

Plate 1. Robert Mapplethorpe, *Self-Portrait*, 1974, gelatin silver print from Polaroid negative (produced as multiple). Gift of The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation to the J. Paul Getty Trust and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation.



# Rediscovering Robert Mapplethorpe

## Expectations and challenges of studying the Getty Research Institute archive

### Mapplethorpe who?

The presentation of a dual exhibition in Los Angeles, of a show shared with Edvard Munch in Oslo, of a publication dedicated to his archives and, in another vein, a documentary at the Berlinale<sup>1</sup>, has made 2016 an important year for the study of Robert Mapplethorpe's work. A conference on the polemical reception of his 1990 exhibition in Cincinnati added to this busy agenda last Fall<sup>2</sup>.

How can one explain such keen interest in an artist who died 27 years ago and whose oeuvre has already been studied so often? This question is particularly legitimate as the shows and publications on Mapplethorpe seem to repeat themselves, giving an impression that all has been said on him and his photographs.

Yet the artist, who is known for his silver gelatin prints, elaborated a body of work over the course of two decades that is remarkably diverse, including, notably, many collages and Polaroids, and works achieved with the help of painting – a rich and complex oeuvre that has rarely been appreciated for these qualities. The projects presented in 2016 were thus justified by the fact that, in many ways, Mapplethorpe can be seen as a photographer whose work remains understudied.

The new reading opened up by the exhibition “The Perfect Medium” and the publication *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Archive* had been made possible with the study of the “Robert Mapplethorpe papers and photographs”, which have been available at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles since

2013. After two small shows presented at the end of 2012<sup>3</sup>, these major projects were the first that were meant to make compressive use of the archival collection that had been handed down by the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation five years ago. For an artist whose oeuvre is to be reconsidered, these documents open up an entirely new field of study.

### **Context**

To best grasp the challenges in studying his archive, it matters to consider the context in which this collection was introduced in 2011.

The gift that was made by the R. Mapplethorpe Foundation to the J. Paul Getty Museum, to the Getty Research Institute (GRI) and to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) took place after several forms of collaboration with other institutions. Since its founding in 1989, the Foundation has dedicated its work to the patrimonial management of Mapplethorpe's oeuvre (in particular, it is in charge of printing editions that had not been produced while the artist was still alive) but also to enhancing his work on an institutional level. The latter took shape with several gifts granted to important museums or, in specific cases, to small institutions that contribute to scholarship in relevant contexts. The gifts to the Solomon R. Guggenheim (made in 1992 and including two hundred works) or to the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction (in 2011) constitute two such examples<sup>4</sup>. The archive's conceding to the Getty and LACMA, which included not only a significant part of the works conserved by the Foundation, but also all the documentation that had been collected by the artist since the end of the sixties, concluded a period that had been dedicated to supporting the study of Mapplethorpe's achievements on an institutional level.

Since 1989, the Foundation has also been active through its program for institutional grants. Thus, when the gift to the New York Guggenheim was made, the Foundation also announced its participation in the funding of a department for photography at the museum. At the time, the gift and the grant were therefore part of the same deal. The same was true in 2012 as a collaboration with The National Galleries of Scotland was made public: on that occasion, the Scottish institutions inaugurated a research program dedicated to photography and that was co-funded

by the Foundation. Since then, the relevant galleries are each named the “Robert Mapplethorpe Photography Gallery” at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery and many works produced by Mapplethorpe have rejoined (in return) a collection shared with the Tate Modern in London.

The Foundation thus directs its work trying to line up the interests of the different parties involved in the projects it supports. With the gift to the Getty and LACMA, the idea was the same: make sure, on the one side, that the most important part of the estate would be enhanced through the work of renowned institutions, and, on the other side, financially encourage their



Plate 2. Robert Mapplethorpe, *Sam Wagstaff*, ca. 1972, color Polaroid print (13.3 x 10.8 cm). Gift of The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation to the J. Paul Getty Trust and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation.

scholarship on photography. The latter goal fits with one of the two additional mandates allotted right before Mapplethorpe's death. Besides its missions involving printing or copyrights, it has as its legal obligation to support institutions participating in the study of photography – a mission to which the funding of research on AIDS and HIV-related infections was added<sup>5</sup>. Thus, when the Foundation uses the opportunity of a grant to get works into important collections, it honors several of its mandates at the same time.

Moreover, the collaboration with the Californian institutions was a meaningful give-and-take. Through its gift, the Foundation managed to help the Getty fulfill its own goal – namely to establish an original collection that is complementary to the one given by J. Paul Getty (mainly a collector of antiques, paintings and furniture). At the Getty, photography is granted a double special status: whereas the acquisitions are aimed at pieces that were produced at the same time as those collected by the institution's founder, and although the latter didn't collect any photographs, the museum has been involved in the establishment of an important collection of ancient and modern prints since the eighties. Launched with the gift of the Samuel Wagstaff collection in 1984 (who happened to be Mapplethorpe's lover and patron in the seventies – plate 2)<sup>6</sup>, the Getty's collection consists today of more than two billion prints – from *photographie plasticienne* to documentary photography.

