

## Robert Mapplethorpe: "Enfant Terrible" of the Photographic World

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Robert Mapplethorpe (4 November 1946 - 9 March 1989) is widely known as a controversial figure in the contemporary art world. His prolific photographic career spanned nearly twenty years beginning with his first solo exhibition in October 1970, at the age of 23. Mapplethorpe's unusually high degree of recognition as an artist and photographer is due in part to the controversy that has surrounded his work, mostly subsequent to his death in 1989.

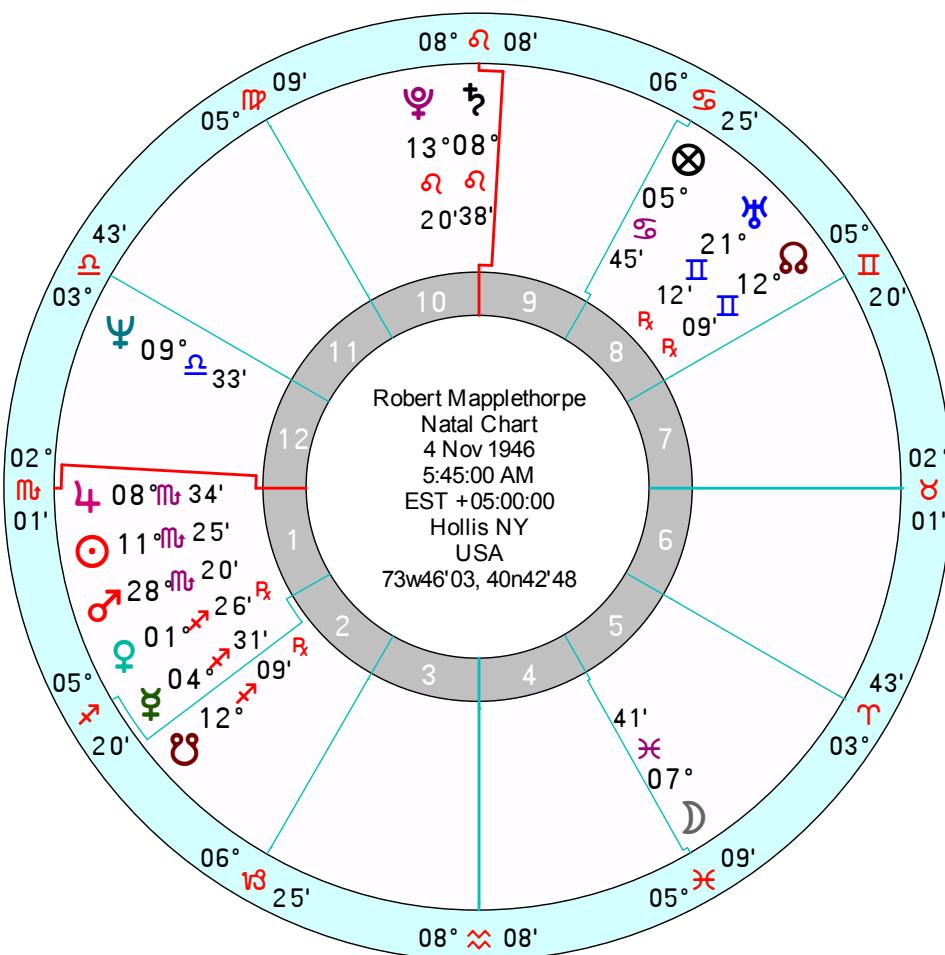


Figure 1

An intimate and candid account of Mapplethorpe's life is revealed in "Mapplethorpe: A Biography" by Patricia Morrisroe. She was personally selected by the artist to document his life and her book stands as the definitive exploration of the life and times of one of the most celebrated and provocative photographers of the twentieth century. Her book chronicles the development of the man and his art through four decades of the American cultural scene: his troubled childhood in Floral Park, Queens; periods in his life as a catholic schoolboy, military

cadet, free-spirited hippie and sexual explorer; his intense relationship with poet and rock star Patti Smith; his introduction to the New York art world; his love affair with patrician art collector Sam Wagstaff; his obsession with New York's sexual underworld; his emergence as a major force on the international photography scene; and finally, his desperate struggle to reap the benefits of fame before he succumbed to AIDS.

Astrologically, Mapplethorpe has a complex and strongly Scorpionic chart (*Figure 1.*) The fixed water sign of Scorpio holds claim to the Sun, Mars, Jupiter and his Ascendant. Here we have an intense and passionate individual who lived life on the edge and was ruthless in his pursuit of fame and fortune. The pronounced conjunction of the Sun and Jupiter resonated strongly in his life. Ebertin describes **Sun/Jupiter** as "*creative power, the capability to perform record achievements.*" Also, "*the striving for possessions and power, advancement in life, recognition, success in the material sphere*". Fortunate connections and events enabled Mapplethorpe to attain, although not necessarily maintain, the status and success he often craved.

For Mapplethorpe the route to success was there, yet this favourable and influential conjunction, was often at cross-purposes with the culmination of **Saturn, Pluto and the Midheaven in Leo squaring the benevolent Sun/Jupiter**. The result is multiple aspects, by square/conjunction and midpoint combinations that, on one hand, provide the means to success, but on the other, deny the rewards due as a result of hard work and effort. This enforced "*three steps forward and two steps backward*" manner of advancing in life must have been a source of great frustration to the notoriously impatient artist. It also goes some way to flesh out some of the hidden and debauched features of his personality.

