Early Results from GLASS-JWST. IX. First Spectroscopic Confirmation of Low-mass Quiescent Galaxies at $z > 2$ with NIRISS

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Abstract

How passive galaxies form, and the physical mechanisms which prevent star formation over long timescales, are some of the most outstanding questions in understanding galaxy evolution. The properties of quiescent galaxies over cosmic time provide crucial information to identify the quenching mechanisms. Passive galaxies have been confirmed and studied out to $z \sim 4$, but all of these studies have been limited to massive systems (mostly with log($M_{\text{star}}/M_\odot$) > 10.8). Using JWST-NIRISS grism slitless spectroscopic data from the GLASS-JWST Early Release Science program, we present spectroscopic confirmation of two quiescent galaxies at $z_{\text{spec}} = 2.650^{+0.004}_{-0.006}$ and $z_{\text{spec}} = 2.433^{+0.032}_{-0.016}$ (3σ errors) with stellar masses of log($M_{\text{star}}/M_\odot$) = 10.59$^{+0.11}_{-0.05}$ and log($M_{\text{star}}/M_\odot$) = 10.07$^{+0.03}_{-0.01}$ (corrected for magnification factors of $\mu = 2.0$ and $\mu = 2.1$, respectively). The latter represents the first spectroscopic confirmation of the existence of low-mass quiescent galaxies at cosmic noon, showcasing the power of JWST to identify and characterize this enigmatic population.

Unified Astronomy Thesaurus concepts: Galaxies (573); High-redshift galaxies (734); Quenched galaxies (2016)

1. Introduction

Two of the most outstanding questions in understanding galaxy evolution are how quiescent galaxies form and what mechanisms are responsible for the halting of the star formation activity. Several physical processes and theoretical explanations have been suggested to first stop star formation in a galaxy and then maintain it as quiescent over its lifetime (see Man & Belli 2018 for a brief review of quenching mechanisms). The properties of quiescent galaxies as a function of cosmic time (e.g., stellar mass function and number density, star formation history, stellar age, metallicity, [$\alpha$/Fe] abundance, size and morphology, kinematics, and environment) provide crucial information to identify the quenching mechanisms and their relative importance at different times in the cosmic history.

Over the last decade, incredibly dedicated effort and investment on ground-based 8–10 m telescopes and the Hubble Space Telescope (HST) have repeatedly pushed the spectroscopic confirmation of the existence of quiescent galaxies to $z \sim 4$, when the universe was only 1.5 Gyr old, progressively challenging theoretical models of galaxy formation and evolution (Gobat et al. 2012; Marsan et al. 2015; Glazebrook et al. 2017; Kado-Fong et al. 2017; Forrest et al. 2020a). Multiobject deep near-IR (NIR) (i.e., rest-frame optical) spectroscopy of $2 < z < 4$ quiescent galaxies has allowed for the measurements of their stellar populations and star formation histories (Schreiber et al. 2018; Belli et al. 2019; D’Eugenio et al. 2020, 2021; Estrada-Carpenter et al. 2020; Forrest et al. 2020a, 2020b; Saracco et al. 2020; Valentino et al. 2020), kinematics, sizes, and morphologies (van de Sande et al. 2013; Belli et al. 2017; Hill et al. 2016; Newman et al. 2018; Tanaka et al. 2019; Estrada-Carpenter et al. 2020; Saracco et al. 2020; Esdaile et al. 2021; Stockmann et al. 2021; Forrest et al. 2022), metallicity (Morishita et al. 2019; Saracco et al. 2020), [$\alpha$/Fe] abundances (Kriek et al. 2016), and environment (McConachie et al. 2022).
However, all of these studies have been limited to the most massive quiescent galaxies (mostly $\log(M_{\text{star}}/M_\odot) > 11$, with only a small fraction with $10.5 < \log(M_{\text{star}}/M_\odot) < 11$). No low-mass (i.e., $\log(M_{\text{star}}/M_\odot) < 10.5$, hereafter corresponding to around a third of the characteristic stellar mass of the galaxy stellar mass function; e.g., Muzzin et al. 2013) quiescent galaxy at $z > 2$ has been spectroscopically confirmed yet, preventing the exploration of quenching mechanisms to the low-stellar-mass regime at cosmic noon. For example, while some form of feedback generally attributed to active galactic nuclei (AGNs) is supposed for the quenching of galaxies at the massive end, it is unclear whether AGN feedback can also operate in low-mass galaxies. Furthermore, halo quenching is not expected to operate in dark matter halos below $10^{12} M_\odot$ at $z \approx 2$ (Dekel & Birnboim 2008), corresponding to roughly $M_{\text{star}} \approx 10^{10.5} M_\odot$ (Behroozi et al. 2013). Indeed, multiwavelength photometric surveys have been able to push photometric measurements of the stellar mass function of quiescent galaxies down to $\log(M_{\text{star}}/M_\odot) \sim 9.5–10$ at $z \approx 2–3$, finding a sharp decline in the number density of quiescent galaxies with $\log(M_{\text{star}}/M_\odot) \lesssim 10.5$ (e.g., Tomczak et al. 2014), although spectroscopic redshift measurements are needed to confirm these findings.

