PHILIP MOULD
& COMPANY

BLOOMSBURY STUD

The art of Stephen Tomlin

5th June – 11th August 2023

It is with great pleasure that we bring to you the first exhibition of the distinguished Bloomsbury sculptor, as well as “breaker of human hearts” Stephen ‘Tommy’ Tomlin. This quotation is from one of his esteemed subjects, Virginia Woolf, and goes to the heart of Tommy’s success. His artistic skills, disarming charm, intelligence and conviviality opened the doors to him becoming the effective ‘sculptor in residence’ to this rarified circle, and although his all too brief life ended at the age of thirty-five, his legacy endures. The majority of his significant portrait sculptures are included in this exhibition.

We would like to thank our lenders who have generously made this possible, and as always the support and collaboration of The Charleston Trust who continue to make great strides in telling the Bloomsbury story together with their allied activities. This exhibition takes its title from the excellent biography of Tommy written by Michael Bloch and Susan Fox who have been unstinting in their support, and whom we graciously acknowledge for having brought the sculptor back into public awareness. An updated reprint of the book, including illustrations from this exhibition, is now available. The exhibition has also been richly enhanced by the artwork of the esteemed painter and designer Luke Edward Hall, who has managed to channel, with his own inimitable touch, much of the Charleston and Bloomsbury aesthetic for which we are admiringly grateful. Finally I would like to thank the creative support and industry of our gallery staff – in particular Lawrence Hendra, Laura Edmundson, Ellie Smith, Diana Bularca, Holly Smith, Libby Henderson, and Catherine Mould.

Philip Mould

MICHAEL BLOCH

Stephen Tomlin: A Biographical Sketch

Stephen Tomlin had a touch of brilliance. He possessed a sharp intellect; he showed prowess as an actor, poet and musician; he was considered a fascinating conversationalist. Strikingly handsome in his twenties, and bisexual by nature, he was also (to quote his Times obituary) 'one of those figures of terrific charm with whom most people fall in love'. These qualities endeared him to the Bloomsbury Group: for a while he was one of their most cherished adherents. Yet his life was unfulfilled: psychological problems prevented him from making the most of his talents, and drove him to drink, drugs, and a sad and lonely death at the age of thirty-five. His main legacy consists of his output as an artist, sparse in quantity but of considerable beauty and originality. In his twenties he worked as a sculptor; in his thirties, as a designer of ceramics.

‘Tommy’ (as he was known to his intimates) was born in London on 2 March 1901, son of a Chancery barrister who became a senior judge and was raised to the peerage. He followed his father and older brothers to Harrow, where he was a popular boy (who excited the passions of not a few contemporaries) and won all the prizes, also achieving renown as an actor, singer and poet. But by the time he left the school at the end of 1918 he was in the throes of depression, no doubt partly due to the Great War: term after term, he witnessed boys he had known or loved leave for the front and either not return or do so mutilated in body or mind.

In January 1919, just seventeen, Tommy was admitted to New College, Oxford to read history: but he continued to feel restless and left the university after only two terms. During his brief Oxford residence he became obsessed by the Shelley Memorial, an enormous homoerotic nude statue of the drowned poet by the Victorian sculptor Henry Onslow Ford. A sonnet he dedicated to Roy Harrod, a fellow undergraduate (later a famous economist) who was infatuated with him, suggests that he was already leading a varied and promiscuous sex life. It is not clear how he spent the year

