

Ian Hamilton Finlay - *War and Pieces of a Garden*

31 October - 22 November 2025

This exhibition marks the centenary of **Ian Hamilton Finlay** (1925–2006), internationally recognised as a poet, writer, visual artist and gardener. He is best known for his garden Little Sparta, which is set in the Pentland Hills in the village of Dunsyre, 25 miles south-west of Edinburgh. Finlay viewed Little Sparta as a contemporary version of the classical Greek Arcadian idyll. His wider work takes many forms with several recurring themes, including the sea and seafaring, nature and landscape, the Classical world, 20th-century warfare and the political and social upheaval of the French Revolution.

The works within *War and Pieces of a Garden* explore the juxtaposition between two main themes within Finlay's wider practice, that of the natural world and the brutality of war. Such contrasting subject matter, synonymous with much of Finlay's output, mirrors the complexities within the artist himself. Battles were not just historical metaphors within his work, but a declaration that it is necessary, as the artist viewed it, to accept conflict as a means to restore order. This was evidenced through his own 'battles' with various establishment forces, including the Scottish Arts Council and Strathclyde Regional Council. Likewise, Finlay's lifelong reflections on the pastoral idyll provide a deeper understanding of his own position within the world, given that illness restricted him to the physical limits of his garden for much of his life.

A number of the items in the exhibition are drawn from the Glasgow School of Art Library Special Collections, which holds many prints and booklets published through Wild Hawthorn Press. Alongside these, the exhibition includes several private loans, including prints and photographs from Finlay's friends and collaborators.

Ian Hamilton Finlay was born in Nassau, the Bahamas, in 1925. At age six, he was sent to boarding school in Scotland. However, the outbreak of war interrupted his schooling and he was evacuated to the village of Gartmore in the Highlands. In 1941, aged 16, he briefly studied Drawing and Painting at Glasgow School of Art (GSA) and worked for a time as a janitor at the school. It was while at the GSA that Finlay befriended fellow artist and future collaborator Margot Sandeman (1922-2009), alongside the likes of Joan Eardley (1921-1963) and Bet Low (1924-2007). The terror of the Clydebank Blitz in March 1941 had a lasting effect on him, and the '*hail of bombs and bruise of war*'¹ would manifest in his later work amongst the recurring motifs of warplanes, tanks and battleships.

Whilst undertaking national service with the Non-Combatant and Service Corps between 1944-47, Finlay travelled to post-Nazi Germany, where he was struck by the sight of tanks stationed outside Neoclassical buildings. Upon his return to Glasgow, he was adopted as an acolyte of the poet Hugh MacDiarmid (1892 – 1978), who would be best man at his wedding to fellow artist Marion Fletcher in 1947, until he and MacDiarmid acrimoniously fell out in the early 1960s.

Finlay spent a period in the Highlands from 1948 onwards, working as a shepherd and labourer, first whilst living at Invergeddie Farm in Glen Lednock, before moving to a cottage at Druim-na-Cille, on the Dunira Estate near Comrie. He spent eight years in rural Perthshire, living as a painter and

writer, periodically publishing his short stories in newspapers and magazines. It was during this time that he first began to suffer from agoraphobia, a condition that affected him until the mid-1990s. Finlay was hospitalised in 1954, at the same time as his first marriage was ending. In a later proverb, Finlay declared: *'Illness and exile restore our horizons to us'*².

By the winter of 1955 Finlay was living in the Orkney island of Rousay, which served as a continued source of inspiration for later works. From 1956 onwards, he was largely based in Edinburgh, where he continued to suffer from what he described as *'nervous anxiety [...] unpleasant, but no more interesting than toothache'*³. The publication of a book of short stories, *The Sea Bed and Other Stories*, in 1958 marked the end of Finlay's prose writing. His first collection of comic and melancholy lyric poems, *The Dancers Inherit the Party*, was published in the autumn of 1960 by Gael Turnbull's Migrant Press. Around this time, Finlay began to make simple wooden toys in a makeshift workshop in a friend's flat, which he would later exhibit. These toys served as a *'stepping stone to his poem-objects'* that came later⁴.

Whilst living in Edinburgh, Finlay met Jessie McGuffie, with whom he set up Wild Hawthorn Press in 1961. Early publications included work by poets such as Lorine Niedecker, Louis Zukofsky, Robert Lax and Gael Turnbull. In the spring of 1962, he launched the periodical *Poor. Old. Tired. Horse.* (P.O.T.H), which ran for 25 issues and included rural Scottish lyrics by George Mackay Brown alongside contemporary international poets such as Anselm Hollo, Shimpei Kusano and works by Vladimir Mayakovsky and Guillaume Apollinaire. During this period, Finlay was introduced to the work of the concrete poets of São Paulo's Noigandres collective through his friend and fellow poet Edwin Morgan. This innovative form had a lasting impact on him and his work, and P.O.T.H. became a critical outlet for disseminating this new development in poetic form.

