

Impact Statement

Juliana Pan, Grade 11

***The Stories Etched into Stone*, 2026**

Acrylic on canvas board, 16 x 20 inches

Issaquah High School, Issaquah, Washington, USA

Unsung Hero: Mary Anning

In an ever-changing world, it is easy to overlook the past. Society is constantly moving forward, chasing what is new and leaving behind what already happened. But Mary Anning refused to look away. She devoted her life to uncovering fossils in the cliffs of Lyme Regis to reveal a valuable glimpse into a world millions of years older than her own. I chose Mary Anning because her story is not merely about discovering prehistoric fossils, but instead a reminder that we must understand and acknowledge the past to live in the present. The world we live in is a multitude of layered histories, and sometimes, we must look beneath our feet to know where we stand.

Although Anning faced a childhood full of poverty, she found her passion while exploring the cliffs of Lyme Regis for fossils. When she was just twelve years old, she meticulously dug out a five-meter-long skeleton. At first, townspeople claimed she discovered a massive monster. After years of extensive scientific study, paleontologists concluded Anning discovered the fossil of an ichthyosaur, a remarkable marine reptile that ruled the seas millions of years ago. In December 1823, Anning was the first to uncover a complete skeleton of a plesiosaurus, an extinct marine reptile from the age of the dinosaurs. In 1828, Anning discovered a pterosaur. It was the first pterosaur to be discovered outside of Germany. However, Anning did not allow her passion to be limited by her lack of formal scientific education. Instead, she voraciously read scientific books and copied complex papers by hand to become an expert in paleontology, geology, and anatomy. Despite her growing reputation for discovering and identifying fossils, the scientific community refused to acknowledge her priceless contributions because of her social status as a woman during that time. Male scientists who bought Mary's discovered fossils did not credit her discoveries in their papers. Upon learning this, I was heartbroken at the lack of recognition Anning received despite her crucial contributions to not only science, but understanding our history. Thus, I felt an overwhelming duty to ensure her inspiring story would not be overlooked.

I began retelling Anning's story on canvas, a medium traditionally known to preserve the subject. Just like how Anning preserved our past, I wanted to preserve her legacy. What I most wanted to capture was her pure excitement in her sparkling eyes and sincere smile as a testament to her lifelong passion. The pickaxe strapped to her belt serves as a quiet symbol of her dedication and diligence. It represents the physical labor behind discoveries that can sometimes seem effortless when reduced to a name in a textbook. I wanted the pickaxe to remain as a reminder that knowledge is not simply found, but experienced. I chose warm colors throughout the piece to create a sense of vitality and wonder. Although fossils are remnants of things that have long since

died, I did not want my painting to feel lifeless or mournful. Instead, I wanted her sense of wonder to remain alive.

Anning continued searching despite having little institutional power or recognition, driven by her curiosity and determination rather than the promise of being remembered. As both a visual artist and writer, I strive to carry that same mindset into my own work. I will continue creating art about people, voices, and histories I do not want the world to overlook. I hope this artwork can do more than commemorate Mary Anning. I want it to become an invitation for others to discover her story for themselves. I plan to share the piece with my school and community while sharing Anning's discoveries and the barriers she faced as a woman in the nineteenth-century field of science. By placing her story in a contemporary setting, I hope viewers will consider not only who has been forgotten in the past, but also the voices we may be overlooking today.

Ultimately, Mary Anning has inspired me to become a more attentive observer of history, of people, and of the world around me. She spent her life looking beneath the surface for evidence of what had been forgotten. Through my artwork, I hope to encourage others to do the same.