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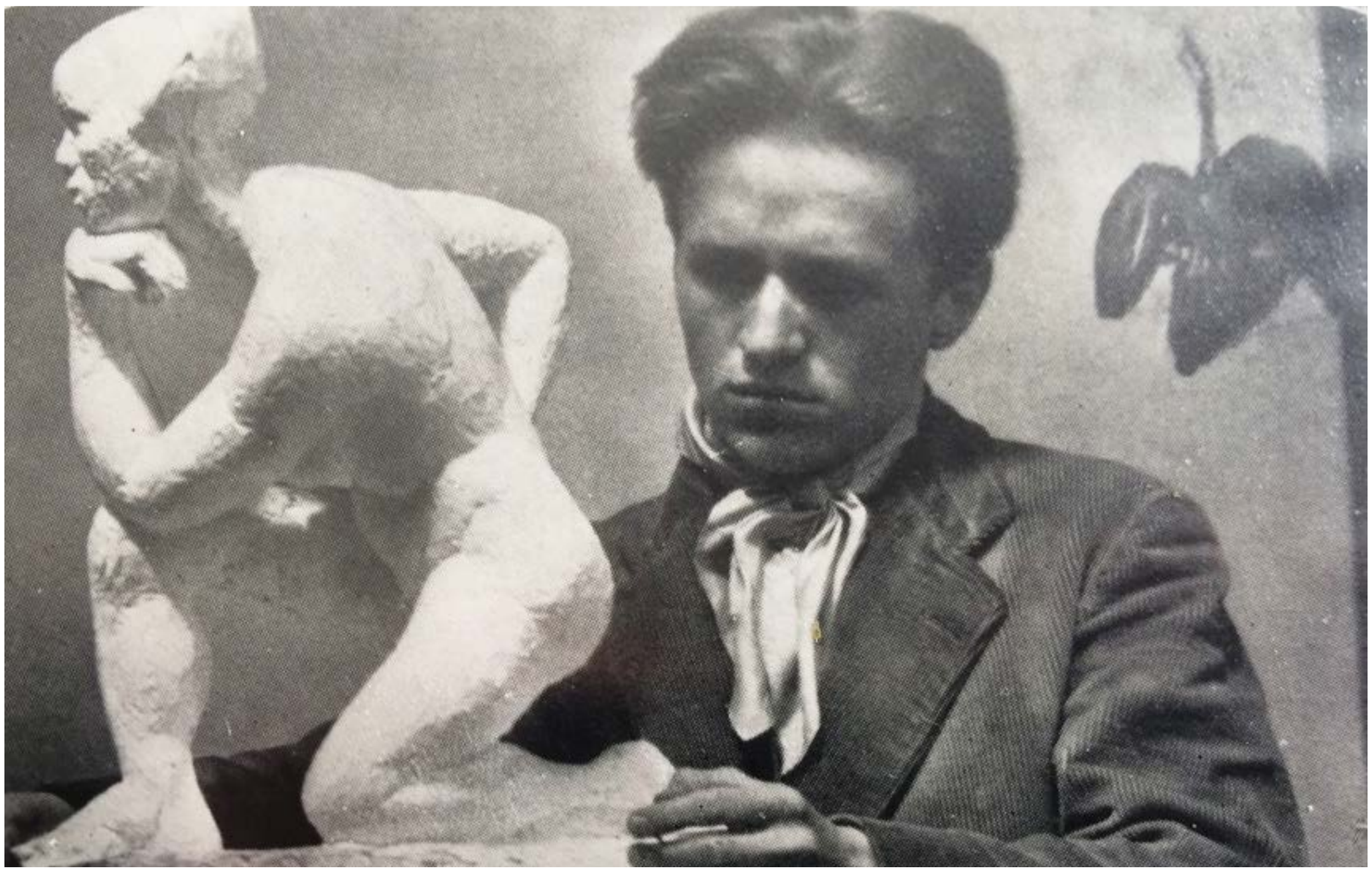

following his departure from Oxford, but he saw much of two mentors who would both later become successful novelists – the Old Etonian millionaire Leo Myers, and Sylvia Townsend Warner (whom he had known since Harrow where she was the daughter of the history master).

By the autumn of 1920 Tommy, possibly inspired by the Shelley Memorial, had decided to become a sculptor, and was apprenticed to Frank Dobson, a talented artist (and friend of Myers) whose work represented a transitional phase between traditional sculpture and modernism. They became friends and visited Paris together, where they found inspiration in museums and galleries and were introduced to opium and cocaine. (Dobson managed to kick the habit; Tommy did not.) After a year's training with Dobson, Tommy retreated for a further year to a remote village in Dorset, Chaldon Herring, where he formed a close platonic friendship with T. F. Powys, a reclusive novelist in his forties who had not yet attempted to publish his fiction. With the aid of Sylvia and others Tommy managed to bring Powys's work to the attention of publishers: it soon saw the light of print and, thanks to Tommy, the formerly obscure Powys became a well-known man of letters.