The gift made in 2011 should thus be understood as conforming to an agenda dedicated to supporting scholarship on photography – an agenda held by two of its main actors in the United States. The Getty and the Foundation shared involvement in the establishment of dedicated research departments: like their colleagues from New York, the Californians offer an important program thanks to which several institutes dedicated to photography have been created<sup>7</sup>. Thus, with its gift, the Foundation sought to support scholarship on Mapplethorpe while helping an institution participating, like the Foundation, in reflections on the medium. The Getty, seeking to become a major player in the field (thanks, notably, to the establishment of a collection including every aspect of the history of photography), doubles this ambition with a rich exhibition program, which, according to its own estimations, attracts more than half of the visitors to its galleries<sup>8</sup>.



Plate 3. Robert Mapplethorpe, *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1973, color Polaroid print. Gift of The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation to the J. Paul Getty Trust and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation.

### **The work revealed by the archive**

According to Michael Ward Stout, president of the R. Mapplethorpe Foundation, finding an institution renowned both for its program and its conservation facilities had been a difficult task<sup>9</sup>. The J. Paul Getty Museum, LACMA, and Getty Research Institute were therefore chosen for their complementarities. LACMA allows the work to be appreciated in the context of modern and contemporary art, whereas the J. Paul Getty Museum makes it possible to study his photographs in a more limited environment through its center for photography. As for

the Getty Research Institute, it offers remarkable study and conservation conditions with, among other things, a cold chamber with important storage capacities.

Due to its many requirements, the Foundation was obliged to grant its gift according to differing conditions. The LACMA and the Getty are in charge of implementing an exhibition program as well as supervising the conservation of about two thousand art pieces (even if, in fact, only fifty works are held at LACMA). They are also bound to acquire several dozens works – acting as compensation here as well. As for the contact sheets and negatives owned by the Foundation, they are meant to rejoin the Getty's collection in the near future.

The Getty Research Institute received the most significant material. The thousands of articles conserved in its Special Collections include many documents that relate to the exhibitions or that give an account of studio work or collaborations between institutions<sup>10</sup>. But apart from this secondary material (certainly informative document, as with every artist), it is the hundreds of pieces labeled non-editioned prints that catch the attention. As implied by their modest label, the non-editioned prints are pieces that differ from the silver gelatin prints, which are printed in an edition of ten. From experiments to three-dimensional works, these unique pieces are surprising. They evidence an eclectic practice, be it in terms of techniques involved or content, and attract our attention to the fact that only half of Mapplethorpe's oeuvre consisted of silver gelatin prints. Thus, despite the impression given by the majority of the exhibitions presented since his death, more than two thousand pieces (of the four thousand produced between 1968 and 1989) were unique works. The hundreds of Polaroids aside – for which, naturally, there is only one original (plates 1, 2 & 3) – several dozens of pieces are unique; many were made without any camera or with mixed materials, notably among the collages and installations.

The archival material held at the GRI depicts an artist initially interested more in working on images than in making them. Herein is an important distinction: photography was not the medium through which Mapplethorpe chose to express himself, but it was rather the medium that he believed could reveal emotions. To him, the picture's strength lays not so much in what it captures (relating to his own interests) as in what it reveals about the viewer. This part of magic operates also with images

Plate 4. Robert Mapplethorpe, *Untitled*, 1968, collage on paper with graphite, colored pencil, thread, and pastel in artist's frame. Gift of The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation to the J. Paul Getty Trust and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation.





produced by others and that Mapplethorpe had, at first, appropriated.

He used the images he had collected since he was a teenager for collages and painted works, save some drawings which sometimes included cut images as well (plate 4). At the GRI, one notices a great number of pieces made with pages from magazines – including news periodicals (e.g. *Life*) or pornographic publications. Mapplethorpe worked with a diverse iconography: apart from the sexually explicit material, we spot portraits of actors, pictures of embracing couples, and images of animals and landscapes. As is made clear with this material, those unique works are not characterized by their content (even though we notice a certain interest in explicit images, the ones through which Mapplethorpe would later make a name for himself) but by the way they have been transformed.

Among the pieces based on retouched images, three different types of works are to be distinguished. The first ones are collages in the strictest sense. One or several images were combined with different materials (plastic mesh, colored paper, etc.) on a cardboard or paper base. These works, sometimes adorned with a special framing and a sophisticated mat, are colorful compositions mastered with geometrical forms. Very often, one notices a strong contrast between the elegant presentation and the picture

fragments that are left visible. In *Leatherman I*, for example (made in 1970 – plate 8), pink velvet surrounds a gentleman in leather clothing whose suggestive gear (recalling sadomasochism) is hidden behind a dotted mesh that mitigates the demonstrativeness of the scene. As in *Leatherman I*, Mapplethorpe's collages seem to be made to enhance an antinomy between the presentation and the kind of pictures with which he chose to work.

