

Narratives of Process and Time in the Prints of Jörg Schmeisser

Change over time lies at the heart of Jörg Schmeisser's art. Born in 1942 in Stolp, Pomerania (now Poland), the artist embraced printmaking at an early moment in his career as the best vehicle to explore his fascination for the world. The accuracy with which he describes individual details recalls the objective recordings he made of the artifacts unearthed in the archaeological excavations in Greece and Israel for Saul and Gladys Weinberg of the University of Missouri. Inspired by nature and his travels, Schmeisser portrays poetic renditions, alternate visions, and interpretations of reality. His unrivalled mastery of the complexities of the etching technique and unique methods of inking reinforce the theme of the passage of time in nature and the effects of time on mankind and the artifacts of human civilization.

Each print in this exhibition is a journey that involves time and space. The inherent narrativity of the pieces has an ever shifting relationship with time, dependent on the structure of existence constructed by the viewer. Through the use of layering, they explore a variety of chronological and spatial sequences in unexpected ways. They contain multiple stories, which interweave to create complex networks that work outside of a singular progression of time and the normal flow of space. Rather than just one instant, they present multiple moments and narratives that revolve around each other, dependent and independent at the same time.

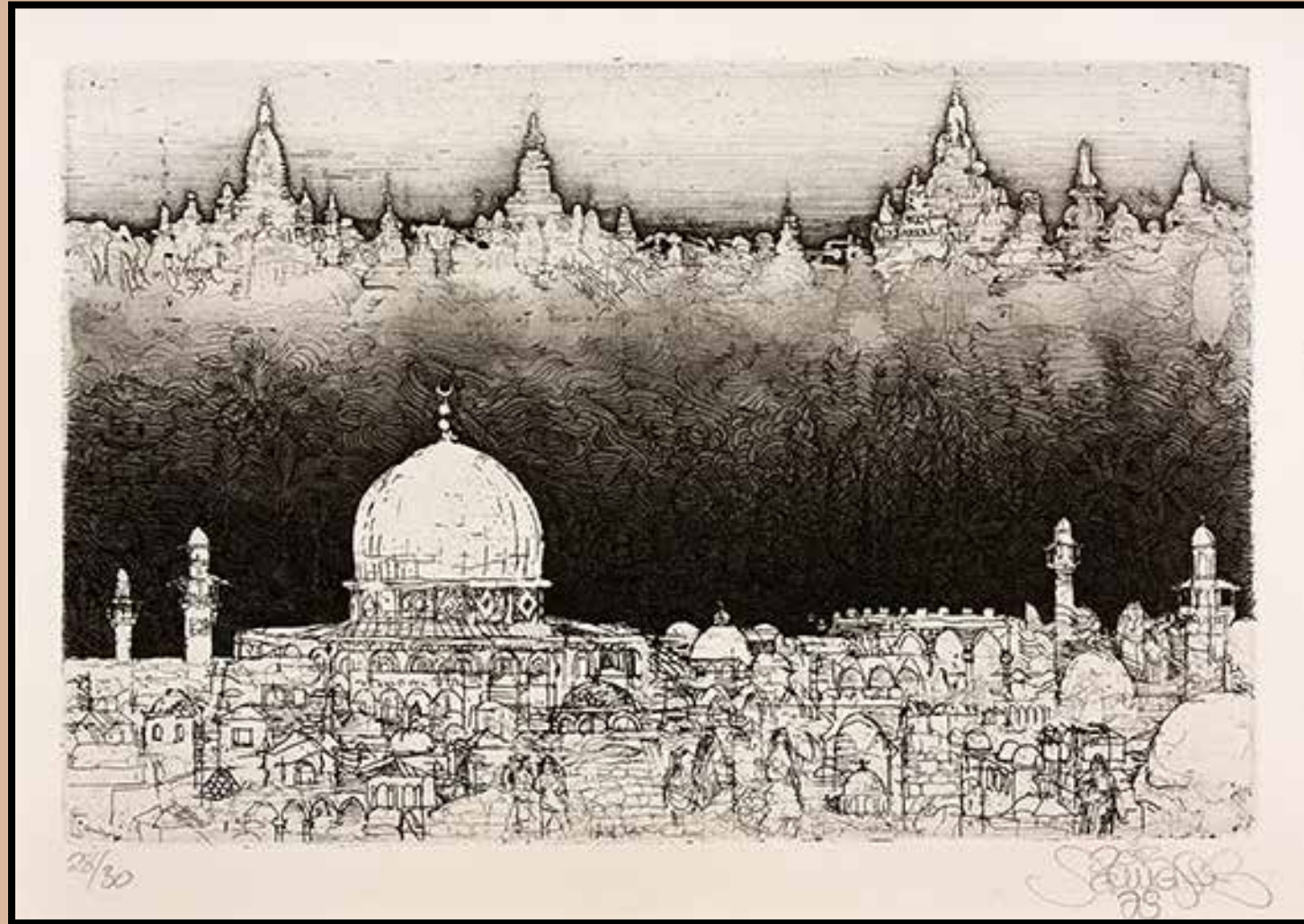


Jörg Schmeisser (German, 1942–2012)
Here and Now, Echoes from a Distant Past, 1993

Color etching

Gift of the Student Fee Capital Improvement Committee, University of Missouri (98.5)

In contrast to the orderly narratives found in the other prints presented here, time and space have been collapsed into a chaotic scene. Pieces and fragments from a variety of stories throughout time and the history of the world are mixed together in a fiery, turbulent landscape. Decorative fragments including an ancient Greek palmette, French fleur-de-lys, and European Bronze Age double circular ornament reference the achievements of human civilization. At the center a priestess, dressed in a robe reminiscent of far eastern garments, kneels before a makeshift altar supporting a double-pronged object. Nearby, a fragmentary sculpture of a goddess further emphasizes the themes of fertility and the cult of the mother goddess. Background and foreground merge as the world collapses around the woman, who disintegrates into the primordial world of only partially delineated forms. From the barely indicated to the fully modeled, Schmeisser masterfully uses various print processes to create an unforgettable apocalyptic scene that envelops all time and space. This print was created after a journey to the Greek island of Santorini (Thira/Thera), the site of one of the largest volcanic eruptions in recorded history.



Jörg Schmeisser (German, 1942–2012)

