

Purchase of works by Ian Hamilton Finlay

Committee on the Jean F Watson Bequest

9 March 2010

Purpose of report

1. To consider the purchase of works by Ian Hamilton Finlay (1925-2006).

Main report

2. The following works by Ian Hamilton Finlay are presented to the Committee for consideration:

Two Temples: To Apollo His Music-His Missiles-His Muses

1996

with Annet Stirling

slate

25 x 15.5cm each

Price: £36,000

Sails CN16

1998

with Andrew Whittle

stone

37 x 55 x 10cm

Price: £28,000

Blue & Brown Poems

1968

Set of 12 lithographs

51 x 38 cm

Price: £5,500

3. Ian Hamilton Finlay was one of the major figures of 20th century Scottish art, as well as being a leading international conceptual artist. Poet, publisher, sculptor and gardener, he is perhaps best known for Little Sparta, his extraordinary garden in Lanarkshire.

4. Ian Hamilton Finlay was born of Scottish parents in 1925 in Nassau, the Bahamas. He was educated in Scotland at Dollar Academy. His strong sense of himself as an artist was well established by his mid teens, and besides paintings and prints, his early work included short stories, plays and poems. He attended Glasgow School of Art before being called up for war service.
5. After the war, Finlay worked as a shepherd on Orkney while dreaming of a "visionary happiness in discoursing with classically clad philosophers in a kind of bright green-grassed grove" and starting to write seriously, mainly short stories for the Glasgow Herald and other publications.
6. His first book *The Sea Bed and Other Stories* was published in 1958 and his collection of poems *The Dancers Inherit the Party* followed in 1961. He published the poetry periodical *Poor. Old. Tired. Horse.* between 1962 and 1968. Also in the early 1960s he co-founded the Wild Hawthorn Press. Still flourishing today, this became the vehicle for his own highly prolific and varied output of poem cards, posters, booklets and small objects. From his short-lived but influential Wild Flounder Press he produced the celebrated *Glasgow Beasts* and *a Burd Haw an Inseks an Aw a Fush*, a collection of poems in the Glasgow dialect based on the Japanese tanka form.
7. In 1963, Finlay published *Rapel*, his first collection of concrete poetry, in which the placing of words is not dictated by syntax. Instead, words are placed on the page to create an image which discloses its meaning by juxtaposed sounds, shapes or references. It was as a concrete poet that he first gained wide renown and this poetic practice paved the way for later developments in his work.
8. Key in all his work is the inscription of language onto real objects, thereby creating a very solid three dimensionality for invented, derived or borrowed phrases. This leads to the two seemingly opposed but signal characteristics of his work. His early experiments with concrete poetry led him to play with the formalist concerns (colour, shape, scale, texture, composition) of literary and artistic modernism. At the same time as both a poet and student of classical philosophy, he has always recognised the power of language and art to shape our perceptions of the world.
9. In 1966 Finlay and his wife Sue moved to Stonypath, a windswept hill farm near Dunsyre in Lanarkshire, on the southern edge of the Pentland Hills which was given to Sue by her parents. Here they began to create what has become the now world famous garden, Little Sparta, described by Sir Roy Strong as "the only really original garden made in this country since 1945". Stonypath was, at the time, a simple farmhouse and steading on the edge of the moor. To make the garden, Sue dug flower borders and planted trees, while Finlay created ponds

and a sunken garden. He also started his collaborations with stonemasons and letter-cutters making permanent outdoor works.

