

The Man Who Made Mapplethorpe

By PHILIP GEFTER
Published: April 24, 2007

Correction Appended

Tall, handsome and rich would be one way to describe Sam Wagstaff, a legendary figure in the international art world of the 1970s and '80s. Urbane is another. Iconoclastic, certainly. And glamorous, without a doubt. But the word that keeps cropping up in "Black White + Gray," a new documentary about Mr. Wagstaff by a first-time director, James Crump, that will be shown at the [Tribeca Film Festival](#) next week, is "visionary."

[Enlarge This Image](#)



Francesco Scavullo Foundation

The collector Sam Wagstaff, left, and the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe in a 1974 portrait by Francesco Scavullo.

Mr. Wagstaff was one of the first private art collectors to start buying photographs as early as 1973, long before there was a serious market for them. His photography collection came to be regarded not only for its scholarship. It was also original and unorthodox, and turned out to be extremely valuable. Mr. Wagstaff sold it to the [J. Paul Getty Museum](#) in 1984 for \$5 million, a fortune at the time, establishing that institution's collection of photographs, now among the finest in the world.

But the Wagstaff mystique deepens around his relationship to Robert Mapplethorpe, his lover, to whom he was also mentor and career impresario. Mr. Mapplethorpe, 25 years his junior, was the bad boy photographer who scandalized the [National Endowment for the Arts](#) with his formal and highly aestheticized

homoerotic photographs, which were given a retrospective at the [Whitney Museum of Art](#) in 1988, securing his legacy. Still, obscenity charges were brought against the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati when it mounted an exhibition of Mr. Mapplethorpe's work in 1990. Mr. Wagstaff himself affectionately called him "my sly little pornographer."

Mr. Mapplethorpe, a young artist from a working-class neighborhood in Queens, was making elaborate constructions with beaded jewelry when he and the patrician Mr. Wagstaff, who had been a well-known curator at the [Wadsworth Atheneum](#) Museum of Art in Hartford, met at a party in Manhattan in the early 1970s.

Throughout the film, interviews with more than a dozen people who knew them both provide an intimate and anecdotal picture of their lives, both individually and together. In particular, Patti Smith, the poet and rock star, offers tender descriptions of her friendship with both men.

Ms. Smith's friendship with Mr. Mapplethorpe began in 1967 when they were both art

SIGN IN TO E-MAIL OR SAVE THIS

PRINT

SHARE

ARTICLE TOOLS SPONSORED BY

Now Playing in SELECT THEATRES

[More Articles in Movies »](#)

Sophisticated Shopper Deals by E-Mail

Sign up for shopping deals from NYTimes.com's premier advertisers.

Sign Up

[See Sample](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)

American Ballet Theatre
2007 Fall Season opens next week at New York City Center!
Call 212.581.1212 or [click here to order tickets!](#)

Photo © Lois Greenfield 2007

students at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. They were living together near the Chelsea Hotel in the early 1970s when Mr. Mapplethorpe first brought Mr. Wagstaff to meet her. “Sam came in and seemed totally at home in my mess,” she recalls. “We liked each other immediately. He had such a great sense of humor and had such a nonpretentious and nonsanctimonious spiritual air.”

Dominick Dunne met Mr. Wagstaff when they were both young men in New York, and he talks about the dichotomy between Mr. Wagstaff’s life in the closet in the 1950s and his more public profile later with Mr. Mapplethorpe. “Sam Wagstaff was the New York deb’s delight,” he says in the film. “He was probably one of the handsomest men I ever saw. Tall and slender and aristocratic-looking. And he was funny. And he was nice. And the girls went absolutely nuts over him.”

Gordon Baldwin, a curator at the Getty Museum, recalls in the film that Mr. Wagstaff was proud of his aristocratic background and says Mr. Wagstaff told him more than once that his family had owned the farms where the Metropolitan Museum is now, at the time of the Revolution. “It was pretty clear that he came from a starchy background,” he said.

Still, Mr. Dunne notes how oppressive the taboos about homosexuality were for Mr. Wagstaff in the 1950s. Having had a privileged childhood on Central Park South and attended Hotchkiss with classmates like Dean Witter, of the brokerage firm, and Malcolm Baldrige, future secretary of commerce under [President Reagan](#), Mr. Wagstaff seemed destined to become part of New York society.

He didn’t like talking about that period in his life, Ms. Smith remembers. “He would say things with a painful tone in his voice about the suppression and oppression of a homosexual man in the 1950s,” she said. “I never asked him about it because it was the one area I could really sense pain in him.”

Mr. Wagstaff certainly made up for lost time. In the early 1970s, he “became an eager participant in the excesses of the age,” says Joan Juliet Buck, the writer who narrates the film with a lofty voice, reading adulatory, if not lapidary, biographical prose that delivers the facts about Mr. Wagstaff’s life in a tone aimed at, well, posterity. He was “always in rebellion against his conservative and upper class background,” she notes.

“He often held drug parties in his Bowery apartment,” Ms. Buck says at one point, as if holding her nose at the very idea. “He used drugs for sex and he liked the alternative perspectives they offered.”

Philippe Garner, a director of Christie’s in London and a friend of both men, says in the film: “My guess is that Robert gave Sam the courage to explore areas of his personality, to savor a darker kind of lifestyle than he would have done on his own. He unlocked a dark genie within him.”