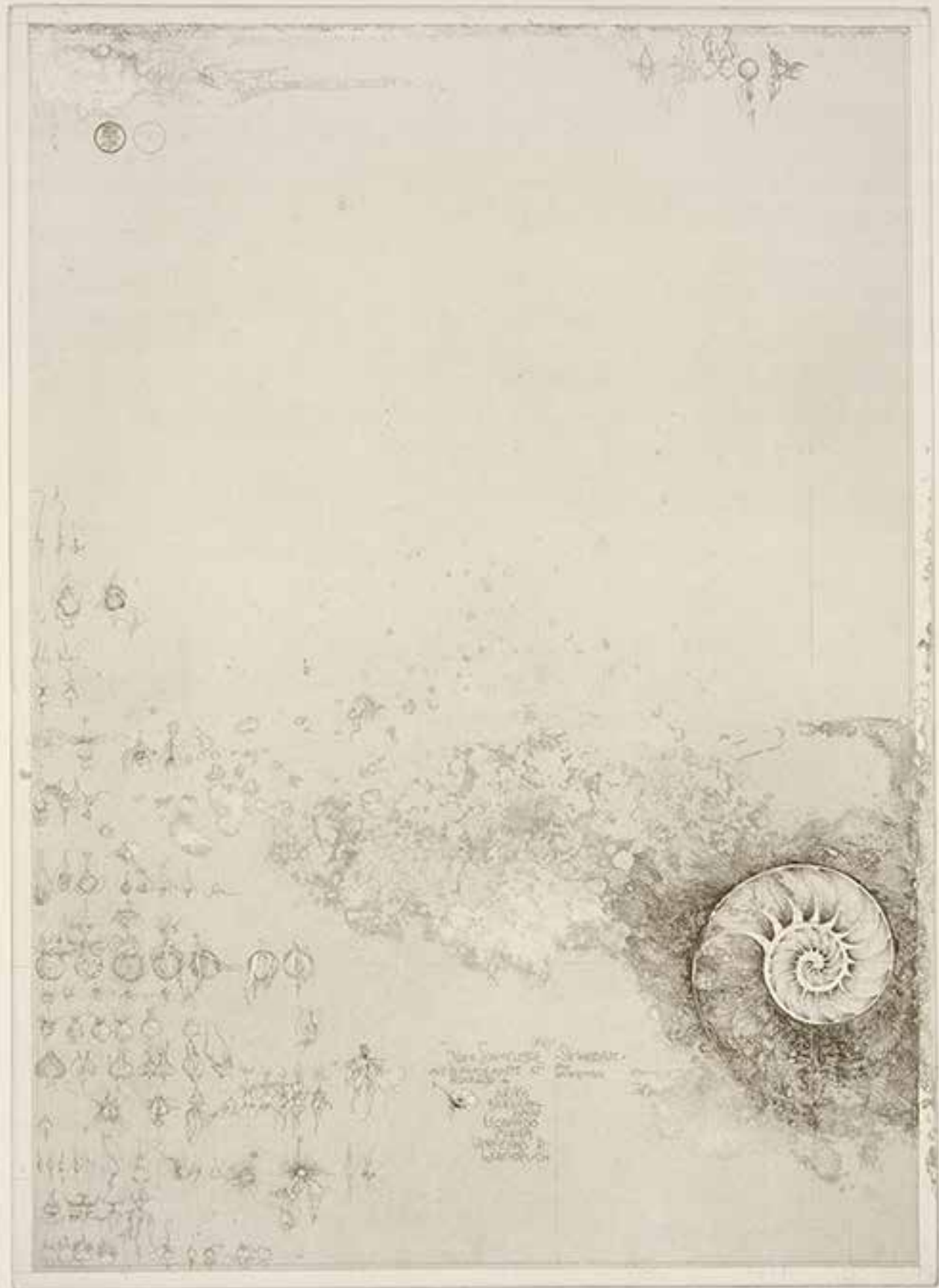
Pagan and Jerusalem, 1973

Etching and aquatint

Museum Purchase (75.11)

This etching invites the viewer to take a mental voyage from Jerusalem to Pagan. In the foreground, the iconic seventh century Dome of the Rock dominates the skyline of Jerusalem. Densely packed with a variety of architectural forms, this imaginary recreation does not represent any specific moment in the city's history. Rather, it shows a timeless iconic view. The large figures moving about the city serve as a vehicle through which the viewer can figuratively enter the city. Pagan (Bagan) appears at the top of the composition, overlaying Jerusalem. The city served as the capital of numerous Burmese dynasties between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries and was an important center for Buddhist studies by the twelfth century.