Plate 5. Robert Mapplethorpe, *Untitled*, ca. 1970, staff paper with spray paint. Gift of The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation to the J. Paul Getty Trust and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation.





Plate 6. Exhibition view of "Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Medium", 20/03-31/07/2016, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Los Angeles, USA). Photo: © 2016 Museum Associates / LACMA; Work: © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation.

Plate 7. Robert Mapplethorpe, *Tire Rack*, 1969, Chromolithograph, colored pencil, stained plywood, Plexiglas, metal crucifix, black thread, needles, and black neckties, framed by the artist. Jointly acquired by the J.Paul Getty Trust and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; partial gift of The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation; partial purchase with funds provided by the J.Paul Getty Trust and the David Geffen Foundation. Photo: © 2016 Museum Associates / LACMA. Work: © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation.

Added to these assemblages come pieces made with the help of magazine pages covered with paint. They show how the artist mastered the use of stencils and templates, as well as spray paint. The pictures he used disappear behind several flat tints that gradually tone down, leaving some spared parts visible. One might suspect a vicious pleasure here: Mapplethorpe revealed just the minimum, or tended to attract our attention to a harmless fragment in order to let us look for the most suggestive parts hidden behind solid colors. These works gathered under the name spray painted works or hand painted works were produced between 1969 and 1976. Here again, the used images disappear – yet not under diverse materials this time, but according to a method that vaguely recalls Pop-artists serigraph prints and has something of a handcrafted work. The content of these pieces is mixed as well: portraits, sex scenes, vernacular photographs and even paper sheets (plates 5). As of 1971-72, the same technique was used for works based on the artist's own Polaroids.

The last group of unique works held at the GRI (aside from the hundreds of Polaroids taken between 1970 and 1976) consists of installations produced as early as 1968. Two types of assemblages are of note here: the ones built with fabric and found objects (the earliest and biggest pieces) and the others meant to enhance images taken from magazines. Among the former are works based on garments – with, for example, pieces

of underwear stretched on wooden frames (*Untitled (Blue Underwear)*, 1970 – plate 6). In the latter, the used pictures were most often combined with objects in the form of totems, small altars or boxes recalling confessionals. The iconographic range alluded to here is more limited, with numerous references to Christian figures.

As with the two-dimensional works formerly mentioned, the images included in these installations had been transformed. Covered with painting or crayons, they were integrated into assemblages in which symmetry matters very much. *Tire Rack* (1969 – plate 7), for instance, shows a representation of the Holy Marie with drawn geometric forms mirroring the lines created with the objects added to the picture – e.g. the fine rope connecting the stigmata on her hands. Whereas the works on paper with clear lines and balanced compositions recall Mapplethorpe's interest in minimal art, the three-dimensional pieces are most certainly reminiscent of his catholic upbringing. At the GRI some sculptures suggest the association of the two genres, such as with sleek crosses (here a similar version photographed in the artist's studio – *Silver Mirror Cross*, 1983, plate 9).

Plate 8. Robert Mapplethorpe, *Leatherman #1*, 1970, Mixed media; Image: 23.97 x 17.15 cm; Frame: 37.94 x 47.94 cm. Jointly acquired by the J. Paul Getty Trust and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Partial gift of the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation; partial purchase with funds provided by the J. Paul Getty Trust and the David Geffen Foundation. © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation.



### Photography as a medium for emotions

These very different pieces all seek to produce the same effect. They hide things more than they show them, remaining suggestive and often implying an experience constrained by their sophisticated form of presentation.

Behind Mapplethorpe's art is thus a constrained appreciation of a picture. For him this dates back to a founding incident that marked his entry into adult life: in several interviews he explained that, in his work, he had hoped to recreate the unique emotion he had associated with photography since his adolescence. On several occasions, he described "a feeling in the stomach"<sup>11</sup> when he saw covers of erotic magazines for the first time – when he wasn't yet allowed to buy them. This experience shaped his approach to photography: all the more attractive if forbidden, explicit pictures were for him as desirable as the scenes that were photographed. Moreover, what struck the young artist was that this feeling had been provoked by censored images that had become partly invisible – "which made them even sexier", he said<sup>12</sup>. "If I could somehow bring that element into art, if I could somehow retain that feeling, I would be doing something that was uniquely my own", he explained<sup>13</sup>.



Plate 9. Robert Mapplethorpe, *Polaroid test short of the interior of Mapplethorpe's West Twenty-third Street loft, taken for House & Garden, June 1988*. Gift of The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation.