The angles, particularly the Midheaven, play a significant role in Mapplethorpe's chart. Saturn, as previously mentioned, is tightly conjunct it, Jupiter squares it by slightly over half a degree and Uranus semi-squares it within two degrees. Robert Hand writes, "*planets close to an angle can stand out from all other planets and become dominant themes in a person's life*". Saturn conjunct the Midheaven outlines the tenacious and single-minded adherence he applied to his personal objectives, aims and aspirations. Ebertin writes, "*the necessity to struggle against difficulties or odds, the inclination to occupy oneself with one's own personality, inhibited development*". As Saturn is also conjunct Pluto, it is not surprising as to why Morrisroe sometimes paints a selfish, egoistic and self-destructive streak into Mapplethorpe's character. Cold-heartedness or callousness were not foreign to him - and his treatment of others often left a lot to be desired.

By harnessing and directing the **Saturn/Pluto** energies into his work and vocation, Mapplethorpe had "*the capability to make record achievements of the highest possible order*". Ebertin also suggests "*martyrdom*" and it is interesting to note his obsession for a time with religious themes such as crucifixion and iconography. The simplicity of his composition also had religious undercurrents.

Mapplethorpe did not formally train as a photographer. From 1963 to 1969 he studied at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, NY. He first majored in advertising design, later switching to graphic arts (drawing, painting and sculpture). His introduction to photography was through the use of polaroids. Once he discovered this medium he became fascinated with the history of photography and with its technical potential. He immersed himself in a study of works by its great exponents. This was facilitated by his connection with Sam Wagstaff, a wealthy art collector and former museum curator who became his lover, and later his friend. They met in 1972, while transiting Saturn was conjuncting Mapplethorpe's Moon's Node, and transiting Node sesquisquared it; an indication of a significant contact with an older and important

person. Wagstaff supported and encouraged the young artist, who had by then determined to concentrate on photography.

In 1976 Mapplethorpe began an intensely productive period concentrating on flowers and portraits. At the height of his career Mapplethorpe received up to \$US10,000 for a single portrait sitting. At a sociological level, **Sun/Jupiter** indicates "*wealthy or prominent people, or those higher up in the social scale than oneself*". This becomes evident in the subjects that Mapplethorpe photographed, which included a wide cross-section of NY artists, socialites, actors, models, producers and body-builders, etc. He adored the physical form, and particularly the sculptured physiques of well-muscled African American men.

Some of his photographs were praised for their simplicity and beautiful composition, others condemned for their dealings with taboo or explicit aspects of sexuality. The graphic scenes portrayed in his S&M photographs from the 1970's only comprise a small part of his substantial body of work, but it is these pictures that define his contribution as an artist to most people. And, now, even years after his death, wherever his work is exhibited it is accompanied with outcries of moral outrage. Mapplethorpe explored the extremities of the New York gay scene and documented it for all time. He recognised that it was a period that had a time limit on itself and for him also. The photographs from that period can no longer be taken because the scene has changed so dramatically with the advent of AIDS and also society's increasing tolerance towards homosexuals.

For an insight into his creative process we should look at the energy that drove and motivated him. His Sun structure is quite revealing:

**Sun = Pluto/Midheaven:** "*The desire to obtain power and authority. The power of one's own personality in the attainment of success in life*".

**Sun = Jupiter/Pluto:** "*The successful use of extraordinary physical and mental powers, the creation of magical effects*".

**Sun = Saturn/Pluto:** "*Physical toil and over-exertion, sparing no pains in one's work*".

Mapplethorpe was ambitious and driven. He was determined to make a name for himself, and it is fair to say some of his portraits are exquisitely beautiful, even magical. The photographer/artist is evident in the exact **Neptune = Sun/Moon** midpoint; his eye for composition and artistic genius comes from the conjunctions of Mercury and Venus, and Venus and Mars, and the midpoints **Venus = Sun/Uranus = Mercury/Mars = Uranus/Pluto**, of which Ebertin suggests, "*the wings of artistic genius and inspiration, artistic creativity and the desire to bring the new into art*."

The above combinations also explain his seemingly insatiable sexual appetite and penchant for quick casual encounters. One of his deepest regrets was that he never achieved personal happiness and satisfaction in his personal relationships. This can be partly attributed to the **Neptune = Sun/Moon** midpoint - *the undermining of associations through misunderstandings, deceptions and unreliability*.

By 1986 Mapplethorpe was aware of the fact that he was HIV positive. This coincided with the beginning of his mid-life crisis transits commencing with Uranus opposing natal Uranus, and Pluto squaring his Midheaven and Saturn conjunction. He knew that he had a serious, life-threatening disease, and he began a vain attempt to restore and improve his health.

**Of Pluto = Saturn/Midheaven**, Ebertin says, "*the attainment of success in life only under great difficulties, a fateful struggle, a struggle ordained by destiny.*"

Pluto continued to assault his Saturn and Midheaven in 1987; his condition worsened and Sam Wagstaff died of the illness that same year. In late 1987 Pluto moved on to his **Sun/Saturn** midpoint and further inhibited his creativity and vitality, but not his will to live, which he sustained to the bitter end. By 1988 Pluto was exactly conjunct his Sun. He finally succumbed to the disease at 6am EST on March 9, 1989 in Boston, MA. Transiting Saturn semi-squared his Mars, transiting Mars opposed his Mars, and Solar Arc directed Pluto semi-squared his Sun.

### **References:**

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