Meanwhile, on a visit to London in the summer of 1922, Tommy had met David 'Bunny' Garnett, a charismatic bisexual novelist eight years his senior who was closely involved with the Bloomsbury Group, having had an intense wartime friendship with Duncan Grant. Tommy and Bunny formed an instant attachment, which was certainly sexual for a time. Bunny visited Tommy at Chaldon; and when Tommy returned to London early in 1923, installing himself in a studio in Fulham, the first sculpture on which he worked (indeed, the first of his works known to have survived) was a portrait head of Bunny carved in Ham Hill stone. Tommy had already met Duncan Grant and Maynard Keynes; at Bunny's thirtieth birthday party in March 1923 he was introduced to other leading members of the Group – Lytton Strachey and Dora Carrington, Leonard and Virginia Woolf, Clive and Vanessa Bell.

Tommy was drawn to the 'Bloomsberries' by their love of intellectual discussion, their bohemian lifestyles, and their rejection of conventional values and of sentimentality in art. He in turn appealed to them with his charm, intellect and good looks. But before his friendship with them could blossom he was sidetracked by an all-consuming love affair with another person met at Bunny's party, the American heiress Henrietta Bingham: daughter of a newspaper tycoon who would later become United States Ambassador to London, she was undergoing psychoanalysis with Freud's English disciple Ernest Jones. Tommy spent several months in her constant company, and executed a bust of her: gazing downwards and slightly tilted to one side, it captures an elusive, coquettish, quizzical quality. As he wrote to her, this was the first time he had fallen seriously in love with another – in all his previous affairs the passion had mainly been in the other direction. He felt wretched when she sailed for America without him in August 1923 – and still more so when she returned to England

the following spring but showed no interest in resuming their relationship. He suffered another breakdown, from which he sought relief through psychoanalysis and immersion in his work: to this period belongs his widely admired bust of his sometime lover Duncan Grant.

The years 1925-7 saw the apogee of Tommy's association with 'Bloomsbury'. He became a favourite guest at three of their country houses – Hilton Hall near Cambridge, where Bunny moved after achieving success as a novelist; Charleston in Sussex, where Duncan lived with Vanessa Bell; and above all Ham Spray in the Wiltshire Downs, where the writer Lytton Strachey lived in a triangular relationship with the artist Dora Carrington and her husband Ralph Partridge. By the spring of 1926 both Lytton and Carrington had fallen in love with Tommy, who reciprocated their feelings; Carrington painted a portrait of him, while Tommy executed a statue for the Ham Spray grounds. Other friends from this period included the Russian mosaicist Boris Anrep, who used Tommy as the model for his tableau ART in the vestibule of the National Gallery (still there

today); and Eddy Sackville-West, a talented but neurotic youth who was heir to the Sackville peerage and often had Tommy to stay at Knole, his family's seat in Kent. Tommy sculpted a bust of Eddy, described by Lytton as 'full of finesse and charm'; while Eddy commissioned the surrealist artist John Banting to paint a striking bare-chested portrait of Tommy.

There was some discussion as to whether Tommy might move permanently to Ham Spray, replacing Ralph as the resident bisexual man. Instead, a relationship developed (encouraged by Carrington) between Tommy and Lytton's niece Julia Strachey, an attractive woman of Tommy's own age who shared something of his troubled psychology. It was a curious relationship in that Tommy continued to be rampantly promiscuous, while she did not enjoy sex. Nevertheless, her company brought him tranquillity, and during the first months of 1927 they lived happily together in Paris where Tommy studied art. They were both under pressure from their respectable families (on whom they depended financially) to marry, which they did in London in July 1927.