The advent of the JWST, with its amazing set of instruments, finally enables us to definitively identify low-mass quiescent galaxies at $z > 2$ and to spectroscopically characterize their properties for the first time.

In this Letter, we present spectroscopic confirmation of two quiescent galaxies at $z > 2$, including the first spectroscopic confirmation of a low-mass quiescent galaxy at $z > 2$, using JWST-NIRISS grism slitless spectroscopic data obtained from the GLASS-JWST Early Release Science (ERS-1324; PI: Treu) program. GLASS-JWST is obtaining NIRISS (Doyon et al. 2012; Willott et al. 2022) and NIRSpec (Jakobsen et al. 2022) spectroscopy in the center of the A2744 cluster field, while obtaining NIRCAM (Rieke et al. 2005) images of two parallel fields. GLASS-JWST consists of the deepest extragalactic data among the ERS programs. Details can be found in the survey paper (Treu et al. 2022).

This Letter is organized as follows. In Section 2 we introduce the selection of the low-mass quiescent galaxy candidates from multiwavelength photometric catalogs in the A2744 cluster field. In Section 3 we present the JWST-NIRISS grism spectra of the low-mass quiescent galaxies, their spectroscopic redshifts, robust stellar masses obtained from the modeling of the photometry, and gravitational lensing magnification corrections. We conclude in Section 4. Magnitudes are given in the AB system and a standard cosmology with $\Omega_m = 0.3$, $\Omega_{\Lambda} = 0.7$, and $h = 0.7$ is assumed when necessary, along with a Chabrier (2003) initial mass function.

2. Sample of Low-mass Quiescent Galaxies

Candidate low-mass quiescent galaxies were selected from the HFF-DeepSpace catalogs in the Abell 2744 cluster field (hereafter, A2744-clu) pointing constructed by Shipley et al. (2018) and cross-validated using the HFF-ASTRODEEP catalogs (Castellano et al. 2016; Merlin et al. 2016).

The NIR-selected HFF-DeepSpace A2744-clu photometric catalog covers an area of $\sim 5.4$ arcmin$^2$ with complete coverage in 14 bands from the HST-UVIS F275W to the Spitzer-IRAC 8 µm down to a 75% detection completeness of $\sim 28.2$ mag in the F160W band. EAZY (Brammer et al. 2008) was used to derive photometric redshifts ($z_{\text{phot}}$) and rest-frame colors. Fitting and Assessment of Synthetic Templates (FAST; Kriek et al. 2009) was used to derive stellar population properties adopting Bruzual & Charlot (2003) stellar population synthesis models, a delayed exponentially declining star formation history (SFH), solar metallicity, and a Calzetti et al. (2000) dust attenuation law with $0 < A_{V}[\text{mag}] < 6$. See Shipley et al. (2018) for a detailed description of the HFF-DeepSpace catalogs and high-level science data.

First, we selected all galaxies with $n_{F160W} < 26.5$, photometric redshift $z_{\text{phot}} > 2$, stellar mass $M_{\text{star}} > 10^{10} M_\odot$, and specific star formation rate (sSFR) $\log(sSFR[\text{yr}^{-1}]) < -9.7$, and use$_{\text{phot}} = 1$. We then visually inspected postage stamps of the HST images, detection image, and segmentation map of all resulting objects using the HFFExplorer to remove any spurious or problematic objects (e.g., galaxies contaminated by stellar diffraction spikes, objects detected too close to subtracted bright cluster galaxies, very broad/unconstrained photometric redshift probability functions, blended objects, and potentially merging systems). This resulted in 25 galaxies, shown in the sSFR–$M_{\text{star}}$ diagram (Figure 1, top panel) and in the rest-frame $U − V$ versus $V − J$ diagram (Figure 1, bottom panel; hereafter, $UVJ$ diagram).