Through his works, Mapplethorpe wanted to provide an account of his own experiences while recalling similar incidents many of his contemporaries might have also confronted. At the time, individuals who wanted pictures of nude men (or women) were confronted with limitations that had been imposed by legislators. This restricted access to images was therefore a strong constituent of the iconography created *for* and *by* homosexuals from the 1940s up through the 1960s in the United States – with characteristic elements of censorship associated to it ever since its first appearance. Blindfolds and similar masks are thus inseparable from the first works produced by Mapplethorpe, as well as from the first images exhibiting homosexuality. His leather man is therefore an individual without an identity; his eyes are covered with a black mask (plate 8) as in the pictures made public in police reports – the first publications authorized to contain explicit material<sup>14</sup>. At the GRI, one encounters the notion of anonymity in various pieces signed by Mapplethorpe with a simple “X” (plate 11).

Sealed under plastic mesh (much like the erotic magazines that the teenager could never acquire, or even open), the image used in *Leatherman I* is literally and figuratively trapped in the conventions determined by legislators<sup>15</sup>. This kind of work refers to another type of codes, meant this time to bypass censorship by compensating the content of the photographs with references to art history. For instance, the velvet and the ornamental pattern chosen for *Leatherman I* recall materials used as early as the mid-nineteenth century for the presentation of daguerreotypes. Surrounded by enhancing materials and presented in leather cases, those daguerreotypes are among the pieces collected by Mapplethorpe that are also available at the Getty Research Institute today.

This kind of astuteness used at the turn of the century to excuse the lascivious content of photographs has inspired many artists. In Mapplethorpe’s archive (as well as in the collection of his lover, Sam Wagstaff), next to works by Nadar and August Sander one finds many prints produced by photographers such as Wilhelm von Gloeden, where young men posed near columns reminiscent of ancient Greece<sup>16</sup>. The archive thus reveals an erudite artist whose oeuvre is full of references to the history of photography<sup>17</sup>. In this respect, the catalogs of his personal collection’s auctions are invaluable complements to the

publication printed by the GRI<sup>18</sup>, as are some of the Polaroids documenting his New-York loft on West Twenty-Third Street (plate 9).

In addition to the Daguerreotypes, Mapplethorpe's collection includes many pictures from "Beefcake" magazines. Produced in the 1950s and 1960s for publications that celebrated body building<sup>19</sup>, these pictures of athletes are sometimes covered with a layer of paint over the genitals. Obviously added to the image before it had been reproduced in magazines such as *Physique Pictorial*, those shoddy G-strings suggested that they could be erased by the purchaser of the original print. As in Mapplethorpe's work, these images had been retouched by hand in order to hide the most explicit parts from prying eyes.

Yet the painted cover (or the applied sticker) serves as a temporary constraint, suggesting a reversible action only meant for the image to pass postal control. What the documentation available at the GRI therefore makes clear is that Mapplethorpe's work is dedicated to exalting visual limitations but also to ways of freeing oneself from them. Like the photographers who painted fake pieces of underwear on top of bodybuilders initially posing naked, Mapplethorpe creatively overcame the censorship associated with his first sexual emotions. Initially struck by frustration due to his inability to access specific images (and, so, to control the feelings that they provoked),



Plate 10.  
Exhibition view of  
"Robert  
Mapplethorpe: The  
Perfect Medium",  
20/03-31/07/2016,  
Los Angeles County  
Museum of Art (Los  
Angeles, USA).  
Photo: © 2016  
Museum Associates  
/ LACMA;  
Work: © Robert  
Mapplethorpe  
Foundation.

he managed through his work to modify the situation in his favor. The subject, the composition, but also the moment of the shooting and the satisfaction associated with overcoming censorship – these were all mastered by the artist.

The many works available in Los Angeles (the ones at the GRI but also some of the non-editioned prints held in the J. Paul Getty Museum's own collection) also demonstrate Mapplethorpe's virtuosity in using the many different methods related to photography. Alternative processes (collages and emulsion photo transfers, for instance) joined the long list of technique used by Mapplethorpe until his death: cibachromes, etchings (monochromatic or color), dye transfers, Polaroids (small or enlarged), lithographs and platinum prints (on paper or canvas). With this artist, known for having delegated the production of his silver gelatin prints, one sees great deftness in the making of "hand-made" works – whether drawings or unique prints.

At last, this variety provides us with information about the ambitions of an artist who gradually enjoyed being financially at ease, and therefore allowed for the use of some very costly printing methods in his art production. After having worked for so long with just the cameras and films he had been given<sup>20</sup> (while working only with the erotic magazines he was able to afford), Mapplethorpe obviously took great pleasure in using special methods that referred back to the pieces he had collected. He was thus free from constraints, once again.

