

# DESIGN OF THE MONTH

By Timothy Holton

## *Baroque in Oak: Framing a 17th-Century Map*

**A**t Holton Studio Frame-Makers, it's not often that we do anything in a baroque style, but since one of our founding principles is adaptation—a key reason we make all our frames from scratch—when a customer in Chicago sent me a seventeenth-century map to frame, I welcomed the challenge. The map's wonderful illustrations included numerous cues for a frame design, and I settled on a scroll, or cartouche, pattern.

The antique map of the Americas, which was printed in Frankfurt in 1631, is about 15" x 18 1/2". I elected to frame it close, which we do much more often than most framers. In general, I find framing close more unifying, simple, and direct. In the case of a map, its utilitarian nature—albeit highly decorative in this instance—especially demanded a simple and direct presentation. The profile is 3" wide, plus a slim 18-karat oil gilded slip, and is made in stained quartersawn white oak. The slip, of which just 1/8" is revealed, is actually 1" wide and conceals a gasket mat to separate the print from the glass. The rabbit is lined with metal frame sealing tape to protect the valuable antique map from the acids in the wood.

We make all our frames from solid hardwood—the shop's really set up as a custom fur-



Holton Studio Frame-Makers



*This antique map was the perfect candidate for one of Holton Studio's custom-built hardwood frames. The profile is 3" wide with a slim, 18K oil-gilded slip.*

niture shop, but all we make is frames—and I always consider the first basis of the frame's beauty to be the wood itself. Quartersawn white oak is particularly notable for its coarse grain and "ray flake" figure, the distinctive stripes that were revealed when the board is sawn along the medullary rays that radiate out from the center of the tree. Apart from being inherently beautiful, oak was a suitable choice of wood given that until the early seventeenth century, the time from which the map dates, nearly all the frames in northern Europe were oak. Oak has also been long associated with strength and durability—all the more reason for its use as a protective setting for a valuable antique.

The second basis of a frame's beauty is its craftsmanship. From wood selection to deco-



**Timothy Holton** is the owner of Holton Studio Frame-Makers in Berkeley, CA. A native Californian inspired by the art and architecture of his home state, Tim began his career in framing at Storey Framing in 1975. After earning a history degree and a brief career in live theater, Tim returned his attention to framing, honing the joining and carving skills that distinguish his work. After the Oakland Museum's contemporary artisan gallery displayed his work in 1993, he was spurred to open his own business, which now specializes in hand-carved hardwood frames built entirely in-house. Tim lives in Berkeley with his wife, Stephanie McCoy. They have an adult daughter, Ella.

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rative detail to finishing, every part and step of the frame's making should be done carefully; but the joinery—how the frame is put together—is especially significant.

All our frames are closed corner. We use different kinds of joinery, but this frame has conventional miters with visible splines; i.e., triangles of wood glued into a slot cut deep into each corner.

The third basis of the beauty of the frame I consider is its suitability to and harmony with the picture—the adaptation of one art form to another. I therefore looked to the map for design cues for the frame and found that it offered several. It was especially rewarding to have the opportunity to develop a simple baroque pattern, in part because we don't often get to do that, but also because it's a vernacular so commonplace in the tradition and language of picture frames that framers tend to become attuned to it without even thinking about it. In the instance here, where we were framing an important but nonetheless essentially utilitarian type of work, it's also a case of simplifying a style given to being overwrought. Even though the print is finely detailed, the image has enough boldness,

density, and contrast to hold up to a heavy frame. The distinctly handmade print called for a hand-carved frame. Other than the cartouche flourish around the outside, the basic profile is, in fact, a simple, flat design carved with a low gouge.

The finish is crucial. It should protect the wood without creating a barrier to touch and the tactile pleasure of the feel of wood. We used our usual finish for oak, first staining it with an aniline water dye that matched the cool brown ink of the print, followed with two coats of varnish, and finished with a blend of waxes and abrasives.

It's easy to imagine that this is a well-traveled piece. Perhaps now it will settle down for a while in a comfortable, suitable home! The owner had these appreciative words for us: "Do you ever wonder which of your works might last hundreds of years? If we assume that people continue to preserve this 387-year-old map, I cannot imagine anyone wanting to take it out of this frame. Surely whoever has this map in future ages will have your hand-carved oak along with it. I think your pieces will be floating around for centuries." **PFM**

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