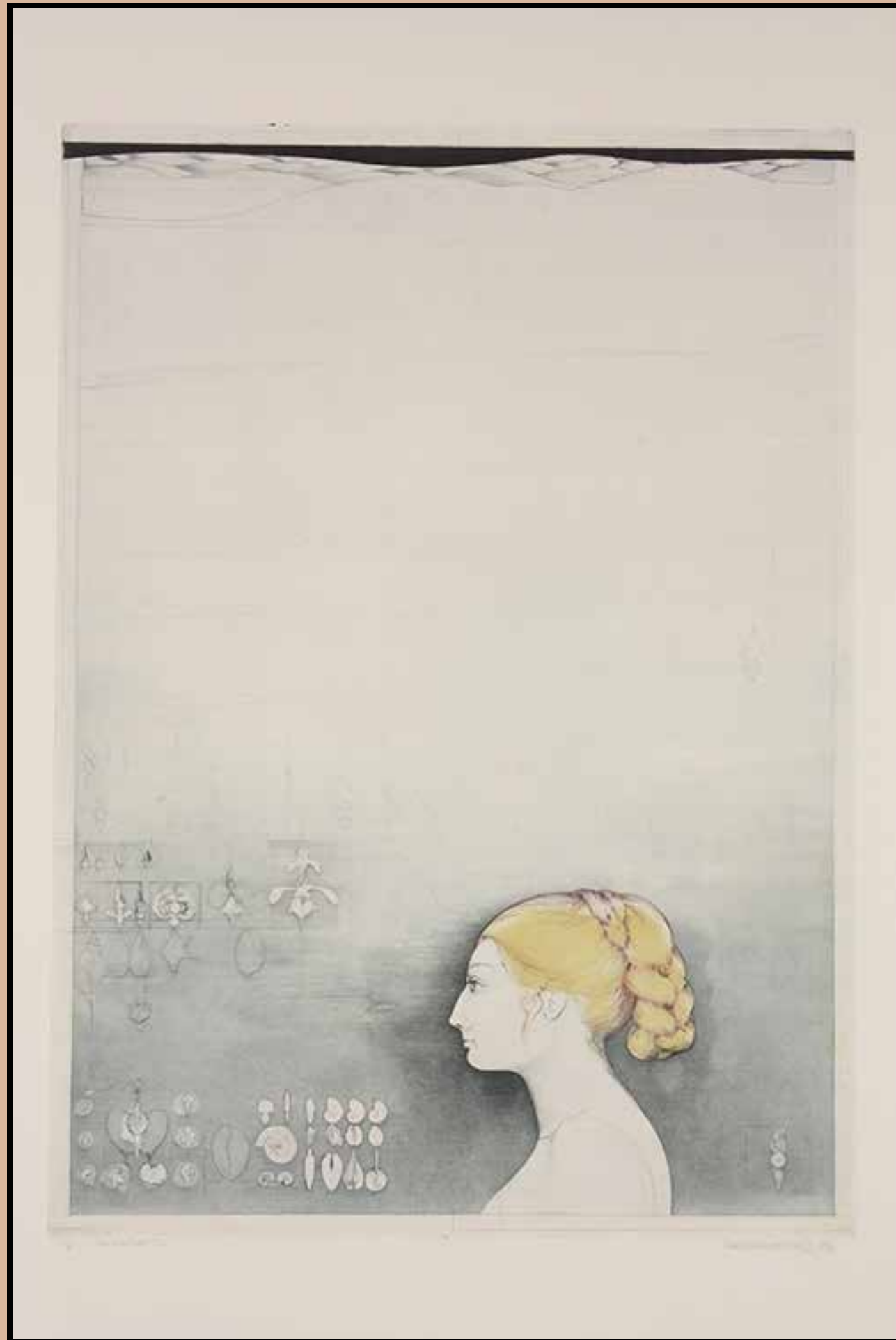
Schmeisser suggests an unknown great distance between the two cities through the central area of the composition, which transitions from a rich black behind Jerusalem through ever lightening shades of gray, until the vaguely sketched city of Pagan is reached. This zone is further enlivened by a variety of swirling forms and palm trees, indicating that only a jungle separates the two great cities. At the same time, the swirling layers of the vast span between the metropolises appears almost stratigraphic in appearance, implying a geological time relation between them. While geographically distant from each other, the large buildings of Pagan imply that it is near Jerusalem, and by association, not that far from us.



Jörg Schmeisser (German, 1942–2012)
Sie Wird Alt (She Grows Old), 1966-67
From the series *Sie Wird Alt*
Etching
Museum Purchase (69.1085.1)

This is the first print in a series of six that focuses on the passage of time in two narratives merged into one story. The lengthy evolution of life on earth serves as the background for the fleeting account of a woman growing old, as well as a variety of other minor story lines. Schmeisser's printmaking process also plays a role in the narrative as he changes and recycles a number of plates to create the series.

