

# Illustrating Justice

## The art of capturing courtroom appearances

By David Volk

Good art can't be rushed. The lighting has to be right, the detail vivid, the composition eye-catching. Seattle sculptor and abstract artist Peter Millett says it can take him years to complete a drawing or sculpture to his satisfaction, but there are times when he has just seconds to get it right, and his entire paycheck depends on it.

had to be in the courtroom for Soloway's arraignment in U.S. District Court for the District of Western Washington. He had just five minutes in which to do the drawing during Soloway's brief appearance, in which Soloway pleaded not guilty. His trial was still pending as this story was being written.

"The drawing was OK," Millett says. "It tended to make him a little older than he was, but I worked on that after I got out of court ... to take a few years off the drawing. I think I got his expression, and his presence read through the drawing. He was young, and he seemed a little confused, and you know, maybe rather indignant that he was there in the courtroom."

Millett says his drawing was picked up by ABC and Fox, and also by news media overseas.

Because the U.S. federal court system seems to be steadfastly against TV cameras in its hallowed halls, and congressional bills introduced this year to permit cameras may or may not make it out of committee, courtroom artists continue for now to provide

the only visual clue to a suspect's appearance and demeanor in cases such as Soloway's.

"It's the only visual record of what went on in the courtroom," Millett says, "and sometimes the pictures can convey a lot more information than just words. My job is really to get the story of the people and their state of mind, and their postures, and what's going on beyond words, and I think drawings can really reveal that very well."

In some ways, a drawing can convey more specific information than even a photo, he says, "because you can eliminate a lot of unnecessary details, and really focus in on the action. It can be a very effective storytelling device."

Even though state court systems generally do allow cameras in their courtrooms, it may be at the judge's discretion and only after the media file a



COURTESY: PETER MILLETT (2)



The catch is, he can't order his subjects to sit still, change position or provide another sitting—because the focus of his artwork might be in the process of being carted off to jail, and prison guards don't take kindly to having someone get in their way.

Welcome to the world of courtroom artists. Their hand-drawn depictions of suspects, witnesses, attorneys and judges sometimes give the public its only glimpse into the world behind the courthouse doors.

For instance, in May when 27-year-old Seattle resident Robert Alan Soloway—whom prosecutors accuse of being a "spam king"—was charged with spam-related aggravated identity theft, mail fraud, wire fraud, fraud in connection with electronic mail, and money laundering, Seattle's KOMO-TV station turned to Millett to provide viewers with a picture. Millett had just two hours' notice before he

request form several court days before the courtroom appearance “unless good cause is shown.”

No cameras were allowed, for instance, when Paris Hilton was sent back to jail in June to serve the rest of her sentence for driving a car in violation of the terms of her probation for alcohol-related reckless driving, says Los Angeles freelance courtroom artist Mona Shafer Edwards. Newspapers across the world—from the *Idaho Statesman* to Australia’s *Sydney Morning Herald*—instead turned to an Associated Press–distributed sketch by Edwards to convey a tearful Hilton holding a tissue to her face in front of a stern-looking Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge Michael T. Sauer.

Edwards, who has more than 25 years of experience as a courtroom artist, including regular work for KABC-TV in Los Angeles, has also sketched O.J. Simpson, Michael Jackson, Courtney Love, Winona Ryder, Dolly Parton, Snoop Dogg and Heidi Fleiss during trials.

She declines to discuss the rates she charges, but she gets paid by the assignment versus by the drawing or the hour, and receives enough work to earn 98 percent of her living as a courtroom artist, although, she says, “I might do a big trial, and then not have any more work for three months.”

If she sells her work to The Associated Press or Getty Images, they pay her one fee and then have the right to resell the sketch for use by media throughout the world, she says.

Edwards is also a fashion illustrator who has co-authored nine textbooks for use in college fashion-design and illustration classes. In addition, she creates fine-arts posters and storyboards for films.

She got her start as a courtroom artist in 1979 after talking the local NBC station into giving her a chance. Her first assignment was the Lee Marvin palimony trial.