Despite Mr. Wagstaff’s sybaritic activities and his relationship with Mr. Mapplethorpe, unconventional at the time, he managed to amass a world-class photography collection and also to shape the other man’s career. From the humble Polaroids Mr. Mapplethorpe was making when they first met to his more provocative and refined photographs, which now command \$300,000 a print at auction, the influence of Mr. Wagstaff’s taste and aesthetic sensibility on his work is undeniable.

The film’s title, “Black White + Gray,” has several meanings. Most, if not all, of the photographs in the Wagstaff collection were black and white. Most of Mr. Mapplethorpe’s best-known work is black and white too, and many of his nude subjects were African-American.

MOST POPULAR

E-MAILED BLOGGED SEARCHED MOVIES

1. [Paul Krugman: Gore Derangement Syndrome](#)
2. [Maureen Dowd: A Mock Columnist, Amok](#)
3. [Editorial Observer: Politeness and Authority at a Hilltop College in Minnesota](#)
4. [Nine Lives: What Cats Know About War](#)
5. [Frank Rich: The ‘Good Germans’ Among Us](#)
6. [Patients Warned as Maker Halts Sale of Heart Implant Part](#)
7. [Qargha Journal: A Golf Course Where Water Is No Hazard](#)
8. [Thomas L. Friedman: Who Will Succeed Al Gore?](#)
9. [Money in New York: The Sy Empire](#)
10. [High Tea, India Style](#)

[Go to Complete List »](#)



The New York Times **OPINION**
nytimes.com/opinion

See Rutu Modan's latest column "Chez Maurice"
Also in Opinion:
[Which came first, the chicken or the egg?](#)
[What's on the Opinionator's mind?](#)
[The economics of gold-digging](#)

ADVERTISEMENTS

All the news that's fit to personalize.

All the news that's fit to **personalize.**
My Times ▶

The New York Times STORE



Elizabeth Taylor 1970
[Buy Now](#)

But more specifically, the title refers to an exhibition called “Black, White and Gray” organized by Mr. Wagstaff as a curator at the Wadsworth Atheneum in the early 1960s. The show included works by Barnett Newman, [Ellsworth Kelly](#), Ad Reinhardt and [Jasper Johns](#), among others.

The show “sent shock waves through popular culture and heralded fashion’s embrace of Minimalist aesthetics,” Ms. Buck says in her narration. At the time Vogue magazine published an eight-page feature on James Galanos’s couture, with Mr. Wagstaff’s exhibition as the backdrop.

“Back in the 1960s, curators like Sam, Frank O’Hara and Henry Geldzahler were much more like artists than a lot of curators on the scene are today,” Raymond Foye, the publisher of Hanuman Books, an independent press, says in the film.

“He had a very special antenna to find what was new, what was good, what resonated with him,” says Clark Worswick, a curator and photography scholar.

The film’s narration tends to cast Mr. Wagstaff in nothing less than Olympian terms: “His aesthetic underscores an unequal vision grounded in passion, intelligence, sexuality and clever financial speculation,” Ms. Buck recites as rare self-portraits by Mr. Wagstaff are shown. “He had few rivals in his time. And none at all today.”

The intimate, never-before-shown photographs of Mr. Wagstaff and Mr. Mapplethorpe throughout “Black White + Gray” make great social anthropology, and the interviews with Ms. Smith, Mr. Dunne and others give depth and warmth to an otherwise stiff, if earnest, portrait.

Both Mr. Wagstaff and Mr. Mapplethorpe died of AIDS, Mr. Wagstaff in 1987 and Mr. Mapplethorpe in 1989.

One snippet of footage shows a shy and endearing Ms. Smith reciting a short poem of hers in an interview on the BBC in 1971: “New York is the thing that seduced me. New York is the thing that formed me. New York is the thing that deformed me. New York is the thing that perverted me. New York is the thing that converted me. And New York is the thing that I love too.”

Written before she met Mr. Wagstaff, this little gem nevertheless proves to be a fitting coda to the film — and to the man.

“Black White + Gray” shows next Tuesday at the Pace Schimmel Center, 3 Spruce Street, at Park Row, Lower Manhattan. Tickets and schedule: tribecafilmfestival.org or (866) 941-3378.

Correction: April 25, 2007

An article in The Arts yesterday about a new documentary on the photography collector Sam Wagstaff misstated the name of the museum that was charged with obscenity in 1990 when it showed work by Robert Mapplethorpe, Mr. Wagstaff’s protégé and lover. It was the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati — not the Cincinnati Museum of Art.

[More Articles in Movies »](#)

[Need to know more? 50% off home delivery of The Times.](#)

Tips

To find reference information about the words used in this article, double-click on any word, phrase or name. A new window will open with a dictionary definition or encyclopedia entry.

Past Coverage

[Buoyed by Hollywood and Camera Sales, Sony Doubles Profit \(July 27, 2007\)](#)

[Wallace Seawell, 90, a Master at Shooting Stars \(June 2, 2007\)](#)

[FILM; Starring New York, City of Grit and Glamour \(May 25, 2007\)](#)

[The Man Who Made Mapplethorpe; A Film Trains a Lens on the Photography Collector Sam Wagstaff \(April 24, 2007\)](#)

Related Searches

[Motion Pictures](#)

[Photography](#)

[Mapplethorpe, Robert](#)