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Gardens

# Dare you journey to Little Sparta – a point of no return?

On the centenary of the birth of Ian Hamilton Finlay — poet, iconoclast, social revolutionary and maritime obsessive — his Scottish garden is being celebrated as his greatest work of art



Natalie Whittle

Socketed in the Pentland Hills, amid rolling farmland south-west of Edinburgh, a low stone cottage is hidden up a dirt track, shielded front and back by bushy gardens. Through a wooden side gate, a path meanders to an old piggery, a vegetable patch and run-offs for rainwater: two ponds with gurgling pipe chutes, a little burn and a largish lochan. Ducks glide happily, with moorland and hilltops in the distance. Spring frogs are beginning to croak in the bulrushes.

It is a modest, traditional smallholding, where an owner could just about scratch a living. Instead, its former resident, the late artist-poet Ian Hamilton Finlay, turned it into his most famous and most idiosyncratic artwork.

This year marks the centenary of Finlay's birth, and his singular legacy is being celebrated in May with a book and series of exhibitions in eight galleries from Edinburgh to London and Basel, all titled *Fragments,* and curated and edited by Pia Maria Simig. Notable are those at Ingleby Gallery and at Victoria Miro; the latter will show works in wood, stone and neon. Particularly interesting are some of the guillotine-themed pieces that brought Finlay to international attention in the late 1980s, when his interest in social revolution gave him a spiky, head-turning cachet.




Poetry and sculpture come together in works such as 'The Present Order' (1983) © Murdo Macleod/The estate of Ian Hamilton Finlay/Courtesy the artist's estate and Victoria Miro

But it is the Pentland cottage-garden, gifted to Finlay and his wife Sue by her family, that remains the most enchanting draw. In the 1960s, when the newly-weds moved in, the estate was gloomily called Stonypath, and a single ash tree stood in the garden. Over the course of the Finlays' 40-year occupation, it was reborn as Little Sparta, a kind of live-in artwork spread over seven acres. Sculptures and landscaping by Finlay gradually filled the garden with ideas, designed to make cryptic allusions to classical myths, maritime adventure and antiquity. The name was inspired by the Spartans, warriors who — like the artist — had a plucky and somewhat isolationist fighting spirit.

By most accounts, including his own, Finlay was a mercurial figure. He asked for a single occupation to be inscribed on his family headstone — poet — but art and language were always intertwined in his work. After early study at Glasgow School of Art, he moved into concrete poetry. Later, he became a great polymath and collaborator. This brought the art world to Little Sparta, rather than taking Finlay into it: he was reluctant to rub shoulders in the clubby galleries, but proved adept at transferring his playful, fragmentary verse to works on paper, stone and other media, aided by other craftspeople.

At the cottage, a damp ground-floor bedroom cheered by a wood-burning stove, books, Olivetti typewriter and model sailboats was his self-declared "command central". Here he used his library as "his palette", says head gardener George Gilliland.

Gilliland has a difficult set of jobs — looking after the garden almost single-handed, but also managing the fragile stone artworks. "If you were thinking of planning a garden this isn't the place to do it," he says wryly. At an altitude of 300m, surrounded by the moors stretching from the Pentlands, Little Sparta is high enough to catch wind, rain and all the elements — a storm has ripped through and taken down a score of trees when I visit.



Finlay at home © Tom Kidd/Alamy

But the Finlays, showing a determination that became part of Little Sparta's mythology, created a windbreak, and began to build up the greenery with "garden thugs" such as cranesbill, periwinkle, astrantia, sweet Cicely and rosebay willow herb, a tough fireweed that Finlay called his "obstreperous companion". The somewhat iconoclastic plantings in the garden — including trees close together — reflected his more general contempt for received wisdom. "He took a stance over all sorts of authority, and had strongly held principles," says Gilliland.

The garden has a strong motif; it is a "a garden of the sea", says Gilliland. The sea and the boyish romance of sailing — but also the danger and mystery of maritime adventure — were particular obsessions for Finlay. There are flagstones inscribed with names of historical vessels — caravel (Portuguese explorers' sailboat), boomie (large-masted Thames barge), cog (warship of the Middle Ages) — and trees planted so that the leaves' shadows mimic the play of light on water.



'Ionic Capital (c1992)' © Sam Rebben/The Estate of Ian Hamilton Finlay/Courtesy the artist's estate and Victoria Miro




'Electis Arboribus Amoenissimus' (1995) © Sam Rebben/The Estate of Ian Hamilton Finlay/Courtesy the artist's estate and Victoria Miro

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Instead of pineapples, hand grenade finials (1991) © Sam Rebben/The Estate of Ian Hamilton Finlay/Courtesy the artist's estate and Victoria Miro

Mischievous tricks meet you at every corner: a gate's pillars are topped with sculpted stone hand grenades, resembling and mocking the status-symbol pineapples once all the rage in the 17th century. A patch of the piggery's slate roof is sprayed gold, nudging at the story of Philemon and Baucis, the kindly old couple of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* who showed hospitality to gods in disguise and were rewarded with a temple.

Classical sources were just as important to Finlay as maritime ones: there's even a temple to Apollo, which in superbly wily fashion, Finlay leveraged as a tax break, arguing to the local council that it was a place of worship and should be accounted as such. (Inevitably, this didn't go down well.)

In the garden's early years, Finlay made a "big leap, moving his poetry into the landscape", says Gilliland. Many of the pieces are poems or words and verse fragments etched into stone, made by local stonemasons to Finlay's instructions, and in collaborations with font designers such as Michael Harvey, who also created typefaces for Faber & Faber. The scheme was improvised and added to, bit by bit, over the years. "It acted as a testing ground for ideas, but it is a sequence of poetic conceits — it's deliberate," adds Gilliland.



'Republic' (1995) © The Estate of Ian Hamilton Finlay/Courtesy the Artist's Estate and Victoria Miro




'La Rèvolution est un Bloc' (1992) © The Estate of Ian Hamilton Finlay/Courtesy the Artist's Estate and Victoria Miro

For most of the year, Gillilland works here alone. "The garden is meant to be solitary, the paths are narrow and twist to a point of no return — that's part of discovery," he says. In the "English parkland" section at the back of the house, there is even a parallel track of beech hedge for a "huff lane" where a bad mood could be secluded and hopefully cured with a contemplative sit on one of the benches.

True to his exacting vision, the garden is only open in the summer months, when Finlay thought it had most to offer. As a whole, Little Sparta is "like a cryptic crossword puzzle", says Gilliland. "It's a place that allows you to think."

*Little Sparta is open June-September (littlesparta.org.uk); victoria-miro.com; inglebygallery.com; "Fragments", published by ACC Art Books*