



By Kimberly Biesiada

"A picture can only be well framed if it's in a well-made frame."

That core belief is the guiding principle at Holton Studio Frame-Makers, on which their entire design approach is based. The full-service frame shop, which doubles as an art gallery as well as a complete woodworking shop, was created by Berkeley, CA native Timothy Holton in 1993. The hardwood frames sold there are designed and custom-made in-house by a small team of artisans.

For Holton, a professional framer since 1975 who also spent several years working in theater, the business is the realization of his dream to run a designer-maker studio in the tradition of the Arts and Crafts Movement. Among the offerings at Holton Studio Frame-Makers are mitered

frames, floaters, Adirondack and Oxford (lap-joined) frames, and mortise-and-tenon frames made from walnut, mahogany, cherry, maple, and their most popular wood, quartersawn white oak.

In an interview with PFM, Holton discusses his design influences, the evolution of his 28-year-old business, and the importance of hiring and training people who are well-suited for the job.

Your mission statement says you aim to “revive the art and craft of frame-making by restoring its bases in the art of the joiner, the cabinetmaker, the woodwright; in the inspiration of nature and its materials; and in the instincts, imagination, and intelligence of the craftsman.” What first sparked your passion for this kind of traditional craftsmanship?

I worked at Storey Framing in Berkeley for 17 years. It started as an afterschool job in 1975, and I ended up working there through high school, college, and during my years in professional theater. The owner, Jim Storey, was really conscientious about craftsmanship. Everything about the work was careful.

I also grew up in Berkeley, one of the great centers of the American Arts and Crafts Movement, so I always had that ethos. I was surrounded by the architecture of people like Bernard Maybeck. My family had a house in Inverness, CA, that was built in 1908, and it was just an exemplary Craftsman home—all redwood. Berkeley is also a big center for the environmental movement. John Muir lived here. It's where the Sierra Club was founded. So that sort of rev-



● From a part-time gig in high school to a full-time career, Holton has been creating custom frames for over 45 years.

erence for nature was a big part of it, too.

That might all sound a bit farfetched—like, what does this have to do with picture framing? But it has everything to do with how I think about materials. I believe everything about a frame should honor its material, because nothing we can make is as beautiful as what's found in nature. And I appreciate the inherent beauty of things that are well made, no matter how simple, no matter how utilitarian. The care embodied in anything that's well made is visible. It becomes part of what you enjoy about looking at a beautifully framed picture. I think there is a real underestimation of that.

You were a framer for nearly 20 years before opening your shop. What made you decide to take the plunge?

Very early on, I actually had this concept for a wholesale framing business selling mortise-and-tenon picture frames. I was just one guy—I didn't have any vision for being a manufacturer with 500 employees or anything like that—so it wasn't that unreasonable. It's just that as I got into it, I felt more and more constrained by every frame I was making needing to have mortise-and-tenon joints. It wasn't always the most beautiful choice for every picture.

When I decided to focus on making frames, Jim Storey let me set up a bench in his shop to explore my own designs and sell them there. Someone from the Oakland Museum saw them, and my work was displayed in the museum store during an exhibition in 1993. That gave me the confidence to set up my own shop. I leased a space in Emeryville and was there for 23 years until moving the business to Berkeley in 2016.

Does most of your business today come from retail?

Yes. We do a tiny bit of wholesale to different shops, including Storey Framing and Aarnun Gallery down in Pasadena. The vast majority of our business is retail, which I consider crucial to the vitality and creativity of frame design.

Are there certain kinds of artwork or objects that you frame more frequently than others?

We frame everything: photographs, children's art, diplomas, watercolors, tiles. But we have made a specialty of Northern California landscape paintings. California has a wonderful, old tradition of landscape painting. The gallery that we run here is dedicated to contemporary Northern California landscapes.



● Holton hard at work carving one of the business's handmade hardwood frames.

You also ship framed pieces across the country, right?

