

Robert Mapplethorpe

b. 1946, Floral Park, N.Y.; d. 1989, Boston

Robert Mapplethorpe was born November 4, 1946, in Floral Park, New York. He left home in 1962 and enrolled at the Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, in 1963, where he studied painting and sculpture and received his B.F.A. in 1970. During this time, he met artist, poet, and musician Patti Smith. She encouraged his work and posed for numerous portraits when they lived together in Brooklyn and in the Chelsea Hotel in Manhattan, a gathering place for artists, writers, and musicians in the early 1970s.

It was not Mapplethorpe's original intention to be a photographer, and from 1970 to 1974, he mainly made assemblage constructions that incorporate images of men from pornographic magazines with found objects and painting. In order to create his own images for these collages, Mapplethorpe turned to photography, initially using a Polaroid SX-70 camera. Interested in portraiture, Mapplethorpe worked as a staff photographer for Andy Warhol's *Interview* magazine. He also produced album covers for Smith and the group Television, and at the same time photographed socialites and celebrities such as John Paul Getty III and Carolina Herrera.

Two of Mapplethorpe's friends were influential in his continuing exploration of photography as a means of art making. He met John McKendry, Curator of Prints and Photography at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in 1971. The curator bought Mapplethorpe his first camera and persuaded him to take up photography full-time. Mapplethorpe traveled to Europe for the first time with McKendry, where he was introduced to many of the collectors who later became sitters for portraits. Curator and photography collector Sam Wagstaff, whom he met in 1972, became Mapplethorpe's friend and eventual lover, encouraging the photographer's development, gallery associations, and career course. They remained close until Wagstaff's death in 1986.

Mapplethorpe had his first substantial shows in 1977, both in New York: an exhibition of photographs of flowers at the Holly Solomon Gallery and one of male nudes and sadomasochistic imagery at the Kitchen. Mapplethorpe's diverse work—homoerotic images, floral still lifes, pictures of children, commissioned portraits, mixed-media sculpture—is united by the constancy of his approach and technique. The surfaces of his prints offer a seemingly endless gradation of blacks and whites, shadow and light, and regardless of subject, his images are both elegant and provocative. In the mid-to-late 1980s, returning to the sculptural use of photography seen in his early assemblages, Mapplethorpe created sensual

diptychs and triptychs of photographs printed on fabric and luxurious cloth panels. In 1988, four major exhibitions of his work were organized: by the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia; and the National Portrait Gallery, London. Mapplethorpe died due to complications from AIDS on March 9, 1989, in Boston.

The Institute of Contemporary Art's retrospective continued to travel after Mapplethorpe's death. Although the exhibition had sparked no controversy at its first two venues, the threat of right-wing objections to the photographs of S/M and homoerotic acts prompted officials at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., to cancel the show two weeks before its scheduled opening. The exhibition instead traveled to the Washington Project for the Arts, Washington, D.C., where it received record attendance.