Finlay married Sue MacDonald Lockhart in 1964, and the following spring, left Edinburgh with his new wife to live in various rural farmsteads throughout Scotland. The Finlays' lived for a period at Gledfield in Ardgay in Easter Ross. Described as *'the first of his garden retreats'*⁵, it was here that Finlay made his first large-scale outdoor poem-objects, on the external walls and internal stairwell of the farmhouse, alongside a large painted wooden garden piece, *The horizon of Holland is all ears*. It was while living at Gledfield that their son, Alec, was born. The family lived for a brief time in a tiny cottage in Coaltown of Callange, near Ceres in Fife, which Sue noted was *'a place as pastoral as its address'*⁶.

The family moved permanently to Stonypath, a small farmhouse with some outbuildings, set in the Pentland Hills near the village of Dunsyre, in September 1966. In the following year their daughter Ailie was born. One of the outbuildings, a former cow byre, was used to display Finlay's works and those of his collaborators. It would later become known as the Temple of Apollo. In 1967 Finlay suffered a heart attack, at which point Wild Hawthorn Press focused solely on publishing his own work. Finlay's agoraphobia was so severe that it restricted him to the boundaries of garden for the next four decades, with Sue and other collaborators tasked with overseeing his public artworks and exhibitions.

Spread across seven acres of wild and exposed moorland, the garden at Stonypath gradually took shape as Finlay placed his poetry into the landscape. Collaborating with stone carvers, letterers,

2 Ian Hamilton Finlay, *Detached Sentences on Friendship* (Wild Hawthorn Press 1991)

3 Ian Hamilton Finlay, 'Autobiographical Sketch' in *Ian Hamilton Finlay Selections* (University of California Press 2012)

4 Alec Finlay, *Ian Hamilton Finlay Selections* (University of California Press 2012) p.17

5 Alec Finlay, *Ian Hamilton Finlay Selections* (University of California Press 2012) p.33

6 Yves Abrioux, *Ian Hamilton Finlay: A Visual Primer* (Reaktion Books 1992) p.4

traditional dry stone dykers, and at times other artists and poets, the numerous sculptures and artworks are integral to the garden as a whole. Individual poetic and sculptural elements find their form in wood, stone and metal. Finlay carefully positioned them amongst the trees, ponds and paths to create a garden that, when taken in its entirety, exists as a total artwork. Over the decades Finlay expanded the garden, using it as a vehicle to explore themes as diverse as the sea and fishing fleets, Man's relationship to nature, classical antiquity, the French Revolution, and the Second World War.

In 1969 Finlay became embroiled in the first of many of his famous 'Battles', a five-year legal dispute with poetry publisher Fulcrum Press, which had misdescribed their new edition of Finlay's book *The Dancer's Inherit the Party* as a first edition. This affair culminated in a court case in 1974. Finlay incurred considerable personal costs, withdrawing further to the confines of his garden retreat. Martial imagery replaced the pastoral in his work at this time, as he noted in a letter from 1971: "*I have begun to build model battleships instead of model fishing-boats and this (small circumstance) seems to symbolize a great change in my feelings about life*"⁷.

The following decades were marked by further battles, where Finlay's moral values were pitted against those of the establishment and became known as '*The Little Spartan War*'. In 1977, Finlay was subject of a major solo exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery, London. The following year he withdrew the touring version of the exhibition from the Scottish Arts Council's Charlotte Square Gallery in Edinburgh, on the eve of the opening. This was in retaliation for a perceived lack of support over the earlier Fulcrum affair. It also resulted in the renaming of the garden in 1979 and the formation of '*The Saint-Just Vigilantes*'⁸. That year also saw the infamous '*Crates Event*' unfold, after the Scottish Arts Council (S.A.C.) mistakenly returned two Neoclassical stone reliefs to Stonypath after acquiring them for their collection. Finlay returned the works, but only after modifying the reliefs to mark the occasion.

Drawing on one of the most famous conflicts of the classical world, he rechristened the garden *Little Sparta*, in opposition to the Establishment in Edinburgh, the so-called Athens of the North. *The First Battle of Little Sparta* followed in February 1983. This was the result of a long and bitter dispute between Finlay and Strathclyde Regional Council regarding the Temple of Apollo. The local authority deemed it an art gallery, and so subject to commercial rates, whilst Finlay maintained it was a religious building in the vein of Garden Temples from the Classical world, and thus should be exempt from taxation. This impasse culminated with the Saint-Just Vigilantes and Finlay successfully defending Little Sparta from the Sheriff Officer, sent on behalf of the Region, from seizing works from the Temple in place of unpaid rates. However, the victory was short lived, and the following month the Sheriff Officer returned. This time Strathclyde Region emerged victorious, having successfully seized several works from the Garden Temple, including many works belonging to private collectors and other institutions.

