

2006

Review of *Félix Bracquemond et les Arts Décoratifs: Du Japonisme à l'Art Nouveau* by Jean-Paul Bouillon

Rossella Froissart-Pezone
Université d'Aix-Marseille

Pamela J. Warner
University of Rhode Island, pwarner@mail.uri.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/art_facpubs



Part of the [History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons](#)

Terms of Use

All rights reserved under copyright.

Citation/Publisher Attribution

Froissart-Pezone, Rossella. Review of Félix Bracquemond et les Arts Décoratifs: Du Japonisme à l'Art Nouveau, by Jean-Paul Bouillon. Translated by Pamela J. Warner. *Studies in the Decorative Arts* 13 (2006): 108-11. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/studdecoarts.13.2.40663275>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Art and Art History at DigitalCommons@URI. It has been accepted for inclusion in Art and Art History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@etal.uri.edu.

leaves open the logical question about how consumers viewed the explosion of decorative objects that appeared on the marketplace in the last years of the nineteenth century, and what larger significance a study of consumption and taste might reveal about turn-of-the-century culture. Given the solid research of the last twenty years, and the excellent new works under review here, we can anticipate that future

scholars will again return with new questions to this rich and complex period.

Amy F. Ogata

Associate Professor

The Bard Graduate Center for the Studies
in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture, New York

NOTES

1. Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design: From William Morris to Walter Gropius*, rev. ed. (New York, 1975); Stephan Tschudi-Madsen, *Sources of Art Nouveau*, trans. Ragnar Christopherson (New York, 1956); Robert Schmutzler, "The English Origins of Art Nouveau," *Architectural Review* 117, no. 698 (February 1955): 108-17; Robert Schmutzler, *Art Nouveau* (New York, 1961).

2. Gabriel P. Weisberg, *Art Nouveau Bing: Paris Style 1900* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, in association with the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, 1986).

3. On the latter, see also Rossella Froissart-Pezone, "Félix Aubert, *Art dans Tout*, and *Art Nouveau Lace*," *Studies in the Decorative Arts* 8, no. 2 (Spring-Summer 2001): 37-76.

Jean-Paul Bouillon, *Félix Bracquemond et les arts décoratifs: Du japonisme à l'Art nouveau*, exh. cat. Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2005. 228 pp., 160 color pls., bibliog. Paper, EUR 45.

This book, accompanying an exhibition of the same name organized in Limoges in 2005, is not a catalogue, strictly speaking, and does not limit itself to providing reproductions and carefully researched entries on each of the objects presented. In fact, its contribution far surpasses that of a simple reevaluation of an artist, Félix Bracquemond (1833-1914), who has been somewhat forgotten today: indeed it opens the broader context of debates concerning the decorative arts in France during the last decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Visiting the exhibition proved to be indispensable for anyone who wanted to discover the visual richness of a creative body of work that took many forms. Etchings, ceramics, glassware, bookbindings, enamels, tapestries, embroideries: all of these were fields of investigation for Bracquemond, all equally open and offering new formal possibilities. Because this artist always based his research on the study of materials, as Jean-Paul Bouillon ably demonstrates, it is extremely revealing to examine closely the variety of aesthetic results that he obtained—despite the similarities of his preferred subjects—from each chosen support, from paper and clay to creamware (*faïence fine*), porcelain, leather, silk, or wool. In the absence of the textural beauty of the works themselves, one has to be satisfied with the beautiful reproductions of this catalogue. The critical essays that

form the five sections convey the complex logic that Bracquemond used to unite the two facets of his creation: theory and handwork.

Bouillon's dedication to Bracquemond is not new, and this book is the long-awaited culmination of a series of investigations that he began with his monumental doctoral dissertation in 1979 on the early years of the artist, which has remained unpublished.¹ Since then, several publications have revealed aspects of Bracquemond's oeuvre, but none gives us such a complete view of his work as a decorator, as well as the historical and intellectual context within which this oeuvre can be located between 1860 and 1910.

Bouillon attempts to show above all that Bracquemond was not merely a scrupulous art worker but also a demanding conceptualist, who wanted concrete realizations of his hypotheses. The art historian succeeds only partly in convincing the reader of Bracquemond's actual status as a theoretician. What is missing, in my opinion, is a specific essay on an important text that Bracquemond published in 1885 entitled *Du dessin et de la couleur*, which we only know currently in a poor reissue, without a valid critical framework.² It is nonetheless in this work that the engraver developed an artistic concept that seems quite original and that Bouillon places at the center of his thinking on ornament as the source of his creation. In his first chapter ("Bracquemond and the Decorative Arts: In Search of Lost Unity"), which serves as a general introduction, Bouillon evokes *Du dessin et de la couleur*, and he examines it perhaps too briefly at the end of the catalogue, in the section that reunites the late works of the decorator, those made between 1881 and 1914.

