



Profile: Vicki Ellen Behringer

[by Regan Morris]

Witnessing history and documenting it—fast

Vicki Ellen Behringer has worked on many of the biggest trials of the last decade: from the Unabomber to Michael Jackson to Enron. LawCrossing speaks with the sketch artist about her role as a documentarian of courtroom history.

Since the 1980s, judges have been letting cameras into the courtroom, and media outlets have been dropping sketch artists from their staff. When Judge Ito allowed cameras into the O.J. Simpson trial, the future of courtroom sketch artists looked very, very bleak.

But many judges were wary and often repulsed by the Simpson spectacle of lawyers and witnesses showboating for the cameras. After the trial judges reconsidered the future, perhaps cameras in the courtroom is not a great idea. In some ways, sketch artists like Vicki Ellen Behringer owe their recent prosperity to Judge Ito.

"We love Judge Ito," Ms. Behringer said. "I thought my whole career was going down the tubes at that point, but then the O.J. trial came along."

The backlash after the Simpson trial meant a booming business for courtroom artists. The last two years have been the busiest for Ms. Behringer, who spoke to LawCrossing the day after sketching scenes from the start of Michael Jackson's trial in California. She plans to sketch the entire Jackson trial, which some predict could last about five or six months. She recently finished sketching scenes from the trial of Scott Peterson, who

was found guilty of murdering his wife and unborn son.

Ms. Behringer, who has been working as a courtroom sketch artist for 15 years, did not intend to enter the legal profession, although like many in the profession, her favorite show was Perry Mason.

Back in the heyday of courtroom sketch artists in the 1960s and 70s, newspapers and television stations often employed fulltime artists and sent them around to various trials. Now, most all artists work freelance, and work between major trials can be scarce. There were three artists (including Behringer) covering the start of Jackson's trial last month. And three artists also covered the Peterson trial.

Ms. Behringer did not want to discuss financial details of her career, but sketch artists at trials with strong media interest can charge up to \$400 per sketch. There are about 80 news outlets from around the world covering the Jackson trial. Media interest will likely wax and wane over the course of the trial, but the start and end will be lucrative days for the artists.

Like journalism, the keys to being a good courtroom artist are speed and accuracy. You have to sketch fast and be able to capture a person's likeness quickly. Ms. Behringer sketches in pencil, then she uses ink and erases the pencil before finishing the work in watercolors. Her website www.courtroomartist.com shows examples of her work.

She draws fast. During the Peterson trial, for example, she was averaging four to ten sketches per day. When she is finished with a sketch, she leaves the court and displays it for the press in the hallways or in the parking lot, wherever the media is gathered. And the artists are quite competitive. If a journalist chooses your work or you have a deal with the media outlet, then the reporters use digital cameras to photograph the paintings. The artists get paid once, regardless of how many times the newspaper or TV station broadcasts the work.

Ms. Behringer was working as an artist drawing houses for real estate companies when a friend suggested she become a courtroom artist. A week later, one of her art teachers suggested the same thing, and she began to think seriously about it. Before she had time to act, a friend told her about an opening at the courthouse in Sacramento. It's quite tricky to get into the profession like that, and Ms. Behringer said it was awful because the person she replaced had died in a motorcycle accident.

She lives in Sacramento, but often lives in motels during trials. She is considering renting an apartment for the Jackson trial so she can bring her dog with her. She rarely leaves California for work, which has not been a problem in recent years with so many trials. In between trials, she does commissioned work and sells her original courtroom paintings to collectors, generally the attorneys depicted.

"I've just been really lucky getting so much



work. There have been so many trials in California," she said.

To be a good courtroom artist: "You have to be very resilient and be a good salesperson, be a good businessperson; you have to be a very good artist that works very, very fast and be able to go for long stretches. To be available at a moment's notice and to go for long stretches without any income."

But having Peterson and Jackson back to back is "really, really lucky."