

Exhibition: ***Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Medium***

On View: **March 20–July 31, 2016**

Location: **BCAM, Level 2**



(Image captions on page 5)

(Los Angeles—November 18, 2015) The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) presents *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Medium*, a major retrospective examining the work and career of one of the most influential visual artists of the 20th century. *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Medium* is co-organized by LACMA and the J. Paul Getty Museum. In a historic collaboration, the two institutions will trace the artist's working methods and materials, presenting the improvisational, experimental aspects of his practice alongside the refined perfection of his prints. The works on display provide new context for understanding the key genres that Mapplethorpe pursued: portraiture, the nude, and still life. His personal connections to sitters, his ability to manage a successful studio, and his ambition to elevate photography to the status of contemporary art will be demonstrated through rarely seen correspondence, books, and other ephemera, including those from the artist's archive held by the Getty Research Institute.

LACMA's presentation (March 20–July 31, 2016) focuses on Mapplethorpe's working methods, sources, and creative processes—the experimental and performative aspects of his work—while the J. Paul Getty Museum (March 15–July 31, 2016) highlights the artist's disciplined studio practice, figure studies, and legacy. Between the two museums, more than 300 works by Mapplethorpe will be on view, making this one of the largest-ever presentations of his work. The objects on view in *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Medium* are drawn almost entirely from the landmark joint acquisition of art and archival materials made in 2011 by the J. Paul Getty Trust and LACMA from The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation.

"4 years ago LACMA and the Getty came together to jointly acquire the art and archives of Robert Mapplethorpe," said Michael Govan, LACMA CEO and Wallis Annenberg Director. "It has been an exciting collaboration ever since, as our researchers, conservators, and curators have all spent time with this trove of Mapplethorpe's art. Now, we are glad to present this large-scale joint exhibition to Los Angeles and the world."

"Through this historic collaboration, the LACMA and J. Paul Getty Museum exhibitions offer a new perspective on this influential artist," said Britt Salvesen, curator and head of the Wallis Annenberg Photography department. "*Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Medium* reveals the rich resources of the Mapplethorpe archive, which provides a broader context for the iconic images that brought him fame. Mapplethorpe's refined style challenged viewers to consider his portraits, flowers, and sexually explicit images as equal expressions of a personal vision. His drive to capture the perfect moment is the core of his art."

Following its Los Angeles debut, *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Medium* will travel internationally beginning with the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts in Canada (September 10, 2016–January 15, 2017), the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia, (October 28, 2017–February 4, 2018), and another international venue. This will be the first major traveling retrospective in North America since the landmark exhibition *The Perfect Moment*, organized in 1988 by the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia.

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated book, *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Photographs*, co-published by LACMA and the J. Paul Getty Museum. A comprehensive guide to the artist's work and career, this publication will feature an introduction by co-curators Britt Salvesen and Paul Martineau, five scholarly essays, an illustrated chronology, and a selected exhibition history and bibliography.

The J. Paul Getty Museum presentation is curated by Paul Martineau, associate curator of photographs. For more information, download the Getty press release here: [news.getty.edu](http://news.getty.edu).

## **Exhibition Organization**

The LACMA presentation is organized in five thematic sections. The first gallery establishes Mapplethorpe in the milieu of 1970s and 1980s urban gay culture, depicting himself and his models openly declaring their sexuality through clothing, body

adornment, and gesture. The second gallery highlights the work Mapplethorpe created in the late 1960s and early 1970s before he took up photography in earnest. As a student of graphic design at the Pratt Institute, he demonstrated an early facility for draftsmanship and a penchant for geometric composition. He designed jewelry and temporary assemblages using items of clothing. Inspired by Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns, and Robert Rauschenberg, he also experimented with collages and constructions, often incorporating Catholic iconography and appropriated imagery from homosexual periodicals.

Mapplethorpe borrowed a Polaroid camera from a friend in 1970 and, over the course of the next year, honed his vision as a photographer. These early unique images, installed in the third gallery, reveal his observational acuity and his ability to be in the moment. Mapplethorpe was one of his own best subjects, as his many self-portraits attest, and he was open about being a participant in the scenarios he depicted. The fourth gallery focuses on Mapplethorpe's engagement with the leather and bondage community, his appropriation of pornographic source material, and his exploration of the African American male nude. Additionally, this gallery features ephemera relating to Mapplethorpe's first breakout exhibitions in New York, including a joint exhibition at The Kitchen and Holly Solomon Gallery in 1977. The fifth gallery presents work from the mid-1980s, when Mapplethorpe was running a successful studio and producing many commissioned portraits. Among his favorite subjects were the artists, musicians, and other performers he first encountered in the downtown art scene in the '70s. He commented that photography was "the perfect medium for the 70s and 80s, when everything was fast. If I were to make something that took two weeks to do, I'd lose my enthusiasm. It would become an act of labor and the love would be gone."