They began married life in a cottage at Swallowcliffe in Wiltshire, a picturesque village within reach of Ham Spray, where they lived from 1927 to 1930. Carrington and other friends who visited them there had the impression that they were leading an idyllic existence. Certainly Tommy did some of his best work at this period, including busts of Julia (1928) and Lytton (1929), which splendidly capture their subjects' personalities (her insouciance and his amused cynicism). But all was not well. From time to time Tommy would suffer severe depressions, during which he was unable to work and gave vent to violent rages. He was on the way to becoming a hopeless alcoholic and drug addict. And his erotomania was getting out of hand: in her memoirs Julia gives an extraordinary description of parties at which he set out to seduce all the guests.

In August 1931 Tommy achieved a longstanding ambition when he persuaded Virginia Woolf to sit for a bust. It was not an altogether satisfactory experience: Virginia had originally admired Tommy but had become exasperated by his troubled nature.

In 1930 they moved to London, living in a series of furnished flats, Tommy renting a studio for his work in Percy Street, Fitzrovia; but it was not a happy time. His alcoholic and sexual debauches continued; he found it hard to secure commissions owing to the economic crisis; and he became abusive towards his wife. Increasingly they lived apart, Julia visiting her aunt and uncle Dorothy and Simon Bussy (both artists) in the South of France, Tommy going off on walking tours with various friends. Still, when he chose to exercise it he retained all his charm, and several new acquaintances fell under his spell. In the spring of 1931 he picked up a pretty young working-class unemployed hotel porter at a cinema – Humble Williams, known as 'H.' – whom he took to live with him as servant and lover: H. would remain Tommy's devoted companion for the rest of his life and was liked and accepted by most of his circle, including Julia.

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had originally admired Tommy but had become exasperated by his troubled nature, and was herself feeling depressed. She disliked 'sitting' and after a few sessions refused to sit further, so the bust is essentially unfinished. Yet it is generally recognised as Tommy's masterpiece. As Virginia's nephew and biographer Quentin Bell (who as a boy adored Tommy's visits to Charleston) later wrote:

> *It is not flattering. It makes her look older and fiercer than she was. But it has a force, a life, a truth... Virginia gave him no time to spoil his brilliant first conception. Irritated, despondent, reckless, he pushed his clay into position and was forced to give, while there was still time, the essential structure to her face. Her blank eyes stare as in blind affronted dismay, but it is far more like than any of the photographs.*

Whatever the bust's merits, Tommy seems to have been discouraged by this experience, for he did little sculpture thereafter (though he worked intermittently for several more years on Pomona, a gigantic female statue for the garden of his friend Bryan Guinness at Biddesden in Hampshire, the maquette of which is included in the exhibition). Henceforth his main artistic endeavours were in the field of decorative ceramics. This arose through his friendship with the potter Phyllis Keyes, who had set up her kiln in Warren Street, round the corner from Percy Street where he had his studio. Drawing on classical sculpture and Mediterranean pottery, Tommy designed pieces which were then cast by Phyllis and decorated by Duncan or Vanessa. The two exquisite ceramic figures included in the exhibition, male and female, represent the (now rare) fruits of this collaboration.

Within a few weeks in late 1931 and early 1932 Tommy received a series of devastating blows. In December his elder brother

Garrow, to whom he was devoted, was killed in a flying accident. The following month Lytton, whom Tommy regarded as a father figure, died of stomach cancer at Ham Spray, aged fifty-one. It was feared that Carrington, who had often declared that she could not live without Lytton, would now take her own life. In the hope of averting this, Tommy stayed with her at Ham Spray, and seemed to calm her. But on 14 March 1932, while alone in the house, she shot herself. These events plunged Tommy into the blackest depression. In 1933 he gave artistic expression to his mood by writing a remarkable long poem, The Sluggard's Quadrille, published anonymously in the New Statesman: the literary editor, Bunny Garnett, wrote in his memoirs that he considered it 'one of the most tragic poems of despair in the English language.'

Tommy's last years were particularly sad. He drowned himself in alcohol, was incapable of much work, and did not even wish to see much of old friends. His handsome looks went and he became overweight and haggard. In 1934 Julia, having suffered much physical and mental abuse, finally left him.