### **The use of archival material in the study of Mapplethorpe's work**

The presence of such a variety of pieces highlights a clear deficit in the exhibitions and publications that have been set almost exclusively with black and white silver gelatin prints<sup>21</sup> – a trend that may be over (with a greater mixture of pieces in the show presented at LACMA – plate 10), but that has had a lasting impact on its reception.

Those interested in the correspondence or notebooks will remain frustrated – the collection holds very few documents written by the artist. Mapplethorpe read rarely and wrote even less<sup>22</sup>. "[He] didn't analyze or talk about his process; any clues to the workings of his mind were laid bare within his art", sums up his friend Patti Smith<sup>23</sup>. In this regard, the mail exchanges with



Plate 11.  
Robert  
Mapplethorpe,  
*Untitled ("Sam—I  
love you and I need  
you—hurry home")*,  
1974, altered color  
Polaroid print.  
Gift of The Robert  
Mapplethorpe  
Foundation to the  
J.Paul Getty Trust  
and the Los Angeles  
County Museum  
of Art. © Robert  
Mapplethorpe  
Foundation.

his lover are insightful: Mapplethorpe's answers to the letters written by Sam Wagstaff often took the form of a simple image (*Untitled (Sam I Love You and I Need You - Hurry Home)*, 1974 – plate 11)<sup>24</sup>. Thus the archive's relevance is not in the availability of manuscripts that might allow a better grasp of his thinking. However, it enables a reevaluation of his artistic method, which has often been interpreted through an unrepresentative collection of his works.

Thanks to archival documentation, one understands the perfection that is characteristic of the prints produced with a Hasselblad as manifesting the opulence born by financial limitations – initially, his carefulness in the making of photographs





Plate 12. Robert Mapplethorpe, *Banana & Keys*, 1974, From *Interview* 5, no. 11 (November 1975): n. p. Gift of The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation.

was motivated by a wish to spare the few films available<sup>25</sup>. It is also possible to read the formal aspects of his monochrome prints as a reference system that an artist needed to master if his or her work was sexually explicit (using an “excuse-formalism” that shaped a whole imagery when Mapplethorpe was still a student at Pratt Institute). As for his photographs, dramatically framed with, for instance, zebra wood (like his portrait of Arnold Schwarzenegger from 1976), they referred to pictures of bodybuilders

disguised as Tarzan to apologize for their nudity (as attested by the portfolios held by the artist and later handed down to the GRI)<sup>26</sup>.

Thanks to the unique artworks we also understand the importance of the context in which his art emerged (at a time when representations of homosexual male desire was still prohibited). Works such as *Banana and Keys* (1973, here with its reproduction in a newspaper – plate 12) seem less enigmatic if it is explained, as in the publication of the Getty Research Institute, that they were reminiscent of the coding used in the 1960s and 1970s to discreetly indicate sexual preferences (keys visibly attached to pants, or colored bandanas hanging from a pocket on jeans, each of which were associated with specific practices)<sup>27</sup>.

“When [experimentations are] looked at together with later material, it demonstrates how the sensibilities shaped during this time would continue to inform his creative practice”, concludes the co-editors of the publication<sup>28</sup>. These kinds of comments remind that a reading that insists on the formal aspects of the picture does not help to decipher portraits such as *Ridley and Lyle Heeter* (1979 – plate 13). Theories on fetishism and the “gay semiotic” function much better here<sup>29</sup> – to explain notably that occasional formalism was used by Mapplethorpe

to mirror the theatricality and simulated aspect of the role play specific to sadomasochism.

By examining pieces of the collection, one can also interpret Mapplethorpe's oeuvre as his own fetish. Photography became the substitute for a primary sexual emotion, an object in which his feeling was displaced when he was a teenager. With his oeuvre, the artist fostered a nostalgic relationship to photography that, like in the portrait of Brian & Lyle, was grounded on a great deal of staging. Like with the formalist aesthetics, the pink velvet, zebra wood or the metal chains served such a purpose in an oeuvre where everything was meant to be some kind of disguise. In his art, formalism and censorship were the backside of the same constraint that shaped the work of many other artists before him.

The archival material available at the Getty also supports an interpretation of Mapplethorpe's work as dedicated to the "making of photography". In terms of its materiality, the pieces produced by the artist include every type – from platinum prints to emulsion

Plate 13. Robert Mapplethorpe, *Brian Ridley and Lyle Heeter*, 1979, Gelatin silver print, 35.56 x 35.56 cm, Promised gift of the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation to the J. Paul Getty Trust and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation.



transfers. But they were also elaborated according to methods that transformed the final print into a unique piece, as much as a photograph on glass, for instance. It is therefore mentioned in the GRI publication that in the history of the medium, “early prints are often considered to have more in common with drawings or etchings and engravings than with late-nineteenth- or twentieth-century sharp, glossy photographs [...]”<sup>30</sup>. Some of the portfolios kept in California show very well how Mapplethorpe reworked photographs seeking to match the qualities of prints made in the nineteenth century. In some albums, one also finds images from magazines colored like a photochrom.

