

UK news

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Ian Hamilton Finlay, artist and gardener, dies at 80

Ian Hamilton Finlay, Scotland's greatest artist, died peacefully yesterday morning, aged 80.

He had lived, since 1966, in a cottage in the Pentland hills south-west of Edinburgh, where he had created his sublime garden, Little Sparta. It has been described as the greatest Scottish art work of all time, and one of the greatest contemporary pieces of art anywhere.

Increasingly frail and reclusive, Finlay had remained a gentle and generous host for the art and garden-lovers who had made pilgrimages to Little Sparta until his recent move to a nursing home.

Set in a beautiful, but bleak and unforgiving landscape, Finlay's Little Sparta is an extraordinary artist's garden, combining landscape, trees, plants, sculpture and poems to make a true Gesamtkunstwerk.

In its politics revolutionary, its philosophy rigorous and its poems pure and pithy, Little Sparta fused its artist's fascination with the classical world, the second world war and the French Revolution.

Sir Nicholas Serota, director of the Tate, said: "Ian Hamilton Finlay made a unique contribution to the art of our time through his creation of the garden, Little Sparta at Stonypath near Edinburgh.

"In his work as a philosopher, poet and sculptor, he reinvigorated the classical tradition in art. His works combine beauty and precision in a celebration of the relationship between man and nature." Last month Finlay's work was included in the Tate Triennial, a major three-yearly survey of contemporary British art.

Victoria Miro, his London gallerist, said: "We have lost a truly unique, great artist. He was an exceptional genius. I have worked with many artists, but he was on his own."

Finlay was born in the Bahamas in 1925, from where his parents ran bootleg in prohibition America. He was sent home to boarding school in Scotland at the age of six. By his teens he was producing paintings, poems and plays.

For many years he was an outsider figure in Scotland. In 1983 his cottage became the scene of the so-called First Battle of Little Sparta, in which Finlay's supporters successfully prevented the removal of works from the garden's temple by the Strathclyde regional council in a dispute over rates.

Ownership of Little Sparta last year passed to a charitable trust, which aims to safeguard the garden and its fragile, beautiful contents for the nation. Fundraising is still in progress.

Finlay's works are held in collections worldwide, though he rarely left his home in the Pentlands. In 1991 he was presented with a bust of Saint-Just by the Communist party of France. He was shortlisted for the Turner prize in 1985 and awarded a CBE in 2002.