In 2005, I was a visiting artist at the American Academy in Rome. One day, as I was looking for the Temple of Romulus, I stumbled into a room at Cosma Damiano where I discovered, illuminated in the dark, a dramatic eighteenth-century Neapolitan presepe crowded with elaborately clothed gesticulating figures. As I continued on my search for the Temple, the kernel of that theatrical vision stayed with me. In 2011, when Sarah Stanbury mentioned she was on research leave, I suggested we go to Rome and look at presepi. Thus began our three-year collaboration. A journey that was very much driven by the artists, collectors, historians and curators we met along the way.

The Italian presepe is a vibrant form of installation art practiced all over Italy by everyone from school children to the most highly trained artists. Each presepe, a miniature cabinet of memory, is a palimpsest of Italian art and culture. The story is always the same, but the personal act of making a presepe continuously reenergizes the story.

This exhibition, while not presuming to present the definitive statement on the Italian presepe, offers a series of encounters in three regions where distinctive vernaculars have developed: Rome, Naples and Puglia. My photographs, enhanced with antique frames and juxtaposed with vitrines, historic maps and etchings, seek to create the atmosphere of discovery that Sarah and I experienced as the presepe trail unfolded. The generous loans from the Carnegie Museum of Art, the Knights of Columbus Museum and Al Walker’s wonderful scarabattolo all add immeasurable depth to the conversation. Barbara Craig’s inventive set utilizing the figures the Mellon students acquired on their 2013 research trip delightfully brings the heart of the Italian presepe to the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Art Gallery, College of the Holy Cross.
MARGOT BALBONI

Margot Balboni is a cultural landscape photographer and independent curator. Her work has been exhibited nationally and is in many private and public collections, such as the Farnsworth Museum and the Boston Athenaeum. She has received a Traveling Fellowship from the Museum School, was an Artist in Residence at the American Academy in Rome, and received the Lois Nellie Gill Award from the Ucross Foundation. From her work on the “Big Dig” and the transformation of Boston to her aerial alphabet of the American Made Landscape, she has been photographing “time and place” for the past 25 years.

SARAH STANBURY

Sarah Stanbury, Murray Professor of the Arts and Humanities at the College of the Holy Cross and a 2010 Guggenheim Fellow, has published widely on visual culture in the late Middle Ages. Her books include Seeing the Guaim Poet: Description and the Act of Perception (1991) and The Visual Object of Desire in Late Medieval England (2007). She has published three collaborative essay collections: Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory; Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature; and Women’s Space: Patronage, Place, and Gender in the Medieval Church, as well as an edition of the Middle English poem Pearl. With art historian Virginia Ragunin she also created the website Mapping Margery Kempe in the Medieval World.

The Italian Presepe: Cultural Landscapes of the Soul had its origins in visits to Rome, Puglia, Basilicata, and Naples between 2011 and 2013. In June 2013 the research trip included Olivia Vanni, ’13, Mario Leiva, ’14, and Helen Tucceri, ’15, summer Mellon interns who provided help with research and translation. The project has been supported by the Dean’s Office, the Committee on Scholarship at the College of the Holy Cross, and the McFarland Center for Religion, Ethics, and Culture. Tom Landy deserves special thanks for his endorsement of this project. A version of the essay, ”Nostalgia and the Repair of Place: A Nativity in St. Peter’s Square,” appeared in Interfaces, 35 (2014). We are grateful to Maurice Gerach for permission to reprint.

We thank the many curators and art historians who generously introduced us to their world: Enrico Genovese at Santa Maria in Via and Roberto Fabrizzi of the Amici del Presepio in Rome, Ileana Creazzo of the National Museum of San Martino, Naples, Rachel Delphia, Curator of Decorative Arts at the Carnegie Museum of Art, and Donatella Occhiusi, who led us on an in-depth tour of the Museum of Rome in Trastevere. Art historian Sabina de Cavi gave guidance in the early stages of this project, and Roberta Catello provided invaluable insight to her family’s extraordinary collection in Naples. Many people opened their homes and collections to us, including Francesco Giorgino and Ada Campione, Barbara Giovannone, and Daniele Guardevacarro, Carlo Magi, Carla Mariana Giliberti, and Elena Basile.

We are also immensely grateful to Robert Smith, Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, Sarah Luria, and Virginia Ragunin for their careful readings of the essay, and to Shelburne Thurber, Lucy Aptekar, John Rahill, and Milo Werner for their unfailing patience and guidance through this three-year project. It is with great gratitude that we thank Roger Hankins, Director of the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Art Gallery, College of the Holy Cross, for his support and bountiful enthusiasm for this exhibition.
COVER PHOTO

Samaritan Woman,
Attributed to Cenazzo, workshop of
Lorenzo Mosca, (active 1721-1739)
Silk dress with gold embroidery: necklace and
earrings of silver and gold with coral
Banco di Napoli, Presepe
Palazzo Reale, Naples

All photography by Margot Balboni
except for Frank E. Graham,
reproductions of framed or cased objects
located on pages 21, 28, 45, 56, 57

Page 70
Photo of drawing: Emilio Pinto
Oasi nel Deserto e Mercato Orientale, 2006
La Natività Ritrovata Nella Bottega
D’arte e di Restauro di Nello D’Antonio
Edizioni Scientifiche e Artistiche, 2012

Catalogue design by Ernesto Aparicio

LENDERS TO THE EXHIBITION

Margot Balboni
Carnegie Museum of Art
Barbara Craig
Fitchburg Art Museum
Houghton Library, Harvard University
The Knights of Columbus Museum
Mount Holyoke College Art Museum
Alfred J. Walker

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