She says her fashion background has been helpful in virtually every trial. “With celebrities, it’s all about fashion—how people carry themselves, and how they wear their clothing and what they’re wearing.”

For instance, because of her fashion background, Edwards included a purse in her depiction of Court-

ney Love’s appearance in Beverly Hills Superior Court in 2004, part of a series of appearances that ultimately led Love to plead no contest to a charge of misdemeanor assault and plead guilty to misdemeanor possession of a forged narcotics prescription. The cases were dismissed and her related record expunged last December after Love completed anger-management counseling and a drug-rehabilitation program.

“[During an early appearance in the case], she came in, threw her purse down on the table and threw her leg over her other leg in what I saw as a ‘Do with me what you will’ attitude,” says Edwards. “But I think Judge Elden Fox kind of liked her. She had gone through so much, and she would hold up her hand like she was asking permission to speak, like a little girl. She seemed to be a destructive kind of person, and she is trying to get her life on track. I think she’s really improving herself.”

For Edwards—who says she’s been cast as a courtroom artist on TV shows such as *Medium* and *Shark*, and the film *Ghosts of Mississippi*—the most interesting—and most difficult—part of being a courtroom artist is that she’s documenting history. “I’m giving a window into history. That moment is there, and then it’s gone. It’s very spontaneous, and I feel I have a responsibility to document that moment. So I give a peek into the soul of the case. I’m not a portrait artist. I just give the essence, and that’s really difficult, and also important, to show something that tells the story by capturing just a minute or two.

“[Also], I think the subject is very aware when a camera is on them,” she says, “and people who have a camera on them are much more unwilling to show themselves. I’m able to be more of an observer without the person knowing I am there, so what I do really captures who they are.”

As Los Angeles County District Attorney Steve Cooley noted, in a quote he provided for Edwards’ 2006 book, *Captured! Inside the World of Celebrity Trials*, “Mona’s artwork captures the essence of the rough-and-tumble justice system.”

While illustrations aren’t the daily staple of our news diet the way they used to be when photos were

**Far left: Seattle artist Peter Millett had just two hours’ notice in May when a local TV station called on him to sketch the arraignment of Robert Alan Soloway, who is charged with spam-related aggravated identity theft. Below left: Mona Shafer Edwards is famous for her courtroom drawings of celebrities ranging from O.J. Simpson and Michael Jackson to Dolly Parton and Paris Hilton. Shown below is her 2004 sketch of Courtney Love in Beverly Hills Superior Court.**



COURTESY: XXXXXXXXXXXXX

COURTESY: SANTA MONICA PRESS

Grand Bay Resort  
1/2 h.

prohibited in all courtrooms and drawings regularly appeared on the pages of daily newspapers and flashed up on the screen of numerous nightly newscasts, a handful of people in the Northwest still quietly ply this trade with pens, pencils, pads and lightning-fast drawing skills—responding to calls from harried editors who need artists to gather up their supplies and head downtown.

Although many courtroom artists—especially those in the Northwest, where celebrity trials are far less common than in L.A.—earn most of their living from masterpieces they create outside the halls of justice, they still enjoy talking about their part-time courtroom jobs. And most remain ready to drop their everyday paintbrushes at a moment's notice and rush to the courthouse when the call comes in.

These artists include Idaho's Zella Strickland, British Columbia's Jane Wolsak and Washington's Millett, who says: "I love the excitement of it. I love the drama of it. It's important work."

Although the artists agree that excitement and public service help keep them interested in the courtroom-art field, each took a decidedly different route to get there.

### The Aspiring Science Illustrator

Zella Strickland had an art career in mind as far back as her preschool years, but she readily admits courtroom art wasn't it.

In fact, she drew just about everything else before she landed in court. When she was in college, her art instructor asked her to attend an art conference and draw pictures of the seminars. The Boise-area resident then went on to sketch several Idaho legislators each week for a small newspaper doing profiles on them, and she even sketched the celebrations surrounding the 1967 inauguration of Idaho Gov. Don Samuelson.