Bouillon seeks the key to the unity of Bracquemond's oeuvre not in the pages of this ambitious text but rather in his work as an engraver and in his thinking on etching, duly returned to its place in the hierarchy of the arts. This dual interest in engraving and ornament is manifested in an emblematic work, the *Fragment de frise d'après Le Pautre* (1853), which summarizes the very complex relationship that Bracquemond maintained between a prestigious past on the one hand and a freer and newer naturalist inspiration on the other. This engraving (p. 40, cat. 8), depicting a fragment of a frieze by Bracquemond after the seventeenth-century French designer Jean Le Pautre, depicting scrolling acanthus leaves and putti, can be situated in the neo-Baroque vogue of the early Second Empire, but, as Bouillon remarks, the printmaker was not satisfied with a mere reproduction of a composition that he intended to use as a studio model: he chose to render the plastic beauty of the foliage by insisting on the vitality and the variety of forms, qualities that recurred in Bracquemond's ceramic creations of the 1860s and 1870s. Bouillon very rightly gives this work a central role in Bracquemond's development: realized at the State's expense during economically difficult times, the *Fragment de frise* can also be considered a turning point in the career of the artist, who was aware that decoration represented a vital opportunity when he was faced with a shortage of orders for work in other media. This engraving also demonstrates Bracquemond's theoretical concept of ornament, as Bouillon explains it. If engraving is an art of the distribution of light, of the just hierarchy of tonal values, of the organization of forms, what is ornament if not the successful application of these principles? The artist argued that all art is "ornamental" because it organizes form, following laws that are not natural but that come from invention. This is a central point in the conceptualization of ornament, assimilated by Bracquemond to a discipline very close to that practiced by the printmaker: zones of light and dark distributed judiciously across the surface of the paper (and not the regular shading of tonal values) determine the "modeling," that is to say, the effect of light on the represented object. It is this quality he describes in *Du dessin et de la couleur* and on which the successful rendering of an object is based, according to Bracquemond.

Bouillon emphasizes the strong connection between engraving's specific techniques and ornamental art more generally, a link that lies in their shared disciplines of distribution and ordering: distribution involves luminous values while ordering is evident in the composition of forms and colors. He asserts that engraving's manner of placing

dark and light surfaces next to one another made possible the "conversion" of Bracquemond from the hyper-realist line of his earliest masterpieces (for example, *Le Haut d'un battant de porte*, an etching of 1852) to the "synthetic" line that traces flat zones in the creamware (*faïence fine*) of the Roussseau Service of 1866. The latter line prefigures that in prints of the 1890s by many Art Nouveau artists and others such as Paul Gauguin and the Nabis, as well as Art Nouveau ornament, where retaining flatness becomes one of the fundamental laws of surface decoration.

Nevertheless, Bracquemond seems, in my opinion, to question late nineteenth-century decoration and even his own oeuvre, *Du dessin et de la couleur*, when he insists on "modeling" in his writings and when, as a sincere admirer of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, he does not hesitate to give drawing a place of honor because color is unable "to express anything at all by itself."³ In his works as a decorator, however, color applied in bright flat zones can play a primary role, even if an indispensable complement is always "contour"—an artificial line that does not exist in nature and that attests to the autonomous nature inherent in all artistic creation. Where does this contradiction between theory and practice come from? Are Bracquemond's works finally more modern than the ideas expressed in his writings?

Bouillon, however, rightly insists on the originality of the engraver's concept of "ornamental" art, which Bracquemond substitutes for the terms "decorative," "industrial," or "applied" art, designating specialized domains for ornament and implying that it involves the superposition of a secondary form on a primary form that would support it. In the end, "ornamental art" would embrace all of artistic creation according to the former meaning of the verb "to ornament." This takes on the meaning of "ordering," and "organizing," that is, putting forms in relationships and attempting to harmonize them. As his craft of engraving taught him, "to ornament" a surface—as any other object—simply meant to order and distribute elements taken from nature but subjected to principles that belong only to an "artistic will." If a modernity can be found in Bracquemond, then, it may well be in the idea of an autonomous creation, one that obeys only its own laws, eliminates the "subject," and deploys its lines and colors according to purely formal organizational principles.