H. remained a faithful companion, but even he often found Tommy's ways intolerable. One friend Tommy continued to see was the artist Augustus John, another alcoholic, who invited Tommy to spend Christmas 1936 at Fryern Court, his house in the New Forest. While staying there, Tommy had a tooth extracted; subsequently he fell ill, possibly as a result of a fragment of infected tooth falling into a lung, and went into a nursing home at Boscombe near Bournemouth, where he died on 5 January 1937. The general verdict on his death was that 'heavy drinking had weakened his resistance'. The final contents of his studio included the original busts of Henrietta, Julia and Lytton, probably the people who had meant most to him (though he had turned Julia away when she attempted to visit him on his deathbed).

The tragedy of his unfulfilled life and untimely end should not blind us to his achievement as an artist, or to the fact that, for most of his adulthood, he made an indelible and generally inspiring impression on all he met.

Lytton Strachey

1929
Plaster
18 3/4 in. (47.5 cm) high

‘The general impression is so superb, that I am beginning to be afraid that I shall find it rather difficult to live up to.’

– Lytton Strachey, 1929

This is the artist’s surviving plaster, painted to simulate bronze, from which three recorded casts were produced between 1929 and 1930. Modelled over two weeks at Strachey’s country home, Ham Spray, it is today considered one of the most venerated portraits of the eminent writer at the heart of the Bloomsbury group. Lytton and Tomlin adored each other, they remained lifelong friends and were briefly lovers. The evident naturalism and affecting expressiveness of this portrait represent Tomlin at the height of his powers, placing him on par with ground-breaking international portrait sculptors, including Auguste Rodin (1840-1917).

Further Details

Male Figure and Female Figure

Phyllis Keyes, Stephen Tomlin and Duncan Grant

Mid 1930s
Ceramic
13 in. (33 cm) high

Collaboration is a common phenomenon in Bloomsbury artistic practice, and these exceptionally beguiling ceramics show Tomlin working with two other artists. Designed by Tomlin, turned into ceramic by Phyllis Keyes and colourfully enriched by Duncan Grant, these unconventional classical figures - quite likely depicting ancient deities - are a highly successful amalgam of talents. Towards the end of his career, Tomlin worked exclusively as a ceramicist; he partnered with Keyes in the 1930s and these two reclining nudes are amongst their most ambitious productions.

Further Details

Henrietta Bingham

1923
Plaster (painted)
10 3/8 in. (26.5 cm) high

Tomlin's strikingly modernist sculpture of jazz age journalist, and wealthy American socialite, Henrietta Bingham was sculpted at the height of the couple's fervid, but doomed relationship. It captures her attentively crooking her head, a quirk she employed when conversing with people in whom she was most interested. Bingham's angular brow bone, pencil-thin eyebrows and stylised eyes exemplify 1920s fashion, and acknowledge Paris school modernism pioneered by the likes of Henri Matisse and Constantin Brâncusi.

