Daniel Katz Gallery

ANTIQUITY TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Glyn Philpot (London 1884 - 1937)

Le Martiniquais (Julien Zaïre)

Circa: 1931

1931
oil on canvas
35 x 27.5 cm (13 ³/▮ x 10 ⁷/▮ inches)
Signed 'GP' lower left

This exquisite jewel-like painting by Glyn Philpot of Julien Zaire, also known as Tom Whiskey, is one of just three portraits the artist made of the sitter, all painted in Paris during the winter of 1931-32, at the moment his work was entering a strikingly modern phase. Together, the group presents Whiskey as the epitome of interwar sophistication. The present work distinguishes itself as the smallest and most intimate of the three, stripping away surrounding detail to focus on the sitter's quiet, self-possessed presence. The result is an encounter that feels direct, personal, and deeply memorable.

By the late 1920s, Philpot stood among the most successful portrait painters in Britain, sought after by fashionable patrons and institutions alike. His polished, psychologically perceptive portraits secured both critical acclaim and financial comfort, enabling him to maintain a well-appointed studio in Chelsea alongside his country retreat at Baynards Manor in Surrey. Yet even as commissions flourished, he had begun to feel the constraints of the society portrait conventions that had brought him such success.

This shift toward a more modern visual language did not occur abruptly. In 1930, while serving on the

jury of the Carnegie International Exhibition in Pittsburgh, Philpot encountered major works by leading contemporary artists including Picasso, Braque and de Chirico. Picasso's Portrait of Olga 1923, which was awarded first prize, offered a particularly compelling example of how traditional portraiture could be reimagined through a modern lens. The experience reinforced for Philpot that innovation need not come at the expense of discipline - an idea that would soon find expression in his own work.

The following year, his move to Paris marked a decisive turning point in both his artistic and personal life. Settling with Vivian Forbes in Montparnasse - then the centre of the European avant-garde - he immersed himself in a milieu associated with figures such as Picasso, Leger, Giacometti and Chagall. His new studio, designed by the Polish-Jewish architect Bruno Elkouken, represented a stark departure from the plush, antique-filled interiors of his English life. Writing to Father John Gray, Philpot remarked wryly on this transformation: "a most relentlessly modern building, and a little furniture mostly made of glass and aluminium - not exactly cosy.'

Paris also afforded freedoms unavailable in London. As a homosexual man within a society that imposed severe legal and social restrictions, Philpot encountered there a new sense of personal as well as artistic liberation. Writing to his sister Daisy in September 1931, shortly after a trip to Berlin, he described the intensity of this shift: "I feel the paint will explode on the canvas ... I love everything & everybody so intensely that I feel as if I am floating on air". This emotional urgency helps explain the bold experimentation that began to define his work of the early 1930s.

It was within this atmosphere of renewal that Philpot almost certainly encountered Julien Zaire. Although documentation remains limited, the subtitle Le Martiniquais indicates that Zaire came from Martinique. Archival records suggest he was born in Sainte-Luce in 1900 and later undertook military service. Robin Gibson has proposed that he may have worked as a nightclub waiter, though it seems equally plausible that he performed within the Parisian cabaret scene under the name 'Tom Whiskey." Figures of this kind were associated with venues such as the Bal Biomet - the celebrated "Bal Negre" - linked to performers including Josephine Baker. Zaire quickly became one of Philpot's most compelling sitters, allowing the artist to explore questions of identity, modernity and representation beyond the conventions of polite English portraiture.

In the present work, Philpot presents Zaire not as an exoticised figure but as an embodiment of refined modernity. Unlike the larger portraits, where the sitter is framed by gramophones, glass shelving and polished interiors, here the composition tightens. The frontal gaze, the cropped format, and the reduction of surrounding detail draw the viewer into a more immediate psychological exchange. Modernity remains present, but it is subdued - serving to frame, rather than compete with, the sitter's individuality.

The handling of paint reinforces this intimacy. The surface is smooth and controlled yet animated by subtle tonal shifts that model the face with remarkable sensitivity. Light moves gently across the brow and cheekbones, giving volume without theatricality. The palette is restrained but carefully orchestrated: the muted rose background, the soft cream of the scarf, and the deep blacks of hat and jacket combine to create a quiet harmony that allows the sitter's presence to dominate.

The background, though understated, retains a clear modern inflection. The pink wall sets off the dark silhouette of the hat, while the sharp, linear forms of glass or metal structures to the right introduce a

note of architectural precision. These elements likely echo Philpot's studio on Boulevard Raspail, situating the sitter within a distinctly contemporary interior. Yet they remain secondary - held in balance so that the psychological presence of the figure remains paramount.

This change of environment coincided with a marked shift in Philpot's artistic direction, one that was immediately recognised by critics. Reviewing his 1932 Leicester Galleries exhibition, P. G. Konody noted his ‘prodigious progress’ observing that Philpot had ‘definitely abandoned realistic representation... and now applies himself to the pictorial interpretation of metaphysical problems’. Another reviewer praised the work's lyrical quality: 'The colour sings, the line dances... an ancient world created anew.’

Such transformation carried risks. Philpot's departure from academic portraiture unsettled some of the patrons who had previously ensured his success, and commissions became less predictable. Nevertheless, the early 1930s proved one of the most fertile periods of his career. Within this context, the portrait of Tom Whiskey holds particular significance. While Philpot would go on to depict performers, circus figures and mythological subjects, here he offers something more restrained and, in many ways, more radical: a sustained and dignified engagement with a Black male sitter. Unlike his frequent collaborator Henry Thomas, who was often cast in allegorical roles, Zaire is presented simply as himself - composed, intelligent and assured.

This approach may in part reflect Philpot's own sense of marginality, working outside the conventions of British society and discovering new freedoms abroad. Without imposing narrative or stereotype, he allows the sitter's individuality to define the work. As Simon Martin has observed, "not as racist stereotype, but as beautiful, modern, and elevated on to the aesthetic ideal of the nude and portrait in Western culture”.

The effect is one of striking restraint. Modern surroundings are held in quiet equilibrium while Zaire's presence remains central. The painting's power lies not in spectacle, but in the calm authority with which the sitter occupies the picture-an assertion of identity rendered with dignity and clarity.

Philpot's sudden death in 1937 curtailed a career still in transformation. Works such as this stand as testament to the significance of his late development: portraits that move beyond likeness to capture the complexity and humanity of modern life, securing his place among the most perceptive portrait painters of twentieth-century Britain.

Provenance

Leicester Galleries

Private Collection, acquired from the above, and by descent to 2026

Literature:

A.C. Sewter (intro), Thomas Bodkin (foreword), Glyn Philpot (1884 -1937), illustrated b/w pl. 70

Simon Martin, Glyn Philpot: Flesh and Spirit, Pallant House Gallery, exhibition catalogue (work not exhibited), 2022, illustrated b/w fig.158 , mentioned p149.