Although the newspaper could have run photos, the owner of the publication hired her to do sketches because he thought it would boost readership, she says. He even went so far as to interview business owners for stories while Strickland sat nearby, sketching them.

When she wasn't working for him, she drew people in a local park for \$5 a pop.

About the only thing she didn't do was draw what she wanted: scientific illustrations. Ever since she had baby-sat a veterinarian's children in high school and seen sketches in his medical book, she'd felt she could do as good a job as the artist who drew the pictures she'd viewed. Unfortu-

CV Partners  
1/3 sq.

Ameritel  
1/3 sq.



COURTESY: ZELLA STRICKLAND (2)

**Idaho artist Zella Strickland once wanted to draw scientific illustrations. Today she is renowned for her depictions of cases such as the famous Randy Weaver trial, shown at right, with Judge Edward Lodge presiding and defense attorney Charles Peterson standing.**

nately, she couldn't find a college that taught that particular skill, and her parents insisted she study teaching. She tried substitute-teaching briefly in 1966 and 1967, but soon went back to drawing.

Strickland says she became a courtroom artist in 1981, when a local CBS affiliate decided it needed an illustrator. Since she didn't know exactly what a courtroom artist did, she relied on the skills and speed she'd picked up in college and at the newspaper, sketching outlines with black felt-tip pen on gray paper, then coloring her drawings with colored pencils once she got to the television studio. Although she already had extensive experience sketching on the fly, she had so much trouble remembering what color clothing people wore, she had to write the colors in the margins.

These days, Strickland is such a veteran that she has a set trial-day routine, regardless of whether it's a defendant's first appearance or a full trial. She arrives a half-hour early and makes sure that she's the first one in the courtroom so she can find the seat with the best view. Once the proceedings start, she draws the defendant and attorneys first, then witnesses, followed by the judge, if time permits. Time is of the essence because court usually starts around 9 A.M., and she has to have her first sketches done by 11:30 so they will be ready for the noon newscast.

"Sometimes you're still trying to color them while they're taking them away from you," she says.

If she's working a trial instead of a short court appearance, she might work anywhere from a single eight-hour day to every weekday for more than a week. She



local NBC station \$150 a day, she says, and also charges a separate daily fee to each national media outlet using her services. Sometimes she gets assignments a year in advance: She already has a court date on a federal kidnapping trial set for early 2008.

She attributes her success to her speed, objectivity and understanding of the importance of her job. “I feel like a reporter [because] I do something to inform the public,” she says. “I like doing it. I feel like I’m filling a niche. The drawings get the word out to a public that otherwise would probably never think about what goes on in a courtroom. People need to know what

goes on in their courtrooms.”

The courtroom art supplements her ongoing work of painting humorous Western scenes for an Old West–themed greeting card company, Leanin’ Tree. She still remembers her goal from her youth, but she has put any regrets behind her.

“Courtroom art was not anything I would have pursued,” she says, “but I think it fit me. So, maybe I wasn’t supposed to be a scientific illustrator.”

### If at First You Don’t Succeed

Unlike Strickland, Jane Wolsak knew she wanted to be a courtroom artist. She just

doesn’t aim for a specific number of pictures per day. Instead, she tries to put as many of the players into a picture as she can, depending on deadlines and what’s happening during the trial.

“I used to tell my husband, ‘If I put the American flag in the picture, you know I had plenty of time,’” she says.