Candidate quiescent galaxies were finally selected based on their positions within (or close to the boundary of) the quiescent wedge in the $UVJ$ diagram and from visual inspection of their spectral energy distributions (SEDs), looking for strong rest-frame optical Balmer/4000 Å breaks. A few additional objects with poorly sampled SEDs around the rest-frame optical breaks were removed from the initial sample. This resulted in the identification of eight low-mass quiescent galaxies, shown as filled colored circles in Figure 1. Their SEDs are shown in Figure 2, while Table 1 lists their photometrically derived properties.

Several works (e.g., Marsan et al. 2015; Merlin et al. 2018, 2019; Schreiber et al. 2018; Carnall et al. 2020) have shown that the standard selection of quiescent galaxies in the $UVJ$ diagram (in particular, the $U − V > 1.3$ criterion) is potentially biased against unobscured recently quenched (i.e., younger than a few hundred million years) post-starburst galaxies, which still have significant emission in the UV due to massive bright stars not yet being evolved off the main sequence (see, e.g., ID = 5715 in Figure 2). Here we apply a conservative approach, selecting unambiguous evolved quiescent galaxies, and we postpone a systematic and complete search for quiescent distant galaxies to future studies.

3. Analysis and Results

The GLASS-ERS program, executed on 2022 June 28–29, performed wide-field slitless spectroscopy at 1.0–2.2 µm with NIRISS with a single pointing roughly centered on the core of A2744-clu. The reduction of the NIRISS data, along with the extraction of the spectra and modeling of the contamination, performed with the Grizli analysis software (Brammer & Matharu 2021), is presented in another companion paper (Roberts-Borsani et al. 2022, hereafter Paper I).
Of the eight candidates listed in Table 1, three (IDs = 1412, 2500, and 4111) are outside of the NIRISS pointing, whereas three others (IDs = 6555, 1103, and 5715) have a significant level of contamination from bright nearby sources which cannot be optimally corrected for with the current preliminary calibration files (see Paper I for details). The Grizli extracted one-dimensional NIRISS spectra of the remaining two candidates are shown in Figure 3, along with their false-color images constructed from both HST-WFC3/NIR bands and JWST-NIRISS bands separately. Although ID = 4877 is the most massive quiescent candidate of the sample, with log($M_{\text{star}}^{\text{corr}} / M_\odot$) = 10.67, it is comparable to the lowest mass quiescent galaxy spectroscopically confirmed at $z > 2$ to date (Estrada-Carpenter et al. 2020). On the other hand, ID = 5607, with log($M_{\text{star}}^{\text{corr}} / M_\odot$) = 9.92, pushes the limit well below previous works, since it has a stellar mass estimate before lensing magnification correction $< 10^{10.5} M_\odot$.

Figure 3 shows the best-fit Grizli model (red curve) which places them, respectively, at redshifts of $z_{\text{spec}} = 2.650^{+0.004}_{-0.006}$ and $z_{\text{spec}} = 2.433^{+0.032}_{-0.016}$ (3σ errors). The NIRISS spectra show strong Balmer/4000 Å breaks, as well as other blended stellar continuum absorption features (the locations of Ca II HK, Hδ, Hγ, Hβ, Mg b, and Na D are highlighted in Figure 3). Furthermore, the NIRISS spectra do not show evidence of emission lines, confirming the quiescent nature of the candidates. For ID = 4877, emission-line forced photometry returns $f_{\text{O I}}/\mu = 0.2(\pm 1.5) \times 10^{-18}$ erg s$^{-1}$ cm$^{-2}$, $f_{\text{H} \beta} = 1.4(\pm 2.1) \times 10^{-18}$ erg s$^{-1}$ cm$^{-2}$, and $f_{\text{O III}} = 4.6(\pm 2.5) \times 10^{-18}$ erg s$^{-1}$ cm$^{-2}$, whereas for ID = 5607 we measure $f_{\text{O I}}/\mu = -4.7(\pm 1.2) \times 10^{-18}$ erg s$^{-1}$ cm$^{-2}$, $f_{\text{H} \beta} = -0.2(\pm 2.3) \times 10^{-18}$ erg s$^{-1}$ cm$^{-2}$, whereas both [O II] and Hβ are right at the longer-wavelength end of the F115W and F150W spectra, respectively, whereas [O III] falls in the gap between F150W and F200W.

We used FAST to model the HFF-DeepSpace photometry combined with the NIRISS F115W, F150W, and F200W spectra, fixing the redshift at the spectroscopic redshift. Compared to the SED-modeling assumptions presented in Section 2, we allowed for a range of stellar metallicities from subsolar ($Z = 0.004$) to supersolar ($Z = 0.05$). Figure 3 shows in blue the best-fit FAST model.

