



MARK SFIRRI

Kimberly Winkle

2024 POP Merit Award Recipient

Photo: John Carlano

Photos by Mark Sfirri unless otherwise noted.

Each year the AAW's Professional Outreach Program (POP) awards its esteemed Merit Award to an artist who has shown exceptional development and whose artwork and creative practice have directly influenced or had a significant impact on other artists within the woodturning field. Learn more about the program, the Merit Award, and past recipients at tiny.cc/AAWPOP.

The 2024 AAW POP Merit Award recipient is Mark Sfirri. Museum for Art in Wood Executive Director and Chief Curator Jennifer-Navva Milliken states, "It's impossible to overestimate the impact of Mark Sfirri's contributions to creativity in wood. He brings a unique exuberance and mirth to his work that invites participation from his viewers. It's underscored by rigorous technique and practice; however, it demonstrates to us that creating and sharing joy is hard but rewarding work."

View a video made in tribute to Mark's POP Merit Award at tiny.cc/SfirriMeritAward (URL is case-sensitive). ►

SYMPOSIUM DEMONSTRATOR IN SAINT PAUL!

Mark Sfirri will be a demonstrator at AAW's International Woodturning Symposium in Saint Paul, Minnesota, June 12-15, 2025, where he will share his wealth of experience with attendees. Don't miss this chance to learn from Mark, live and in person! For the latest details, visit aawsymposium.org.



Photo: Sam Sfirri

An inspired career

Mark Sfirri's career has been extensive and diverse. In addition to being an accomplished woodturner, he is also an award-winning educator, researcher, writer, collaborator, photographer, and printmaker—aspects of his career that complement each other with creative overlap. The volume, breadth, and depth of his professional activities are truly remarkable. He has delivered more than 200 lectures and workshops and demonstrated at more than twenty woodturning symposia worldwide; his work is included in more than 250 publications, and he has authored more than twenty articles

and reviews in notable books and journals; and he has exhibited his work in more than 300 exhibitions, curated or adjudicated more than thirty shows, and has work held in the permanent collections of twenty-eight public institutions, including the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian, Yale Art Gallery, Museum of Art & Design NYC, Minneapolis Institute of Art, Museum for Art in Wood, the Carnegie Museum of Art, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the James A. Michener Art Museum, among others.

Mark states, “I have always scanned the horizon to look for opportunities that were of interest. I view a career

as collecting building blocks to build a wall of unknown width and height with no idea of where it would lead. I challenge myself with my own practice and research. I have always been inquisitive and the diversity of things that I do keeps it all fresh.” To know Mark is to know that he assumes each aspect of his career with profound seriousness, preparedness, and focus.

Mark Sfirri's passion and lifelong pursuit of working with wood developed at a very young age. He carved a dog out of oak in the seventh grade and, in junior high shop class, made a box that had two drawers. Simultaneously nurtured and challenged by a strong art program at school, he continued woodworking and woodcarving throughout his teens. Mark states, “I was a serious art student in high school. We could major in art—five days a week! It was a rigorous program. I loved it all.” In his high school art program, students were given weekly in-class assignments, weekly homework assignments, monthly reading and writing assignments, quarterly assignments, and a yearly assignment. “Being forced to think about ideas for assignments forced me to put on my creative hat frequently and come up with an idea; I had a pretty good work ethic growing up, but this pushed it into high gear in high school.”

Certainly his formative art experience in high school prepared him to pursue art in college, and it provided a solid foundation for a disciplined creative practice that he continues today. His parents permitted him to study art at the highly regarded Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) if he studied architecture, which he pursued but disliked. He describes wandering around the school one day visiting every studio, and when he walked into the woodshop, he found not only his calling but also his major.

Sfirri ultimately earned both his bachelor of fine arts and master of fine arts degrees in furniture design from RISD. Under the tutelage of the skillful



Mark Sfirri, 2006, demonstrating at Bucks County Community College in Newtown, Pennsylvania, where he taught from 1981-2017.