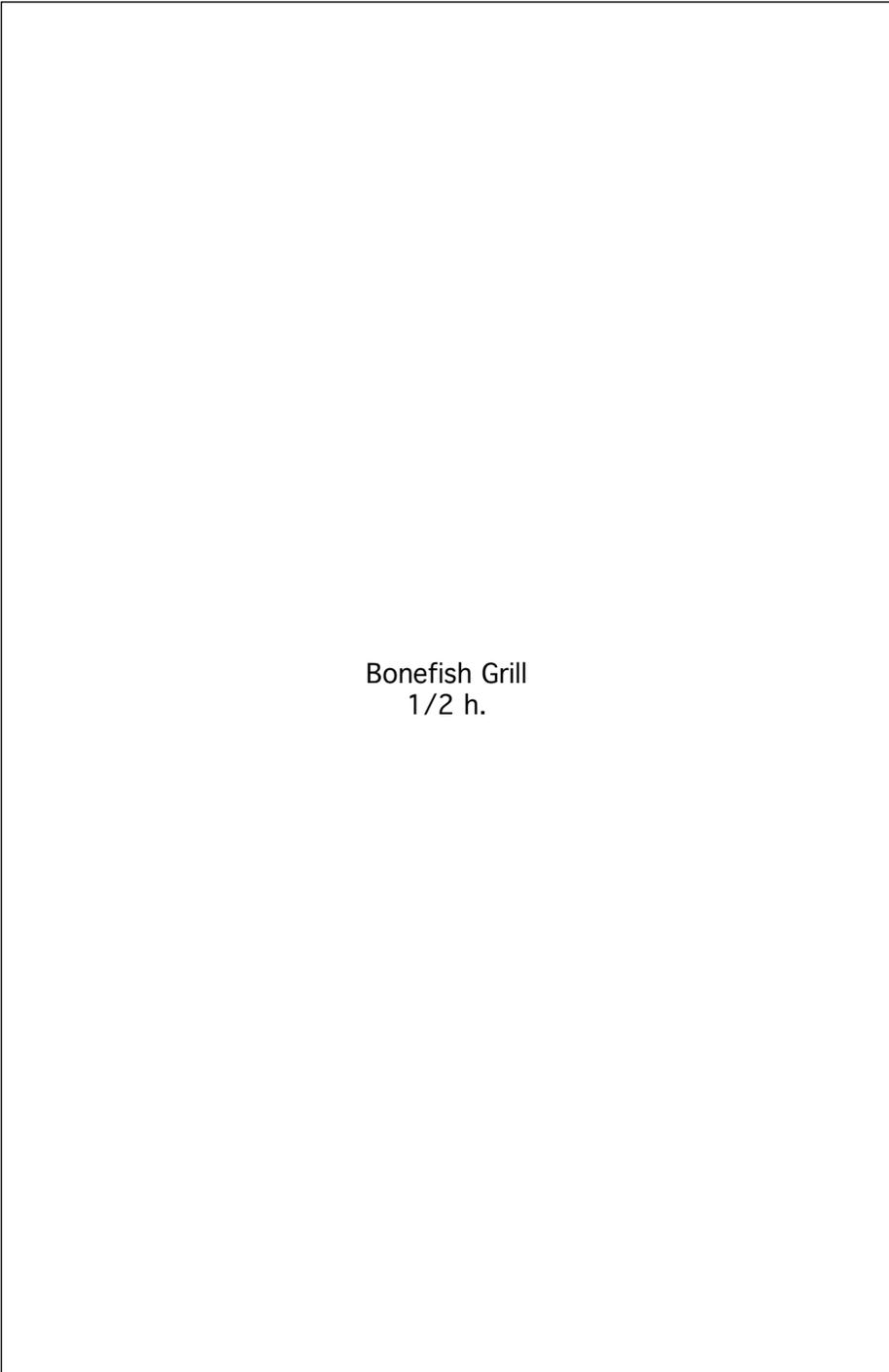
Mistakes can be a problem because there’s usually not enough time to start over. So these days she starts out with a brown pencil that’s easy to erase. If she needs to correct a mistake during the coloring-in stage, which she does with watercolors, she paints over it.

She’s never succumbed to writer’s—or, rather, drawer’s—cramp, but she once was sidelined for several months by arthritis, to which her profession may have contributed, and had to have surgery to replace a joint in her hand.

Over the last 26 years, she has covered cases involving everything from mining rights to murder. One of her first cases was the trial of a mountain man accused of killing two government agents on his property. She says she thought things had come full circle when she was called on for a similar case in 1993: the famous “Ruby Ridge” trial of Randy Weaver, a man involved in a multiday standoff with U.S. marshals who wanted to arrest him on a charge of failure to appear in court on weapons charges. A marshal and members of Weaver’s family were killed during the standoff. Weaver was found not guilty of murder and all other charges except bail violation and failure to appear for trial, and the case continues to be a topic of public discussion.

