings with the nails barely visible, as if they were flying in the air rather than nailed to a door. Neither wounds nor blood is visible, and only by upon closer examination of their sagging heads, bodies, and legs, does one see that the birds are dead. With the use of clear lines and palpable textures, Bracquemond created an ambiguous and contradictory perception for the viewer: are these creatures flying in a lively manner or hanging lifelessly? To reinforce the viewer's doubt and conflicting perceptions and to add dramatic effect, the quatrain was added in the fifth state of the plate<sup>11</sup>(figure 8) in which the viewer reads the French pun, *voler*, to fly or to steal. Behind all these visual, verbal, and perceptual choices, however, there is still a balance. The four creatures

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<sup>10</sup> See the findings of different state of the plate in Elizabeth K. Helsinger, *The "Writing" of Modern Life: The Etching Revival in France, Britain, and the U.S., 1850-1940*, (Chicago, IL: Smart Museum of Art, Univ. of Chicago, 2008), 58-60.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

are nailed to the almost flat door, with only the corners of the door providing some sense of depth, as if these creatures were inscribed on a big wooden plaque. They are juxtaposed with the smaller plaque with the inscribed quatrain, which is nailed beneath them, forming a coherent balance between the visual placement of the creatures and the verbal message, as if, the quatrain is the verbal interpretation of the image, and the image is the visualization of the quatrain.

Upon closer examination, the subtle shadows of the plaque with the quatrain fall in the same direction as do the creatures' shadows, as if the plaque with the quatrain was actually hanging there beneath the birds under the sunlight in real life when Bracquemond observed the scene. For the viewer of the etching, this creates a perceptual ambiguity and illusion between reality and imagination. The inscribed quatrain seems to be a straightforward expression of moralistic warning about the inappropriate behavior of stealing; however, the representation of the birds as dead and nailed to the door – though not in a violent or bloody way, but rather in a sad, tender, elegant, and almost idealistic manner – seems to evoke not repulsive emotions but rather to encourage reflection and contemplation. The composition spurs not only contemplation of “flying” or “stealing”, but also a meditation of life and death, which complicates the otherwise straightforward, realistically represented subject matter, thus allowing for more ambiguity and multiple meanings for the work.

Unlike other, more spontaneous media such as oil painting and drawing, the etching process is indirect and can be full of uncertainty. The printmaker must etch his or her design in a reverse manner through the varnish, then bite the plate with acid, remove the varnish, apply and wipe the ink, and then print the plate before he or she can see an initial result. Each decision – how deep the lines will be etched, how long the plate will be bitten, how the ink will be wiped – can produce a very different result in the final print. In this way the etching process requires

meticulous calculation and a thorough comprehension of the potential effect of each line and the biting process that will create it. Each state of the etching is not only a test of the artist's knowledge and technique, but also evidence of the artist's creative process and intentionality, allowing us to investigate the artist's mind and vision. From the preparatory sketch to the finished state, Bracquemond kept refining this etching and adding more elements and layers to it, increasing the complexity of the work. In the first state of this etching (figure 6), Bracquemond had sketched in all the important elements including the doorframe, four creatures, a hinge, even the minor wormholes or nails' marks on the door, except for the quatrain, one of the most important elements that alludes to the moralistic interpretation. In the following two to three states, he just kept polishing and perfecting all these elements and details (figure 7). Until the fifth state, the quatrain was finally added to this etching (figure 8).<sup>12</sup> This great alteration might reflect the artist sudden change of his initial concept and intention in this work, suggesting that this work might have multiple meanings and interpretations for the artist himself over time and states.

In *The Top of a Door*, Bracquemond created the most accurate and clear lines, values, and textures through the ambiguous and uncertain process of etching. The remarkable clarity of his etched lines is never simple; instead, these lines are complex, multi-layered, and intertwined, as is the subject matter itself. Within the clarity is also an ambiguity, underneath which is a synthesis of Bracquemond's view of truth, beauty, and imagination. It is the coexistence of clarity and ambiguity in this work that makes it more significant and engaging.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 60.

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**Illustrations:**



Figure 1a. Félix Bracquemond, *Self-Portrait*, 1853. Pastel, graphite, and gold-toned paint on wove paper. 36 9/16 x 26 7/8 in., Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, 1943.836



Figure 1b. *Self-Portrait of Félix Bracquemond in 1852, from "L'Art"*, etched by Paul Adolphe Rajon (French, 1843–1888) and printed by François Delarue in 1878. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 63.625.15



Figure 2. Félix Bracquemond, *Le Haut d'un Battant de porte* (*The Top of a Door*), 1865. Etching on paper, 13 1/16 x 20 3/4 inches. University of Cincinnati Fine Arts Collection, 847



Figure 3. The eighth state, 1865. Same plate as the University of Cincinnati Art Collection's impression.

Plate 177: *three dead birds and a bat mounted on door*, tag below reads: "Ici, tu vois tristement pendre/Oiseaux, pillards et Convoiteux/A leurs pareils C'est pour apprendre/Que Voler et Voler son deux"; from the third volume of prints produced by the Société des Aquafortistes.

Félix Bracquemond, *Le Haut d'un Battant de porte (The Top of a Door)*, 1865. Etching on paper with surface tone, 30.2cm x39.7cm, The British Museum, 1924,0112.33



Figure 4. Detail of the bird on the upper right.

Félix Bracquemond, *The Upper Part of a Door (Le haut d'un Battant de Porte)*, 1865.



Figure 5. *A drawing for the crow featured in the upper left on 19 September 1852.* Félix Bracquemond, French (1833-1914). *Bird (Crow)*, 1852. Pen and brown ink on off-white card, 6 3/8 x 6 13/16 in. (16.19 x 17.3 cm), Minneapolis Institute of Art, 23.50.5



Figure 6. First state proof, December 20, 1852

*Three dead birds and a bat; with door sketched in, before tag with inscription. 1852.*

Etching, touched with graphite; Inscription content: Dated, titled and inscribed "1er état l'épreuve/20 décembre 1852/Un battant de porte"

Félix Bracquemond, *Le Haut d'un Battant de porte (The Top of a Door)*, 1852. Etching on paper, 29.7cm x 39.1cm (trimmed), The British Museum, 1865,1209.671



Figure 7. Third state of ten; *Three dead birds and a bat mounted on door; before tag with inscription.* 1852. Félix Bracquemond, *The Upper Part of a Door (Le haut d'un Battant de Porte)*, 1852. Etching on paper, 29.7cm x 39.7cm, The British Museum, 1924,0112.31



Figure 8. After the fifth state, 1852. *Three dead birds and a bat mounted on door, tag below reads: "Ici, tu vois tristement pendre/Oiseaux, pillards et Convoiteux/A leurs pareils C'est pour apprendre/Que Voler et Voler son deux"*. Félix Bracquemond, *Le Haut d'un Battant de porte (The Top of a Door)*, 1852. Etching on greyish chine collé, 30.4cm x 40cm, The British Museum, 1924,0112.32