Photo: Frank Pronesti



Haystack (Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, Maine), Block Print Edition of 28, 2017, 8¾" x 7" (22cm x 18cm)



Carved Serving Tray, 1975, Honduras mahogany, 2" x 27" x 18" (5cm x 69cm x 46cm)

Collection of the Artist, Exhibited at the Museum for Contemporary Craft, *Young Americans*, 1978

and influential professor of woodworking Tage Frid, Sfirri developed a strong technical foundation of woodworking processes, which has provided him with a virtuosic set of skills to utilize as he explores and tests the limits and creative potential of the medium. Seeing some of Sfirri's early explorations in turning and carving, such as his *Carved Serving Tray* (1975), Frid encouraged him to explore incorporating lathe-turned components in his furniture. This suggestion ultimately played a defining role in Mark's future work, as seen in *Hall Table* (2011), now in the permanent collection of the AAW.

Influence and collaboration

Mark attended RISD in the 1970s during a particularly strong period of the American Studio Craft Movement, when attendance in university craft programs was high and the conversations about craft were robust, which inspired new directions and interpretations of traditional craft forms and their expressions. During his time at RISD, Mark was inspired by the work of late furniture maker and educator Alphonse Mattia, who was a graduate student in the program at the time. Mattia's conceptually developed and impeccably crafted work (see *Architect's Valet*) had a significant impact on Mark. The use of the furniture format and wood as a means of expression by Mattia and other makers served as a source of inspiration for Mark, influencing his work throughout much of his career.

In 1978, after completing his MFA, he found a job in the woodworking industry, working for three years in Rochester, New York, as a director of design and engineering. In the fall of 1981, he began his longtime teaching career at Bucks County Community College in Newtown, Pennsylvania, where he led the Fine Woodworking Program and guided students—including notable woodturning artists Derek

Hall Table, 2011, Bubinga, mahogany, paint,
36" × 41" × 15½" (91cm × 104cm × 39cm)

Collection of Kathy Hiban and AAW Permanent
Collection, donated by Deena and Jerome Kaplan



Split-Turned Mirror, 1978,
Walnut, 34" × 22" × 3"
(86cm × 56cm × 8cm)

Collection of Jack Stevens

Weidman, Miriam Carpenter, Dan Zobel, and others—to success until his retirement in 2017.

In 1983, he and his wife bought a house and property in New Hope, Pennsylvania, where he eventually built the studio he continues to work in today. Always eager to learn and seize opportunities, Mark also became a machine dealer, buying equipment, fixing it up, and setting up his shop. By 1986, his shop was complete and he felt ready to start his own thing, but he didn't quite know just yet what that would be. He made a lot of double-rimmed bowls and applied to several art-and-craft shows. Although he initially faced rejection, he persisted and eventually gained some acceptances. ►



Alphonse Mattia,
Architect's Valet, 1989,
Ebonized walnut, pau
amarillo, wenge, ebony,
Delron® (acetal plastic),
paint, 78¼" × 21¾" × 17¼"
(2m × 55cm × 44cm)

Photo courtesy of Rago/
Wright Auctions



Double Rimmed Bowl Revisited, 2007
but a design Sfirri first explored in 1978,
Figured mahogany, 3" × 10¾" × 7"
(8cm × 27cm × 18cm)

Collection of the Artist

During this time, Mark also started collaborating with painter Robert Dodge on both furniture and other objects, including several folding screens and turned work such as *Bugs and Thugs*. These early collaborative works reveal stylistic characteristics that are common in Sfirri's work, such as the strong use of color, exaggerated gestures, carved



Bugs and Thugs (collaboration with Robert Dodge), 1987, Poplar, goldleaf, paint, 4" x 20" x 20" (10cm x 51cm x 51cm)

Collection of the Museum for Art in Wood

Photo: John Carlano



Folding Screen (collaboration with Robert Dodge), 1989, Maple, wenge, pear, goldleaf, paint, Approx. 76" x 48" x 12" (2m x 1.2m x 30cm)

Private Collection

surfaces, broken or shifted planes, and wit. Moreover, these early collaborative works illustrate Mark's uncanny ability to synthesize disparate media and voices into a uniquely cohesive and wildly creative whole; collaboration has remained influential and an important component of his artistic practice.

