



Special Report

Elizabeth Williams: The Eye of the Sketch Artist



Over the past few months, lower Manhattan was the home to an unusual social event: The Martha Stewart trial in U. S. Federal Court. All celebrity defendants create a stir when they go on trial, but the show for Martha was extraordinary. The tent at the foot of the courthouse steps looked like something you would more likely see at a summer society fundraiser, but every effort was made to accommodate the public's right to know. For days on end, we would see a snippet of video on the evening news as Team Martha either climbed the stairs into the courthouse at the start of the day, or descended in the dimming light of late afternoon.

Stationed on either side of the steps were a phalanx of video and still photographers waiting for the brief thirty-second appearances of Martha and her attorneys. Since much of the trial took place during a bitter cold snap, the working press had to endure a lot of hardship to get the job done. And, as anyone who has photographed a high profile trial knows, the accused usually musters a game face for that rite of passage as the shutters click, the flashes pop, and insouciant reporters fling questions that will go unanswered.

What would it be like if you could observe the accused from inside the courtroom? What if you could study the characters at leisure, without cold fingers and toes? That is a privilege that is denied to photographers in Federal Court and in some states, including New York. What if you could study your subjects over an extended period of time, during the vicissitudes of trial, where it would be impossible for the subject to show nothing but a game face? To find out, we took up that very question with an artist who covered the Martha Stewart trial.

As any photographer knows, it's all about getting the shot - being ready with your finger on the shutter at the crucial moment, whether that moment is the look that passes between bride and groom, or the perfect split second as a child begins to laugh, or the minute when the defendant emerges from the courtroom. When you're waiting to get the shot, anything can happen, and the good photographers are at the ready.

But what if, instead of having a camera in your hands, you had a big sheet of paper and a



© Elizabeth Williams
Opening remarks in Rigas family trial - defendants owned the Adelphia company and were accused of plundering it.

collection of pencils, pens, inks, and paints?

To find out about the work of a courtroom sketch artist, and to learn how this work influences and is influenced by photography, we went to Elizabeth Williams, a professional sketch artist for some of today's highest-profile courtroom dramas - including the recent trial of Martha Stewart. "Like photographers, we have to figure out what's the shot," Williams said, but she knows her own skill lies in sketching rather than in photography, and the difference in the medium makes a huge difference in the work.

Williams said that until recently, she never went near a camera. Back in the days when the offices of New York Newsday, for whom she has often worked - and for whom she covered the Stewart trial - were in midtown Manhattan, Williams could just drop off the sketches after a day in court. A staff photographer would then photograph her drawings, and then she'd see her work in print in the following day's paper.

Luckily, the move of the Newsday offices out to Kew Gardens, Queens, coincided with the surge in popularity of digital photography, and so Williams started learning to shoot her own sketches digitally, so that she could transmit the digital files to the newspaper in time for the nightly deadline.

"Had that move happened before, it would have been a serious problem," she said. "If someone I was sketching took the stand late in the day, I would have had to take the photos out to Queens, and I wouldn't have gotten there by the deadline," but digital photography makes it possible.

In fact, shooting her work herself may improve the way it's ultimately seen, as before she had to hope she'd get an experienced photographer who would understand the subtleties involved in shooting her sketches.

"At the trial of the late mob boss John Gotti, I got this great drawing, it was really terrific, and the editor had to go with a picture that was way over exposed. It really did make a huge difference," she said. "A lot depends on how the artwork is shot, what the lighting is like, and then sometimes you see yourself on air or in the newspaper and you want to crawl in a hole."

"Now, I can see how it's going to look before I e-mail it to Newsday or wherever. It's a complex medium, and if you don't have a good photo, you think you have a good drawing, but when you shoot it, you look at it and you go, "Oh my god."

Williams found that when she was sketching for the Martha Stewart trial, the courtroom's black marble background posed difficulties, because when she photographed the drawing, it would flare.



Stewart trial witness for the prosecution Douglas Fanuel

"It would be so distracting that when I shot it I could see it was flaring, but I had to work very fast, because it was Friday afternoon, late, and I ended up having to shoot it three times before getting it right."

When Williams does have her work shot by a professional photographer, she's very aware of the work that goes into getting the photography right. "It's a marriage between the artist and the photographer," she says.

Williams's work looks a little different from some of the more standard-fare courtroom sketches, because she was trained by one of the best-known court artists, Bill Robles, who is now covering the Michael Jackson trial.