Dominating the composition, a cross section of a nautilus shell emerges from a bubbling primordial soup. The perfect geometric compartmentalization of the hardened shell contrasts with the soft and irregular organic forms. Neatly arranged in rows, these early forms of life go through a variety of mutations, with each row telling a unique tale of differing length and complexity. Reminiscent of Leonardo da Vinci's biological studies, Schmeisser pays homage to the great master in the inscription placed between the shell and the primitive biological forms.



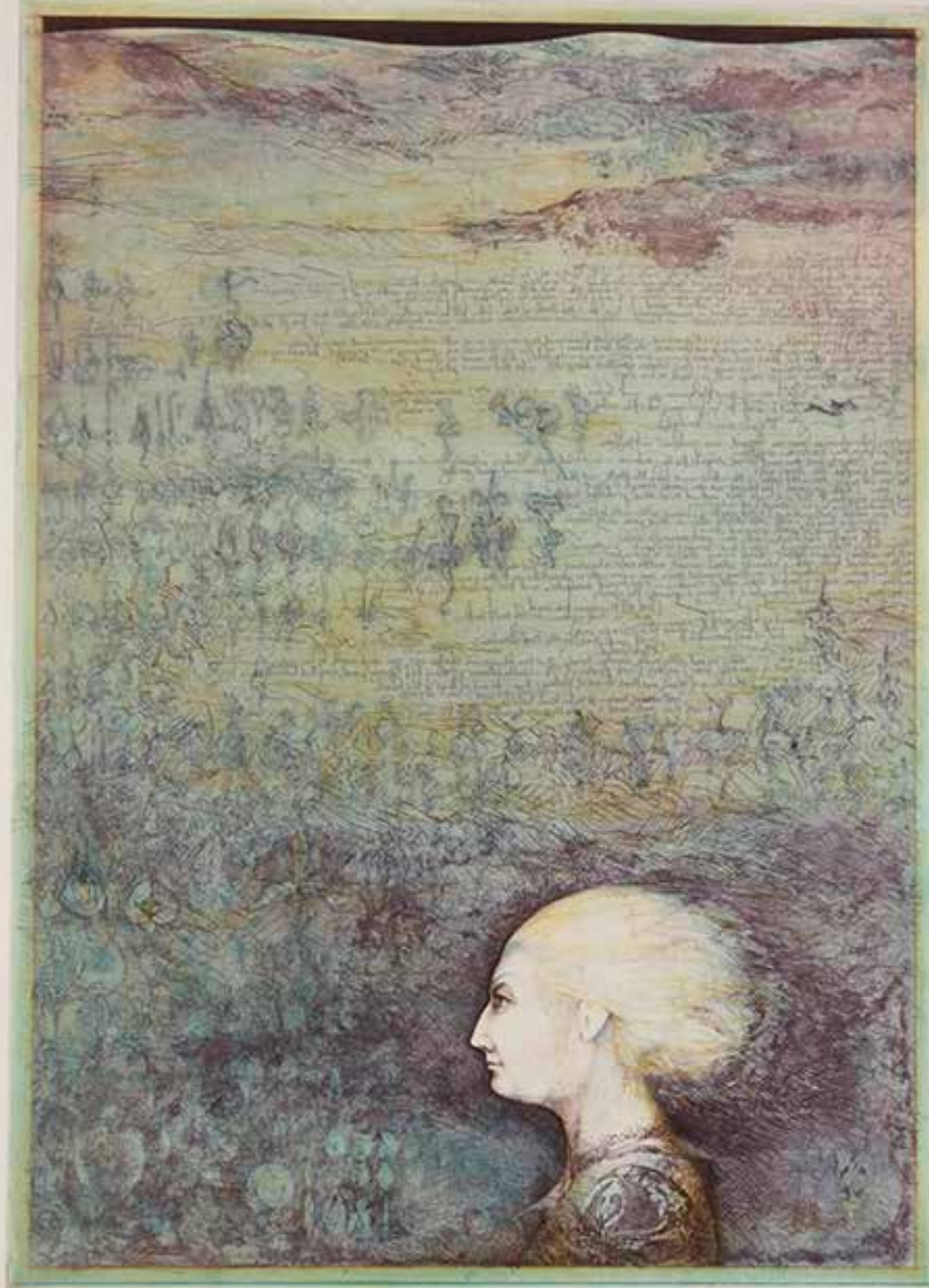
Jörg Schmeisser (German, 1942–2012)
Sie Wird Alt I (She Grows Old I), 1966-67
From the series *Sie Wird Alt*
Etching
Museum Purchase (69.1085.2)

