

Get AP Mobile for your phone at [APnews.com](http://apnews.com)

AP Associated Press

Poinciana artist becomes well known as "The Grate Lady"

The Ledger

By TERRI DYER REPORTER CORRESPONDENT

Published: May 18, 2010

POINCIANA -- Bobbi Mastrangelo of Poinciana, affectionately known as "The Grate Lady", has received international recognition for her artwork on utility covers, despite her late start in this field.

"I always loved art, but it wasn't until I was in my junior and senior years at Maryvale High School in New York that I took art courses," said the former elementary education teacher who is now in her 70's.

Not having a portfolio ready for an art scholarship, she went to college on a national Jenkins Memorial scholarship and taught third and fourth graders.

"I was the oldest of six kids, so I needed a college scholarship," she said. "I would skip my breaks to take the kids' art classes with them. I later took adult education classes on printmaking and paint making, as well as undergraduate college courses and private courses in painting and papermaking."

Most of her work is in paper, but they have had such realistic details that one of her art exhibit visitors accused the artist of having stolen a manhole cover. People stop her all the time to ask her how she is able to lift the utility covers, not realizing that they are not made of metal.



A 28-inch garden sculpture of daffodils growing out of a grate shows the artist's detailed work, as seen here on a postcard from the Grateworks Collection.

"I have an amazing time with any cover for utilities such as chimney holes, gas holes, and water hole covers. Actually, water covers are half of my artwork, because it is a precious resource," Mastrangelo said. "For Christmas one year, a water authority even made me a miniature water meter with a cover that opened."

The artist did not start focusing on utility covers until she was in her forties. Because she was a stay-at-home mom with three children, she had to exchange babysitting hours with another mom in order to take classes at Stony Brook University and Suffolk Community College, both in New York. Her art career took off when she was in her fifties.

"I had three teachers who really inspired me," she said. "Gail Adelman, a printmaking professor, encouraged me early on. Dan Welden, a master printer who still teaches in Italy, encouraged me to choose a theme or style and how to market my art."

But it was in a history class that Mastrangelo found her passion for utility covers. While studying about pop art on a common object, her teacher Lawrence Alloway noticed that she liked circles.

"In that class, an artist did manhole covers as a point of interest, but I said I'll take it further. That was 1979 -- and I've never looked back," she said.

The artist has lived in Florida for the past six years, having moved here from Long Island. Water authorities up north had been promoting her work for years.

"The Baltimore Public Works Museum rented a 15-foot truck and stored my stuff, some of which I loaned and others I deeded to them," she added. "My artwork took up two rooms for a whole year in 1996, and they still have some on display. I have 10 works now in the Islip Art Museum in Long Island."

The artist has an unusual inspiration, the purple Disney dragon Figment (as in figment of your imagination).

"He has an art palette on back and bells on the side," she said.

Mastrangelo is also a writer, having contributed a short story to "From the Heart: Stories of Love and Friendship" by journalist Kendall Bell. The compilation of stories from writers across the globe was written to uplift others after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

"It was about man that I met on his 100th birthday, and our friendship after that until he died almost two years later," she said.

She developed her writing when she taught and tutored children, including her own. Every summer and during vacations, her children were required to write before they could watch television.

"I would have loved to home school, but it wasn't like it is now," she said. "Since I knew writing was the one thing that took so much of a teacher's time, I had my kids do creative writing and draw pictures. We covered every genre.

"To earn money, I became a Title I tutor and received government funds to assist below-grade level students pass tests for 10 years," she added.

"Eventually, the high school had me teach every student on writing, so I read hundreds of papers. I don't teach or tutor now, though."

Mastrangelo has expanded her art to include environmental conservation of non-urban settings, such as a grate on relic sandy dunes on Johnson Avenue near Haines City.

"There's a series of ancient scrub systems ... left from times of much higher sea level," she noted. "And the oldest and most ancient is one that runs down the middle of Florida for about 150 miles."

The artist would like to see her art at the Smithsonian Museum one day. She has created postcards featuring her utility covers for National Post Card Week since 1992, viewable at <http://bobbimastrangelo.com/postcards.php>. Some featured patriotic themes such as "Don't Go Soft on Terrorism" and "Freedom," which is

her 2010 camouflage design that pays tribute to the U.S. Armed Forces.

In a poem she wrote, the artist shared why she does what she does.

"I have brushed away sand and debris to reveal stamped symbols ... Glimpsed rusty iron peeping through snowy track and icy treads ... Burned my hands: melted my crayons ... Preserving their beauty never outdated."

What do you think? Contact Terri Dyer about this article at Reportermailbox@gmail.com.

© 2010 The Associated Press. All Rights Reserved.