10. Gradually, over the next 25 years, the garden was developed corner by corner, poem by poem, vista by vista, to provide the settings for the individual works. Language is omnipresent, with plaques, benches, headstones, obelisks, planters, bridges and tree-column bases all carrying inscriptions, which conjure up a vast range of metaphorical concepts derived from Western thought and civilisation.
11. The themes dealt with in the garden are those which underpin the structures of our society, including the French Revolution, pre-Socratic views of the nature of the world, the Second World War, and the sea and its fishing fleets. These sources of metaphor and image are realised in the garden's individual art works, such as the stone aircraft carrier bird-table and gate piers capped with brick hand grenades. The legacy of the past is invoked in the inscription on 11 massive stones on the edge of the garden: "The present order is the disorder of the future - Saint Just".
12. The garden continued to expand, with Finlay adding works up to the end of his life, by which time the garden had doubled in size. The unique achievement is to have created a garden which is itself a major artwork, encompassing within it both horticultural elements and such a wealth of individual works. It takes its place in the great tradition of poet-philosophers' gardens stretching from Epicurus to William Shenstone. Even before Finlay's death in 2006, the Little Sparta Trust had been established to preserve Little Sparta for the nation by raising enough to pay for ongoing maintenance.
13. Finlay's work can be austere, but it is also at times witty, or even darkly whimsical. He appeared to love a good argument and came into conflict with Strathclyde Regional Council over his liability for rates on a byre in his garden, which the council insisted was being used as commercial premises. Finlay insisted that it was a garden temple.
14. The genius of Ian Hamilton Finlay has been recognised nationally and internationally. He was nominated for the Turner Prize in 1985 and received honorary doctorates from Aberdeen, Heriot-Watt and Glasgow Universities. The French Communist Party presented him with a bust of Saint-Just in 1991. In 2002 he received the Scottish Horticultural Medal from the Royal Caledonian Horticultural Society and a CBE in the New Year's Honours List. In 2003 he was the recipient of a Scottish Arts Council Creative Scotland Award.
15. The works under consideration are two stone pieces and a set of 12 early prints. The stone pieces are amongst the last work from the estate of the artist. It is unlikely that there will ever be another opportunity to acquire works of such quality directly from the artist's estate.

16. Both of these stone pieces have clear and explicit relationships to Little Sparta, his interest in classical mythology and his passion for the sea and ships. They are self-contained but reflect some of the qualities and nature of the works in the garden setting.
17. Two Temples: To Apollo His Music-His Missiles-His Muses consists of two narrow slate drums. One is carved with the same wording as on the Garden Temple at Little Sparta, the title of the work, while the other is engraved with hieroglyphs representing the attributes of the god of gardens, culture, music and war.
18. Sails CN16 is a stone slab carved with the suggestion of a sailing fishing boat with the registration number on the sails; a witty representation in the weightiest of materials of a swift vessel. The series of twelve prints Blue & Brown Poems is a good early example of the intersection between Finlay's work as a concrete poet and his work as a visual artist and printmaker.
19. The works are being offered by the Ingleby Gallery in Edinburgh, where they were on show in a major exhibition of Finlay's work in June 2009. They were then reserved for consideration by the Watson Committee and the Ingleby Gallery has been generous in retaining these works for so long, as they could be sold immediately on the open market.
20. The City possesses thirteen prints by Finlay, some of which are thematically close to the works under consideration. There are a number of important public art works by Finlay in Edinburgh, including the memorial to Robert Louis Stevenson, A Man of Letters, in Princes Street Gardens and Pears and Nuts, a series of square cast bronze baskets containing fruit and nuts in Hunter Square. The City also possesses a number of photographs of Little Sparta by Martin Greenhalgh.
21. Should the panel approve the purchase of these works, additional external funding will be sought in the new financial year from a variety of sources including the Art Fund, the National Fund for Acquisitions, and the Friends of the City Art Centre and Museums.

Financial Implications


22. The total cost of the works is £69,500. The funds for the purchase of the painting will come from the Jean F Watson Bequest. Grant aid will be sought from the Art Fund, the National Fund for Acquisitions, and the Friends of the City Art Centre and Museums.

Environmental impact

23. There are no adverse environmental impacts arising from this report.

Recommendations

24. It is recommended that the Committee approves the purchase of these works by Ian Hamilton Finlay.



Jim Inch
Director of Corporate Services
25/02/10

Appendices	None
Contact/tel	Ian O’Riordan, Manager, City Art Centre, 529 3955 ian.oriordan@edinburgh.gov.uk
Wards affected	All
Single Outcome Agreement	Supports National Outcome 1 “We live in a Scotland that is the most attractive place for doing business in Europe”
Background Papers	The Jean F Watson Bequest files are held at the City Art Centre