

# BUSINESS

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## Murals make a lovely living

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Stephanie Ditrick's hand-painted tile murals are comfortably ensconced in some of the most elegant homes in Southwest Florida.

But increasingly, new business is coming from the commercial realm — including Publix Supermarkets and a resort in Taiwan.

It's an exciting development for the former newspaper advertising saleswoman, who in the past 12 years has built a family business from a longtime art avocation.

"We had absolutely no capital — no backing. We succeeded because we never gave up," said Ditrick, founder and president of Agape Tile.

Ditrick's dream was born early. She's from a family of artists and studied with some of the best while growing up in California.

A love for tile-painting came while her main role was that of wife and mother; she was decorating a new family home: "Money was tight. I figured there must be some way to dress up the bedroom and kitchen tile with art."

While selling newspaper ads in Tucson, Ariz., Ditrick began moonlighting as a tile painter. It became a full-time occupation 12 years ago; she moved the business to Fort Myers in October 1992.

Currently, a small ensemble of family members, including son Christopher MacNutt and daughter Candace MacNutt, work with Ditrick at a showroom and warehouse-studio south of Fort Myers.

The techniques they use are not new: Egyptians practiced them more than 3,000 years ago, Ditrick said. However, she sees a growing new interest in "glaze-on-glaze" tile murals in the upscale U.S. market because:

- It's more durable than mosaics. "It will outlast the building."

- The colors are vivid because the tile is glazed once before painting, and then re-glazed and baked in a 1,900-degree kiln. "People just stand and stare; they can't figure out why it looks the way it does."

Depending on the size and complexity of the project, Agape Tile charges about \$65 to \$200 per square foot for murals. That may or may not include tile and does not include installation, which is handled by outside tradespeople.

Interior designers, swimming pool builders and tile installers are frequent sources of business referrals. Wild Side Gallery in Key West sells smaller-sized, individual tiles she's painted. But overall, "my work is getting bigger and bigger," Ditrick noted.

Among the bigger deals in progress: two 8-by-7-foot murals of fruits and vegetables, as well as entrance signs for a new Publix supermarket in Boca Raton's Mercado Real shopping center.



**FINISHED PRODUCT:** A finished portion of the Publix fruit mural is displayed on the shop floor waiting to be packaged and sent.



Photos by JOSE R. MENDEZ/News-Press

**LOVELY BUNCH OF FRUIT:** Stephanie Ditrick, Agape Tile, works with the tile being painted for display at a Publix in Boca Raton. Ditrick has been in the tile-designing business for 11 years.

### ART AS BUSINESS

Stephanie Ditrick said she's succeeded in building a business by ignoring some advice she heard in art school.

Following are her tips for making an art business work:

- Don't believe you can't make a living in art.

- Don't get into a rut, just for repeat business. "Most of ours are one-shot deals."

- Find a niche. Ditrick's is painting glaze-on-glaze tiles.

- Get focused. "I threw out my charcoal, my oil paints and concentrated on what I wanted to do the best."

- Be up-front about payment expectations. Ditrick charges a fee for initial sketches and collects half of her total payment before she starts painting. The balance is due upon completion of her work, and not when the tile is installed.

- Don't give up.

Although Publix commissioned many murals in its early days, "it's certainly not standard in our new stores," said Lakeland-based spokeswoman Jennifer Bush.

Ditrick's eyes gleam when describing her biggest project to date: It's a 54-by-36-foot mural of orchids and mythical phoenix birds that's destined for the bottom of a resort swimming pool in Taiwan.

"It's huge. If you laid it out here, it would cover every bit of our showroom and studio and still be one-third bigger."

Ditrick said she and her daughter will travel to Taiwan to view the tile installation.

And she's dreaming of getting additional, lucrative business from international resorts: "The next pool will make a difference for us."