Yes—we have a lot of mail-order customers, and that's very important to our business. Typically, they'll send me an image of something they want to have framed; very often, they'll send me the actual piece, even if it's a large painting. A lot of times I'll lay the piece on the design table and take pictures with corner samples against it. I've also gotten pretty good at Photoshop, so I'll Photoshop an image of their piece into an image of one of our frames.

I talk on the phone, of course, and there's a lot of emailing. It can be time-consuming, but sometimes it expedites the process because there comes a point where they rely on me to choose a few designs for them to consider. They don't have hundreds of samples in front of them to look at.

Sometimes it's too hard for someone to make up their mind based on what they're looking at on their screen. If they've never worked with me before, they may not be ready to just say, 'I'm going to leave that decision to you.' But as time goes on, it gets a little more carte blanche with people who've worked with me in the past. They'll usually want to see what I've got in mind, and they want to know how much it's going to cost. But they become increasingly confident in what they're spending on our work, and are happy to pay.

That's always nice. Particularly during the challenges of this past year.

It's been very gratifying during the pandemic, actually, that people just wanted me to keep going. There's a lot to be said for longevity at a time like this. If you've been around for a long time, then you've got loyal customers who want to help you out.

How many frames do you produce per year?

Probably about 1,000.

Can you give me an overview of that process, from sourcing the wood to designing and building the frame?

There are a couple of local lumberyards that I frequent. I try to get there when the wood has just come in so I can pick through a whole unit of lumber. We start with rough lumber—mostly quartersawn oak and walnut, but other woods, too. Then in the shop, pretty much every frame is made from scratch. We start with those boards, and the basic unit of tools we use for milling is a jointer, planer, and table saw.

Most frames have to be sanded. If it's flat, we'll join it and then sand it afterwards. But if it's a slope or a cove or cushion shape, then we do a lot of the sanding first, because if you cut the 45-degree miters and then try to sand it, you're likely to round over the miter. The mitered frames are all splined. For the mortise-and-tenon frames, we use a hollow chisel mortiser, which is like a drill press but to cut square holes. Then I have a Japanese tenoner machine, the most expensive machine in the shop. It has two big heads that cut both sides of a tenon simultaneously.

Then a lot of the frames have to be molded. We've got something like five table saws, and one is dedicated to molding heads. We have special knives for those, most of which I've had custom made. There's a whole art to cutting profiles. We've had a lot of fun over the years exploring, combining different elements.

There's a way to make money doing this, but it's a tough business model. It's on the opposite end of the spectrum from a turnkey business.



● At Holton Studio Frame-Makers, Sam Edie focuses on frame finishing, shipping, fitting, and more.



● Frame maker Trevor Davis stands with a finished piece. Artwork: "La Punt near St. Moritz, Engadin Valley" by Peder Monsted.

You have five employees, three of whom help make the frames. Was it difficult to find the right people?

Yes. It took me a really, really long time. My first solid employee was Trevor Davis, who's been with me for 22 years. The second frame maker, Eric Johnson, has been with me for 12 years. The problem I have is that it's just a strange combination; people who have picture framing experience don't necessarily have the skills to make my frames because it's real woodworking, and people with the skills to make my frames don't necessarily have an interest in pictorial art. Most woodworkers want to make chairs and tables, stuff like that. Here, you're making things out of wood that really depend on another art form for their success.

As you know, the right frame on the right picture is just wonderful. To make something that's sort of simple, but you made it out of good material and you made it right, and then to put it around a picture—suddenly, it becomes something much, much greater. To me, that's extremely gratifying. But it's hard to find people who are that tuned in to pictures that that's satisfying enough for them.

Both Trevor and Eric came with some skills, but basically, I made a huge investment in them learning to do it. You cannot overvalue your employees. The value of good employees is immeasurable.

To me, that comes down more than anything to good work. I turned down a job because it was going to be like 200 super-simple frames, and I said, this is just going to drive us crazy. It's going to make us miserable. It's the work itself that we're finding value in here. I mean, we're trying to make a living, that goes without saying. But there are other ways to make a lot more money, and the real reward of doing this work is the work itself. It's inherently valuable if you do it right. You don't want to forget what makes it meaningful. **PFM**