

PRESS RELEASE

The Museo dell'Ara Pacis presents the exhibition

ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE THE FORMS OF BEAUTY

From 29 May to 4 October 2026, a retrospective dedicated to Robert Mapplethorpe, master of 20th-century photography, with a unique selection of works and new material exclusive to the Rome exhibition

Rome, 28 May 2026 – The Museo dell'Ara Pacis presents, **from 29 May to 4 October 2026, Robert Mapplethorpe. The Forms of Beauty**: a selection of **more than 200 photographs** by the American master that explore the concept of beauty as absolute perfection and formal rigour.

The exhibition is curated by **Denis Curti** and promoted by **Roma Capitale, Assessorato alla Cultura, Sovrintendenza Capitolina ai Beni Culturali** and **Marsilio Arte**; organised by **Zètema Progetto Cultura** and **Marsilio Arte**, in collaboration with the **Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, New York**. With the support of **Miamo**. Fashion Partner: **Rinascente**. Mobility Partner: **ATAC** and **Ferrovie dello Stato Italiane**. Official Radio: **Radio Capital**. The catalogue is published by **Marsilio Arte**.

Robert Mapplethorpe (New York, 1946-1989) did not photograph subjects: he sculpted space through the lens of his Hasselblad, transforming every shot into an artefact of absolute classicism, defined by geometric vision and the pursuit of perfection. The exhibition, divided into eight sections, centres on the search for pure form, in which human bodies, faces and still lifes are all approached with the same obsessive attention to light and geometry.

Robert Mapplethorpe. The Forms of Beauty is the final chapter of a major touring exhibition that opened at the Stanze della Fotografia in Venice before moving to Palazzo Reale in Milan. The Rome venue brings together the masterworks that have captivated visitors in both cities: portraits of celebrated figures from the worlds of art, literature, music and film, among them **Yoko Ono, Robert Rauschenberg, Donald Sutherland, David Byrne, and Richard Gere**. Other sections are devoted to self-portraits; to his muses **Patti Smith** and **Lisa Lyon**; to flowers and to the most sensual images of **male and female bodies**; and to exploring **the dialogue with antiquity, for which the exhibition also presents two classical sculptures from the Musei Capitolini**: the *Statue of Aphrodite* from the second half of the 1st century BC, and the *Statue of an Athlete*, 1st century AD, after a Greek original of the 5th century BC.

A richly layered journey that begins with a side of Robert Mapplethorpe largely unknown to the general public: **his earliest works**, consisting of **assemblages and three-dimensional collages** made from archival images, cuttings from erotic magazines, religious fetishes and

items of clothing. Provocative works conceived to trigger an emotional response and invite the viewer to complete the meaning of the piece.

In the rooms dedicated to his muses, the exhibition celebrates the symbiotic relationship of love, friendship and complicity with the poet and musician Patti Smith, through a selection of portraits made from their Chelsea Hotel days onwards, shown alongside photographs dedicated to bodybuilder Lisa Lyon. Self-portraits and celebrity portraits are here too, of course, but the heart of the exhibition lie **the flower series and still lifes**: photographs in which natural elements are isolated and examined with obsessive attention to light, transformed into geometric forms and artefacts of absolute classicism. Nature finds its counterpart in the body, in the most celebrated and sensual images dedicated to the anatomical study of **male and female forms**, where human flesh is immortalised by the camera as sculpted marble. The exhibition closes, fittingly, by exploring **Mapplethorpe's deep connection with Italy**, where a constant visual dialogue between the contemporary, classicism, the baroque and archaeology reveals how **ancient art and modern photography can coexist in perfect harmony**.

“There is a persistent misunderstanding that has always surrounded the work of Robert Mapplethorpe: the idea that he was a photographer of provocation, an artist of scandal tied to the New York underground of the seventies and eighties. Strip his images of their most explicit and geometrically disruptive content, and what remains is pure classicism. Mapplethorpe was not after scandal for its own sake: he was after the perfection of form. Whether photographing a flower or the sculptural body of Lisa Lyon, his eye was governed by the same rules: an obsession with balance, symmetry, top light and a compositional rigour rooted in Renaissance sculpture. His real strength lay in applying the order and harmony of classical statuary to subjects considered, at the time, provocative. Mapplethorpe did not want to shock the world: he wanted to elevate the human body – every body – to a sacred and monumental dimension. This is why, decades on, his photographs do not feel dated in the way that much protest art of that era does: because classical beauty is timeless, and Mapplethorpe was, first and foremost, a consummate classical photographer”, explains curator **Denis Curti**.

The exhibition's most distinctive element is **a body of material presented only here in Rome**: photographs taken during Mapplethorpe's stays in Italy, between Capri and Naples, encouraged by his Neapolitan gallerist Lucio Amelio, who invited him to participate in *Terrae Motus* following the earthquake that struck Naples in 1980. Mapplethorpe threw himself into the project alongside more than 60 other artists, among them Warhol, Cragg, Cucchi, Fabro, Kiefer, Kounellis, Paolini, Pistoletto, Rauschenberg, Schifano, Schnabel, Twombly and Vedova. Amelio wanted to transform the catastrophe into creative energy: *“It fell to the artists, to all of us, to be bold: to tear down the barriers and shift the rubble”*.

The photographs reveal an intimate and previously little-documented connection with Italy, a journey through the folds of time in which art is not confined to museums but lives in the piazzas and streets of its cities. A selection conceived as a conversation with the Ara Pacis itself, creating a compelling visual short-circuit between classical statuary and contemporary photography.

“The Mapplethorpe exhibition in Rome marks an important milestone in the development of Marsilio Arte, which has identified photography as one of the central languages of its contemporary exhibition programme, beginning with the Stanze della Fotografia in Venice. In recent years we have chosen to invest in the narrative power of this medium, capable of engaging with audiences in a way that is immediate, profound and universal. Our renewed

collaboration with Roma Capitale and the Sovrintendenza Capitolina ai Beni Culturali, with an exhibition dedicated to an absolute master such as Mapplethorpe, reflects a commitment that has long defined our approach: the desire to produce and present, in the most prestigious contexts, major international cultural projects that are not simply retrospectives, but offer fresh perspectives, original curatorial approaches and a genuine dialogue with the location, the museum and the city. This is our promise to audiences and our vision for the future of our exhibition programme”, says Luca De Michelis, CEO of Marsilio Editori and Marsilio Arte

Accompanying the exhibition is a the **podcast *Mapplethorpe Unframed*, written and presented by Nicolas Ballario** – available on Spotify, Apple Music and all major platforms – and a catalogue published by **Marsilio Arte**, exploring the breadth of Mapplethorpe's output and the evolution of his visual language through 257 works.

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