In his dissertation, Bouillon emphasized the links between Bracquemond and the circle around the positivist thinker Auguste Comte. Without returning to the artist's personal ties with this milieu, Bouillon accentuates what the concepts of the "logical beauty" of materials and of the

development of techniques owe to positivist doctrines, and how they saved Bracquemond from any type of Neoplatonic idealism and made him consider a work of art as simply a beautiful “ornamented matter.” Thus it is not surprising that from this, as well as from his extraordinary mastery of engraving, flows Bracquemond’s attachment to craft, which is never pure virtuosity.

As Bouillon describes it (pp. 15-19), the artist’s passage from engraving to ornament occurs very naturally in 1866, after his brief experience in a decoration workshop and his meeting with the publisher Auguste Poulet-Malassis. Beginning in 1860, the artist had collaborated with the ceramist Théodore Deck. Their first pieces were still in a neo-Renaissance style, but one of them already featured a freely handled landscape that anticipates the experiments with Impressionist ceramics later attempted by Haviland. It was in 1866 that Bracquemond began experimenting with new decoration for creamware (*faïence fine*) thanks to the commission for a service by François-Eugène Rousseau, a dealer-manufacturer who employed “independent workers.” The Rousseau plates, strongly inspired by the prints of Hokusai and Hiroshige, among others, pose two essential questions for the decorative arts of this period in France: the role of *Japonisme* and that, more generally, of the social function of the arts. Bouillon helpfully clears away several clichés. It is not so much Japanese “influence” on French art that determined its appearance, but rather a carefully chosen repertoire of forms, depending on a material, earthenware, and a technique, etching, whose crisp line and clear-cut values are quite different from those of the original Japanese woodblock prints. In passing from the metal plate engraved by the artist to the innumerable combinations of motifs by potters, an attempt at the socialization of art was made: the Rousseau Service, meant to be low-cost, was intended at the same time to satisfy the aesthetics of the bourgeoisie. Even though it stands at the opposite end of the spectrum from Second Empire historicism, it is not without reference to the past: the form and the coloring of the plates recall the eighteenth century and everyday earthenware from Strasbourg, Marseilles, or Vincennes.

After the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871), a major evolution can be sketched in Bracquemond’s aesthetic. Reflecting the widespread desire for a democratization of the arts, the first Rousseau Service is an example of the broad diffusion of industrial arts, like the founding of the Union des Beaux-Arts Appliqués à l’Industrie (Union of Fine Arts Applied to Industry) in 1864 and its activities. The defeat of France and the painful episode of the Commune marked a

turning point in Bracquemond’s art, according to Bouillon: the second, fragmentary Rousseau Service and then his work on porcelain and stoneware for Haviland led Bracquemond toward a more elitist art, far from the simplicity of his first faïences. His encounter in 1872 with Charles Haviland and the latter’s establishment of a studio for him in Paris began an exceptional aesthetic experiment, yet a disappointing one: the commercial demands of industry impeded Bracquemond and pushed him to break the contract in 1881. Nevertheless, the *Service parisien* which he created in this framework remains one of the most beautiful of the period, a success that Bouillon places on the level of the great masterpieces of eighteenth-century decorative arts. Bracquemond’s drawings of animals and plants, as well as their transfer onto milky porcelain, attest to the exceptional mastery of material and its effects. The artist’s evolution concludes in the *Service des animaux* (c. 1878), where the subjects, amply drawn, incorporate line into the ceramic paste, and in the *Service à fleurs et rubans* (1878), where the dynamic lines no longer owe much to *Japonisme*, but rather anticipate the spatial vitality of Art Nouveau. It is also in these years that Bracquemond made a daring attempt to create “pictorial ceramics,” thanks to new techniques allowing the adaptation of brightly colored barbotines to an aesthetic very close to that of the Impressionists with whom he was exhibiting. The compartmentalization of fields of color in the *Service des animaux* and the proximity of the barbotines to painting lay the groundwork for a union between the “minor” and “major” arts, around which the encounters among Bracquemond, the ceramist Ernest Chaplet, and Paul Gauguin are the emblematic pivot. In a previous publication Bouillon called this the founding act of Art Nouveau—and of modern art more generally—in the middle of the 1880s.⁴

The historian, however, cannot avoid reminding readers that, in spite of the appearance of the “arabesque” and of a “pure ornamental abstraction” in Bracquemond’s works, their “theoretical substrata” was quite different from that of, say, Henry Van de Velde and, more generally, from Art Nouveau. As with the *Fragment de frise* of 1853, Bracquemond’s portrait of Edmond de Goncourt in 1881 can be considered the aesthetic manifesto of the three decades to come. The “beautiful textures” of this “montage of art materials” and the “gleaming eye [of Goncourt] that looks at them” (gleaming with desire) fully express the sensuality of this period, its never-denied ties to the past (still and always the eighteenth century), and the corollary revival of a refined art for elite connoisseurs and patrons. The works

Bracquemond realized for Baron Vitta and for the Gobelins manufactory (a form of state patronage exemplified by the orders of Gustave Geoffroy) are typical.