This idea of the “making” (one could say “fabrication”) of the photographic object thus refers to the creation of an identity by individuals who, like Mapplethorpe, were unable to identify with pictures that only had a negative overtone. His art can thus also be understood as a “fabricated” (but more free) alternative to the imagery published and censored by authorities. Mapplethorpe fabricated his own pictures of sexuality like others before had invented idealized representations by adding painting on pictures that had been initially produced with a camera.

Many other comparisons can be drawn to the history of photography. Through SM or sensual representations of masculinity, Mapplethorpe’s work emulates that which is on the margins by using a medium that also suffered, at the time of his working, from under-consideration. This deficit on which his oeuvre was built also shaped one of the Foundation’s mandates, dedicating its work, as previously mentioned, to the support of institutions whose scholarship participates in the recognition of photography as an art form as much as painting or sculpture.

The work of the Foundation thus continues the ambitions of an artist who was determined to reassess the place of the photographic medium in art history. For that matter, his art was shaped at a time when photography, as a studied and collected object, saw its status change. The increasing number of exhibitions and auctions, the emergence of a market and the establishment of related collections (such as Samuel Wagstaff’s, of whom Mapplethorpe was the legatee), make apparent a change of focus that was visible among the work of other artists working with photography at the same time<sup>31</sup>. *De facto*, the Mapplethorpe Archive shall appeal to those interested in photography in general, and, in particular, to those interested in the evolution of its status as of the mid-twentieth century.



Plate 14. Samuel J. Wagstaff, *Photograph of a Mapplethorpe mixed-media assemblage (ca 1972) at his Bond Street loft, ca. 1973*, Kodacolor print. Gift of The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation.  
© Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation.



**What importance should the archival material be granted in the future?**

Plate 15. Robert Mapplethorpe, *Untitled (Sam Wagstaff)*, ca. 1973, color Polaroid print. Gift of The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation to the J. Paul Getty Trust and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation.

The central question that emerges with the study of the archival collection concerns the relevance granted to a body of unique work that is a minority compared to the silver gelatin prints. The early work reveals the artist's intentions and, in many ways, is more significant than the hundreds of monochrome editioned prints that were often produced to match the collectors' tastes. But should these unique pieces be more present in exhibitions if they give the (wrong) impression that Mapplethorpe's praxis was balanced in terms of medium and approaches?

No matter what, their presence in shows would help to readjust the scientific discourse about an artist who has been misunderstood, although over-exhibited. In this regard, several explanations can be given. As previously mentioned, if we consider the works exhibited since the 1970s<sup>32</sup>, the pieces that have been most often presented were the silver gelatin prints, which, due to their strong presence, distorted the way his work was read. Additionally, the context in which his art was

studied did not help to highlight the parts of his work that have been less discussed. Indeed, the polemical reception of his art in the United States has transformed his achievements, which have been overshadowed by discussions about the most excessive pieces at the time of the fights between liberals and conservatives – in the context of the well-known Culture Wars. Thus, the limited reading of his work, a factor of exclusion, can also be explained by the explicit content of pieces that were not fully excused by a formal aesthetics in the 1970s. The double phenomenon mentioned herein – the work’s difficult reception due to a polemical context, as well as the disappearance of early and unique pieces in favor of more recent editioned photographs – is a matter of one single logic: namely, the implementation of safe projects limited to formal edited works, which accounts for the preference given to prints that, although explicit, can be read according to conventions understandable by every art historian. This is a very clear trend that has stood out since the controversies that irrupted at the end of the 1980s in the United States.

Already in 1995, the art critic Luc Sante wrote that “Robert Mapplethorpe’s work is difficult to see, which is not the same thing as saying it is difficult to look at. [...] Headlines, slogans, editorials, legal and moral and political judgments, has arisen to

Plate 16. Exhibition view of “Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Medium”, 20/03-31/07/2016, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Los Angeles, USA). Photo: © 2016 Museum Associates / LACMA; Work: © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation.



obstruct the sight”, he said<sup>33</sup>.

The archival collection available at the Getty Research Institute makes it possible to review this problematic. It draws our attention to a body of work that had been produced way before the controversy occurred and, more importantly, is made of the most singular pieces, very different from the ones studied in institutions since Mapplethorpe’s death. Thus, when reading the publication of the GRI, one is struck by the change in tone, which, hopefully, augurs a new approach to studying and receiving his work. If it is still possible to find very formal prints in the exhibitions mounted with the archive (as at LACMA this year – plate 16), they remain unmentioned in the numerous essays published in *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Archive*. Consequently, the study of his oeuvre is literally liberated – free from references to academicism so as to allow a reading that enable one to go back to the essence of his work.

