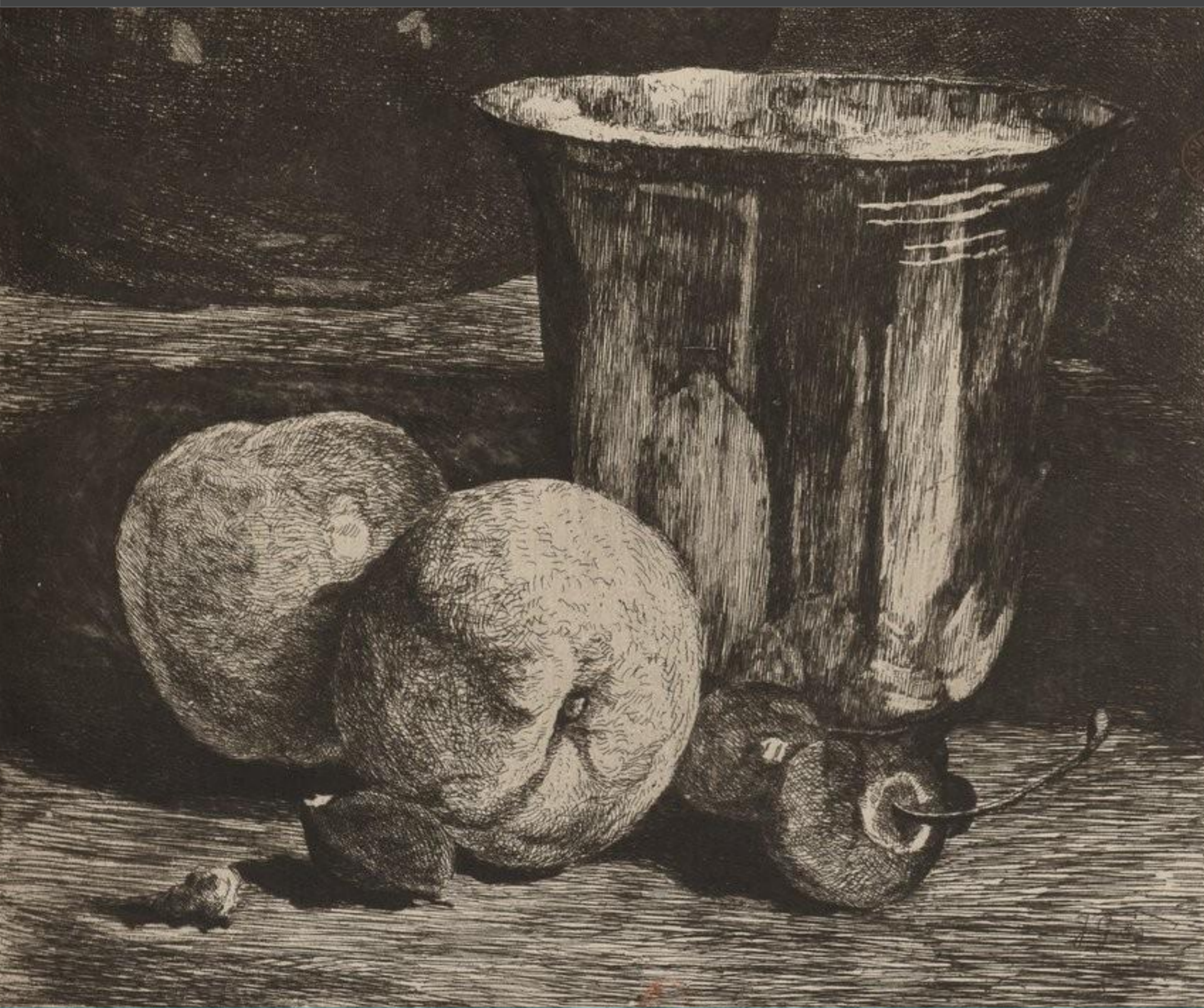




# The Goncourt brothers: Authors and Aquafortistes



Le Gobelet d'Argent, after Chardin, by Jules de Goncourt (1863)

“Nous sommes plongés dans  
l’eau-forte, mais jusqu’au cou  
et par-dessus la tête!”

“We are utterly absorbed by  
etching – in over our heads and  
up to our necks in it!”

– Journal, February 17, 1859



Jules and Edmond de Goncourt,  
by Paul Gavarni (1848)

## Project Overview

My DPhil examines the 100+ etchings made by Jules and Edmond de Goncourt. The Goncourt brothers are primarily known as authors and their etchings have previously been dismissed as a recreational pursuit. However, I argue that their work as etchers, or **aquafortistes**, in fact played a key role in their literary works. Further, the Goncourts were the only writers to practice etching during the 19th century French etching revival, and thus provide a unique perspective on the relationship between the etched and written line.

### Who were the Goncourt brothers?

Jules (1830–70) and Edmond (1822–96) de Goncourt were French novelists, art historians, and art collectors. They were inseparable and collaborated on everything until Jules’ early death.

### What was the 19th c. etching revival?

During the 1840–50s in Paris (and later in Britain and the United States), artists and writers united to promote the freedom and expressivity of etching as an antidote to the rise of photography and cheap mass-produced images.

### How does etching work?

The artist first uses a metal needle to draw on a copper plate covered with an acid-resistant surface. The plate is then dipped into acid, which eats into the exposed lines. Next, the plate is covered in ink and wiped clean so that only the grooves made by the acid retain ink. Finally, the plate is run through a printing press to transfer the image onto paper.

### Research questions:

- Do the brothers’ descriptions of the etching and writing processes reveal more similarities or differences between the two?
- Can we find characteristics of etching transposed into writing through their famous *l’écriture artiste* (artistic writing style)?
- How did they use etchings as sources for their novels?
- How do their etchings of eighteenth or nineteenth-century artworks function as a form of historical research, homage, or creative interpretation?



Femme Vue de Dos,  
after Boucher, by Jules  
de Goncourt (1859)