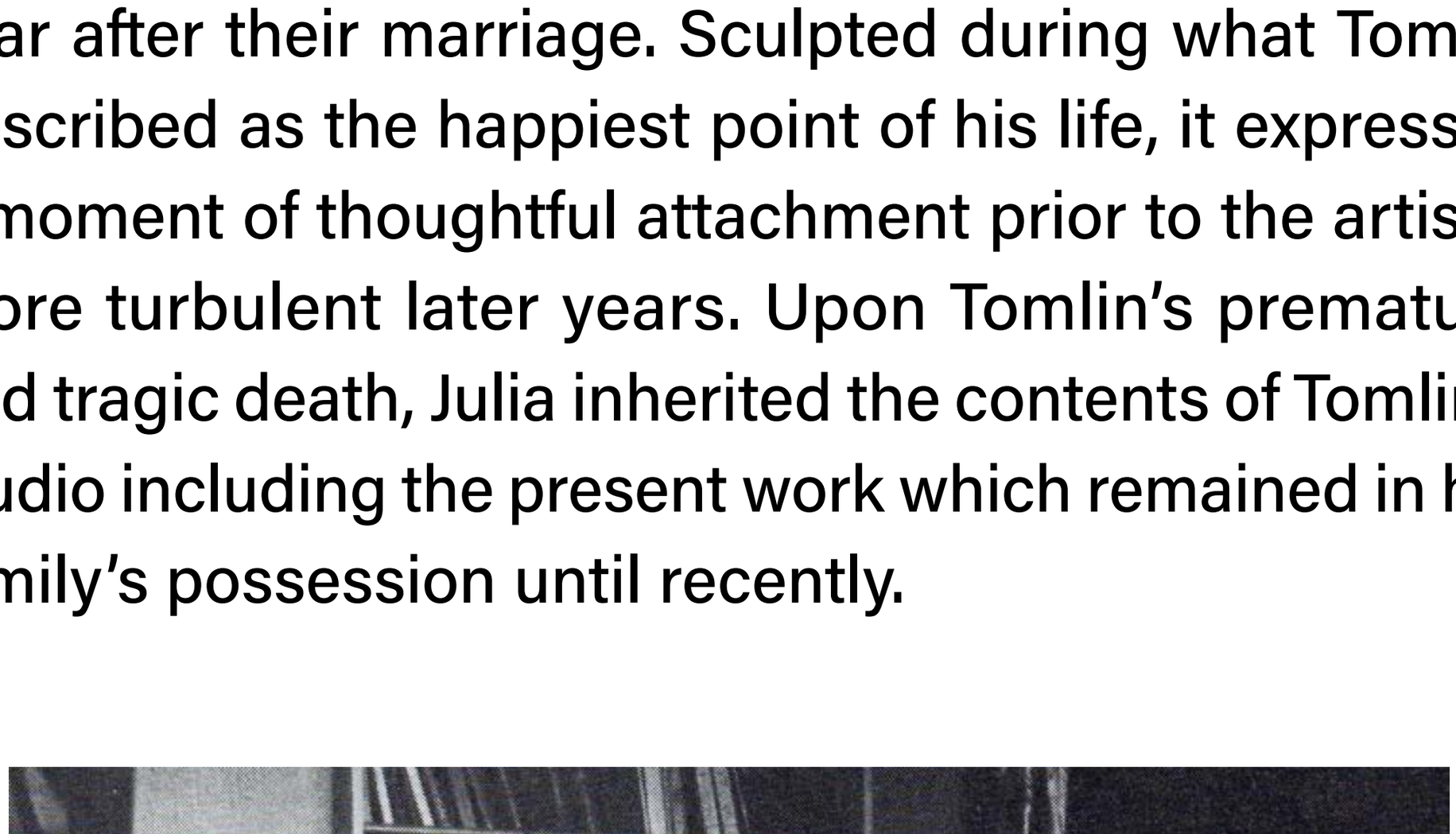
Julia Strachey

1928
Ceramic (unglazed)
16 7/8 in. (43 cm) high

‘I seem to be in love with you, damn you.’

– Stephen Tomlin to Julia Strachey

This portrait of the artist’s wife, the niece of Lytton Strachey and an author herself, was completed the year after their marriage. Sculpted during what Tomlin described as the happiest point of his life, it expresses a moment of thoughtful attachment prior to the artist’s more turbulent later years. Upon Tomlin’s premature and tragic death, Julia inherited the contents of Tomlin’s studio including the present work which remained in her family’s possession until recently.



Reclining Female Nude

Mid-1920s
Bronze
9 7/8 in. (25 cm) high

Many of Tomlin's sculptures such as this exude a timeless quality. Stylistically he was indebted to his teacher, Frank Dobson (1886-1963): both sculptors mark the beginning of a significant moment of stylistic transition culminating in the abstract sculptures of Henry Moore (1898-1986), Barbara Hepworth (1903-1975) and others over the following decades. The surface of this nude deliberately expresses the marks of the individual clay pellets with which it was modelled - also evident in his busts of Duncan Grant and Joan Trower, produced in 1924 and 1925, included in this exhibition.