The best-fit stellar masses (not corrected for lensing magnification factor $\mu$) at the spectroscopic redshifts are log($\mu \times M_{\text{star}} / M_\odot$) = 10.89$^{+0.10}_{-0.04}(0.05)$ and 10.38$^{+0.05}_{-0.03}(0.03)$ (1σ uncertainties) for ID = 4877 and ID = 5607, respectively, in good agreement within the errors with those previously determined adopting the photometric redshifts. The SED modeling confirms the quiescent nature of these two candidates, with $\sim 3\sigma$ upper limits on the star formation rates of SFR $< 0.1$–$0.2 M_\odot$ yr$^{-1}$, and on the sSFR of log(sSFR[yr$^{-1}$]) $< -12$ and $<-11.1$, for ID = 4877 and ID = 5607, respectively, compared to log(sSFR[yr$^{-1}$]) $> -8.8$ for typical main-sequence star-forming galaxies at $2.0 < z < 2.5$ with similar stellar masses (Whitaker et al. 2014).

Using revised lensing magnification maps from Bergamini et al. (2022) and adopting the spectroscopic redshifts, we find $\mu_{\text{spec}} = 2.02 \pm 0.04$ and $\mu_{\text{spec}} = 2.09 \pm 0.05$ for ID = 4877 and ID = 5607, respectively. We note that this does not include systematic uncertainty arising from lens-modeling assumptions, although we expect this uncertainty to be modest given the magnification factors. The gravitational lensing magnification corrected stellar masses are therefore found to be log($M_{\text{star}}^{\text{corr}} / M_\odot$) = 10.99$^{+0.11}_{-0.04}(0.05)$ and 10.45$^{+0.05}_{-0.03}(0.03)$ (1σ uncertainties) for ID = 4877 and log($M_{\text{star}}^{\text{corr}} / M_\odot$) = 10.07$^{+0.06}_{-0.03}$ for ID = 5607. With a stellar mass of $\approx 10^{10} M_\odot$, HFF-DS 5607 is the lowest mass quiescent galaxy to be spectroscopically confirmed at $z > 2$ to date.

The addition of the NIRISS spectra to the photometry in the SED modeling results in significantly better constrained stellar population properties, as shown in Figure 4. In particular, moderate dust extinction $A_V \sim 0.5$ mag is found to be present in both galaxies. The stellar age is robustly constrained for both sources to be in the range $\sim 0.8$–$1.3$ Gyr (3σ) while the timescale $\tau$ of the SFH is found to be quite short, with a $3\sigma$
upper limit of 100 Myr for both sources, indicative of a rapid formation for both low-mass quiescent galaxies. We note that the detailed fits and derived stellar population properties are model dependent, and we expect these to improve with more sophisticated modeling (e.g., adopting nonparametric SFHs) and improved calibration of the NIRISS data.

4. Summary and Conclusions

This Letter presents a first look at low-mass quiescent galaxies in the JWST-NIRISS data from the GLASS-ERS survey in the A2744 cluster. The power of JWST for spectroscopic studies of low-mass quiescent galaxies at cosmic noon (i.e., $z > 2$) is demonstrated by spectroscopic confirmation of the quiescent nature of two $z \sim 2.5$ galaxies, which were identified through SED modeling as passive candidates in the HFF-DeepSpace photometric catalogs. Our results are summarized as follows:

1. We measure the spectroscopic redshifts of two low-mass quiescent galaxies via their Balmer/4000 Å breaks and stellar absorption features from NIRISS spectra ($z = 2.650^{+0.004}_{-0.006}$ for HFF-DS 4877 and $z = 2.433^{+0.032}_{-0.016}$ for HFF-DS 5607; 3σ errors).
Figure 3. Top: NIRISS F115W+F150W+F200W spectrum of HFF-DS 4877 (gray symbols) with Grizli best-fit model (red solid curve) and FAST best-fit model (blue solid curve) overplotted. The positions of major spectral features (e.g., \([\text{O}\ II]\), \(\text{Ca\ II}\) HK, H\(_\alpha\), H\(_\beta\), H\(_\gamma\), H\(_\delta\), \([\text{O}\ III]\), Mgb, and NaD) are highlighted at the best-fit Grizli redshift. The gravitational lensing magnification factor and stellar mass, corrected for lensing magnification, derived assuming the spectroscopic redshift are listed. The top-left inset shows the Grizli redshift probability function \(p(z)\) in orange, with listed the best-fit Grizli spectroscopic redshift and upper and lower 3σ values. The bottom-right insets show false-color images (2″ × 2″) from HST-WFC3/NIR bands (left) and JWST-NIRISS bands (right). Bottom: same as the top panel, but for HFF-DS 5607. With a gravitational lensing corrected stellar mass below 10^{10} M_\odot, HFF-DS 5607 is the first low-mass quiescent galaxy spectroscopically confirmed at \(z > 2\).

