



Impact Statement

Anna Bernita, Grade 12

Jurassic Coast: Beneath the Surface, 2026

Acrylic, clay, oil, paper, pen, watercolor, marker, fibers on canvas, 11.5 x 16.5 inches

IPAC, Guayaquil, Ecuador

Unsung Hero: Marry Anning

Throughout my life I've always enjoyed art and science, finding great inspiration whenever I saw women taking part and standing out in these fields, despite being cut out or having their ideas stolen and buried. Therefore, when I saw this competition about Unsung Heroes, I was excited to uncover one of their stories and that's when I came across a familiar picture, Mary Anning, a pioneer in paleontology. In that moment, I remember how I had seen her already, last year, in the fossil exhibition of the Natural History Museum in London. I started recalling what I felt when I found her portrait there, it looked small right beneath her big Plesiosaur fossil, which stood among the crowd in the even bigger hallway. The text next to the image was a story of how, at 11, she discovered her first Ichthyosaur and how her passion for fossils led to many studies of the Earth's past. Strength, passion, admiration, that's what I felt back then and again a few weeks ago when looking through the Unsung Heroes' directory. Investigating more, I found out about her struggles: poor access to education, financial problems, judgment from other scientists and how she kept pursuing her passion despite it all. That's when I knew I had the perfect subject and inspiration for my artwork: I had to dig into the past to find her, just as she did with her fossils, I had to extract her story for others to know, and specially for girls like me to have someone to look up to.

In the context of the XVIII and XIX centuries, the world was mostly dictated by the church: the bible's theory of creation and the scientific field were in constant fight, and the ideas of evolution and extinction were still controversial and confusing for many. Apart from this, in 1799, in a village called Lyme Regis, a brilliant paleontologist called Mary Anning was born. Her father, struggling to maintain a family of twelve, spent his free time by the seashore looking for little fossils to sell, his daughter Mary serving as a young helper. During these hours, she cultivated a passion for fossil hunting, and after her father and most of her siblings passed away, she took the responsibility of helping her only remaining brother to support the family. While selling small ammonites in her depot, she also taught herself anatomy and geology, striking her first big discovery: It was an Ichthyosaur skull her brother had seen at the cliffs. She took it to herself to dig for months and finally found the complete skeleton. By 1823, she found the first ever Plesiosaur: a new creature from the sea. Many doubt the veracity of her finding, the Geological Society of London even organized a meeting without Anning to discuss the new fossil. Even after determining it was true, they diminished her work and W. Conybeare ended up taking the credit. After multiple discoveries including the first Pterosaur outside Germany, she was still not accepted in scientific societies and her story, as dinosaurs, disappear. Despite this, years later

her discoveries helped shape fields such as paleontology, geology, and comparative anatomy, and continue to be a base for modern science.

After deconstructing all her story, I figured out that a portrait of her wouldn't be enough to express her talent, curiosity and passion for exploring beneath time and surface. That's why I chose to depict her lifestyle, discoveries and surroundings too. First, the fossils, her livelihood, sculpted in clay and laying on the sides: I decided to shape her Ichthyosaur and Plesiosaur as they were the ones I remember seeing during my visit to the Natural History Museum, my first connection to her story. In addition, the Plesiosaur fossil was the first ever found and thought to be fake, representing the struggle to prove herself in the scientific community. Another detail we can see are the sketches of fossils and the sculpted Ammonites with price tags at the bottom: this represents two worlds, scientific discoveries and a fossil business to maintain herself financially. In the background, we can see two different places: her house, place of her workshop and depot, and the beach where she unburied the past being herself the only silhouette standing in the landscape, her footprints the only ones in the sand. Finally, we can see some text and stamps coming out of the canvas, representing the impact of her story, how she inspired poems and how she turned Lyme Regis into the Jurassic Coast.

To conclude, Mary Anning has made me realize how lucky I am to have access to education and be able to pursue my passions freely, unlike other girls around the world. Because of this, she's inspired me to work hard and be resilient against any adversity, applying this in all fights, not just my own. I want to inspire young girls like she's inspired me, to battle gender roles and stereotypes and let them know that their dreams don't have a limit. That's why I want to publish this artwork and to spread her story through social media. In addition, I'll be donating the painting to my school, for it to decorate the history classroom. In this way she'll serve as a role model for every student, bringing inspiration to my community and her story will finally be seen.

References:

https://shop.minimuseum.com/blogs/articles/mary-anning?srsId=AfmBOoodGh1cZb3_Dz71Gf5BQM9tvbdU29CBbZHjo7vWFSEgLf8RiFP4

https://ournh.ox.ac.uk/learn-mary-annings-ichthyosaur#listing_524386_0

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