The Italian Presepe: Cultural Landscape of the Soul is an exploration of an important form of traditional religious Italian diorama art depicting the Nativity. In 2012, Sarah Stanbury, a medievalist and member of the Holy Cross English Department, approached me about the exciting project on which she and Boston-based photographer Margot Balboni were collaborating. From our first meeting it was abundantly clear the material they had been studying and photographing was incredibly powerful and the basis of a very meaningful exhibition.

Italians date their rich history of the presepe to 1223, when St. Francis reenacted the Nativity in Greccio. Through the centuries the presepe has developed a history deeply entwined with Italian Christian tradition, art and culture. The Italian presepe is a widely practiced art form, encompassing in three dimensions elements of sculpture, painting and set design. As Balboni notes, the story is always the same, but the personal act of making a presepe continuously re-energizes the story of the birth of Christ.

Each exhibition mounted at the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Art Gallery begins with the imagination and eye of an artist, as is the case here. We are grateful to Margot Balboni for sharing her vision, energy and hard work with us through her beautiful photographs, both in the exhibition and in the pages of this catalogue. We are also deeply indebted and grateful to Sarah Stanbury for bringing the idea of this exhibition to my attention, and for her contribution to the selection of images, artifacts, and the illuminating essay contained in this catalogue. I would like to thank Rev. Philip Boroughs, S.J., president of the College, for his continued and enthusiastic support of the Gallery’s exhibition and educational program. To Iris Cantor and the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Foundation we are most grateful for their sustained support and encouragement over three decades.

This exhibition is the result of many hours of work by individuals associated with the Gallery and from the lending institutions. I would like to express my thanks to Rachel Delphia, the Alan G. and Jane A. Lehman Curator of Decorative Arts and Design at the Carnegie Museum of Art, for shepherding the loan of several key presepe figures to the exhibition, as well as Elizabeth Tufts Brown, Carnegie’s Associate Registrar, for her immense assistance. Thanks to Theatre Department faculty member Barbara Craig and Savannah Plante’16 for their wonderfully inventive Holy Cross presepe.

We are grateful to the following lenders to the exhibition: Nick Capasso, Director and Catherine Hunter, Associate Consulting Curator, Fitchburg Art Museum; Carrie McGinnis, Preservation Librarian and Registrar, Houghton Library, Harvard University; Bethany Sheffer, Curator and Registrar, Knights of Columbus Museum, New Haven, CT; Wendy Watson, Curator and Linda Delone Best, Collections Manager, Mount Holyoke College Art Museum; and Alfred J. Walker. Many thanks go to Paula Rosenblum, Assistant Director, Cantor Art Gallery for organizational support for the exhibition and Timothy Johnson for his installation expertise. And finally, to Ernesto Aparicio, great appreciation for the masterful design of this catalogue.

ROGER D. HANKINS, Director
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