

**Palazzo Reale presents**  
***Robert Mapplethorpe. Forms of Desire***  
**Over 200 of the American photographer's most powerful, iconic,  
and unconventional works**

*Milan, 28 January 2026 – Robert Mapplethorpe: Forms of Desire* opens at **Palazzo Reale**, featuring a wide selection of the American photographer's most iconic, powerful and unconventional works, along with a group of previously unseen images. Timed to coincide with the Olympic and Paralympic period, the Milanese exhibition gives visitors a rare chance to encounter the work of one of the 20th century's most original, refined and controversial artists.

Organised by **Comune di Milano | Cultura** and produced by **Palazzo Reale** and **Marsilio Arte** in collaboration with the **Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation** in New York, the exhibition is part of the **Milano Cortina 2026 Cultural Olympiad**. This multidisciplinary, inclusive and wide-reaching programme will bring Italy to life, promoting Olympic values through culture, heritage and sport, ahead of the Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games that Italy will host from 6 to 22 February and from 6 to 15 March 2026 respectively.

**Curated by Denis Curti, the exhibition will be on view in the galleries of Palazzo Reale from 29 January to 17 May 2026.**

**Tommaso Sacchi**, Councillor for Culture of the City of Milan, explains: “*With Robert Mapplethorpe: Forms of Desire, Milan pays tribute to a master who skilfully united the discipline of classical composition with the freedom of contemporary expression. In his images, the human body becomes architecture, culture, and the ideal measure. In constant dialogue with sculpture and the classical tradition, Mapplethorpe's photographs reveal his aspiration to an ideal of absolute beauty, rigorous yet deeply sensual. The exhibition takes on a special resonance in Milan: creative energy is transformed into an aesthetic principle, a harmonious balance between matter and idea, between the ephemeral and the eternal. Hosting this important stage of the project at Palazzo Reale reaffirms Milan's role as the capital of contemporary image-making and as a city capable of embracing the most complex and radical languages of modernity*”.

Born in New York in 1946 and died in Boston at the age of just 42, Mapplethorpe was one of the defining voices of counterculture **from the 1960s to the 1980s**, when creativity became a political act and the arts merged into powerful new languages of freedom and identity.

“*Everything changed when his friend, the filmmaker Sandy Daley, gave Mapplethorpe a Polaroid camera*”, recounts Denis Curti, curator of the exhibition. “*Between 1970 and 1971, with that camera in hand, Robert began exploring self-portraiture, focusing on homoerotic imagery and starting with himself. At the same time, he met Tom of Finland (the pseudonym of Touko Laaksonen), the first artist to give visual form to homosexual aesthetics. A deep friendship developed between them that forever transformed Mapplethorpe's vision. Both explored themes of fetishism, leather and classical beauty applied to the male body. While Tom expressed this through the exaggeration of drawing, Mapplethorpe used photography to convey an almost marble-like precision. Together, they helped turn what had previously been considered purely underground material into art*”.

The focus of the Milan show is on his aesthetic research and his sensual nudes, which stand out for their formal perfection, an Olympian Greek mimesis in which musculature and physical tension are emphasised. The body, sculpted through the masterful use of light and contrast, becomes the vehicle for the sublimation of his artistic inquiry.

Denis Curti continues: "Sam Wagstaff, Mapplethorpe's mentor and partner, gave him his first Hasselblad in 1975, the medium-format camera that allowed him to achieve that sculptural precision and those perfect black-and-whites for which he is now universally known. **The aim of this exhibition is to reposition Robert Mapplethorpe, a self-taught artist, within the highest sphere of photography, among the most important photographers of the 20th century, provocation and censorship aside**".

The creation of such a comprehensive exhibition has been made possible **thanks to the generous collaboration with the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation in New York**, established by the photographer himself in 1988, just a few months before his death, not only to safeguard his work but also to fund medical research and projects linked to the fight against the virus and the treatment of HIV.

The exhibition unfolds through several thematic sections featuring **over 200 works** that trace the entire evolution of Mapplethorpe's visual language, from his early experimental beginnings to his stylistic maturity.