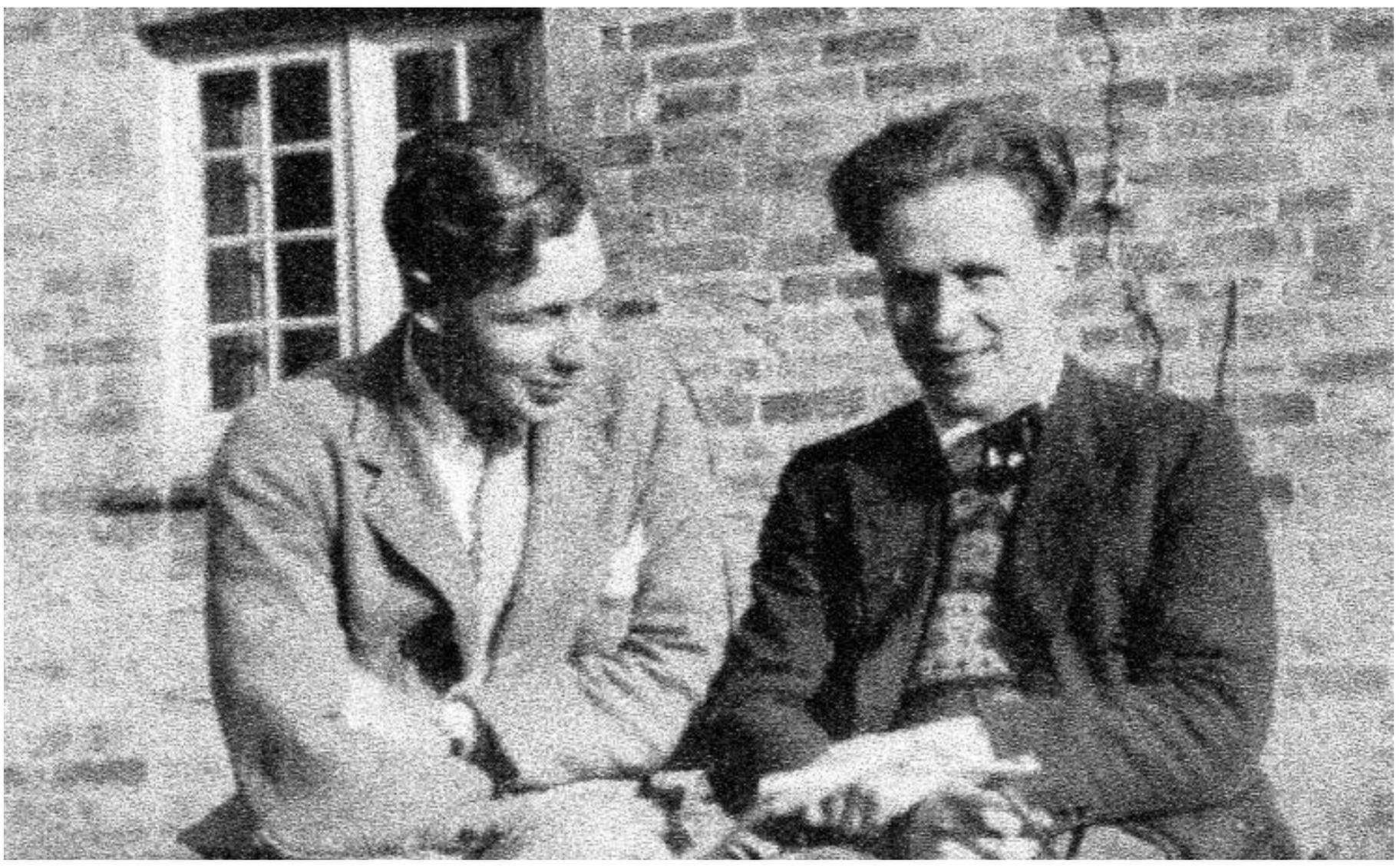
Further Details

David Garnett

1923
Ham Hill Stone
22 in. (56 cm) high

The Charleston Trust

David Garnett, known as 'Bunny', was the first member of the Bloomsbury group to meet Tomlin. He was instantly intoxicated by his charm, and later introduced him to the rest of the circle. Carved directly in stone, with pared-down clarity evocative of archaic Polynesian sculpted heads, the sittings took place almost daily throughout the first few months of 1923. The frequency of the sittings was almost certainly accelerated by their amorous affair, and both men talked freely about their homosexuality, which was illegal at the time. They forged a lifelong bond.



