

OTON POLAK

Maribor – Jewish Tower, 1951, etching, 32 x 40 cm

Oton Polak (1917–2011, Maribor) was initially educated as a geographer and cartographer. He made a living as a forestry technician, which sparked an interest in the forest as an artistic subject, one that he explored in later years. He was encouraged to paint by Maks Kavčič in particular, and decided to study at the Zagreb Academy of Fine Arts. His studies were interrupted by World War II, when he was forcibly mobilised into the German army and sent to the Western Front. In the French city of Caen, Polak surrendered to the Allies and spent some time painting portraits of French officers' wives. He then returned to Yugoslavia, first to Split, where he was assigned to the propaganda section of the Partisan brigade. After the war, Polak continued his studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Ljubljana as a member of the first generation of students at the newly founded academy. His oeuvre includes paintings, drawings, prints, tapestries and mosaics.

A cycle of thirty old-town-themed etchings created during his postgraduate printmaking studies (1950–1952) received the Prešeren Award. In Polak's works, this theme – often depicted in the prints by Fran Stiplovšek, Viktor Cotič and Josip Peteln in the interwar period – is portrayed with an eye for detail and tectonically constructed composition. In terms of framing, Polak focuses on narrower and wider sections, raising and lowering the horizon, which reveals different points of view commonly found in older vedute of Maribor. Cityscapes remained one of Polak's central and most recognisable art subjects even in the subsequent decades, when he was attracted by the compactness and neatness of old towns.