At the time, Strickland’s drawings were picked up by CNN and a number of other media outlets. She still earns use fees from the pictures because they are often featured on TV shows about Weaver, she says.

For drawings she does while a case is taking place, she generally charges the



Bonefish Grill  
1/2 h.

Lannigan Meadows  
1/3 sq.



**British Columbia artist Jane Wolsak does drawings for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and media all over the world. At right is a 2002 sketch of former British Columbia Premier Glen Clark on the witness stand, plus two of his lawyers and a court clerk. In August 2002, Clark was found not guilty of breach of trust and of receiving an illegal benefit related to casino licensing.**

had to overcome a major hurdle: a disastrous first outing.

Thanks to a recommendation from a friend who knew Wolsak could draw, a British Columbia newspaper editor hired Wolsak to sketch a 1998 copyright-infringement trial in which singer Sarah McLachlan testified. Unfortunately, Wolsak's drawing was so unacceptable, "They cut off the head that I drew and put a photograph on the body," she recalls.

McLachlan was in court to respond to a producer's allegations that he deserved to be credited on an album. The court ruled in the singer's favor.

Wolsak felt so much pressure on her first assignment that the drawing didn't come out the way she wanted.

While it may be hard to draw when your subject is moving, it's even harder when the subject is a celebrity, she says. "It's particularly difficult when you're drawing a famous person whom everyone knows, because you have to get it right, and everybody recognizes whether you did or not."

McLachlan's "soft, pretty face" was more challenging to draw than a face with more-pronounced features, she adds.

To continue with her courtroom-art career, Wolsak attended—without an assignment—a local murder trial five months later. She was able to sell her sketches to a Victoria, B.C., newspaper and

Hotel Andra  
1/3 sq.



he is. I wish I could just be calm about it, and sit and stare to get what I need, but there's not enough time.

"You're looking at the hairline, then length of hair, the size of the nose. What's his expression? Is he shackled? What height is he? And then, *poof*, he's gone, and maybe you're only halfway down his nose."

Her secret is to start sketching before the appearance begins, drawing the

area where the accused will stand. She also adds in the sheriff, who's already there, because it makes the picture more interesting. That way she can concentrate on the subject as soon as the person appears. She typically spends about 45 minutes to an hour after the court appearance finishing such a sketch.

"We're not portrait artists. We're just doing the best we can under the circumstances," she says.

If she makes a mistake while she's sitting in the courtroom, she can correct it easily if she catches the mistake in time, since she starts sketching with light gray

show samples from the trial to CBC, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, which then hired her to sketch another trial. She's kept busy ever since, fielding about three or four assignments per month, including work for the CP—Canadian Press news agency—as well as the CBC, she says.

The Vancouver, B.C., resident gets more work than many of her U.S. colleagues because cameras are generally prohibited in courtrooms in Canada, forcing news broadcasters to rely heavily on what Canadians call "courtroom illustrators."

Wolsak says she prefers the term "illustrator" because it best describes her job: illustrating stories. She started out drawing vertical-format sketches, using a graphite pencil, but she now does horizontal pictures (which fit television screens better), using colored pencils. Her palette leans toward grays and browns, because they reflect the colors of clothing and furniture typically found in courtrooms, she says.

After nine years, she still finds illustrating daunting, but not because she's nervous. Instead, the pressure revolves around the need to capture as much detail as possible in an extremely short time. More often than not, she finds herself attending first court appearances, which are often quick-turn affairs, lasting just long enough to allow the accused to get a court date. Thirty-second appearances are not unusual.

During one short appearance when two other illustrators were also present, one artist drew the suspect clean-shaven; another drew him with a goatee; and a third gave him a beard. Wolsak can't remember which depiction was hers, and to this day she's not sure who was right.

"Short appearances are nerve-wracking," she says. "You don't know when the accused is going to come in, so you have to be ready as case after case is called. Suddenly you recognize the name, and there

University of Washington  
1/2 h.