An expanding repertoire

The late 1980s and early 1990s were a prolific period for Sfirri; he continued to collaborate with Dodge while creating new bodies of work. His inventive style garnered the attention of publications such as *American Craft* and *American Woodturner*, and he began exhibiting in high-end galleries such as Jane Korman's Swann Gallery on Rittenhouse Square in Philadelphia and Sansar Gallery in Washington, D.C. Maintaining a very active schedule and prolific production, he continued to teach full time and make furniture in his home studio with the assistance of two full-time employees.



Rejects from the Bat Factory, 2002 (first set made in 1993), Ash, poplar, paint, 38" x 24" x 6" (97cm x 61cm x 15cm)

Sets are in various collections, including National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, Yale Art Gallery, and The Museum for Art in Wood

The financial recession in the early 90s resulted in a major downturn in sales for studio furniture, and Mark concluded that if he were going to make work that wasn't going to sell, he might as well make objects that satisfied his own creative urges. This realization and determination set him on a new course, and he began incorporating illusion, spontaneity, animation, and humor into his designs. He also started his work in multiaxis turning with candlesticks, baseball bats, painted "vessel" forms, figures, spoons, rolling pins, and sculpture.

In 1992, Canadian woodturner Michael Hosaluk invited Mark to Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, for a conference that ultimately evolved into the Emma Collaboration. The experience inspired him to try something new; he wanted to see if he could make a turned spindle appear bent. This direction was his start in the turning world and a stronger involvement with the AAW.

The 90s and beyond were growth years for Mark for varied reasons and were inspired by varied interests. Mark states, "When something sparks my interest, I go after it. What I've loved so much about my career is the fact that I have so many interests and have managed to wear different hats to address things that interest me. Having a teaching career played a large part in giving me time and a salary to do that."

In 2006, Mark made the conscious decision to step away from his singular focus on a solo career to explore the works of artists such as Wharton Esherick and Stephen Hogbin. He sought to understand what inspired them and to see the world of creative woodworking from their perspective. Reflecting on Stephen Hogbin's work, Mark was impressed by his innovative designs, especially his *Walking Bowl* series, which expanded the concept of traditional bowls in a way that was ahead of its time. Sfirri notes



Branch Rolling Pin, 2006, Honduras mahogany, 3" x 22" x 4"
(8cm x 56cm x 10cm)

Collection of Tina and Albert LeCoff

Inch Worm Bat, 2006, Quilted maple,
6" x 21½" x 3" (15cm x 55cm x 8cm)

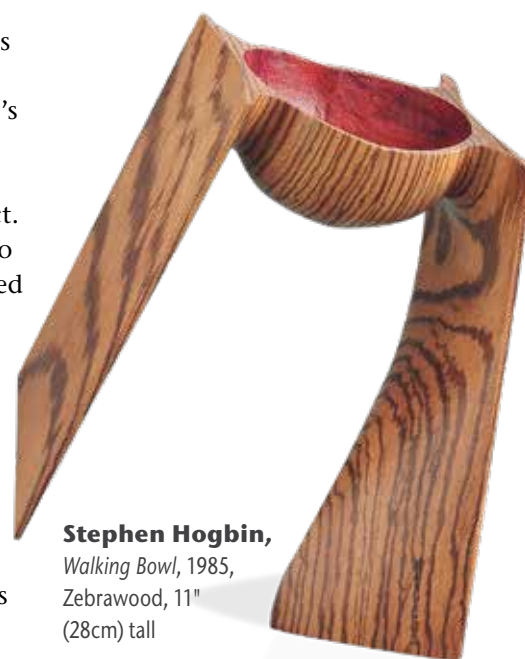
Private Collection

that Hogbin's *Walking Bowls* "touch on turned forms, but they expanded the notion of what a bowl could be in a way that no one was thinking about. He was so thoughtful about the concept behind his designs. Taking risks and pushing ideas is what inspired me." As an educator, Mark found it important to expose his students to a broader field of furniture making and woodturning, as it was equally educational and inspirational for him. His studies on other makers, particularly Wharton Esherick, not only influenced his own creative practice but also led him to write articles and deliver presentations on Esherick's work.

