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Mapplethorpe's Artistic Twin



Musée Rodin

A new exhibit pairs the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe with the sculptures of Auguste Rodin, showing that their work and sensibility was often eerily similar, almost clone-like.

In the now 25 years since Robert Mapplethorpe's death, there have been an almost tiring number of exhibitions regrouping his series on flowers, sex, celebrities, and so on into predictable narratives. But this spring in Paris, the Mapplethorpe hoopla is taking an interesting turn. In a veritable Mapplethorpe renaissance, two exhibitions have launched in tandem dedicated to his work. The Grand Palais is displaying a 250-image, non-chronological Mapplethorpe retrospective spanning his entire career (and running through July 14). Meanwhile, across the Seine, another new expo boasts a more novel approach: it situates Mapplethorpe's work against that of iconic French sculptor Auguste Rodin (held at his namesake museum from April 8-September 21). It's an "entirely different, but complementary" way to see Mapplethorpe's work, Michael Stout, President of the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, said rather admiringly. Though their chosen media were different, Mapplethorpe's work seen here (120 photographs on loan from the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation) is so attuned to the sculptural he seems to have dipped his hands in Rodin's clay.

The scenography makes smart use of what is in fact a relatively small exhibition space: a corridor and a single room. With glass panels that double as dividers, Mapplethorpe's images are hung adjacent to clusters of Rodin sculptures. (There are 50 sculptures in total, mainly presented in glass vitrines.) Staged in a way that is at once packed and airy, the transparency of the glass structures make the associations stronger, be it overt juxtapositions or glimpses out of the corner of one's eye. The silhouettes seem to reverberate across the room, in a mildly hall-of-mirrors effect.

Billed by the curators as a “dialogue,” the show is ultimately more like two voices communing in completely matched unison. It’s the *Parent Trap* effect in a museum setting (with a time machine). The concord of the two artists’ visions is astonishing: the crouching and contorting forms are positively clone-like at times. Even the way each artist dealt with texture seems to be shared: the smoothness of firm bodies and the wildness of hair, with equivalent fixations on curves—hips and foreheads and necks and arched hands.

The echoes are clearly felt despite the fact that they worked a full century apart. Auguste Rodin (1840-1917) and Robert Mapplethorpe (1946-1989) had no contextual overlap: the two shared neither epoch nor nationality. Mapplethorpe never cited Rodin as an influence, though apparently he was prone to roaming the sculpture halls of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Yet it seems obvious in situ that they shared some vision of how to portray and visualize the human form, in a how-did-no-one-notice-this-before kind of way.

By measuring the photography against the sculpture, the curators want the viewer to look at both media with a fresh perspective. But in fact the effect is closer to creating a blur, all the more so with the themes common to the work of both artists selected by the curators: Movement, A Taste for Detail, Eroticism, Drapery.

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Right in the opening corridor, there’s a Mapplethorpe image of two men holding hands, their arms grazing across the body of a woman between them and masking her lady parts with their grasp (*Ken and Lydia and Tyler*, 1985). Next door, a Mapplethorpe photograph of a trio of taut bodies fit together like nesting dolls, framed shoulder to knee (*Derrick Cross and Friends*, 1982). As a counterpart, Rodin’s *The Three Faunesses* (1896), one version in bronze, another in plaster, are a parallel-universe trio: three forms clasping each other in a similar outline to Mapplethorpe’s images. An exhibition panel explicates that in Mapplethorpe’s work, “the movement is suspended and the man becomes sculpture.” Indeed. A Mapplethorpe portrait, from the pubis up, of *Michael St. Clair* (1986) shows the subject with his chest thrust out, while his arms are wholly hidden behind his torso. It’s immediately evocative of Rodin’s plaster *Large Torso of the Falling Man*, said to be *Louis XIV* (1904), a ripped, armless upper body depicted in great detail from pubis to neck that is situated nearby. The framing is similar, and in both, the depiction of the male body is that of a graceful carving.

Mapplethorpe is infamous for his raw depictions of sexuality, but Rodin was no prude. There may not have been a gay underground in his day, but he sculpted some Sapphic action, as exemplified by *Assemblage: Female Figure Upside Down on Another* (1900). And his small-scale sculpture *Avarice and Lust* (1887) embodies the two sins via a masculine form entangled with a female one. It may not be an exact visual mirror of Mapplethorpe’s *Lisa Lyon* (1981), in which his subject is lifting her skirt to show off her pubic hair, or *Cock* (1982), an erect penis sprung to action, but Rodin did not shy away from genitalia, nor from depicting naked desire.



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One notable difference in the exhibition was that Mapplethorpe often named his image subjects, whereas Rodin just cited their gender (barring two Balzac sculptures). It's an interesting divergence. Though Rodin may well have known his models, they remain nameless representations of "a" body. Mapplethorpe often gives shout-outs to the specific forms studied, even if they're frequently faceless, and not revealing much "inner" personality. Still, they're not simply bodies, but forms *embodied* by so-and-so. Some subjects were lovers, some were models hand-picked off the street, some known personalities (i.e. choreographer Bills T. Jones). Even Mapplethorpe's depiction of himself is assertive. It may be Rodin's museum, but Mapplethorpe's self-portraits bookend the exhibition entrance and exit, and his mythology seems to somehow loom larger than Monsieur Rodin.

This display of two influential and inadvertently connected men shows them synchronized so perfectly, it seems we learn little except how weirdly analogous their work was. But the bigger takeaway seems to be that artists—be they working in 1880 or 1980 or 2080—will ceaselessly be fascinated by and fixated on the body. The way its contours can be manipulated, and it remains, always, somehow surprising.