Jonathan MAHO

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1. “Robert Mapplethorpe : The Perfect Medium” (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 15/03-31/07/2016 and LACMA, 20/03-31/07/2016); “Mapplethorpe + Munch” (Oslo: Munch Museum, 06/02-29/05/2016) ; *Robert Mapplethorpe : The Archive* (Ed.: Frances Terpak and Michelle Brunnick, Getty Publications, 2016) ; *Mapplethorpe: Look at the Pictures* (Randy Barbato and Fenton Bailey, Film Manufacturers / HBO, 2016).
2. “*Mapplethorpe + 25*, A Symposium to Commemorate the 25th Anniversary of Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment at the Contemporary Arts Center”, Cincinnati: Contemporary Arts Center, 23-24/10/2016. This Symposium offered to consider the impact of the controversy provoked between 1989 and 1990 by the public funding granted to the exhibition “The Perfect Moment”.
3. “In focus” (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 23/10/2012-24/03/2013); “Robert Mapplethorpe: XYZ” (Los Angeles: LACMA, 21/10/2012-24/03/2013).
4. The gift granted to the Guggenheim comprised of 200 representative works; the museum’s page on the “Robert Mapplethorpe Gift” is available here: <http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/acquisitions/11>. As for the gift to the Kinsey Institute, a description says it consists of 30 “arresting portraits and powerful images documenting the sexual lives of people in Mapplethorpe’s circle in the 1970s and early 1980s.” (<http://newsinfo.iu.edu/news-archive/19348.html>)

5. Mapplethorpe himself died from AIDS-related complications in March of 1989.
6. The collection acquired in 1984 by the Getty comprised of 16,000 articles: 6,000 prints (with 500 works by Nadar), 10,000 postcards and 1,300 books. In 2005, Sam Wagstaff's personal archive also joined the Getty Research Institute's collection. Regarding the Wagstaff Collection at the Getty, see: <http://blogs.getty.edu/iris/treasures-from-the-vault-anticipating-mapplethorpe/>
7. To those projects co-financed by the R. Mapplethorpe Foundation already mentioned (Guggenheim, Scottish National Portrait Gallery), we can add among the Getty's achievements the photographic archives at the Berlinische Galerie in Berlin, for instance. Like the grants given by the Foundation, the Getty supports the implementation of documentary collections and departments dedicated to the medium. In Berlin, it involved the constitution, between 2003 and 2005, of an archive related to East Berlin (with 60,000 prints).
8. According to the statistics of 2006. See: Philip Geftter, "Getty Museum spotlights its photo collection", *International Herald Tribune*, 13/10/2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/13/arts/13iht-geftter.3148844.html>
9. Michael Ward Stout, "Foreword", in Frances Terpak, Michelle Brunnick (Ed.), *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Archive*, Los Angeles, Getty Publications, 2016, p. VI
10. The archives are comprised above all of negatives and contact sheets (granted gradually over 10 years), documents related to studio work (inventory cards, portfolios, printing test, etc.), mails, and ephemera related to exhibitions (posters, invitation cards, installation views, etc.).
11. "I would see a young kid walking down 42nd Street and then go to a magazine storefront - [stores] I didn't know anything about. I became obsessed with going into them and seeing what was inside these magazines. They were all sealed, which made them even sexier somehow, because you couldn't get at them. A kid gets a certain kind of reaction, which of course once you've been exposed to everything you don't get. I got that feeling in my stomach, it's not a directly sexual one, it's something more potent than that. I thought that if I could somehow bring that element into art, if I could somehow retain that feeling, I would be doing something that was uniquely my own." (Mapplethorpe quoted by Ingrid Sischy in: "A Society Artist", in Richard Marshall (Ed.), *Robert Mapplethorpe*, New York / Boston, Whitney Museum of American: New York Graphic Society Books / Little, Brown and company, 1988, p. 81).
12. See the afore quotation.
13. Mapplethorpe quoted by Gerrit Henry in: "Robert Mapplethorpe - collecting quality: an interview", *Print Collector's Newsletter*, vol. 13, n°4, Sept.-Oct. 1982, p. 129
14. The covering elements refer as much to censorship as to the criminalization of a sexuality of which the first representations emerged in reports published by the police. In Mapplethorpe's work, one finds many explicit pieces associated to the loss of identity, with crosses or blindfolds partly covering the face. Many silver gelatin prints were also framed so as to exclude the model's head.
15. If we compare this type of work to those clearly referring to religious iconography, we can also recognize the squared pattern as recalling the grid of the confession window. It is, for instance, the case with the pieces entitled *Paper Bag* (1971), which were made from a pierced bag with a window leaving a picture visible behind a metal mesh.
16. The German Wilhelm von Gloeden (1856-1931) took photos while on retreats in Sicilia at the end of the 19th century. His



work includes young men posing naked in the vein of epebes of the Antic Greece. As noticed by Richard Meyer, posing next to antique ruins in the town of Taormina functioned for Gloeden as “a tactical reclamation of the past” which allowed him and his work to escape censure (R. Meyer, “Inverted Histories”, in Catherine Lord, Richard Meyer (Ed.), *Art & Queer Culture*, London, Phaidon, coll. “FA General”, 2013, p. 17).

