



ARTS

Mapplethorpe: A Sculptural Perspective

By MARA HOBERMAN APRIL 15, 2014

PARIS — In an interview published in 1988, Robert Mapplethorpe mused, “If I had been born 100 or 200 years ago, I might have been a sculptor, but photography is a very quick way to see, to make sculpture.” This spring, 25 years after his death, two Paris museums are working in tandem to showcase the importance of sculpture to the American photographer’s oeuvre.

The largest-ever retrospective of the artist’s work is now on view at the Grand Palais here until July 13 and, across the Seine, the Musée Rodin is holding an exhibition that juxtaposes Mapplethorpe’s photographs with Rodin’s bronze, plaster and marble works through Sept. 21. The complementary shows — which were conceived in conjunction with the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation and share some of the same curators — try to link the photographer’s carefully composed black-and-white nudes and still lifes to sculpture. They hope to offer a fresh perspective on an artist whose classical aesthetic is often overshadowed by the sexual themes of his work and his role in America’s culture wars of the late 1980s.

“Mapplethorpe always said that his goal was to achieve perfection in form, which is of course an ideal that links him to Michelangelo,” said Jérôme Neutres, the head curator of the Grand Palais retrospective. By approaching the photographer within the context of European sculpture, the organizers of “Robert Mapplethorpe” hope to provide a new way for viewers to connect to a well-known artist’s body of work.

Michelangelo’s “Dying Slave,” a highlight of the Louvre’s sculpture collection, was one of Mapplethorpe’s earliest subjects. His 1974 Polaroid of a

book reproduction of the Renaissance masterpiece is not included in Mr. Neutres's exhibition, but it appears in the catalog. Among the more than 250 Mapplethorpe photographs at the Grand Palais, lesser-known still lifes of Neoclassical bronze and marble sculptures are shown next to some of his most famous nudes, including his 1981 "Ajitto" series featuring a black man posing on a pedestal.

"Mapplethorpe-Rodin," meanwhile, tries to tie Mapplethorpe to one of the most important French artists of the 19th century whose iconic sculpture, *The Thinker*, has become a symbol of French culture. More than a hundred Mapplethorpe photographs, all loans from the Mapplethorpe foundation in New York, are mounted on glass walls in front of 50 Rodin sculptures in thematic subgroups like "Eroticism and Damnation" and "Movement and Tension." The curators of the two exhibitions, who worked together for more than two years, have collectively brought 350 diverse Mapplethorpe works to the French capital, many from the foundation but also from institutions and private collections.

Having shown in private galleries in Paris as early as 1978, Mapplethorpe is well known in France. Daniel Templon, who exhibited Mapplethorpe at his Paris gallery in 1985, recalled ample attention for the "legendary New York artist, almost on the level of Andy Warhol." Somewhat curiously, however, France has not organized a solo museum show since the artist's death in 1989. Sean Kelly, whose New York gallery has represented the Mapplethorpe Estate in the United States for a decade, said: "It should be applauded that after a bit of a drought Paris has really stepped up with these two shows that present Mapplethorpe in such a profound, informed and substantial way."

The French curators play up the early appreciation for Mapplethorpe in Paris (not to mention his interest in the writings of Jean Cocteau and Jean Genet), but the photographer had a distinctly New York pedigree. Born in Queens in 1946, he studied art at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn before moving to Manhattan in 1969, where he mingled with Warhol's entourage at the nightclub Max's Kansas City and lived with the poet and singer Patti Smith at the Chelsea Hotel.

Immersing himself in two of the city's underground scenes — avant-garde art and S-and-M — Mapplethorpe gained recognition in the 1970s with his

photographs of both crowds. In the late 1980s, he made national headlines when the Corcoran Gallery in Washington canceled his exhibition, which included homoerotic and sadomasochistic content, amidst a political uproar over public financing for the arts.

