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“Qui siamo tutti astronomi”?

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The first women to have scientific recognition in the space of astronomy belonged to the Harvard College Observatory. But in other cases, women have remained nameless faces, relegated to the role of helpers to dispose of the amount of data produced by photographic applications. They do not appear in publications and it is difficult to reconstruct their presence in the laboratories because only a few oral testimonies remain, tainted by the lability of memory.

In this report, two Italian cases are brought to light. The first concerns the four nuns who worked at the Specola Vaticana and contributed to the creation of the part of the Astrographic Catalog of the “La Carte du Ciel” project, entrusted to the observatory of the Catholic Church. The second concerns a dozen young women, called scanners, who worked in the laboratory of the Institute of Physics of the University of Bari and contributed to the international research program on high-energy particles coordinated by CERN of Geneva. This work aims to bring out the contribution of these “petites mains”, because from their daily work, carried out side by side with scientists, research methods can be reconstructed and some aspects can be reflected on: the progressive specialization of the work of the “Handyman boy” in the scientific laboratory; if the structuring of the work that distinguishes between anonymous helpers and manager-scientist is so clear-cut in reality; at last, if the hierarchical structuring of work has determined a professional, intellectual and social “supremacy” within the scientific community.

Primary author: CAMPANILE, Benedetta (Università degli Studi di Bari Aldo Moro)

Presenter: CAMPANILE, Benedetta (Università degli Studi di Bari Aldo Moro)

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