High Country  
1/3 sq.

Waves Waterfront  
1/3 sq.

pencils whose marks are easy to erase. Once she starts filling the sketch in with the colored pencils, which she does in court while she can still view colors important to depicting facial features, it's too late.

During a typical trial, she can spend up to seven hours a day sketching the proceedings, but most days are shorter because of recesses and breaks for meals.

Although she lines up early to ensure a good seat, then usually starts sketching around 9:30 or 10, her deadline for local and national TV stations and newspapers is generally 4:30. If she's drawing a particularly sensational trial, she might have only 1.5 hours to meet her first deadline at 11:30 A.M.

She typically tries to draw four scenes a day, but has done more depending on the guidance she gets from the reporter covering the case, the story line defined by the journalist and the number of witnesses who are testifying. She earns (CAN)\$150 to \$900 per courtroom-art day, depending on how many TV stations and newspapers purchase the day's drawings.

Wolsak is also a painter, specializing in acrylic still lifes, but she relies much more heavily on the income she receives from courtroom illustrating than Strickland and Millett do. As a result, her schedule is even more erratic. For instance, when she began attending the trial of Robert Pickton, the Port Coquitlam pig farmer accused of murdering numerous Vancouver women, she expected to work until the trial—which began in January and is predicted to last at least a year—was completed. But once testimony focused on forensics, the media lost interest, she says, and the assignment was cut down.

Wolsak says her work is important “because I think it just enhances the reporter's story. It also gives you an idea of the atmosphere of the whole courtroom.”

While she's had to sit through many trials focusing on violent crimes, they don't bother her because she doesn't really take in the details, she says. She hears the high points but doesn't become emotionally involved because she doesn't attend the trial every day to hear the whole story, and her drawing keeps her focused on visual aspects of the case instead of the verbal testimony.

“I enjoy the mixture of painting and courtroom art,” she says. “In my painting, I do very painstaking, slow work. I can't do that in courtroom work. I have a tight deadline. Those first few days of the Pickton trial, I didn't get lunch at all, but in a way it's good for me to have

something done relatively quickly. I can't agonize over whether it's perfect; I have to have a sense of completion and accomplishment, and move on."

She adds that she feels lucky to be paid to sit and draw. "I enjoy the challenge. It's stressful, and sometimes I'm more pleased with my work than other times. I'm certainly better than I was. Certainly better than when I drew Sarah McLachlan."

### Millett Always Gets His Man

Millett is one of the most renowned artists in the Northwest. Considering that the New York Museum of Modern Art bought one of his abstract drawings in the late 1970s, and that his sculptures appeared at the Seattle Art Museum and Tacoma Art Museum in the 1980s and '90s, Millett may not really need the \$600 a day he generally gets when he covers a trial. Still, there's always been something about the stark images that emerge from courtrooms that has captured his imagination.

The Chicago-area native, who moved to Seattle in 1972, says courtroom sketches first caught his eye when he followed the 1969 trial of the Chicago Seven accused of involvement in unlawful protests during the 1968 Democratic National Convention. They were all ultimately acquitted.

Although he'd always loved drawing, he was riveted by the illustrations of the Chicago Seven case that were done by family friend and courtroom artist Franklin McMahon. "I just found the drawings fascinating," he says. "They were very intense drawings, and they gave you access to what went on in the courtroom."

Before that time, he hadn't known it was possible to make a living as an artist. "I realized, then, that this was something I might be able to do."

He got a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1971, and moved to Seattle in 1972 to do graduate work. Although he took a part-time teaching job in 1976, he approached a Seattle television station that same year about being a courtroom artist, and he's been doing it ever since.

He might work a few days one month, then have to wait up to six months for another assignment, but the feast-or-famine nature of the field didn't keep him from finally dropping teaching in 1996. He wanted to focus on work in the courts.

"Teaching was steady, but I hated to miss out on the drawing," he says. "I find it fascinating—just the range of human emotions and the body language. I like working fast, and I like being in on the

Davies Reid  
1/3 sq.

