



ART

LITTLE SPARTA

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY ANNE BARCLAY MORGAN

Ian Hamilton Finlay's
Literary Landscape

On an undulating hillside in the southern uplands of Scotland, artist and poet Ian Hamilton Finlay has dedicated more than 25 years to building an extraordinary garden. Located about an hour's drive south of Edinburgh, Finlay's home is so isolated that even nearby villagers do not know of its whereabouts.

The steep road leading up to the property is a challenge to traverse. Here, lost in the barren and stark beauty of the Scottish moors at the considerable altitude of 1,000 feet, is a neoclassical jewel where Finlay's poetic sculptural works are set into diverse garden scenes.

Originally an abandoned croft, the garden incorporates only one previously existing element into its design—an old tree, a big ash, at the front tip of the property. All the subsequent plantings, ponds, buildings, and sculptures were his inspiration. From his abode and studio, Finlay

works on his art, writes, and continues to develop his garden. Wearing tall gum boots, he welcomes visitors warmly, presses a map of the garden in their hands, and offers to meet them later on.

Occupying approximately four acres, the garden surrounds his house, with the entrance in front and the more extensive rear section spreading into the moorland. In a minimum of two hours one can get a general overview of Finlay's garden, but much more time is needed to read the inscriptions on his sculptures and walkways, and to appreciate the ideas behind his designs.

Amidst a widely varying terrain, the visitor discovers intricate gardens, numerous pools and ponds, and stone walkways. Surprises pop up—at your feet, hanging from branches, or nestled in trees. Finlay uses a range of materials in his sculptural works, from stone benches, posts, and grave markers to bronze, brightly painted metal, and

brick. Most of the objects—sundials, classical statues, fence posts, and pillars—are inscribed with allusions to classical poets, writers, and artists.

Indeed, Finlay's garden, named Little Sparta, was inspired in part by the classical garden of William Shenstone, an 18th-century poet and landscape theorist. The entrance to the Front Garden is marked by an archway and gate bearing the garden's name. This area contains paths laid with lettered slabs in cast concrete, sculptural elements such as a wooden pillar marked "Terra/Mare," inscribed benches and vessels, small clearings, and dense foliage.

From there, a path leads through a series of intimate spaces, each with its own unique character defined by groupings of trees, shrubs, and sculptures. The Roman Garden, which includes the stone sculpture of a fighter plane on a pedestal titled *Fly Navy*, melds into a long, curved brick pathway.

The Henry Vaughan Walk stretches along the lower edge of the garden, where a row of trees and shrubs screens the moor from view. Small stone pillars inscribed with the words of the 17th-century English poet lead the visitor from the physical and metaphorical darkness toward the light of the Sunk Garden, one of the first sections Finlay designed.

Behind Finlay's house lies the beautifully peaceful Temple Pond, where *The Marble Paper Boat* rises from the water on a stone pedestal. Directly facing the pond is his Garden Temple with the inscriptions "To Apollo," "His Music," "His Missiles," "His Muses." On the other side, set on angle from the pond, is the Temple of Philemon and Baucis; behind it lies the Allotment (Epicurean) Garden, or vegetable garden.

Leaving the rear garden, the visitor crosses the Claudi Bridge, a reference to the classical French painter Claude Lorrain. Here, the

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: BRICK PIERS AND AN INSCRIBED LINTEL FRAME A GARDEN GATE; A LATIN-ENGRAVED STONE MARKS ENTRANCE TO POND; A PATHWAY TABLET IS PAUSE FOR THOUGHT; A SUNDIAL WITH A MESSAGE; AN ARCADIAN-INSPIRED PLANTER; SCULPTURE ANIMATES A SHADED GARDEN.

garden expands, reaching out toward the moor; the vast sky is revealed, and the transition is almost startling. Farther up the hill is a series of pools. Amid the trees, the silhouettes of Apollo and Daphné are poised at a run in vivid colors that contrast with the pale green leaves.

Nearby, a number of structures and sculptures overlook the largest body of water, Lochan Eck. At the far corner of this small lake, a solitary column stands against the windswept hills and brooding sky. The inscription at its base is taken from the French revolutionary Saint-Just: "The world has been empty since the Romans." In many ways, these words describe the meaning of some of Finlay's works, which form a critique of aspects of contemporary culture.

Originally, Finlay did not anticipate that his garden would become a destination for the public. "I began in a state of total ignorance," Finlay claims, noting that books on gardening were rare when he began his project.

He did much of the gardening labor himself, and only recently employed a man to help out. Finlay dug most of the ponds with his spade, using a bulldozer to create



**TOP: FINLAY'S HOUSE NESTLES AGAINST A GARDEN POND. ABOVE: A CARVED SUBMARINE FLOATS ON A PED-
ESTAL. OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: MONO-
LITH DEFINES THE WATER'S EDGE; A BRIDGE NAMED
CLAUDI; SILHOUETTES OF APOLLO AND DAPHNE ENLIV-
EN A WOODLAND BORDER; SPRING WATER AND LITERA-
TURE MELD IN THIS TABLET; EVEN STRAWBERRY PLANTS
BEAR INSCRIPTIONS; A DAM WALL ALSO FEEDS A CREEK.**

only the largest one. Last summer he added another pond, which was "impossible to resist digging" because machinery was on hand for new water pipe trenches. Finlay establishes long-term working relationships with primarily English craftsmen who carve the inscriptions and fabricate sculptures to his exact specifications.

Finlay dislikes the notion expressed by some that Little Sparta constitutes his most important work of art. Yet it has become an arena for his ideas on artwork for other locations. With a strong international reputation established, he regularly receives commissions for sculpture parks and landscape improvements in other parts of the world.

In all of Finlay's work, there is a purity of thought and concept, and the absence of what he despises the most—"muddle." He is upset by visitors who photograph only his sculptures. Because for Finlay, every element of his garden is integral to the whole, the way every moor and mountain compose the grand landscape.

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