"He always drew the scene just as though he was the photographer in the courtroom," she said. "I was trained with that approach, which I think creates that 'natural' look. The difference in New York City is there are artists who, instead of drawing the actual scene, draw made up composites of the courtroom. This creates a very different look and lacks that 'natural' quality."

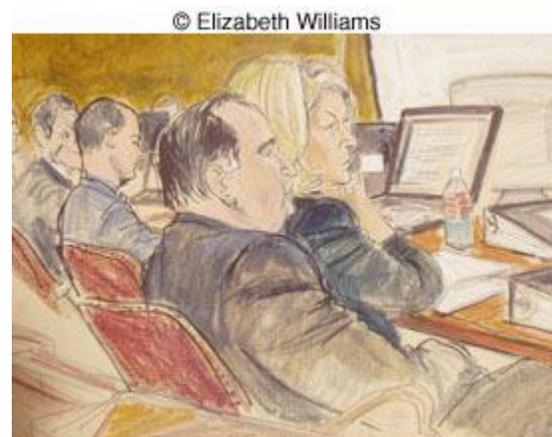
Getting the sketch inside the courtroom is very much like getting the shot outside the courtroom, Williams said. And in the high-profile cases, the pressure is on to get an interesting angle on the players in the trial.

"It was like bird watching to get a hold of Martha Stewart and get that one look. She'd occasionally have these pained looks when the prosecutors would get up there. It's a lot of waiting until you have your shot," she said. "That's part of why we're hired, because we can do that, and that's what we're supposed to be doing."

Because Williams sits in the courtroom watching the proceedings, she's privy to learning details about some of the celebrities that other people may miss. John Delorean, the car magnate who was arrested in the 1980s on charges of money laundering and drug trafficking, for example, had a twitch, making it difficult to draw him accurately. "I wanted to say, 'stop with the twitching already!' But I'm sure he was extremely nervous."

Still, Williams has to get the drawing, and luckily, she often has time to do a few preliminary sketches, which help her to "understand the face" of the person. "I end up really trying very hard to draw. You have to capture the moment, to capture what it is when it's going on."

At the Martha Stewart trial, the view of Stewart that Williams was privy to was unlike that outside the courtroom, in that Stewart was no longer playing to her audience. Instead, she shielded herself from courtroom observers by sitting between her attorneys, and she looked



Martha Stewart and Robert Morvillo at the defense table.

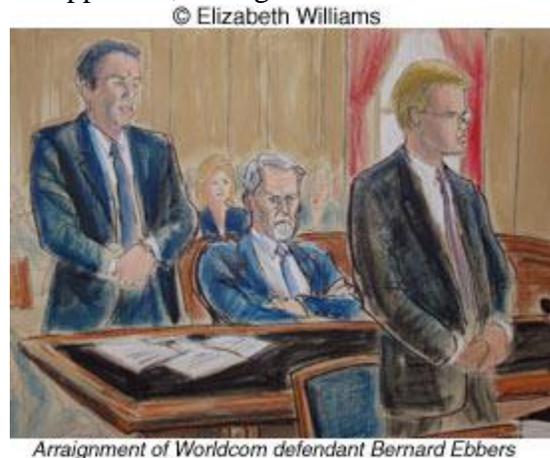
down much of the time, Williams said.

"We actually saw less of her face, because she sat with her profile to us and a lot of times she'd turn away. You couldn't really get a good look at her," Williams said. "As far as really seeing her, she didn't show an awful lot of emotion. She's a very controlled person." This, of course, made Williams's job of sketching Stewart that much more difficult.

"It was quite a challenge. During breaks, they'd go into another room. But in the courtroom, there were a few times she'd turn around to talk to her supporters, or to give them some of the green tea drink she'd brought."

In the arraignment of Worldcom's CEO Bernie Evers, Williams had an added challenge: he never stood up when entering his plea, as nearly every defendant does.

"In an arraignment, the shot is of the defendant standing up and saying out loud that he's not guilty. That's the shot," Williams said. "I'm sitting there trying to understand his face, drawing it at least once, and waiting for the moment when he'll stand up. He sat there with his arms folded the whole time."



"You're looking for the shot, and I'm sure the photographers go through the same thing, and the shot occurs, and you're suddenly changing horses in midstream. That's the way news is. You have to constantly keep all your options open."

