

A black and white photograph of a classical marble sculpture of a female torso. The sculpture is shown from the neck down to the thighs, with the head and arms missing. It features prominent breasts, a defined navel, and a pubic area. The marble has a weathered, pitted texture. The lighting is dramatic, coming from the upper left, casting deep shadows on the right side of the body and highlighting the contours of the left side. The background is solid black.

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Robert Mapplethorpe
Female Torso
1978

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Robert Mapplethorpe (1946 – 1989)

Female Torso, 1978

Silver gelatin photograph

50.8 x 40.6 cm;

10 x 16 in.

Provenance

Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, New York;
Private collection, Belgium.

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This photograph presents a fragmentary marble statue of a female nude, isolated against an unmodulated black ground. The figure survives only as a torso; the head, arms, and lower legs are lost, and the marble surface is weathered by age. Raised on a slender metal support and lit from the left, the truncated body emerges from deep shadow, so that the swell of the breasts, the soft articulation of the abdomen and the gentle turn of the hips are rendered almost entirely through gradations of light. Mapplethorpe records the antique fragment not only as an archaeological document but an autonomous study in form, surface, and tone.

Made in 1978, the image belongs to Mapplethorpe's sustained engagement with classical sculpture, a preoccupation that runs in parallel with his photographs of the living body. He often described photography itself as a means of making sculpture and the perfection of form he associated with the Western sculptural canon remained his stated ambition. By isolating the marble torso against the black and lighting it with the same measure of control he brought to his nudes, he deliberately blurs the boundary between flesh and stone. Here, the carved body assumes the presence of a living model, just as his living models are frequently posed to evoke carved figures.

The truncated nude recalls the long classical tradition of the Venus or Aphrodite torso, in which the loss of head and limbs concentrates the eye upon the modelling of the body itself. For Mapplethorpe, the fragment's incompleteness functions not as a deficiency but as a formal resource, its broken contours and pitted surface intensifying the play of light across the marble. The composition was chosen to open his 1989 volume *Some Women*, where it stands as a classical preface to a sequence of portraits of contemporary women.

Produced in an edition of ten, *Female Torso* exemplifies the refined black-and-white printing for which Mapplethorpe was celebrated in the final decade of his career. Impressions of the subject are preserved in major public collections, among them the J. Paul Getty Museum and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, both of which received works through the gift of the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. The photograph remains one of the most distilled expressions of the artist's lifelong dialogue between photography and sculpture.