The exhibitions here keep the focus on form and away from politics. “Europeans have a more direct involvement with Mapplethorpe’s work that is not filtered through the censorship controversy, which was entirely an American affair,” said Jonathan Nelson, a professor of art history at Syracuse University in Florence who organized an exhibition of Mapplethorpe photographs alongside Michelangelo sculptures at Florence’s Galleria dell’Accademia in 2009. “These shows in Paris allow us to evaluate and appreciate Mapplethorpe as an artist.”

At the Grand Palais, photographs of sculptures appear next to sculptural portraits, including those of the female body builder Lisa Lyon and various muscular men striking athletic poses, from Mapplethorpe’s 1980s “Black Males” series. Similarities abound between what Mr. Neutres describes in the exhibition catalog as Mapplethorpe’s “bodies of bronze and sculptures of flesh.”

In a photograph of Dennis Speight from 1983, for example, the model’s bare dark chest and chiseled biceps appear as hard and polished as a bronze “Spartacus” that Mapplethorpe photographed in 1988. In a 1981 nude portrait of Ms. Lyon, Mapplethorpe has posed her in front of a drop cloth and cropped out her arms, neck and head. The image hangs next to his 1978 photograph of a marble female torso, whose head, arms and lower legs are missing.

“Whether shooting a portrait or a statue, he had the same concerns: lighting, composition and angles,” said Dimitri Levas, who worked as Mapplethorpe’s art director and sourced many of the elements that appeared in his still-life photographs. Mr. Levas, who now sits on the Mapplethorpe foundation’s board of directors, described the artist as having “a classical eye; form was always very important to him.”

The Grand Palais also showcases Mapplethorpe’s own sculptures, a less well-known aspect of the artist’s oeuvre. Among the handful of three-dimensional works on view are a 1968 Joseph Cornell-inspired assemblage, a 1983 Catholic cross made of white carpet, and a folding screen made in 1986 whose panels feature photographs of nudes and flowers.

At the Musée Rodin, Hélène Pinet, the show's co-curator (and an associate curator of the Grand Palais exhibition), said, "It's possible that Mapplethorpe saw Rodin's sculptures when he was in Paris, and certainly he could have seen them in New York at The Met. But with this exhibition we are creating a discourse that didn't actually exist."

This is not the first time the two artist's works have been brought together. In 1992, the Italian curator and art historian Germano Celant organized an exhibition titled "Mapplethorpe versus Rodin" at the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf.

Ms. Pinet said she and her co-curators, Hélène Marraud and the art critic Judith Benhamou-Huet (also credited as an associate curator of the Grand Palais show), "began with Mapplethorpe, first choosing photographs from his oeuvre and then putting these together with works by Rodin according to seven themes." She added: "We were surprised just how many relationships between these two artists we found and how rich the aesthetic comparisons are."

Illustrating the artists' common appreciation for the human form and attraction to contrasting textures, Mapplethorpe's 1980 portrait of Ms. Lyon (a favorite model because of her self-sculpted physique) reclining on a rocky cliff is paired with a circa 1910 Rodin marble where two polished female nudes emerge from a roughly hewn base. Parallels are also drawn between Rodin's plaster sculptures of disembodied hands and feet and Mapplethorpe's tight crops of the same body parts. And photographs of Patti Smith draped in white gauze echo a Rodin study for his famous sculpture of Balzac, in which he shrouded the writer's sculpted body with fabric dipped in wet plaster.

"When Mapplethorpe photographed sculptures he made them come alive," Ms. Pinet said. "And when he photographed people he turned them into sculptures. This is really an astonishing thing."

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Robert Mapplethorpe is widely regarded as one of the world's most important artists of the late twentieth century. The group of photographs in ARTIST... Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe had a unique relationship: they were friends, lovers, artistic collaborators and soul mates. Mapplethorpe and Smith met in 1967 and quickly become lovers; they would live with one another for the next few years. The years they spent together proved to be formative to their artistic development; while Mapplethorpe emerged in the mid-1970s as a successful artist, Smith would achieve simultaneous success as a poet and musician, associated with the punk music genre. Smith was photographed multiple times by Mapplethorpe and would become one of his most frequent s