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DESIGN OF THE MONTH

By Timothy Holton

The World of the Dutch Golden Age

Willem Blaeu was one of the greatest cartographers of the Dutch Golden Age—mapmaker to the Dutch East India Company and immortalized by the paintings of Vermeer. The plate for this world map, which is about 17" x 22", dates from 1606. According to the customer who sent it to us, this hand-colored impression is most likely from the 1640s.

Opportunities to frame such works are rare, and demand and inspire the full powers of the art of the frame maker. Everything about a frame should be justified by the work itself. The richly decorated map provided plenty of material for a frame that would celebrate its significance and beauty, and my customer and I had a blast designing the frame. Like all of my studio's frames, this one started with rough lumber, as were frames in the Dutch Golden Age.

There's a remarkable phenomenon in frame history which I became intrigued by in studying Pieter J.J. Van Thiele's *Framing In the Golden Age: Picture and Frame in 17th Century Holland*: an astonishingly sharp line of demarcation that takes place in 1630. Before that date, almost all the frames in the study are oak, while after that year, almost



none of them are. Given that the plate for the map is dated 1606, the choice of wood for the frame had to be oak. We used quarter sawn white oak.

In the authoritative book *The Mapping of the World*, Rodney Shirley writes, "The most striking characteristics of Blaeu's map are the superb border decorations. Along the top are allegorical representations of the sun and moon and the five known planets—Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. Down the sides are, on the left, four panels illustrating the elements (Fire, Air, Water and Earth), and on the right, the four seasons. Along the bottom are seven vignettes showing the seven wonders of the world..."

These panels combined with the rendered gold bead moldings that bound them strongly suggest a cassetta picture frame construction, so that's what we settled on. The face of the frame is 4 1/2" wide, but the back sweeps out a bit farther. I cut in to the flat panel, or frieze, long openings with round ends that echo the shapes of the frames for the vignettes in the top and bottom portions

This ornate, custom-built cassetta frame was designed to celebrate a richly decorated antique map by William Blaeu.



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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of the map's decorative border, and set swirly amber and white stained glass into those openings. Square openings inset with jasper tiles accent the corners and centers of the top and bottom panels of the frieze. The sight mold, with a gilded ovolo on the inside, is carved with a barrel and bead pattern to echo the two patterns defining the decorative border of the map. (Bead moldings are tedious, but I had a bit of luck there: the inner pattern of the map border has sets of three beads while the outer one has two—so naturally the pattern left for me to carve only had to have one!)

Decorative frames this wide look best when their ornamental patterns have a dynamic gradation. The outer cap molding, suitably bolder than the molding closest to the map, has a carved broken cove pattern that is strongly architectural and also echoes the graticule markings, conventional on maps, that designate latitude and longitude. The outermost, surmounting bead is carved at each corner with a ball.

We fumed the frame, exposing it to strong ammonia in a sealed tent. The ammonia fumes react with the tannins in the oak, darkening the wood and essentially ac-



I A detailed view of the frame's decorative border and moulding. accelerating the natural effects of aging. We then finished it with linseed oil and wax. I love the mellow effect of this finish, but it's especially appealing on historical work like this—not because it feels old (I avoid false “aging” or distressing treatments) but because it feels timeless, helping connect us to the world of Willem Blaeu. **PFM**

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