Sfirri's own work continues to evolve, morph, and expand the limits of what woodturning can be. Through his disciplined studio practice, he has become adept at skills that span the spectrum of woodworking and woodturning—skills that afford him the flexibility to manipulate the material in just about any conceivable way, resulting in a creative output



that is wide-ranging yet displays a common thread that is distinctly his own. When asked about his work, Mark says, "Looking at it one way, it's too much all over the place. I have had to reinvent the wheel so many times, sometimes for just one project. Wouldn't it have made more sense to come up with one thing that I figured out how to do really well and stick with that? There are two answers to that—absolutely *yes* from a marketing standpoint and absolutely *no* from a creativity standpoint. I am nothing if not a creative person. It is what excites me to get up in the morning and go out to my studio. The spark of the new is what excites me." ►



Stephen Hogbin,
Walking Bowl, 1985,
Zebrawood, 11"
(28cm) tall



Night Moves, 2003, Douglas fir, poplar, paint,
10½" x 18¾" x 5½" (27cm x 48cm x 14cm)

Collection of the Artist

Sea of Spoons, 2006,
Various woods and sizes



The Pawns, 2022, Claro walnut, 3" to 5"
(8cm to 13cm) tall

Collection of the Artist



New work, two shows

It is manifestly Mark's creativity—enabled by a willingness to take risks, trust, and follow his curiosity—combined with an impressive work ethic that has contributed to his copious output. In fact, the stream of recent work has led to two upcoming solo exhibitions at major venues: the Museum for Art in Wood and the James A. Michener Art Museum, both in Pennsylvania.

La Famiglia

La Famiglia will open at Philadelphia's Museum for Art in Wood November 1, 2024, and will run through February 16, 2025. The exhibition features work that expresses the theme of "family"



Family Tree, 2020, Western yellow cedar, paint, Each: 11" x 5½" x 3½" (28cm x 14cm x 9cm)

Collection of the Artist

in a variety of ways. Jennifer Navva-Milliken describes the exhibition as "inviting a way of thinking about the definition of family and its meaning through different lenses...." The exhibition includes a range of works that display techniques and styles that are characteristically Sfirri's, including multiaxis-turned-and-carved forms,

color, impeccable craft, loads of personality, and apparent deftness of skill.

Different groupings of stylistically similar forms collectively create the various family assemblages that comprise the exhibition. They range in complexity from the simple, clean, and understated works in *The Pawns* to forms and families that are more complex in shape, surface,



Cousins Immortalized (I-IV), 2022, Bronze, pine, paint, 69½" to 72½" (1.7m to 1.8m) tall

Collection of the Artist



Cousins (I-IV), 2019, Western yellow cedar, paint, 36" to 44¾" (91cm to 114cm) tall x 8¼" x 8¼" (21cm x 21cm)

Collection of the Artist

and character as seen in *Family Tree*. A pawn is the simplest and most expendable piece in the game of chess, but it represents half of the pieces on the board. Sfirri describes *The Pawns* as “a middle-class family in suburbia.” If *The Pawns* are from suburbia, one wonders where the figures in *Family Tree* came from—given the spectrum of color, animation, and character. Exaggerated facial features and saturated color bring the characters to life in such extreme fashion that they appear to be breaking free from the angular carved frames that attempt to restrain them. Sfirri describes this family of characters as “rough sketches that became more and more refined during the carving process. The spontaneity of design played a big part in this series. There is a freshness about this approach that really works for me.” These families, while stylistically quite different, are respectively united through their shared characteristics.