Virginia Woolf

1931 (cast in 1990 by The Charleston Trust)
Bronze
15 3/4 in. (40 cm) high

The Charleston Trust

In 1924 Woolf wrote in her diary: ‘there is a little thrush-like creature called Tomlin who wants to sculpt me.’ It took six years for Tomlin to convince the increasingly eminent novelist to sit for him. She was an acerbic critic of Tommy and a troublesome subject. She hated being ‘peered at’ and abhorred the process, writing in her diary: ‘I waste afternoon after afternoon perching in his rat-ridden and draught-riddled studio: can’t escape.’ She refused to attend the final sittings. Despite this, the bust is now viewed as arguably the most recognisable and expressive representation of Woolf.

Duncan Grant

1924
Bronze
14 3/4 in. (37.5 cm) high

The Charleston Trust
(supported by the Henry Moore Foundation)

In 1924 John Maynard Keynes and David Garnett persuaded the celebrated artist Duncan Grant to sit for this portrait bust – 'what they call being immortalised in bronze', Grant wrote to a friend. It was cast in bronze the following year; one cast was bought by Keynes and is now in the National Portrait Gallery, and the other, the present work, was acquired by Garnett. It is the only known sculpted likeness of Grant to have been taken in his lifetime.

Edward Sackville-West

1925
Lead
14 1/2 in. (36.8 cm) high

Private collection

Described by Lytton Strachey as ‘full of finesse and charm’, this portrait bust depicts the writer and critic, Eddy Sackville-West in his early twenties. Tomlin deftly captures his refined features and elegant charm. Sackville-West was not shy in making his affection for Tomlin well-known; in 1925, Vanessa Bell wrote to her sister: ‘...Did you know that Eddie S.W is desperately in love with Tommy like everyone else...’ He also commissioned the oil portrait by John Banting of Tomlin included in this exhibition.

Joan Trower (née Tomlin)

1925
Bronze
13 1/2 in. (34.3 cm) high

Private collection

This portrait of the artist's sister depicts the sitter gazing downward in a calm, contemplative manner. Joan was the eldest of the five Tomlin siblings and worked as a nurse in the Voluntary Aid Detachment Unit during the First World War. Tomlin rendered his sister with subtly angular features, following a restrained modernist style in line with the more traditional tastes of the commissioner - in this case his father. Tomlin, however, infuriated his father when he spent the entirety of his payment on the marble base on which the bust currently sits.

The Right Hon. Lord Tomlin

1931
Bronze
13 1/2 in. (34.3 cm) high

Private collection

In this formal portrait, Tomlin embodies the essence of traditional establishment in the depiction of his father in the uniform of the Privy Council. A very different character to Tomlin, as well as his usual sitters, he was a distinguished King's Counsel and high court judge and was appointed a Law Lord in 1919 as Baron Tomlin of Ash in the County of Kent. His collar is rendered in elaborate detail to impart his status. This bust is one of Tomlin's last works as a sculptor before he paved a new path as a ceramicist.

Portrait of Stephen Tomlin

John Banting (1902-1972)

1925
Oil on canvas
35 3/8 x 27 1/2 in. (90 x 70 cm)

The Radev Collection

This portrait of Tomlin by the surrealist John Banting was commissioned by the critic and author Eddy Sackville-West. Commissioner, artist and subject were of the same age and shared similar interests and the individual relationships between all three men were almost certainly amorous. Banting, an early British surrealist, had studied in Paris while working as a life model. In 1925 he took a studio near artists Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell on Fitzroy Street, which is where this work was painted. Sackville-West cherished it, and it remained in his collection until his death.

Pomona (maquette)

1931-6
Plaster (painted)
24 in. (61 cm) high

Private collection

This maquette was sculpted in preparation for a monumental commission from the talented society couple Diana Mitford and her husband, Bryan Guinness, for the garden of their country home, Biddesden House, in Wiltshire. In 1931, they asked Tomlin to create an eight feet statue of 'Pomona', the goddess of abundance, to form the focal point of their formal garden. Four versions of this maquette are known to exist in various mediums including terracotta and ceramic.

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