In the trial of Keith Mondello and Joseph Fama, charged in the beating death of Yusef Hawkins in the Bensonhurst section of New York City, the shot was all about the verdict. When the verdict came down, Williams almost didn't know which way to look, as there were two defendants, their attorneys, their families, and dignitaries such as Al Sharpton, all of whom were giving reactions worthy of a sketch.

"When that verdict came down, they went nuts," she said. "Where do you go, because you've got this crazy stuff going on, you've got to look and observe. You just can't point and shoot."

Part of the challenge for artists like Williams is that the newspapers want a representation that's as accurate as a photograph. And while the newspapers usually want just one perfect sketch of the most compelling moment in a trial to accompany the story that will run in the paper the next day, television news wants several shots.

"You can't get the entire thing in one picture," she said. "You must get shots of individuals, one of the judge, one of the defendant, one of the jury."

And why is it that cameras aren't allowed in courtrooms? Just as the rules about this were starting to change in the mid-1990s, along came the trial of OJ Simpson, which Williams suspects may have turned back the progress toward allowing cameras in the courtroom, because that trial "became such an over-the-top media gangbang nightmare."

It does change the tone to have the camera there, Williams said, and not necessarily because the photographers are disrupting the proceedings, but simply because people - even attorneys and judges - will behave differently when there's a camera in the room.

At the trial of Carolyn Warmus, the Westchester schoolteacher who was found guilty of murdering her lover's wife, there were two trials, one without cameras, and the other with cameras.

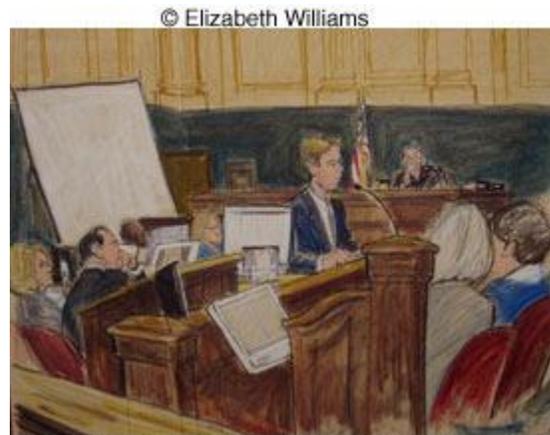
"In the morning, we were able to draw the jury, and were told to stay. In the afternoon, the camera comes in, and I look at the judge and now all of a sudden he's acting differently. His hair is all combed, he's pontificating from the bench - it was an interesting change."

But for all the excitement of covering the trials of such people as Martha Stewart and convicted 1980s financier Michael Milken, being in the courtroom all day is ultimately "pretty damn boring."

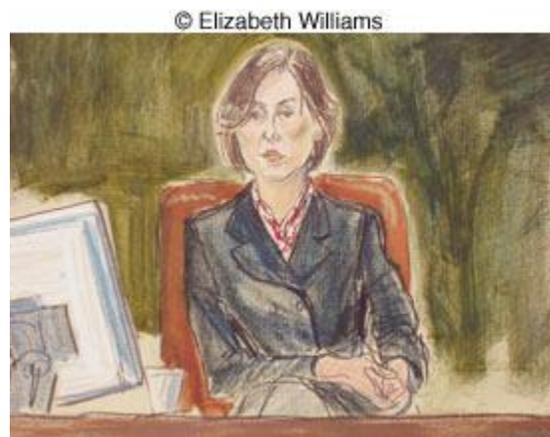
"It's just like a baseball game," Williams said. "You start thinking we need some hotdogs and some beer here. When are they going to hit a home run? Instead, they're going through the phone records."

But if any one of the players starts crying, Williams knows she has her shot, and it's surprisingly easy to draw, because people usually cover their face with their hands when they cry.

"That's pretty easy to draw," she said. "The most difficult thing is a really wild reaction to a verdict. For me, drawing a verdict is like being pushed off a cliff. You have a parachute, but you hope you can just pull the rip cord in time."



Closing statements of Michael Schachter in Stewart trial



Witness Marianna Pasternak - Martha Stewart girl friend

But at the end of the day, Williams has to be satisfied with whatever shot she's been able to get, and so does the newspaper.

"Whatever you're able to get, that's the drawing they're going to use," she said. "You can spend two hours working on something. Photographers must go through that too, but they've got it worse, every day outside in the cold waiting for the shot, or on the front lines in a war. So really the artists are a bunch of wimps compared to that."

—Sarah Van Arsdale