

Sewers in Our Culture  
*by Bobbi Mastrangelo*

People wonder how an artist can be addicted to such a topic as manhole covers. "Don't you get bored?" they ask. "Not really, I answer. I have been dealing with this fascinating subject for thirty years. There is always something new to learn about these iron castings and their environments. The streets and sidewalks tell stories as do the covers that fit into their infrastructure. Their raised designs reflect the aesthetic interest of the region and their care reflects the attitude of the authorities that manage them."

"Speaking of the Managing Authorities, I went to them first when I wanted to know more about the support structure of the covers and the colorful street markings. While riding a bus through Manhattan I had noticed a Con Edison Cover next to an open manhole. The top of a ladder protruded from the tunnel below. Why were rubber gloves sitting on top of the ladder, I wondered? I can re-create this scene, vertically, but I need to learn more."

"So I went to my local Smithtown Highway Department out on Long Island, NY. One of the employees took the time to remove a heavy iron cover so that I could see the backside of it and the construction of the deep brick chimney support below. Brian told me that the rubber gloves were a safety issue worn to protect against electrocution. And red markings on the street indicated electric lines below." View the Con Ed Installation from the "City Views" exhibition at The Staller Center for the Arts.

[\(Con Ed Installation\)](#)

The St. James, NY Water District Employees were her mentors for water cover knowledge. Mario Palmieri explained the cover distinctions. The diameter of the smallest cover, a hand hole cover is 3" – 4" a valve cover is 6" – 8," a water meter pit cover 15" – 18" and a water manhole cover is 24." Knowing she had grown up in the Buffalo NY Region, they gave her an older valve cover with Buffalo stamped in the middle. The Buffalo Valve Cover pattern appears in a deeply embossed print on black hand made paper embedded with cornhusk bits. John Mayleas taught her about the blue street mark outs. W.S. stood for Water Service and W.M. indicated a Water Main. Bobbi's "Water Service" print has hand written information about the mark out.

[\(Buffalo Water\)](#)

During the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, some New Yorkers used the streets as their playground. Their Tales of Three Sewer Hitters really intrigued the artist. Players used sawed off broomsticks for their bats and pink rubber Spauldines for balls. The first sewer served as home plate. The second sewer was second base. A car tire on right side of the street served as first base and a car tire on the left became third base. The goal was to hit the ball beyond the third sewer. That was a home run and the player was venerated as a Three Sewer Hitter!

Mastrangelo enjoys every aspect of manhole cover history and lore. But her most passionate interest is Water, our most precious resource. She believes our technology will deal with fuel and energy provisions. But water needs conservation and protection. Human Beings are seventy – five percent water. The earth is three quarters water. Water is essential for survival. Mastrangelo's Water Works vary from the riveting "People Start - Stop Pollution" assemblage [\(People Start /Stop Pollution\)](#) to the calming Celtic Designed Cover, "Irish Blessings." [\(Irish Blessing\)](#) Essentially, Mastrangelo's renderings on the subject are a "Celebration of Water."

The Baltimore Public Works Museum and The Islip, NY Art Museum have extensive collections of the artist's works. Other museums owning her work are The Heckscher Museum of Huntington, NY, The NYC Fire Museum, and the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University (National Association of Women Artists' Permanent Collection).

Port Washington, NY Water District and Suffolk County, NY Water Authority own her Water Works Prints. Other important collectors include: Nassau County, NY Community College (purchase prize), author Fr. Joseph Girzone and The Moscow Collection of World Manhole Covers. Bobbi Mastrangelo is listed in "Who's Who in American Art."