

The Telegraph

Ian Hamilton Finlay

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Ian Hamilton Finlay, who died yesterday aged 80, was an artist, poet, moralist and "avant gardener" whose work defined and resisted the deracination of European culture; at "Little Sparta", his home in the Pentlands, he created an extraordinary garden which fused classical and postmodern motifs, drawing especially from his heroes Vergil and the French revolutionary Saint-Just.

Ian Hamilton Finlay was born on October 28 1925 at Nassau in the Bahamas. His father James lost the fortune which he had made smuggling with a schooner there, and the family returned to an impoverished life in Glasgow.

Referring later to the moral force of his work, Finlay said that "at the age of 10 or 11 I had a great ambition to be a missionary". At 13, his education was cut short by the war and he was evacuated to Orkney. After briefly attending Glasgow School of Art, he was called up in 1942 and served as a sergeant in the RASC for three years. He had brief periods working in a commercial art studio, fetching fresh water for the artists, and later worked for a year in advertising - "and learned something about brevity".

After the war Hamilton Finlay returned to Orkney, which he described as "Arcady", and became a shepherd. He began to write short stories, many of which were published in the Glasgow Herald, and also short plays.

After moving to Edinburgh in the late 1950s, he founded the Wild Hawthorn Press, which began in 1961 by publishing the works of a variety of contemporary artists, but later concentrated more exclusively on Hamilton Finlay's own work.

The next year he began publication of the periodical Poor. Old. Tired. Horse. (a title drawn from Robert Creeley's poem Please), which ran for 25 issues until 1968, providing a platform for literary inventions, among them Hamilton Finlay's "one word" poems. It was during this period that he began his experiments with concrete poetry. His first poem in sandblasted glass was shown at the Cambridge International Exhibition of Concrete Poetry in 1964. Two years later he settled with his wife at Stonypath in the Southern Uplands, near Dunsyre, Lanarkshire, where he set about creating his poetic garden, later named Little Sparta. (The reference was a riposte to the view of Edinburgh as the "Athens of the North".)

In the early 1970s, as the garden began to take shape, he began his "neo-classical rearmament project", increasingly using the iconography of modern warfare to comment on the pastoral idyll. A set of gateposts were topped with stone hand grenades; a birdtable was shaped like an aircraft carrier. He also started to perfect his collaborative method of working.

In 1978 the withdrawal of an exhibition of his work from the Scottish Art Council's gallery in Edinburgh marked the opening of a protracted battle with the SAC and Strathclyde Region. For 10 years, Hamilton Finlay fought a vigorous campaign against these authorities.

Highlights of what became known as the "War of Little Sparta" included, in 1983, the attempted seizure by the sheriff officer of works from the Garden Temple (a barn which had been converted) in lieu of rates. The region refused to accept that the building was eligible for rates relief as a place of worship or even to discuss its description as such. A group of Hamilton Finlay's supporters, calling themselves the Saint-Just Vigilantes, barred the entrance to Little Sparta. "We had constructed a panzer tank and were letting off explosions and so on," Hamilton Finlay later explained. "It was a thoroughly satisfactory day."

For many, Hamilton Finlay's poetic garden represented his most impressive achievement. It is now preserved by a trust which was founded on his 70th birthday. In an interview in 1995 its creator observed that "certain gardens are described as retreats when they are really attacks".

Some felt that Hamilton Finlay's garden made determinedly idiosyncratic and highly allusive comments on art, nature and classical culture, provoking debate on the legacy of the Enlightenment and asserting the need for spirituality in democracy. It was also a mark of Hamilton Finlay's attachment to classicism, and of his contempt for many of the concerns of the modern art world and the bureaucracy around it, that many artists and critics antipathetic to conceptual art were vocal supporters.

Described by The Sunday Telegraph's John McEwen in 1993 as a "libertarian revolutionary", Hamilton Finlay later became a passionate advocate of the principles that inspired the French Revolution, reserving a special place in his pantheon for Robespierre's assistant, the puritan egalitarian Louis-Antoine de Saint-Just, a bust of whom was presented to him in 1991 by the French Communist Party. With his repeated use of Jacobin and Nazi motifs in his later neo-classical work (he corresponded with the architect Albert Speer), Hamilton Finlay was open to accusations of unsound sympathies. Others argued that the SS insignia demonstrated its descent from the "cultivated extremes" of 18th-century scripts.

The French press, however, reacted badly to a sculpture commissioned to celebrate the bicentenary of the Revolution in 1988. The project consisted of rough-hewn marble blocks inscribed with the word "Osso", its double "S" represented by the lightning insignia of the SS. It was cancelled by the Ministry of Culture; two years later Hamilton Finlay was awarded damages of one franc by the French government.

But though machine guns, tanks and other instruments of war featured prominently at Little Sparta and also in Hamilton Finlay's installations and exhibitions elsewhere, other concerns were as strongly to the fore. Landscape and its relationship to language was a long-standing subjects, while boats, sails and plants were recurring themes.

Hamilton Finlay had no discernible enthusiasm for civil rights at the expense of art. A copse of sycamores in his garden was marked with a stone declaring: "Bring back the birch."

In 1985 he was short-listed for the Turner Prize. Dubbed by one critic "the Capability Brown of Conceptual Art", in 1991 Finlay transformed the grounds of Stockwood Park Craft Museum and Gardens near Luton. Other landscape installations were sited in Stuttgart, Vienna, Otterlo, Strasbourg, Eindhoven, San Diego and Brittany, and his work was exhibited worldwide. There were major shows at the Serpentine in London (1999) and at the National Museum of Scotland (2003). He received honorary degrees from the Universities of Glasgow, Heriot-Watt and Aberdeen, and an honorary professorship from the University of Dundee.

Known to his friends as "wee Ian", Hamilton Finlay's soft-spoken manner surprised those familiar only with his work. He was married twice, and had a son and a daughter.