

Impact Statement

Teresa Napolitano, Grade 12.

Starry Heavens, 2017.

Acrylic, charcoal on paper, 19 x 16 Inches.

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Unsung Hero: Caroline Herschel

My unsung hero is Caroline Herschel, the first woman to discover a comet. Caroline was born in 1750 in Germany and at age ten contracted typhus, which caused her to lose vision in her left eye and never grow past four feet and three inches. Facing these challenges, along with being a woman during this time period, Caroline had to push herself to become the great astronomer she is known as today. On August 1, 1786, she became the first woman to discover a comet, a feat similar to discovering a planet and from 1786-1797, she discovered eight comets, of which she was unquestionably the discoverer of five. Caroline, in 1787, was appointed by George III making her also the first woman to hold an official government position as well as being the first woman to be paid for her scientific service during a time when even most men were not paid for the same. Caroline continued to pave the way for female scientists, and in 1828 was presented a Gold Medal by the Royal Astronomical Society. This award would not be garnered by another woman for over 150 years until awarded to Vera Rubin in 1996. With her brother, Caroline discovered over 2400 astronomical objects over the course of twenty years and has the asteroid 281 Lucretia, her second name, and the crater C. Herschel on the moon named in her honor.

My interpretation of the work of Caroline Herschel is based on the inscription on her tombstone, "The eyes of her who is glorified here below turned to the starry heavens." I wanted to portray Caroline and her telescope as being one with space, so I used a starry background, created by using a sponge technique with blacks, blues, and purples along with splattering white paint over top of this to create the illusion of stars on a night sky, for the negative space in her portrait to show her complete and total dedication to astronomy and how it was so substantial in her life. However, I wanted to make space the main focus of my piece and have Caroline simply as a focal point that added to the effect of the sky to emphasize how she expanded our knowledge of comets, stars, and other astronomical objects. She was not the focus of her studies; space and the universe were. To create a more astronomical feel, I inverted the colors of her portrait so instead of drawing with black, I created her figure with white charcoal that I kept light and smudged so she appears like fog over the sky. I did this to portray the idea of Caroline watching over the galaxies she helped to map and educate people on.

Caroline Herschel made great strides in a field in which men had trouble succeeding in, during a time where most people believed the proper place for a woman was in the home. She helped map the great unknown universe and through my piece I make her name more known to further her recognition, which she so aptly deserves.