



Impact Statement

Madilyn Lesnek, Grade 12

Archaic Beings: Separated Only By Time, 2026

Acrylic, clay, collage on wood panel, 24 x 21 inches

Hartland High School, Hartland, MI

Unsung Hero: Mary Anning

The Unsung Hero I chose to base my artwork on is Mary Anning, a pioneer in paleontology and a devoted fossil collector. Going into this project, I was unsure of the type of hero I wanted to create a piece about, but the second I saw Mary Anning on the list, I was instantly drawn to her and envisioned this piece. I can still vividly remember the first time I ever heard her name. I was in fifth grade when we had just begun our unit on how to identify and carbon date fossils, it was then that I read an excerpt from an article about her and was fascinated by her story. She was born in Southern England in 1799, Lyme Regis specifically, or what is now known as the Jurassic coast, which aided in her passion for fossils. Anning's early life was a struggle, her family were poor religious dissenters with their only reliable income being her fathers as he was a cabinetmaker. Her background and family also fascinated me, as I love to learn about the conditions and childhoods of many 'unsung heroes' in history that shaped them as the person they were known for. Mary's father also sold fossils in his shop as a side business to help bring in more money. And out of his ten children, Mary often accompanied him and learned how to clean and sell fossilized shells, also known as ammonites. This is one thing I truly admire and relate to, as she was able to utilize something her and her father bonded over and turned it into a flourishing career. I, similarly, have bonded over making art with my father and hope to follow in Mary's footsteps by turning my passion into a career. Another aspect of Anning I value and admire is her resourcefulness and dedication to her family, even as she transitioned into adulthood. Growing up in poverty, let alone being a woman, provided Mary with little opportunities for formal education and moments to properly utilize her skills in fossil hunting. Her home life became worse when in 1810 her father died from tuberculosis, leaving the family destitute and relying on charity. Mary, along with her mother's support, was able to excavate and sell the fossils in the cliffs surrounding her home, further solidifying their families' place as fossil hunters and continuing to provide money for her family. I deeply admire this because even though the grief of her father's passing weighed on her and the fact that she was still a teenager, Mary still prioritized her family and did everything she could to ensure their survival.

Anning's fossil discoveries heavily impacted how paleontologists, and scientists in general, understand prehistoric life and the extinction that led to their downfall. Her discoveries not only provide crucial evidence for the idea of extinction but also led to an increase in interest in fossils and paleontology and unintentionally resulted in change in biblical chronology Her first discovery, when she was only twelve, was a complete ichthyosaur skeleton. In her early 20s, she found another complete skeleton, but of a Plesiosaur, a creature that was so unusual and

different that many scientists accused her of lying, questioning its authenticity. She then discovered a pterosaur specimen outside of Germany, which confirmed that these creatures could fly. Anning's fossils showed that the Earth dated even further back than originally believed and held a great amount of diversity. This had a ripple effect where the estimated date of Earth's creation within the Bible, which was about 6000 years, was shorter when compared to the fossils dating. Overall, her three major discoveries forever changed the way future paleontologists would study their own works.

During the initial conception of this piece, I had many different ideas that initially came to mind, but I wanted something that truly reflected her, not only as a person, but also all her extensive history and contributions to the world of paleontology. One impactful inspiration I had during the creation of this piece was the artwork *Duria Antiquior* by her childhood friend Henry De la Beche, as he wanted to raise money for her by selling these prints. I loved the way her discoveries came to life and interacted with one another, so I wanted to emulate that within my piece, but instead of having the creatures interact with each other, I wanted her biggest discovery to interact with her. So, I tried to have the background collage emulate the original colors of that piece. I also included a smaller version of the work right beside her face to show how her intellect- symbolized with the head- influenced those around her to be the focus. Finally, a major aspect I wanted to include was her research and the Geological Society of London. Mary Anning, although full of expertise and talent for locating almost complete skeletons, was rejected from the Geological Society of London because she was a woman and the credit for her discoveries was taken by her male contemporaries. So, in the background, I have referenced many of her discoveries, geological and paleontology notes from the 19th century, and members of the Geological Society of London.

The impact I wanted to demonstrate is how dedicated she was in the face of so much adversity. Anning worked tirelessly to help support her family and fuel her passion of discovery, even at the end of her life in 1847 when she continued to live in financial difficulty despite her major yet uncredited contribution to science. Mary Anning was not only a pioneer in paleontology, but also an artist in her own right, as fossilization is just the Earth's natural way of preserving its own creations, preserving its own works of art for others like Mary Anning to discover and leave their mark on history.

References:

<https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/mary-anning-unsung-hero.html>

<https://www.aaas.org/membership/scientia/legacy-mary-anning-lifelong-fossil-hunter>

<https://oumnh.ox.ac.uk/learn-mary-anning-0#>

<https://youtube.com/shorts/X8xeBaQVLJ4?si=G1ZSWRWt8hGKYVTs>