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Advisory Perspective

Little Sparta: Ian Hamilton Finlay's Eternal Home in Exile

By Rory Mitchell | Edinburgh, 14 August 2024 | Artists

The Pentland Hills southwest of Edinburgh are a long way from the Mediterranean, but it was in this unforgiving landscape that the late Scottish artist and writer Ian Hamilton Finlay created the garden he named 'Little Sparta'. The seven-acre site at Stonypath farm has attained an almost-mythical status not only as a work of art, but also for the life lived by its creator.

I found myself alone when visiting on a wet August day and unexpectedly grateful for the miserable weather. It felt apt, emphasising the peculiar marriage between ancient Greece and the barren moors of Scotland, but also because the rain reveals how well stone wears its age. Most of the sculptures set in Little Sparta are inscribed stone; they bear the marks of their years, gradually settling into the natural world around them like monuments of bygone eras that grow more mysterious and romantic over time.



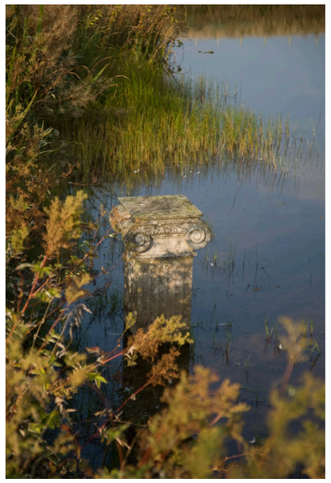
Little Sparta. Courtesy Little Sparta Trust. Photo: Robin Gillanders.

The weight of time is deeply felt at Stonypath, as is the presence of those who have nurtured the garden. This was in many ways a collaborative project between the poet-artist and his wife Sue, who was given the farm by her father in 1966.

During a period of recovery following a heart attack in 1967, Hamilton Finlay resorted to making model boats. Sue explained: 'I shopped for balsa wood and magazines with plans for fishing boats, sailing boats, and even submarines. These were then sailed on the pond. Gradually—over years—the garden took shape. I learnt about plants and planting. Ian found new collaborators to make the works. Little Sparta was created one turf at a time.'

In the following decades more than 270 artworks—mostly sculptures—were installed across the moorland. They reflect Hamilton Finlay's fascination with tempestuous periods in history—among them Classical antiquity, the French Revolution, and the Second World War.

Corinthian pilasters are painted on one side of the house with the inscription, 'To Apollo, his music, his missiles, his muses', above the windows; Doric columns frame barn doors and garden gates; and a cluster of roses are celebrated with a wall text in French tricolour that reads, 'Les femmes de la Révolution'. Elsewhere, his wit and humour are uncovered: a tombstone commemorates a dead birch tree with the inscription, 'Bring back the birch', and nuclear submarines emerge ominously from the ground.



Little Sparta. Courtesy Little Sparta Trust. Photo: Robin Gillanders.

Richard Ingleby, Hamilton Finlay's gallerist and trustee of Little Sparta, described the garden's maritime influence: 'The sea is hugely present there with references to fishing and naval boats, but more than anything, the sounds: the trees that rustle in the wind, mimicking waves breaking on the shore. It's an island kingdom, despite being land-locked. It has this Homeric quality, as if he's finding his way home'.

Hamilton Finlay suffered from chronic agoraphobia and for decades barely left his small kingdom; he once wrote that 'our true home may be found in exile'. Ingleby recalled the artist's amazement at his first-ever visit to a supermarket in the 1990s.



Ian Hamilton Finlay and his daughter Ailie Finlay, Stonypath, 1970. Courtesy Little Sparta. Photo: Richard Demarco.

There are also artworks riddled with references to controversial incidents that took place in Hamilton Finlay's lifetime—attributable to what Ingleby described as his 'very strong sense of moral purpose'. There was the dispute between the artist and the Strathclyde Regional Council over the rates relief he believed he was entitled to, immortalised in the form of numerous works detailing the 'Battle for Little Sparta', including an epigraph from the French revolutionary Saint-Just, 'The Present Order is the Disorder of the Future', inscribed into stone blocks laid out on the ground above Lochan Eck.

For Ingleby, one of the most important ideas of Hamilton Finlay's work and Little Sparta is how the process of transformation becomes a form of poetry. 'A personal favourite is the bird tables with aircraft carriers,' Ingleby says, 'so the starlings arrive as starlings and they take off as Harrier jump jets carrying bread. There are so many little visual amusements throughout the garden that are sometimes overlooked'.



Little Sparta. Courtesy Little Sparta Trust. Photo: Robin Gillanders.

Artists' homes and gardens offer us a rare glimpse into their private worlds, and Hamilton Finlay's garden can also be understood as his most important work of art. At Little Sparta, it feels as though at any moment the artist might step out of his house in his wellies. There is something romantic about imagining him exiled in the remote Pentland Hills, making art that touches on such grand, eternal themes. His vision has influenced people far beyond the borders of Scotland and remains just as intriguing today, with much of Little Sparta's charm to be discovered in the smaller details that reveal themselves like secrets. For these, it's well worth the trip. —[O]

During the Edinburgh Festival Fringe (4–26 August 2024), a return bus service is available to Little Sparta from central Edinburgh on Saturday mornings.

Next year, a series of seven exhibitions will be held at Ian Hamilton Finlay's galleries around the world, marking the centenary of the artist's birth.

Main image: Little Sparta. Courtesy Little Sparta Trust. Photo: Robin Gillanders.