

## **Professor Maria Bianca Cita, Geoscience Scientist**

**Born on September 12, 1924 - Died on August 12, 2024**



Maria Bianca Cita. (courtesy of Elisabetta Erba)

Maria Bianca Cita was one of the best-known Italian geoscientists and a role model for her perseverance, tenacity, and dedication to science. A pioneer in micropaleontologic and stratigraphic studies in Italy, she became an internationally known marine geologist whose career has been celebrated with numerous awards. Maria Bianca was Professor Emeritus (since 1998) of the University of Milan.

Maria Bianca was the first woman student to enrol in 1942 in the “Corso di Laurea in Scienze Geologiche” when it was created at the University of Milan, and then the first woman to obtain the Italian Laurea (July 1946; with the highest score). Her academic career began in 1955 as a field geologist with a training in micropaleontology, and her work was awarded with a master in Stratigraphy. As early as the mid 50s, she addressed issues concerning the Cretaceous/Paleogene boundary, her studies emphasizing the importance of planktonic foraminiferal biostratigraphy for worldwide stratigraphic correlation. Her efforts and interests in stratigraphy and correlation developed further as Maria Bianca joined the shipboard scientific party of Leg 2 of the nascent Deep Sea Drilling Project (DSDP) sailing across the North Atlantic Ocean, the first of four DSDP legs on which she participated (Leg 13, 1970 and Leg 42A, 1975 in the Mediterranean, Leg 47, 1976 in North Atlantic). On Leg 2 she was the first non-U.S. scientist to set foot on the Glomar Challenger, and she and the distinguished radiolarian specialist Cathy Nigrini were also the first women to participate in this international program dedicated to the investigation of the global ocean. From this experience Maria Bianca developed a strong interest in Marine Geology, with a focus on the Mediterranean Sea. The incentive

for her joining and organizing many research cruises between 1980 and 1989 was the extraordinary discovery during DSDP Leg 13 of the Late Miocene dessication of the Mediterranean as revealed by the unexpected recovery of evaporites at the bottom of its western and eastern basins, an event named by her together with William Ryan and Kenneth Hsu the “Messinian Salinity Crisis”.

With her broad scientific experience Maria Bianca undertook major international initiatives. She promoted Italy’s participation to the Ocean Drilling Program (ODP) as part of a consortium supported by the European Science Foundation. She became Chair of the SNS (1990 to 1996), and led a substantial renewal of its activities, updating its internal organization by creating regional committees and working groups to encourage integrated approaches to stratigraphic studies. She is well known for her research on the Neogene, i.e., the definitions of the Zanclean Stage at the base of the Pliocene, and the Calabrian Stage at the base of the Pleistocene Series prior to the redefinition of the Quaternary. Amidst all these responsibilities, Maria was a fervent teacher whose expertise and scientific interests have been conveyed to students and younger scientists over the years, most notably Isabella Premoli Silva and Elisabetta Erba.

Maria Bianca Cita published over 300 papers in scientific journals on leading research topics. She has introduced challenging ideas in the authoritative style that underlied her vibrant personality. Her work has been celebrated with numerous national and international awards, including the *Feltrinelli International Award* of the Accademia dei Lincei (1986) for *Geology, Palaeontology and applications*, and the *F.P. Shepard Medal* of the Society for Sedimentary Geology (SEPM) for her *Excellence in Marine Geology*. She was an Honorary Member of the Geological Society of America since 1987, and of the International Union for Quaternary Research (INQUA) since 2000. She was a member of the Italian Geological Society since 1945 of which she was the first woman President (1989-1990).

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