This was followed the next year by Saint-Just Vigilantes undertaking an audacious raid on the S.A.C. offices in Edinburgh to remove the stone reliefs at the heart of the '*Crates Event*' years earlier, returning them to the Garden Temple as spoils of war. These battles proved fertile raw material for Finlay in which to create new works, including the famous *Battle Monument*, which was erected in 1984 and is situated on the farm track at the entrance to Little Sparta.

In 1987 the French Ministry of Culture invited Finlay to submit a proposal for a garden to commemorate the bicentenary of the French Revolution. However, following a vicious campaign

7 Letter to Ann Kujundzic 4th August 1971 in Ian Hamilton Finlay Selections, (University of California Press 2012) p. 276

8 Named after a prominent French Revolutionary leader Louis Antoine de Saint-Just, the vigilantes were a band of Finlay supporters who played an active role in many of the 'battles'.

of vilification directed at Finlay in the French art press, the commission was cancelled. This became known as *'The French War'*. Finlay had earlier exhibited a work titled *Ossos* (1987) in Paris, which featured the SS symbol inscribed on a large slab of white marble⁹. Certain sectors of the French media mounted a campaign against the work:

*'... systemically misdescribing Ossos without either naming it or providing an illustration [...] in its official condemnation of the defamatory attacks to which Finlay had been subjected, the authorities described it as a campaign of misinformation.'*¹⁰

Finlay sued for defamation, and the courts upheld his claim. Despite this, the French Ministry of Culture felt they had no choice but to cancel the commission, citing the highly emotive and lasting aftermath of Nazi occupation in France, and the risk of the negative publicity overshadowing the bicentenary celebrations. The lasting distress from this very public attack had a deep impact on Finlay and his family.

All the while, the garden continued to grow and develop. Ponds were dug on which Finlay's flotilla of model boats would sail and inscribed stones and concrete aircraft carriers found their rightful home within the garden. Finlay was nominated for the Turner Prize in 1985, and his work is held in major collections including the British Museum (London), Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, (Glasgow), Laumeier Sculpture Park (St Louis, USA), Museum of Modern Art (New York, USA), Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris (France), National Galleries of Scotland (Edinburgh), Tate (London), and Victoria & Albert Museum (London).

Finlay suffered a stroke in the early 2000s. A consequence of this was that it reversed his agoraphobia, allowing him to travel again in the final years of his life. He died on the 27th March 2006, aged 80. On his gravestone, beside his name, reads only one word: 'Poet'.

Finlay's centenary has been marked through several exhibitions across Scotland, including the Tower Foyer Gallery (University of Dundee), Bigger and Upper Clydesdale Museum, Cairn Gallery (Pittenweem, Fife), Ingelby Gallery (Edinburgh), Pier Arts Centre (Stromness, Orkney) and The National Galleries of Scotland (Edinburgh). Further centenary exhibitions have been held at Victoria Miro (London, UK), Kewenig (Palma de Mallorca, Spain), David Nolan Gallery (New York, USA), Sfier-Semler (Hamburg, Germany), Stampa (Basel, Switzerland), Hubert Winter (Vienna, Austria) and Massimo Minini (Brescia, Italy).

Curated by John Farrell

With thanks to Jenny Brownrigg, Michael Hill Johnston, Velvet Butler-Carroll, Mark Anthony Burgoyne, Sean Black, Duncan Chappell, Robin Gillanders, David Bellingham, Joan Hughson, Thomas Greenough, Simon Beeson and Nicola Moss, Margaret McCormick, David and Sheila Robson, Alan Currall, Alastair S Macdonald, Alec Finlay, Eddie Stewart and Stephanie Smith, Michael Hamish Glen, Malcolm Dickson, Alistair Gow, and Alex Neeson.

9 The SS was a notorious Nazi unit during World War Two. Finlay used this imagery in a number of works from this period as a critique of totalitarianism and the aesthetics of power within his work.

10 *'Ossos uncompromisingly interrogated the status of the myth of nature at the end of a century in which a natural force (strikes of lightning) had been used to emblemize the horrific outpouring of Nazi violence.'* Yves Abrioux, Ian Hamilton Finlay: A Visual Primer (Reaktion Books 1992) p.14