



# Artist reveals the multifaceted King of Torts

*“To admirers, he was a tireless fighter for the little people. To detractors, he was a shameless self-promoter.”*

BY TREVOR GORING

*Editor’s note: The 62nd Annual Melvin Belli Seminar was held this past July 24 in San Francisco. To mark the occasion, international artist and author Trevor Goring exhibited two portraits of Melvin Belli. Here, he shares reminiscences and thoughts on the iconic figure (for more information on the Belli Society: [www.bellisociety.org](http://www.bellisociety.org)).*

New York City, July 1995. The O.J. Simpson trial is dominating the media. I have just finished installing an exhibition of my *Images of Justice* paintings and prints at the Association of Trial Lawyers of America (ATLA). Next to my booth is a medical-legal consulting firm represented by a stunningly beautiful, petite blonde. Within minutes a sprightly, dynamic, silver-haired octogenarian suavely presents himself and his considerable entourage to my attractive neighbor and asks her out to lunch. Melvin Belli has arrived.

Over the next five days, between numerous media appearances and social events Mel returned again and again to woo my charming neighbor, and as she was most often absent from her station, he seated himself comfortably in my space and engaged me in some of the most wide-ranging and fascinating conversation I have had the pleasure to share throughout my 20 years of working with the trial lawyer community. At one point we discussed my painting his portrait but alas he was gone within 12 months and a live sitting was not to be.



Melvin Belli, the tough litigator, pictured with his trademark, fine tooled cowboy boots and “bordello red” silk lining of an immaculate suit. A selection of his most popular books is arrayed behind. (Private collection of the artist.)

Painting portraits posthumously is a risky business. If you don’t get it right, your subject may well come back to haunt you. Conscious of this daunting prospect, I placed the idea of creating Mel’s portrait in dormancy until I developed a relationship with a number of prominent members of the Belli Society who encouraged me to take up the task. Since the

idea had been distilling in my mind for many years, and I was convinced that Mel would certainly approve of anything to do with distilling, I embarked upon the necessary research. Family members, friends and colleagues were most helpful in providing background and context, culminating in a marvelous visit with Mel’s son Caesar to visit his mother Joy, in her Palm Springs home, a treasure trove of Belli memorabilia.

Eventually I decided on painting two portraits and completed them in my Montreal studio in time to unveil the largest one at the Belli Society meeting being held that year in Toronto. Two portraits because Mel was nothing if not complex and multifaceted, and I knew there were those who saw him as *Melvin Bellicose* and those who favored the more caring image of this great controversial figure. To admirers, he was a tireless fighter for the little people. To detractors, he was a shameless self-promoter.

## The making of an icon

Unquestionably, Melvin Belli built his career by defending the rights of the individual. Representing individuals in personal injury cases and raising awards to then-unprecedented heights he earned the title of “King of Torts” by Life Magazine writer Robert Wallace in a 1954 profile. In his first personal injury lawsuit, Mel Belli represented an injured cable car



grip man. Over defense attorney's objections, Belli brought a large model of a cable car intersection and the gearbox and chain involved in the accident to court to demonstrate to the jurors exactly what happened. This pioneering work in illustrating in court the nature of his clients' injuries and his early use of photographs, movies, scale models, human skeletons, animals, prostheses and other devices was dramatic, riveting and highly effective. He truly was the "Father of Demonstrative Evidence."

High profile cases involved Mae West, Errol Flynn, Lenny Bruce, Zsa Zsa Gabor, Muhammad Ali, Alex Haley, television evangelist Jim Baker and his wife, Tammy Faye, the Korean jetliner disaster, the MGM Grand Hotel fire in Las Vegas, the collapse of the Kansas City Hyatt walkway, the Benedictin birth defect cases and Sirhan Sirhan. In his best-known case,

Mel Belli represented Jack Ruby on trial for the murder of Lee Harvey Oswald, the assassin of President John F. Kennedy.

His flamboyant character was intimately linked to the life of San Francisco and his eccentric offices and lifestyle were the keen focus of media and tourist attention. He reveled in his victories and after winning a big case, raised a Jolly Roger on the roof of his landmark building and fired off two blasts from a signal cannon to herald the imminent celebration party.

So far the ghost of Melvin Belli has yet to appear in my studio, and I am hopeful that perhaps he is content with my attempts at capturing (or should that be freeing) his spirit, certainly of making a respectful and modest contribution to honouring his legacy of both creative and controversial "lawyering." Melvin Belli loved the law and the limelight equally and lived both to the full.

The King of Torts is dead. Long live the King!

*Trevor Goring is a London-born international portrait artist, historical painter, author and publisher. In 1991 he founded the Images of Justice project to explore and promote the history and symbolism of law in original paintings, limited edition prints and electronic and print media. He has exhibited at over 350 legal and judicial conferences in North America and Europe, his images appear on over 100 magazine covers and his art is found in hundreds of private, corporate and public collections. He lives and maintains studios in Cork City, Ireland and Montreal, Canada. [www.imagesofjustice.com](http://www.imagesofjustice.com) or e-mail [trevor@trevorgoring.com](mailto:trevor@trevorgoring.com).*



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