

Impact Statement

Seoeun Cheon (Zuleica) - Grade 10

***A Hidden Gem Unearthed*, 2025**

Pencil, felt pens, markers, colored pencils, ruler, brushes, watercolor, glue, and instant coffee on paper, 12 x 18 inches

St. Mildred's Lightbourn School, Oakville, Ontario, Canada

Unsung Hero: Mary Anning

Have you heard of the tongue twister, "She sells seashells by the seashore"? Although many often do not realize, this famous phrase is actually about my unsung hero, Mary Anning, a pioneering fossil collector from Lyme Regis, England. As a young girl in the early 1800s, Mary scoured the cliffs near her home, unearthing fossils to help support her family. But what Mary was really uncovering were not seashells, like the tongue twister mentioned, but rather clues to the ancient history of life on Earth.

I chose Mary Anning because she was a true trailblazer, someone whose resilience, courage, and boundless curiosity allowed her to make discoveries that would shape science forever. She persevered while battling poverty, prejudice, and exclusion simply because she was a woman. Like Mary, I am naturally curious and eager to explore the world around me. Her fearless pursuit of knowledge in the face of enormous barriers inspires me to continue learning, creating, and using my passion for art to make a difference.

Mary Anning's impact is nothing short of revolutionary. At just twelve years old, Mary and her brother discovered the first complete Ichthyosaur skeleton, followed by the first complete Plesiosaur in 1823, and one of the earliest pterosaur fossils found outside Germany. These discoveries were more than scientific findings, challenging the very foundation of how people understood the Earth. At a time when religious beliefs dominated, Mary's finds provided concrete evidence that entire species can disappear from existence, fortifying the idea of extinction and scientific views.

Despite her brilliance, Mary Anning was often denied the recognition she deserved. Male scientists published papers based on Mary's discoveries without crediting her, and the Geological Society of London refused to admit her during her lifetime, simply because she was a woman. Yet, Mary persevered and never gave up. She persisted, slowly earning respect and paving the way for women in STEM. She turned the quiet coastal town of Lyme Regis into a hub for geological study and tourism.

Inspired by her story, I created an artwork that honors Mary's life and lasting influence. At the center of my piece is a fossil, which symbolizes one of Mary's real discoveries. Within the fossil, I divided it into sections that each illustrate a key moment of her life: a

portrait of young Mary, scenes of her unearthing fossils, writing about her discoveries, moments of receiving rejection letters by scientific institutions, and ultimately, a recognition as “The Great Paleontologist.” This fossil itself becomes a visual time capsule, carrying Mary’s emotional and historical journey.

Around the fossil, I incorporated a newspaper-style background, bringing viewers back to Mary’s history before stepping into her world. Overall, to create this artwork, I used a variety of materials including pencil, felt pens, markers, colored pencils, ruler, brushes, watercolor, glue, and instant coffee. I expressed the earth through the coffee stains, the rich and messy soil that both concealed Mary’s discoveries and mirrored how her contributions were buried by society. Just as she brushed away layers of rock to reveal ancient life, we too must brush away the biases of history to truly see her brilliance.

Working on this project significantly transformed me. Through Mary’s story, I realized that passion and perseverance can help us overcome even the toughest obstacles and no matter how invisible you may feel or how many times you are told “no,” your work and your voice still matters. I now carry this lesson with me in everything I do, both in my art and in everyday tasks.

With this, to continue spreading Mary’s story, I plan to showcase it during a local mural project I am currently involved in, where I collaborate with fellow high school artists from my community. I will do a show-and-tell about Mary Anning during one of our painting sessions, introducing her legacy and how it relates to creativity and exploration, encouraging fellow artists and staff to see connections between art and science. Additionally, I will post about my artwork and Mary’s story on my social media platform, where I already engage with a wide audience. As well, as the current lead of the media subteam in my high school’s all-girls robotics team, I plan to connect Mary Anning’s pioneering spirit in STEM with my own experiences in robotics, showing that her courage influences me in profound ways and that it can also impact them.

Finally, I will also organize to present my project during my school’s chapel, where I can talk about Mary’s perseverance and hidden impact to a larger school community. I believe her story can inspire students across all grades to value resilience and curiosity. My biggest aspiration is to help others see that sometimes, the most powerful heroes are the ones history tends to forget, the hidden gems that still shine when we finally bring them to light. In the end, Mary Anning’s story is not just about fossils. It’s about resilience, curiosity, and the courage to keep digging — through stone, through doubt, and through injustice — until the truth is finally unearthed.

Mary Anning may have been overlooked in her lifetime, but like the ancient fossils she uncovered, her legacy has emerged over time — a hidden gem unearthed.

References:

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