**The first collages.** The exhibition opens with the assemblages created towards the end of the 1960s. In these very rare and seldom exhibited works, in which Mapplethorpe combines magazine clippings, drawings, religious fetishes, clothing and objects, his research into identity and the pleasure of artifice is reflected – experiments the artist undertook with the aim of creating a relationship with the Other.

**Patti Smith and Lisa Lyon.** Significant space is devoted in two sections to the artist's fundamental muses. While the portraits of Patti Smith capture a symbiotic and vulnerable bond that spans decades, each a true and indelible ode to his beloved friend, those of the world champion bodybuilder Lisa Lyon explore an androgynous beauty that transcends gender conventions, celebrating physical power through neoclassical aesthetic parameters.

**Self-portraits and identity.** The self-portrait section reveals a painful yet fluid introspection. Mapplethorpe uses the camera as a mirror of the soul, documenting his own existence from the dandy poses of the 1970s through to the final images etched by illness.

**Portraiture.** The exhibition features the faces of such luminaries as **Andy Warhol, Peter Gabriel, Yoko Ono, and Isabella Rossellini**. For Mapplethorpe, the studio portrait was an encounter between two souls, a "visual altar" where the physical form is transfigured into legend through a meticulous, exacting attention to balance and light.

**Nudes and flowers.** Male and female nudes celebrate classical perfection while simultaneously challenging traditional social conventions. Particularly iconic are his photographs of flowers (calla lilies, orchids, and tulips), captured as passionate visions and "pulsing muscles", poised between the sanctity of form and subtle erotic allusions.

**A dialogue with antiquity.** The exhibition concludes with a section highlighting the bridge between contemporary photography and classical statuary. Mapplethorpe used his Hasselblad 500C to

"thaw" the marble limbs of ancient sculptures, infusing them with a spark of life and rendering the stone as supple as living flesh.

The retrospective *Robert Mapplethorpe: Forms of Desire* marks the second stop of a three-city tour which began in Venice at Le Stanze della Fotografia and will conclude in Rome at the Museo dell'Ara Pacis (running from 29 May to 4 October 2026). Each exhibition follows a distinct line of inquiry, delving into a different facet of Mapplethorpe's artistry.

*"At Marsilio Arte", says **Luca De Michelis**, CEO of Marsilio Editori and Marsilio Arte, "we believe photography to be the universal language of the modern era. Our commitment is rooted in a vision that bridges Marsilio's publishing heritage with the creation of major exhibition projects: from championing the legacies of great photographers to managing premier venues such as **Le Stanze della Fotografia** in Venice. Through a cultural network linking Venice, Milan, and Rome, we aim to transform the exhibition experience into a living dialogue, where the quality of the catalogue and the rigour of the curatorial project converge to bring the extraordinary power of the image to the public".*

The exhibition is further enriched by ***Mapplethorpe Unframed***, a podcast written and hosted by **Nicolas Ballario**, available on **Spotify**, **Apple Music**, and all major platforms. Additionally, a comprehensive **catalogue** published by **Marsilio Arte** charts Mapplethorpe's prolific output and stylistic evolution through 257 works.

*Robert Mapplethorpe: Forms of Desire* has been made possible **through the support of Radio Capital**, the exhibition's official radio partner, and **InViaggio con Corriere** as media partner, with additional support from **Coop Lombardia** and **La Viarte**.

## PRESS CONTACTS

**Exhibition press office** - Giulia Zanichelli: +39 347 4415077; [giulia@giuliazanichelli.it](mailto:giulia@giuliazanichelli.it)  
[ufficiostampa@giuliazanichelli.it](mailto:ufficiostampa@giuliazanichelli.it)

**Marsilio Arte** - Giovanna Ambrosano: + 39 338 4546387; [g.ambrosano@marsilioarte.it](mailto:g.ambrosano@marsilioarte.it)  
[ufficio.stampa@marsilioarte.it](mailto:ufficio.stampa@marsilioarte.it)

## Municipality of Milan

**Head of Communications** - Elena Conenna [elenamaria.conenna@comune.milano.it](mailto:elenamaria.conenna@comune.milano.it)

**Press office** - Silvia Egiziano [silvia.egiziano@comune.milano.it](mailto:silvia.egiziano@comune.milano.it)