Our greatest artist is a virtual unknown

Ian Hamilton Finlay's centenary will see exhibitions around the globe, but his reputation in Scotland deserves better

Magnus Linklater



He was the greatest Scottish artist of the postwar era — and among the least well-known. This year marks the centenary of Ian Hamilton Finlay, poet and rebel, who created the most important single artwork in Scotland — Little Sparta. The masterpiece is the name of a garden he and his wife Sue carved out of the Pentland Hills, southwest of Edinburgh.

Across the world no fewer than nine international exhibitions will celebrate Finlay's 100th birthday, with shows in London, New York, Germany, Italy, Austria and Switzerland. The Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art (SNGMA) in Edinburgh is also to stage one, but there has still been no prominent retrospective of Finlay's work here.

When he died in 2006, critics were lavish in their praise. Writing in The Independent, Tom Lubbock remembered him as "our greatest living artist" and called him "a wonder of our time, and I would think for a long time to come". The then head of the Tate, Sir Nicholas Serota, credited Little Sparta with making "a unique contribution to the art of our time"; the art historian Sir Roy Strong described it as "the only really original garden created in this country since 1945"; and when Neil MacGregor, former director of the British Museum, was asked to name his favourite Scottish artwork, he chose Finlay's stone relief *Et in Arcadia Ego*.

Why, then, outside the circle of art connoisseurs and garden lovers, does Finlay's reputation not stand higher?

Part of the answer lies in the difficulty of classifying his work. Much of his art is carved in stone and contains ideas about nature, the sea, antiquity, revolution, warfare and modern life, which are meant to challenge the onlooker and provoke the imagination.

Kirstie Meehan, who has curated the show in Edinburgh, says Finlay

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Ian Hamilton Finlay's masterpiece was his garden, Little Sparta, in the Pentland Hills. Its name was meant to conjure the idea of a war on cloying cultural imperialism

himself rejected attempts to be categorised. "I think it's an asset for an artist to refuse to be labelled in that way," she says. "You can see that throughout his career. He starts as a poet, goes into concrete poetry, moves into sculpture, moves into publications, then into gardening. There's a sort of freedom there, which I think most artists don't have."

Another explanation, however, lies in the way Finlay saw himself as a disruptor, someone who challenged the establishment and picked quarrels with it whenever he felt its power was being misused.

He famously declared war on Strathclyde regional council which wanted to designate his *Temple of Apollo* as a commercial building, leading to "the First Battle of Little Sparta" when he defied the council's sheriff officer in front of television cameras. He fell out with the Scottish Arts Council and forcibly removed some of his works from an exhibition.

Little Sparta got its name by challenging Edinburgh and its claim to be "the Athens of the North"; in Greek history the Spartans were usually at war with Athens, and this was Finlay's way of declaring his independence from the cloying hand of cultural imperialism.

He was often cold-shouldered by the critics and may not have helped his cause by challenging them head-on whenever they failed to understand his work. Here he is writing to the then art critic of the Guardian, Waldemar Januszczak, who once described him as "an aggressive Scots loony". Finlay penned a vituperative letter in 1986, branding Januszczak a "cheap, over-fed, over-tolerated, affluent bastard", and added: "To your stupidity, your ignorance, your arrogance, your fashionableness, your cringing ambitiousness, you can from now on add one more problem — me."

To the arts establishment, then, Finlay often came across as "a problem". His standards were high, and, as an archive of his correspondence, held in the SNGMA, reveals, he was critical of much of modern culture which he saw as bland, conformist and shoddy.

He embraced ideas that challenged convention. "We need a revolution," he wrote. "So I looked to see what revolutions there had been." The one he lighted on was the French, when blood spilled from the guillotine.

Some were disturbed by the status he gave to revolutionary leaders like Robespierre, Danton and St Just; others pointed to the way he adopted the Nazi SS symbol as a lightning strike, and accused him of fascism — a charge he angrily dismissed. But when, in 1989, a French critic repeated it, the government in Paris ran scared and cancelled a commission it had given him for a mammoth installation at Versailles to commemorate the revolution.

The cancellation enraged Finlay, and he turned it into art — portraying the head of his critic lying in a basket beneath the guillotine, and quoting one of the revolutionaries as saying: "Freedom of Speech is not Freedom to Speak, it is Freedom to Discuss."

Professor Stephen Bann, an early collaborator who has written extensively about Finlay, says his views hardened as the fame of Little Sparta grew. "The difficulty of ensuring appropriately high standards of workmanship persuaded him that nothing less than a 'revolution' in culture was needed," he says.

If that suggests all of Finlay's work is violent, nothing could be further from the truth. There are pastoral themes to be found at Little Sparta, and tributes to the peaceful traditions of the English garden, as well as the power of nature. One simple quotation from the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin reads: "Calmly before his cottage in the shade/ The plowman sits; smoke rises from his modest hearth./ Hospitably, the evening bells are chiming/ To the wanderer in the peaceful village."

As chairman of the Little Sparta Trust for more than 20 years, I had the privilege of working with Finlay, and helping to conserve this most remarkable of creations. For all his combative style, the picture of him I remember best is of his gentler side — the man in gumboots, leaning on the gate at the garden's entrance, welcoming visitors, happy to discuss the weather, the best way to control willow-herb and Scotland's prospects for the next World Cup.

He even created an artwork with the aphorism: "A World Cup without Scotland is like a Pastoral without Sheep."

Ian Hamilton Finlay is at Modern Two, the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, from March 8 to May 26