Lowell Milken Center for Unsung Heroes
ARTEFFECT

Impact Statement

Haeun Gu, Grade 12
The First Step Toward Earth, 2026
Unsung Hero: Marie Tharp
Watercolor, colored pencil on paper, 24 x 20 inches
Savannah Arts Academy, Savannah, Georgia, USA

I first learned about Marie Tharp because I loved watching documentaries when I was young. I watched many programs about the underwater world and the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, especially those about marine life and the ocean environment. In one of the documentaries I watched back then, Marie Tharp's story was featured impactful in an episode. It used animation and interviews to recreate her journey, including how she was barred from research vessels simply because she was a woman, yet continued her work and eventually completed a map of the Atlantic seafloor. Her work provided important evidence supporting the theories of plate tectonics and continental drift. Since it had been over a decade since I first saw that documentary, I did not immediately recognize her name on the Unsung Heroes list. However, remembering that I had encountered her story as a child made me feel that I could tell her story well.

Before starting this project, I found and watched that documentary again. The line, "...created the first true map of the Earth," left a particularly strong impression on me. The animation was also one of the reasons her story had stayed in my memory for so long. Tharp was not allowed to join research vessels and faced skepticism and indifference from her colleagues simply because she was a woman. When she first proposed her ideas about the Mid-Atlantic Rift Valley, her colleague Bruce Heezen dismissed them as "girl talk." I might have given up at this point, but Tharp did not. She persisted and eventually supported her ideas through her research and findings. By mapping the ocean floor, she revealed the central rift valley running along the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, an important discovery that provided evidence for understanding how the Earth's crust moves. I was especially struck by how her daily work and small efforts eventually revealed something so important about our planet.

As I researched her further, I also came to understand how deeply she cared about her work. I believe her genuine passion for her field helped her continue despite the dismissal she faced from others. She seemed to have a strong sense of purpose that could not easily be shaken by other people's opinions. I wanted this painting to capture the limitations Tharp faced, her effort, and her discoveries all in one composition. I designed the composition so that the viewer's gaze naturally flows from top to bottom, like water, while following her journey. I also wanted to connect the flow of water with the way her achievements developed over time. They were not made overnight, but

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through small efforts and persistence that eventually led to a major discovery. That is why I chose watercolor as my medium. I also painted Marie Tharp's portrait on a separate sheet of paper and attached it to the background as a collage. I wanted to use the natural shadow created by the collage on the background paper to subtly emphasize the layers of the ocean floor represented in the painting and create a sense of depth.

While researching her story, what affected me most was her attitude toward other people's skepticism. As a student at an arts high school, I often share ideas for my artwork and introduce my work to others. Since art is quite strongly influenced by personal taste, I receive both positive and negative feedback. When I receive negative feedback, I often feel discouraged and wonder whether I should change my ideas. Sometimes, I think I took other people's feedback too much to heart. Through Marie Tharp's life, I realized that others may doubt me while I explore something, but what truly matters is my willingness to keep exploring and my dedication to my work.

References:

"The Lost Worlds of Planet Earth" Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey: Episode 9 About Marie Tharp, Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory