

## Impact Statement

Beatrice Liese-Spencer, Grade 11.

***Fossil Hunter***, 2023.

Mixed media sculpture, 12 x 5 x 9.5 inches.

Hopewell Valley Central High School, Hopewell, NJ

Unsung Hero: Mary Anning

I was inspired to represent paleontologist and unsung hero Mary Anning for this project because I was intrigued by this poor, unmarried woman from the 1800s, who had little power in society, yet who worked on uncovering, by the sea cliffs near her home, some of the most massive, powerful creatures to ever grace the Earth. In order to represent this juxtaposition in my artwork, I positioned the large dinosaurs soaring above the rest of the composition and painted the independent, outspoken Mary Anning alone beneath, in a vast expanse of murky water. The image of her struggling to reach the surface represents how suffocated she was by society and how isolated she would have felt, especially after her faithful dog was killed by falling rocks and much of her work was attributed to others. According to Anna Maria Pinney, who helped Anning collect fossils, Anning felt that “the world had used her ill and she does not care for it” and scorned the “men of learning” who “have sucked her brains and made a great deal by publishing works of which she furnished the contents, while she derived none of the advantages”. In 1847, at the age of 47, Mary Anning died of breast cancer in the English coastal town of Lyme Regis where she was born.

I chose to use needle felting, one of my favorite art forms, to create the dinosaurs Mary Anning discovered. I have worked with fibers for a long time in personal projects and believed they were particularly appropriate for this undertaking, since plant-based fibers have been in use since prehistoric times and Mary Anning’s work was concerned with unearthing the past. I positioned the dinosaurs atop thin sticks extending from a box filled with my own rocks and shells, representing the rocky terrain she navigated in search of fossils and shells she sold to rich tourists in order to support her family. The creatures I chose to feature are specific: Anning’s first major discovery happened when she was only 12 years old. Her brother, Joseph, found the Ichthyosaur skull and she unearthed the rest of the skeleton of the large, fish-like beast. Although their discovery was used by Everard Home in the first scientific paper to be written about this massive creature, the children did not receive any credit in the paper, owing to the facts that Mary was a girl and both she and her brother were lower-class. Her next big discovery was of the Plesiosaurus. She found the complete skeleton at 24, and some experts initially refused to believe it was due to the smallness of the head in comparison to the rest of the body. Ultimately, this discovery launched her into fame and many wealthy, powerful people were suddenly eager to meet her. This excitement only increased when she discovered the first pterosaur, a Dimorphodon.

Creating this work of art has been quite an evolving journey for me. My initial idea was very different from the final creation, and I like to think it changed for the better over time, as the story I wanted to tell emerged, and I experimented with ways to portray various parts of Mary’s experience. In my studio art classed, I have almost always focused on painting or drawing rather than 3D art. Although I work on a considerable amount of recreational felting, I have

never considered how to display my felted figures in a way that would do them justice and tell a story. Because of the need to showcase the creatures in a way that would allow them to be appreciated from various vantage points, I wanted to have them suspended in some way, and had to experiment with a variety of options before settling on my final display.

The only thing I wish I could change about my project is the photographic environment. The nature of the piece makes it difficult to photograph in a way so that all parts can be equally appreciated. I found it impossible to take a picture that simultaneously represented the rocks and shells, the painting of Mary Anning, and the white painted sides of the box (which add to the color scheme), and of course, to showcase the dinosaurs from their best angle. Given the nature of the subject matter, I also felt strongly about featuring this work in a natural environment. I struggled with the winter color palette I had to work with in my rural town, which sometimes didn't offer the proper contrast.

Working on this project helped me to consider ways in which I can bring personal passions like felting into more formal art projects, as well as how I can consider the narrative, I want my visual creations to convey. I have been offering a needle felting class for senior citizens in my community, and when my next session begins, I look forward to sharing with them this project. They are often full of stories themselves and I think that they would particularly appreciate the storytelling elements of this project.