

Ian Hamilton Finlay's Garden



Above: A view of
Ian Hamilton Finlay's
Little Sparta.

In the remote uplands of southern Scotland, Ian Hamilton Finlay has gradually created one of the most impressive contemporary sites of integrated sculpture and environment: the garden surrounding his house. Finlay is known as a poet and artist with works in sculpture gardens and public spaces throughout Europe, and has also devoted over 25 years to planning, building and expanding his neoclassical garden. In transforming four acres of desolate moorland into an intricate series of landscaped spaces, Finlay selected shrubs, trees and other natural elements to complement his sculptures, revealing a refined sense of spatial rhythm. Set at the considerable altitude of 1,000 feet,

the garden only really exists in the summer, since Finlay considers the foliage as much a part of the site as the sculpture.

Finlay's home was originally an abandoned croft outside Edinburgh, remote enough to daunt all but the most determined art enthusiasts. Through his own intense physical labor and uncompromisingly challenging designs, the land on all four sides of the original house was gradually transformed into carefully planned areas, each of which is highly distinctive and bears a title. The map each visitor is handed shows 36 sites, and the list is ever expanding. A minimum of two hours is needed to obtain a general overview of his layout. In order to read the inscriptions on his sculptures and

walkways, and appreciate the subtleties of Finlay's ideas, a visitor could easily spend days wandering through the site.

The gate in front of the house bears the name of the garden, "Little Sparta," originally called "Stonypath" before his 1978 "Five-Year Hellinsation Plan." Once inside, the visitor comes across a Roman garden, a sunken garden, stone walkways, paths, small intimate places and, behind the house, numerous ponds as well as large open spaces that embrace the sky and merge into the windswept moor.

Upon the ground, hanging from a branch, or nestled among the bushes and trees, Finlay's poetic sculptural works are often surprising in location, material and content. Some embody emblematic metaphors, blending a motto with the visual element or poems such as idylls. Others make statements about war and social order. To reflect the crisis of values in the modern age, Finlay elaborated on the concept of a neoclassical rearmament, where deities such as Apollo and the Muses are reincarnated as war machines. His evaluation of cultural forces, particularly their interaction with destructive elements, is predominant. Materials range from stone, to bronze, brightly painted metal, resin and brick. Along with the classical statues that one would expect in a neoclassical garden, objects such as sundials, posts and pillars are juxtaposed with vessels, aircraft carriers and other emblems of war, in addition to miniaturized monuments of an obelisk and pyramid. Inscriptions often combine textual with visual references to famous poets, thinkers and artists such as Albrecht Dürer.

Buildings behind the house also form a part of his design. *The Garden Temple*, with its inscriptions "To Apollo," "His Music," "His Missiles," and "His Muses" across the facade, has been the focus of many disputes with regional authorities. In 1983, in what was then called the "First Battle of Little Sparta," the sheriff tried to confiscate works from the Garden Temple, yet was averted by a group of Finlay's supporters. A month later, however, the sheriff removed works, some of which belonged to private collectors and institutions, many of which were never returned to their owners. As a result "Little Sparta" remained closed to visitors for a year. Ironically perhaps, the Temple overlooks the beautifully serene Temple Pond, beyond which lies the Temple of Philemon and Baucis.

About two-thirds of his garden is intricate and intimate, with many hidden surprises and great compositional variety within a very small space. Beyond the Claude Bridge (referring to Claude Lorraine) the garden expands, stretching out into the vastness of the moor. Overlooking Lochan Eck, the largest body of water, various structures and sculptures show the diversity of Finlay's designs. On one edge of the water, a solitary column makes its stand against the barren hills and ominous sky, with an inscription from the French revolutionary

Saint-Just. *Nuclear Sail*, a tall sculpture made of slate, stands on the other side. On the hill above squats *Little Goose Hut* (1982), and nearby, a huge work made of mammoth blocks of stone aligned in four rows, each inscribed with a word from the phrase "The Present Order, Is The Disorder, Of The Future, Saint-Just," would be best read from an airplane.

Originally Finlay did not plan the idea of a garden that would be open to the public. Inspired in part by the garden of William Shenstone, an 18th-century English poet, Finlay's garden is a process, and process has become for him an ideology. By the very fact of working with nature, the notion of permanence takes on a different meaning. Flowers, plants, trees and his works all become an integral part of his design. The 18th-century classical garden follows these organic principles, which he feels were largely lost at the beginning of World War II.

Finlay's designs show the workings of a meticulous mind. He employs primarily craftspeople from England, who carve the inscriptions and fabricate his sculptures to his own very carefully planned designs. In all of his work, there is a purity of thought, of concept, of kind of a certain objectivity and the absence of personal psychology.

Although Finlay doesn't like the point of view that "Little Sparta" is his *chef d'oeuvre*, he tests ideas here that are later used in larger, more public locations. For *Sacred*

Grove, one of Finlay's favorite works that stands at the heart of the Kröller-Müller Museum's sculpture garden in the Netherlands, he first experimented with the stone tree-columns in "Little Sparta." "I couldn't really have done [*Sacred Grove*] without doing it first here, in order to understand how to put the stone in front of the trees, what happens with the roots of the trees, what problems they are likely to be and also how it would actually look," Finlay explains. However, the works in the garden could not be included in a sculpture exhibition, since they each form an integral part of the entire composition.

Having been commissioned to make works for sculpture parks, and plan new gardens and landscape improvements, and having published many proposals, Finlay emphasizes the integration of sculpture with landscape. To focus on the sculptures in "Little Sparta" is not his intent; he disapproves of focusing a camera on the objects. In contrast to the contemporary sculpture garden, which Finlay considers a "deplorable manifestation," every element in his garden is a crucial part of a larger whole.

—Anne Barclay Morgan



Finlay's Garden
Temple and pool.
Photos: Anne Barclay
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