Table 1
Sample of Selected Candidates of Low-mass Quiescent Galaxies at \(z > 2\) and their Properties (from Shipley et al. 2018)

| ID (HFF-DS) | R.A. (deg) | Decl. (deg) | \(H_{\text{60}}\) (AB) | \(z_{\text{phot}}\) | \(\log(\mu \times M_{\text{star}})\) \((M_\odot)\) | \(\log(sSFR)\) \((\text{yr}^{-1})\) | \(\mu\) | \(\log(M_{\text{star}}^{\text{corr}})\) \((M_\odot)\) |
|-------------|------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|--------------------------|----------------|--------|----------------|
| 4877\(^a\)  | 3.605219   | −30.39540   | 23.15         | 2.54 ± 0.06 | 10.97                   | −11.20         | 2.0^{+0.1}_{-0.1} | 10.67  |
| 1412         | 3.575337   | −30.41321   | 22.77         | 2.52 ± 0.03 | 10.83                   | −11.11         | 2.1^{+0.1}_{-0.1} | 10.52  |
| 6555         | 3.582519   | −30.38545   | 24.23         | 3.02 ± 0.09 | 10.83                   | −12.00         | 4.9^{+0.1}_{-0.1} | 10.23  |
| 4111         | 3.568355   | −30.39953   | 23.43         | 2.36 ± 0.05 | 10.42                   | −10.46         | 2.3^{+0.1}_{-0.1} | 10.06  |
| 1103         | 3.585363   | −30.41533   | 22.98         | 2.31 ± 0.19 | 10.50                   | −11.18         | 2.8^{+0.1}_{-0.1} | 10.06  |
| 5607\(^a\)  | 3.601594   | −30.39150   | 23.70         | 2.46 ± 0.04 | 10.24                   | −11.11         | 2.1^{+0.1}_{-0.1} | 9.92   |
| 2500         | 3.572230   | −30.40686   | 24.81         | 2.71 ± 0.12 | 10.06                   | −11.20         | 2.2^{+0.1}_{-0.1} | 9.73   |
| 5715         | 3.586502   | −30.39048   | 25.16         | 3.55 ± 0.26 | 10.35                   | −9.83          | 9.1^{+0.1}_{-0.1} | 9.39   |

Notes. Derived adopting the listed photometric redshifts \(z_{\text{phot}}\) (with 1σ uncertainties). \(\log(M_{\text{star}}^{\text{corr}})\) lists the stellar mass after correcting for the listed gravitational lensing magnification factors \(\mu\) from Bergamini et al. (2022); the quoted uncertainties on \(\mu\) are 1σ statistical errors.

\(^a\) The two galaxies with NIRISS spectroscopy presented in this Letter.
2. The quiescent nature of the two galaxies is further confirmed by SED modeling of the combined photometry and NIRISS spectra, resulting in SFR < 0.2 $M_\odot$ yr$^{-1}$ and log(sSFR[yr$^{-1}$]) < −11, i.e., star formation activity suppressed by more than two orders of magnitude compared to typical star-forming galaxies with similar masses at 2.0 < z < 2.5.

3. No nebular emission lines (i.e., [O II], Hβ, and [O III]) are detected in the spectra, further supporting the quiescent nature of these two galaxies.

4. HFF-DS 5607, with a gravitational lensing magnification corrected stellar mass log($M_{\text{star}}$/$M_\odot$) = 10.07$^{+0.06}_{-0.03}$, is the first spectroscopically confirmed low-mass quiescent galaxy at z > 2.

5. The combination of NIRISS spectroscopy and photometry of distant, low-mass quiescent galaxies is shown to enable the robust measurements of their stellar population properties, such as stellar age, SFH, and dust obscuration.

JWST is finally allowing us, for the first time, to spectroscopically identify and study the population of low-mass (log($M_{\text{star}}$/M$_\odot$) < 10.5) quiescent galaxies at z > 2. The extension of these studies to large and complete sample of low-mass quiescent galaxies will allow for the first spectroscopic measurement of the number density of distant, low-mass quiescent galaxies, and will provide crucial information to discriminate between the multiple quenching mechanisms characterized by different timescales, investigating their potential dependency on stellar mass.

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