## **Exhibition Highlights**

### *Self-portrait* (1980)

Mapplethorpe's turn to photography in the early 1970s coincided with his embrace of New York's leather subculture, and, throughout the decade, he explored the potential of both forms of expression simultaneously. His 1980 self-portrait as a surly, smoking leatherman captures the hyper masculine posturing that was concomitant with the choice of leather as a fashion statement and as a sexual fetish. Staring defiantly into the camera, Mapplethorpe declares his participation in the leather community. At the same time, the photograph expresses the playful and performative aspects of his studio practice. An element of dress-up and theater is evident in much of his portraiture. This self-portrait shows the artist posing in the role of an archetypal tough-guy—a greaser complete with popped collar, a lit cigarette dangling from his lip, and hair styled into a pompadour.

### *Patti Smith (1978)*

Mapplethorpe was studying art at the Pratt Institute, in Brooklyn, when he met Patti Smith in spring 1967. Mapplethorpe and Smith spent the next decade in close proximity, inspiring one another's artistic aspirations. Mapplethorpe chose photography as his medium in the early 1970s, whereas Smith gravitated toward poetry and music, and the two collaborated in a number of portrait sessions. Here, Smith poses in the act of cutting her hair, a gesture of defiance. As she explained in a 1975 interview, she didn't "want to walk around New York looking like a folk-singer. I like rock 'n' roll. So I got hundreds of pictures of Keith Richards, and I hung them up and then just took scissors and chopped away until I had a real Rolling Stones haircut." Mapplethorpe captured Smith's androgynous style, composing the photograph to emphasize contrasts of black and white in Smith's features and wardrobe, in the background, and even in the cat.

### *Lisa Lyon (1982)*

Mapplethorpe met Lisa Lyon at a party in 1979, and he would go on to produce nearly 200 photographs of her over the next several years. The first woman to win the International Federation of Body Builders female competition, Lyon had an androgynous, muscular physique that appealed to Mapplethorpe's interest in the sculptural body. "I'd never seen anybody that looked like that before," he said. "Once she took her clothes off it was like seeing something from another planet." The pinnacle of their collaboration came with the release of the book *Lady* (1983), a series of portraits of Lyon. In this portrait, Mapplethorpe captures Lyon in her work-out attire, a nod to her role as an early advocate for fitness and weight training, which came to be a defining feature of early and mid-1980s American culture.

## **Complementary Exhibition**

The LACMA exhibition will also be accompanied by the installation *Physical: Sex and the Body in the 1980s*, which will feature roughly 30 works from the museum's permanent collection. Placing Mapplethorpe's work in dialogue with his contemporaries, the installation examines the cultural and artistic upheavals of a pivotal decade in the history of American art and society. Featured artists include Bruce Weber, Kiki Smith, Sarah Charlesworth, Laura Aguilar, and Marina Abramovic, among others. *Physical: Sex and the Body* is curated by Ryan Linkof, assistant curator of the Wallis Annenberg Photography department.

## Credit

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

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## About LACMA

Since its inception in 1965, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) has been devoted to collecting works of art that span both history and geography, in addition to representing Los Angeles's uniquely diverse population. Today LACMA is the largest art museum in the western United States, with a collection that includes nearly 130,000 objects dating from antiquity to the present, encompassing the geographic world and nearly the entire history of art. Among the museum's strengths are its holdings of Asian art; Latin American art, ranging from masterpieces from the Ancient Americas to works by leading modern and contemporary artists; and Islamic art, of which LACMA hosts one of the most significant collections in the world. A museum of international stature as well as a vital part of Southern California, LACMA shares its vast collections through exhibitions, public programs, and research facilities that attract over one million visitors annually, in addition to serving millions through digital initiatives such as online collections, scholarly catalogues, and interactive engagement. LACMA is located in Hancock Park, 30 acres situated at the center of Los Angeles, which also contains the Page Museum and La Brea Tar Pits and the forthcoming Academy Museum of Motion Pictures. Situated halfway between the ocean and downtown, LACMA is at the heart of Los Angeles.

Location: 5905 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA, 90036 | 323 857-6000 | [lacma.org](http://lacma.org)

Image captions:

Left: Robert Mapplethorpe, *Patti Smith*, 1978, gelatin silver print, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, gift of The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation to The J. Paul Getty Trust and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation

Center: Robert Mapplethorpe, *Self-Portrait*, 1980, gelatin silver print, promised gift of The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation to The J. Paul Getty Trust and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation

Right: Robert Mapplethorpe, *Lisa Lyon*, 1982, gelatin silver print, promised gift of The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation to The J. Paul Getty Trust and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation

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