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Ian Hamilton Finlay, 80, Poet and Conceptual Artist

by Ken Johnson

Ian Hamilton Finlay, a Scottish poet and conceptual artist known for his neo-Classical-style sculptures inscribed with poetic texts as well as for his home and garden, an imaginative echo of ancient Rome in the Pentland Hills of Lanarkshire, died on Monday at a hospital in Edinburgh. He was 80.

The cause was cancer, said Katherine Chan, director of the Nolan/Eckman Gallery, which represents Mr. Finlay in New York.

The famously contentious Mr. Finlay began calling his home Little Sparta in 1980, partly to symbolize his refusal to compromise with the local authorities over whether a building dedicated to Apollo should be taxed as a religious or a commercial structure.

Now maintained by a foundation, Little Sparta resembles the home of an ancient Roman philosopher-poet. Rustic and Classical-style stone carvings bearing literary quotations have been carefully placed throughout the property. One stone block, seemingly antique and tilted in the ground as if it were a ruin, presents the neatly chiseled words of the French revolutionary Louis de Saint-Just: "The world has been empty since the Romans."

But the grounds are not completely given over to nostalgic traditionalism. Images of 20th-century warfare are also distributed about. The two posts of a stone-and-brick gateway, for example, are each topped by an oversize stone carving of a hand grenade.

Mr. Finlay conceived and designed his sculptures, but hired craftsmen to produce them. He also created works for exhibitions in Europe and the United States and for public commissions. Although he had agoraphobia, which restricted his traveling, he had an internationally recognized career, and many visitors made the pilgrimage to Little Sparta.

Mr. Finlay was on the short list for Britain's Turner Prize for contemporary art in 1985 and received the honorary appointment of a Commander of the British Empire in 2002. His work was selected to be part of the 2006 Tate Triennial, a survey of British contemporary art now on view at Tate Britain in London.

Ian Hamilton Finlay was born on Oct. 28, 1925, in Nassau, the Bahamas, where his father was a bootlegger who smuggled rum into the United States during Prohibition. At 6 Mr. Finlay was sent to boarding school in Scotland. War cut short his education at 13, when he was evacuated to Orkney, an archipelago at the northern tip of Scotland. As a teenager he briefly attended the Glasgow School of Art before being called up in 1942 for duty with the Royal Army Service Corps.

After the war, Mr. Finlay worked as a shepherd while producing paintings; short plays, which were broadcast by the BBC; and stories, which were published in *The Herald of Glasgow*.

In 1961 Mr. Finlay founded the Wild Hawthorn Press, which initially published contemporary poets like Louis Zukofsky and Lorine Niedecker but later focused mainly on Mr. Finlay's poetry. In the early 60's he became interested in concrete poetry, in which the visual appearance of words was meant to count as much as the literary meaning. He also began producing short poems sandblasted on glass. One read simply, "Wave Rock."

In 1966 Mr. Finlay and his second wife, Sue, moved to the cottage and grounds that would become Little Sparta, a patch of highlands then called Stonypath, 30 miles southwest of Edinburgh. It was to be his home for the rest of his life. Mr. Finlay's marriage to his first wife, Marion, ended in divorce. He is survived by his wife and their children, Alec and Eileen Finlay.

Today visitors to Little Sparta are greeted by a bronze plaque mounted on a brick wall that nicely sums up Mr. Finlay's independent, high-minded and mercurial spirit: above the imposing, precisely modeled image of a machine gun, sentiments from the poet Virgil read, "Flute, begin with me Arcadian notes."

CORRECTION:

An obituary of the Scottish artist Ian Hamilton Finlay yesterday misstated the name of a surviving daughter. She is Ailie Simpson, not Eileen Finlay.