17. It is actually Mapplethorpe who introduced Sam Wagstaff to photography. A collector of ancient prints and of magazine images since 1970, the artist convinced his lover to become interested in photography – which Wagstaff did as soon as 1972, the year they met. This common passion, made possible thanks to Wagstaff’s fortune, led to the establishment of one of the first collections dedicated to the medium in the United States. To recall this relation, the J. Paul Getty Museum presented “The Thrill of the Chase: The Wagstaff Collection of Photographs” (15/03-31/07/2016) at the same time as the Mapplethorpe exhibition.

18. The auction catalog from 1982 included many prints by Julia Margaret Cameron, Gustave Le Gray or Alfred Stieglitz. Vernacular photo portfolios were also auctioned on that occasion: this included one portfolio of male nudes entitled *The Male Form in Semi-Nude Condition*. With 47 images of the German bodybuilder Eugen Sandow, this album from the late 19th century account to Mapplethorpe’s interests in the representation of the male body in the history of photography. See: *Photographies from the collection of Robert Mapplethorpe*, Sotheby’s, auction of May 24th, 1982, New York, Sotheby Parke Bernet Inc., 1982.

19. The photographs collected by Mapplethorpe were not only related to the representation of the male body and, more generally, to the imagery that shaped queer sub-cultures in the first part of the 20th century. Thus, daguerreotype portraits and pictures of soldiers from the First World War are also in his collection. The presence

of these kinds of photographs offer insight into an artist who was interested in the presentation modes of photography since the mid-nineteen century, and in fraternities emerging during the war. However, portfolios full of pictures of bodybuilder dominate among the pictures held at the GRI.

20. His first camera was a Polaroid (a SX-70) – a gift from his friend, the artist Sandy Daley, who introduced him to photography in 1970. One year later Mapplethorpe received a second Polaroid camera from the curator for photography at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, John McKendry. Mapplethorpe’s third camera was a Hasselblad gifted by Samuel Wagstaff in 1974 (first used with a camera back for Polaroids, and later for mid-format films). The films first used by Mapplethorpe were granted in 1971 with a fellowship from the Polaroid Corporation.

21. With one remarkable exception: “Polaroids: Mapplethorpe”, mounted at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York in 2008 (03/06-14/09/2008).

22. Patti Smith, intimate of Mapplethorpe when he studied at Pratt Institute, explains in the GRI publication that the artist wasn’t into reading theory books. “He absorbed [them] rather than read”, she wrote (P. Smith, “Picturing Robert”, in Terpak, Brunnick (Ed.), *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Archive*, op. cit., p. 2).

23. *Ibid.*

24. One still finds some interesting writings. In the mails to Samuel Wagstaff, for instance, one discovers that it is Mapplethorpe’s lover who brought to his attention the lack of representations of sexualized male figures in art history. One thus understands that it may have been Wagstaff who pushed Mapplethorpe to focus on it.

25. “Robert [Mapplethorpe] had to work economically”, “making each picture count.” (P. Smith, “Picturing Robert”,

in Terpak, Brunnick (Ed.), *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Archive*, op. cit., p. 4)

26. F. Terpak, M. Brunnick, "Starts Align", in Terpak, Brunnick (Ed.), *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Archive*, op. cit., p. 13

27. *Ibid.*, p. 27. The authors herein mention codes explained, for instance, by Hal Fischer in *Gay semiotics: a photographic study of visual coding among Gay Men* (NFS Press, 1977).

28. F. Terpak, M. Brunnick, "Chelsea Charm", in Terpak, Brunnick (Ed.), *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Archive*, op. cit., p. 47

29. About the relation between fetishism and photography, see: Richard Meyer, "Imagining Sadoomasochism: Robert Mapplethorpe and the Masquerade of Photography" (*Qui parle*, vol. 4, n°1, Fall 1990, pp. 62-78) & Christian Metz: "Photography and Fetish" (*October*, n°34, Fall 1985, pp. 81-90).

30. F. Terpak, M. Brunnick, "Instant Attraction", in Terpak, Brunnick (Ed.), *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Archive*, op. cit., p. 83

31. Regarding the emergence of rich photographic praxis at the time, see: Mary Statzer, *The Photographic Object 1970* (University of California Press, 2016). As for the increasing interest in photography during the same period, see: *Village Voice*, "The photographic collection takes over" (special issue, 1975)

32. Mapplethorpe's first museum exhibitions were presented as of 1978. Prior to that, he was able to show his work three times in commercial galleries only.

33. Luc Sante, "The Unexamined Life", *The New York Review of Books*, 16/11/1995, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1995/11/16/the-unexamined-life/>