

**ROBERT  
MAPPLETHORPE**

the perfect medium

March 15–July 31, 2016

## *The trouble with perfection is that it begins to look easy.*

—Samuel J. Wagstaff Jr., 1982

Robert Mapplethorpe (American, 1946–1989) was born and raised in Queens, New York, the third of six children in a middle-class, Roman Catholic family. He studied art at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, and his early work consisted largely of collage and sculpture. After taking up the camera as his primary medium of expression in the early 1970s, Mapplethorpe used his own intuition and eye to become one of the most significant artists of his time. He is best known for his elegant, flawlessly balanced figure studies that explore gender, race, and sexuality, but he also distinguished himself with his portraits and floral still lifes. Mapplethorpe's influence is pervasive, and almost three decades after his death, his work remains necessary to any serious discussion of late twentieth-century art.

In 2011 the J. Paul Getty Trust and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) jointly acquired art and archival materials by or associated with Mapplethorpe from the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Celebrating that landmark acquisition, this retrospective exhibition was created in two parts and is presented both at the Getty Center and at LACMA.

This exhibition was organized by the J. Paul Getty Museum and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Support for the exhibition and its international tour has been provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art. The Getty Museum's presentation is sponsored by Sotheby's.

Quote: Unpublished note in the Samuel Wagstaff papers of the Getty Research Institute



# Portraits

*People don't have time to wait for someone to paint their portrait anymore.*

—Robert Mapplethorpe, 1977

Mapplethorpe called photography “the perfect medium” — its speed, he thought, matched that of modern life. In 1972 Samuel J. Wagstaff Jr. gave him a Hasselblad medium-format camera, and he began using it to make portraits of members of New York City’s art world. The photographs in this gallery demonstrate Mapplethorpe’s experimentation with studio and environmental portraiture, as well as his desire to connect with his sitters on a deeper level, even if only momentarily. His images of prominent artists, writers, actors, and art dealers helped foster a demand for his work among other creative people, who needed pictures of themselves for professional purposes.

Quote: Patricia Morrisroe, *Mapplethorpe: A Biography* (Random House, 1995)



# Lisa Lyon

*I'd never seen anybody that looked like that before. Once she took her clothes off, it was like seeing something from another planet.*

—Robert Mapplethorpe, 1984

In 1979 Mapplethorpe met Lisa Lyon at a party in New York City. He was intrigued by her physical beauty and power and, after getting better acquainted, invited her to work with him in the studio. Although Lyon had recently won the first world women's bodybuilding championship, she considered herself more of a performance artist or a sculptor whose own body was her medium. Photographer and model were well matched; they shared an enthusiasm for the myriad ways she could be pictured—undressed or clothed in various guises, ranging from ingenue to dominatrix. Their groundbreaking collaboration lasted for six years and resulted in more than 180 limited-edition prints.

Quote: Lecture given at SF Camerawork on June 12, 1984. Mapplethorpe research files, Department of Photographs, the J. Paul Getty Museum



# Studio Practice

*My whole point is to transcend the subject . . . go beyond the subject somehow, so that the composition, the lighting, all around, reaches a certain point of perfection.*

—Robert Mapplethorpe, 1988

Although Mapplethorpe occasionally made photographs outdoors or in other people's homes, he preferred to work in his Manhattan studio loft. He was a soft-spoken man, who often used brief verbal commands and hand gestures to communicate with his models. After a session, Mapplethorpe spent hours reviewing the contact sheets to select the best shots. In 1979 he hired Tom Baril to make finely crafted gelatin silver prints from his negatives. Mapplethorpe was meticulous about print quality, and by employing Baril, he was able to exercise more control over the final results. Throughout his career, Mapplethorpe organized his photographic output into a self-defined body of work by creating limited editions—typically ten to fifteen prints of each image.

Quote: Lawrence Chua, "Robert Mapplethorpe," *Flash Art*, January/February 1989



# The Sculptural Body

*If I had been born one hundred or two hundred years ago,  
I might have been a sculptor.*

—Robert Mapplethorpe, 1987

Mapplethorpe underscored the powerful physical presence of his well-proportioned models with an obsessive attention to detail—from the precision of their statuesque poses to the technical sophistication of the lighting. While Mapplethorpe’s nude figure studies appear to be the cool and distanced observations of a photographer who prized perfection in form above all else, they also fuse a classical sensibility with a palpable sexual anxiety. Charged with the underlying threat of chaos, his highly ordered compositions crackle with visual tension.

Quote: Janet Kardon, ed., *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment* (Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1989)



# Floral Studies

*As an old-fashioned gesture, I once sent Mapplethorpe some flowers at Easter which, to my chagrin, were greeted with snarls. "I hate flowers," he said and pretended to spit on them. Now, if you will, he still spits on them but with his Hasselblad, or he does something perverse to them that nobody else seems to have thought of before. In any case, these are the elegant distanced shots of one whose obsessive training has perfected his aim to the point where he can hit a gladiola straight in the eye at fifty paces.*

—Samuel J. Wagstaff Jr., 1984

Quote: Pamphlet for the Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition *MATRIX 80* at the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, July 28–September 18, 1984, with Samuel J. Wagstaff Jr. as guest curator



# *The Perfect Moment*

In 1988 the retrospective exhibition *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment*, curated by Janet Kardon, opened at the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia before beginning an eight-venue tour. After the exhibition caught the attention of conservative politicians for its inclusion of Mapplethorpe's sex pictures (see the *X Portfolio* displayed nearby), the director of the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, canceled it just a few weeks before it was scheduled to open there in 1989. The following year, when the show traveled to the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, director Dennis Barrie was arrested and charged with pandering obscenity. Barrie was eventually acquitted at the end of a highly publicized trial that revolved around issues of artistic freedom and censorship.





# Crafting a Legacy

*I am obsessed with beauty. I want everything to be perfect, and of course it isn't.*

—Robert Mapplethorpe, 1986

Diagnosed with AIDS in 1986, Mapplethorpe faced his plight with courage and chose to work more ardently than ever. He revisited and refined the themes on which he had based his career: portraiture, classicizing nudes, and still lifes. In 1988 he established the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation to steward his own work into the future, provide support for other photography-related projects, and help fund AIDS research. Never afraid to offend or break rules, Mapplethorpe expanded the notion of what is possible in art. He stands as an example to emerging photographers who continue to test the boundaries of acceptability.

Quote: Patricia Morrisroe, *Mapplethorpe: A Biography* (Random House, 1995)



This material was published in 2016 to coincide with the J. Paul Getty Museum exhibition *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Medium*, March 15–July 31, 2016, at the Getty Center.

To cite this essay, we suggest using:

*Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Medium*, published online 2016, the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, [www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/mapplethorpe](http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/mapplethorpe)

