

With pen in hand, courtroom artist witnessed history

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Before there was C-SPAN, there was Betty Wells and her sketch pad.

The artist, now 83, opened the closed doors of Congress to the public in the 1970s, capturing powerful politicians like Sen. Ted Kennedy and Sen. Strom Thurmond at work.

"That was very interesting and very challenging," said Wells. While working as a sketch artist for NBC, she wielded pens, colored pencils and pastels with a deft hand, illustrating political dramas and high-profile courtroom cases for television viewers.

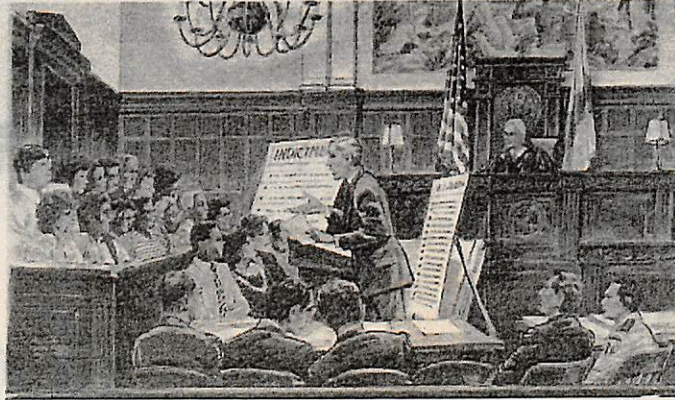
"I learned so much about current events and history and politics. It was just fascinating," said Wells, who often had to recreate scenes in a matter of minutes.

Her images of Congress — which are arguably more interesting than watching C-SPAN for hours at a time — drawings of Supreme Court justices, and sketches from notorious cases around the country like the trials of D.C. sniper John Allen Muhammad,

"30 Years of D.C. Courtroom Art"

Address: Promega
5445 E. Cheryl
Parkway, Fitchburg

Hours: 8 a.m. to
4 p.m., Monday
through Friday,
through Dec. 1



Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega and South Carolina child-killer Susan Smith are now on display at Promega as part of "30 Years of D.C. Courtroom Art." The free show runs through Dec. 1.

The collection features detailed portraits as well as expansive scenes with multiple players. Many brim with kinetic energy and intensity, while others capture quieter moments. Wells recreates emotional moments with a hand gesture, raised eyebrow or intense stare.

"A photographer will shoot away and shoot away and you hope that everyone has their eyes open," said Daniel Swadener, exhibition curator at Promega. "She can create the drama so that everyone involved in the picture can tell their story." Swadener first

In this 1991 drawing from Miami District Court, artist Betty Wells sketched Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega, lower right, during opening arguments.

BETTY WELLS

learned of Wells and her work through an acquaintance writing a book about her.

With fine arts training from the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, Wells began her career painting public murals and illustrating fashion magazines. But she was uniquely suited to the job of courtroom sketch artist.

"In art school they kept telling me to 'Slow down! Where's the fire?'" said Wells, who now lives in Virginia.

She was encouraged by her husband, who quipped, "You're fast, Betty. I don't know who else could do this."

Wells started work as a courtroom sketch artist for a local television station in Baltimore, covering the trial of Black Panther member H. Rap Brown. A few years later,

NBC hired her to cover Watergate.

She loved the challenge of the job. The most difficult assignments were sketching the Senate and the House, "because the rooms were so enormous (and) because there are so many people and so many desks.

"Then next, you have all the nine heads of the (Supreme Court) justices," she said.

In addition to her courtroom work, Wells sometimes went undercover for NBC; she assumed a disguise to sketch members of the North American Man/Boy Love Association, who tried to lower the age of consent to age 4. Those sketches, in dark grays, blues and greens, are featured in the Promega exhibit.

Keeping cool under pressure and quickly discerning the most crucial details of a scene were critical, Wells said.

"I tried to show the viewer what I saw there in court. I left out stuff that was not important," she said. "I like to put the flags in there, the doors. If I'm in a hurry I don't put the doors in. Sometimes I put the items on the judge's bench, sometimes I leave them off."

One of the more colorful sketches in the show is a portrait of a jury.

"I loved doing juries," Wells said. "They're so interesting. All these people, different ages, races, sexes — it was wonderful." ❧