

# DESIGN OF THE MONTH

By Timothy Holton

## *Memento Mori: Framing a Stephen Goldblatt Photograph*

**N**ot long ago, a customer brought into my shop a haunting color photograph by award-winning cinematographer Stephen Goldblatt depicting the decayed interior of a once-lavish aristocratic home in Mexico. At 21" x 41", its large format seemed to call for a different approach than most photographs.

Walter Crane (1945-1915), the great English artist, illustrator, and reformer, wrote that the thing to aim for in framing is "mural feeling." Frames, he argued, should help restore pictures to their original and natural architectural place and role as murals. In the case of easel paintings, that seems like a reasonable goal. It's much harder, though, with photography, the genesis and tradition of which has little to do with architecture. Photographs, therefore, are usually matted and set in fairly narrow frames that don't make any attempt to feel architectural in the same way that heavier frames for paintings traditionally have.

But what if a photo depicts a mural, and is large enough to hold its own as a substantial part of an architectural setting? This was a rare case when Crane's guidance actually served photography.

My shop, Holton Studio Frame-Makers, works in the cabinetmakers' frame tradition

rooted in the shops of Medieval joiners who, besides building cabinets and furniture, were finish carpenters, playing their role in the collaboration that once defined the art of architecture. The job perfectly suited our talents and approach. We set the large 21" x 41" photo in a 2" wide walnut frame. The fisheye lens distortion of the room's straight lines and flat walls suggested the primary form of the frame, which is a convex, or cushion, shape canted in toward the picture. That's bounded inside and out by a narrow step, or fillet. The face of the cushion is painted with linseed oil paint (I like the Swedish brand Ottosson) in the same green (Ottosson's "Copenhagen Green" was perfect) that dominates the walls. Of course, if it was to be harmonious with the picture, the architecture of the frame had to be alive to the extensive and elaborate decorative details of the room depicted in the photo. I therefore devised a simple carve pattern for the corners and my finisher oil-gilded them in 23K leaf, suitably rubbing down the gold a bit. There's also a gilt slip, which helps give emphasis and definition to the dark picture.

I should note that when we frame close (see my Oct. 2007 article "Close-Framed Photographs"), we use a gasket mat or other suitable



A 2" wide walnut frame painted in the same green hue as the walls depicted in this photograph brings harmony, as do the carved, oil-gilded corner decorations.

Photos courtesy of Sam Edie, Holton Studio Frame-Makers



**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.

(Continued on page 33)

(Continued from page 34)

spacer to separate the picture from the glass, and line the rabbet with frame sealing tape to prevent the acids in the wood from migrating to the picture.

The mural depicts a great window opening up to a garden and a maiden at a fountain providing life-giving water to a pair of peace-loving doves. The image's theme of vitality sets it up perfectly for a role in the photograph's own narrative about the cycle of life and decay. Most starkly, on the floor directly before the mural, Goldblatt's picture captures several pigeon carcasses.

But a picture, and especially a framed picture, by representing something—that is, making what is no longer present, present again—makes it alive again, a participant in the world now. A scene of decay is transformed into a reminder of the fleeting nature of life—a part of the great genre of western pictorial art called memento mori. Though works of art inspired by that theme represent death, their point is to have us remember and attend to the value of life. Thus, they themselves are not in decay, but are conscious works of art, made with care and in the full grasp of the vital, life-affirming truth they depict.

For its part, the frame made in a manner sensitive to and alive to the picture, repeating and complementing its



key elements and characteristics, in turn represents the picture. As an architectural element, it brings the photographer's personal, visual depiction of a fleeting moment into the fixed, tangible, and present realm and architectural space our bodies occupy and move about in. There, it merges the relatively disembodied sense of vision (a memory of something distant and remote) with our other senses—our whole, present, vital being.

Stephen Goldblatt may be best known as director of photography on films like "The Cotton Club," "Julie and Julia," "Lethal Weapon"...the list goes on. But it must be pointed out that before he got into film, Goldblatt had a career as a still photographer. His chief claim to fame was taking part, in 1968, in the legendary (to Beatles fans) "mad day out." **PFM**

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