Wenatchee Valley CVB  
1/3 sq.

Dr. Atwood  
1/3 sq.

Biosphere Medical  
1/3 sq.

action. There's always a lot at stake. I like the intensity, including the need to scramble to get the subject's likeness while battling a tight deadline—even if the vantage point is bad, or a lawyer is blocking the view, or the subject is facing the wrong way. In all my years of working, I've always gotten my man. They've never sent me out when I wasn't able to get an image."

His work habits are the key to his success. He gets to court early; he knows the courtroom personnel well enough that they'll let him sit in the jury box if there isn't a jury; and he avoids forming an opinion of the subject before the trial. He draws what he sees without analyzing it.

"I'm a conduit. It goes through my eyes and through my arms without any judgment interference from me."

The process isn't always perfect. He occasionally has false starts. When that happens, he pulls out another piece of paper and starts again, because early on, that may be faster than fixing the problem.

Even so, he's so focused on observing his subject, he often doesn't know just what he's drawn until the proceedings are over and he's looking down at a gray page filled with pastel pencil lines. Then he has to hurry to fill in the color before turning it over to his media client. At that point, time is crucial because most court appearances are short, and because even if he's working a longer-running regular trial, he only has a few hours before his daily 11 A.M. deadline for the noon news. The deadline for the evening news is 4 P.M.

"It just takes working fast," he says. "The whole key is body language. Just reading the gesture and the way they're holding themselves is the key to having a picture that tells the story. It takes intense concentration. Even after doing short proceedings, I'll come out of there and be worn out."

If he's attending a trial rather than an initial appearance, he may spend six or seven hours a day drawing, and an additional hour filling in color, for up to two or three weeks. Once cramping strikes, Millet stops drawing. "That's how you know you're done, sometimes."

His effort to get it down on paper doesn't mean he's ignoring witness testimony. During trials he's heard details so disturbing that he's glad he doesn't have to write about them. "Sometimes you come out of there and say, 'That was just awful.'"

He's glad local courts permit cameras because even though their presence means less work for him, it allows him to avoid many violent cases.

Federal cases frequently relate to regula-

tory or constitutional issues, he says. Millett covered a 1990 flag-burning case, for example, after protesters were arrested for violating a federal law against flag desecration. The incident that led to the arrest occurred at a protest against the flag-desecration law. The Supreme Court subsequently ruled the law was unconstitutional.

The 1991 spotted-owl trial is another good example. The case stemmed from an Audubon Society suit that claimed the U.S. Forest Service's plan for managing forest lands failed to protect the threatened species. The emotional issue pitted environmentalists against the logging industry, which claimed that efforts to save the bird could hurt the economy in logging regions.

"It was a real showdown between the loggers and the Audubon people," Millett says. "The gallery was filled with loggers because what it was all about was their jobs. There was a lot of emotion out there. It was a highly charged atmosphere. They brought their children along and were holding their kids up."

He drew a picture showing lawyers set against a colorful field of loggers' flannel shirts. "I thought that was really telling the story," he says. "I think that was a good drawing."

Such high-profile trials work out well for Millett because each news organization has to pay for the rights to use his pictures. "If it's a big story, you can make pretty good money in one day."

On average, in addition to the daily rate he charges whoever gave him the initial assignment, he typically charges \$300 per drawing to each additional news agency. Of course, other courtroom artists may be trying to sell their depictions of the same case, creating competition.

Millett isn't in it for the money, though. He likes the adrenaline rush of being on deadline and knowing he's doing something significant. "These are very important stories. If you're the only one coming up with the images that people across the country are seeing, these drawings are the only visual record of what's going on in there. I take it very seriously."

He estimates he's averaging 30 days a year or less of courtroom work, but he's always ready for an assignment.

"It's high stakes. It's a laboratory of human emotion. I just love doing it and hope they never allow cameras in the federal courtroom, because then I'd have to set up shop at the pier to get my portrait fix."

*Writer David Volk lives in Seattle.*

505 Broadway  
1/3 sq.

Hotel Max  
1/3 sq.