For the second print of the series, the head of a woman replaces the nautilus shell and swirling primeval goo of the first work. Delineated with the same delicacy and precision as the various organic forms and shells, she appears as a proto-landscape emerges at the top of the print. Her story begins within the overarching story of evolution, which occupies the series. Deriving from the paintings of the fifteenth-century Florentine artist Domenico Veneziano, this idealized blond beauty is the standard against which beauty has been judged since the Renaissance in Europe. Extracted from a high point in the story of civilization, she serves as a quintessential vehicle to illustrate the process of growing old and the inexorable loss of beauty, as well as the transience of life and humankind.



Jörg Schmeisser (German, 1942–2012)
Sie Wird Alt II (She Grows Old II), 1966-67
From the series *Sie Wird Alt*
Etching
Museum Purchase (69.1085.3)

A magnificent red dominates this climactic print of the series. The forms of life are now more highly evolved, intricately detailed, and neatly ordered. Above them the rolling hills of the landscape flow downward unmarred. Dressed in a Renaissance inspired gown, the floral pattern on the sleeve of her dress restates the bloom in front of her. Her hair flows behind her as she/humanity races through time. The strands blowing free of the braid echo the lithesome tendrils of the organic forms around her.



Jörg Schmeisser (German, 1942–2012)
Sie Wird Alt III (She Grows Old III), 1966-67
From the series *Sie Wird Alt*
Etching
Museum Purchase (69.1085.4)

A great deal of time has passed between this print and the previous one. Order has disappeared as forms overlap and disintegrate, and cool greens, blues and purples morph into each other. The land has also lost its contours as forms and colors merge. Incipient wrinkles and shorter hair indicate the increasing age of the woman. Within the interstices of the composition, Schmeisser weaves another narrative, a written one, purposefully rendered backwards, and thus impossible to read.



Jörg Schmeisser (German, 1942–2012)
Sie Wird Alt IV (She Grows Old IV), 1966-67
From the series *Sie Wird Alt*
Etching
Museum Purchase (69.1085.5)

Another great jump in time evidences a continuing process of degeneration throughout the composition. Liquid colors darken and spread erratically, enveloping everything. Organic forms disappear into darkness. Now wearing a coat with fur-trimmed collar, the woman still possesses fine features, but every part of her, including her clothing, evidences decay.



Jörg Schmeisser (German, 1942–2012)

Sie Ist Alt (She Is Old), 1966-67

From the series *Sie Wird Alt*

Etching

Museum Purchase (69.1085.6)

In the final print of the series, a fiery liquid soup spreads and engulfs the composition. Formerly organic forms are reduced to fossilized remains. The decomposition of the woman continues with the relentless progress of time as the blazing red reaches down and envelops everything in its path. The process seems never ending, as evidenced by her eyes that continue to shine with life. Indeed, it is the voyage that Schmeisser finds most important, as his favorite poem *Ithaka* by Constantine Cavafy informs us:

*As you set out for Ithaka
hope your road is a long one,
full of adventure, full of discovery.*

...

*so you're old by the time you reach the island,
wealthy with all you've gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.
Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.*