It would have been interesting had Bouillon inscribed this last chapter in the continuity of the decorative arts of the 1910s. If Bracquemond's participation in Art Nouveau remains—beyond formal resemblances—completely relative and even controversial, the proximity of his ideas with those of the pre-war decorators seems to merit more exploration, in my opinion. Already the billiard room of Baron Vitta's villa La Sapinière at Evian, the decoration of which Bracquemond oversaw between 1895 and 1900, is a clear return to an art with strong national roots, which makes it difficult to characterize as “modern,” *pace* Bouillon. It is certainly undeniable that Bracquemond's retrospective vision was that of the majority of decorators in the 1910s, such as the industrial workers of the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, who did not hesitate to make pure and simple copies of Louis

XV and Louis XVI objects. Did these, therefore, foreshadow the conservatism of Bracquemond's last works? Nonetheless, the sumptuousness and charm of Bracquemond's 1911 tapestries for Gobelins are irresistible (for this, a visit to the exhibition was indispensable). The tapestry *La Forêt*, with the arabesque frame of a neo-Baroque fence contradicting the realist manner of its landscape, always reminds me of Pierre Bonnard's large canvas, *Le Plaisir* (1906-1910), composed like a tapestry and responding, it seems to me, to the same desire to raise the ornamental to the level of an absolute aesthetic principle. Is this not the same thing that Bouillon evokes regarding Henri Matisse and the ironwork of the balcony of his *Piano Lesson*?⁵ Here perhaps lies Bracquemond's true modernity.

Rossella Froissart-Pezone

Maître de conférences d'histoire de l'art contemporain

Université d'Aix-Marseille

(Translated by Pamela J. Warner)

NOTES

1. “Félix Bracquemond: Les années d'apprentissage (1849-1859). La genèse d'un réalisme positiviste,” with a catalogue raisonné of the drawings, engravings, and paintings from this period (Ph.D. diss., under the direction of René Jullian, Université de Paris I, Panthéon-Sorbonne, Paris, 1979, 4 vols. and pls.).
2. 1st ed., Paris, Charpentier & Cie., 1885, repr. as *écrits sur l'art*, ed. Pierre Sanchez (Dijon, 2002).

3. *Ibid.*, 46.

4. Jean-Paul Bouillon, *Journal de l'Art nouveau, 1870-1914* (Geneva, 1985), 30-31.

5. Jean-Paul Bouillon, *Journal de l'Art déco, 1903-1940* (Geneva, 1987), 7.

Mary McLeod, ed., *Charlotte Perriand: An Art of Living*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, in assoc. with the Architectural League of New York, 2003. 304 pp., 59 color pls., 251 b/w ill., bibliog., index. \$65.

Charlotte Perriand, *Charlotte Perriand: A Life of Creation—An Autobiography*. First pub. in French, Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob, 1998. New York: Monacelli, 2003. 383 pp., 78 b/w ill. \$40.

Charlotte Perriand's life was as productive as it was long. Born in 1903 in Paris, she joined Le Corbusier's atelier in 1927, collaborated with Jean Prouvé in the 1940s and 1950s on projects in France and Africa, and devoted her last decades to designing interiors for resorts in the French Alps that thoughtfully served the daily life of residents and were also environmentally sensitive; she died in 1999. Until the 1980s, however, Perriand was not well known outside of a small group of French architects and scholars. Even after a large-scale retrospective in 1985 at the Musée des Arts

Décoratifs in Paris, there was little critical literature about her career, especially in English.¹ Mary McLeod published an important essay in 1987, and a small publication accompanied an Architectural League of New York exhibition, held from December 1997 to January 1998.² The two publications under review here thus represent a major contribution to the scholarship on Perriand; jointly, they define the field of study, and leave intriguing gaps for future research.

The anthology *Charlotte Perriand: An Art of Living*, edited by McLeod, grew out of a conference (held in January 1998) that accompanied the 1997 Architectural League exhibition; Perriand herself did not attend the conference, but spoke in New York the previous November. It includes scholarly essays by Esther da Costa Meyer, McLeod, Danilo Udovicki-Selb, Yasushi Zenno, Arthur Rüegg, Roger Aujame, and Joan Ockman. These essays address various aspects of Perriand's career, ranging from her early days as a rebellious designer who developed tubular steel furniture for