Throughout the works comprising *La Famiglia*, like evolution itself, there is often a nod or glance back to former pieces or series. *Cousins Immortalized*, a family of cast bronze totemic columns displaying stacked carved heads perpetually posed with expressive faces, is an evolution of a prior work, *Cousins*. This previous effort was inspired by a collaborative piece Mark worked on with a Māori carver from New Zealand, Lyonel Grant, and other artists at Emma Collaboration in 2012. Due to the resplendent nature of bronze, the shadows and highlights in *Cousins Immortalized* are more pronounced and contrasting than in their wood predecessors.

The largest family in *La Famiglia* is *Ellis Islanders* (featured on the front cover of this issue), which comprises twenty-nine members ranging in height from 4" (10cm) to almost 16" (41cm). The title references immigrants who came to the U.S. through Ellis Island in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as all of Sfirri's grandparents did. Reminiscent of the era,



Sfirri chose to depict each family member wearing a hat.

While the forms are sophisticated, unique, and thoughtfully executed, Sfirri did very little drawing for any of them—only the occasional rough sketch. He would draw out some basic shapes on the wood, estimate the locations of the turning centers, and then turn them. Utilizing multiple non-parallel axes resulted in more animated forms. This process was followed by shaping and carving. Like the evolution of any family, each member's design was based on the one, or ones, before it. Turned and carved from white holly, the unpainted surfaces bring focus to the individual features,



(Left) Mark Sfirri with Lyonel Grant at the Emma Lake conference, Saskatchewan, Canada, 2012, with the tall carved Western yellow cedar column they worked on in collaboration with other artists.

(Right) *Ellis Islander* (#8), 2021, Holly, 11¼" x 3" x 3" (29cm x 8cm x 8cm)

Collection of the Artist

expressions, and resulting personality of the family members. Their uniform androgyny invites interpretation, allowing the viewer to create or project their own familial associations and narratives.

Deviating from the medium of wood but drawing on his extensive experience with collaboration, Sfirri invited a selection of artists, most of whom he's known for years, to collaborate on *The Immigrant*. He asked each contributor to create a small two-dimensional artwork showing the interpretation of their own immigrant story as it relates to their family. In some cases, it was of the artists themselves or a parent, grandparent, or a distant relative whom they never met. ►



The Immigrant I (one of five frames comprising a total of forty-five artists' work), 2023, Mixed media, each frame: 23" x 23" x 1¼" (58cm x 58cm x 32mm); this frame includes work by Sandra Scicchitani, Fabiane Garcia, John Mydock, Barbara Serratore, Isabel and Alphonse Mattia, Kimberly Winkle, Alex Henderson, Michael Kabbash, and Paul Sasso

Collection of the Artist



Wedding Bouquets, 2022, Poplar, bamboo, paint, Each: 40" x 12" x 12" (102cm x 30cm x 30cm)

Collection of the Artist

Trusting the collaborative process and each of the artist's ability, Mark knew it would succeed. The forty-five individual artworks are accompanied by a brief description of the immigrant being depicted. In reading through the descriptions, heartstrings are plucked, admiration stirs, and collectively they weave the various and complex fibers that comprise not only our nation but also our families. While the format and material may seem uncharacteristic for Mark, an artist so

well known for his mastery of working with wood, it is exactly this unexpectedness, sensitivity, and thoughtfulness that render him exceptional and which keep his work ever evolving and new.

The Flower Show

The marriage of Mark's son Sam led to the creation of the work comprising Sfirri's second solo exhibition, *The Flower Show*, which will be on exhibit at the James A. Michener Art Museum December 14, 2024, to May 4, 2025. Due to concerns about pollen, the venue in which Sam was to be married did not allow fresh flowers to be used, so Mark volunteered to make them from wood instead. Rather than diving into research on flowers to better understand the various species and anatomy, he chose to rely on the image of flowers that he had in his mind and combine that image with his turning, carving, and coloring skills. As he did with the assignments he was given in school, he sprang into action, turning, carving, and painting what ended up

being two vases, each containing a dozen wooden flowers of different types and designs. The red, pink, and purple flowers were contrasted by vases made by Sfirri that featured his well-known "slate" finish. Each vase was positioned on either side of the bride and groom as they took their vows. Inspired (and challenged) by his wife to create a more "bushy" effect, Sfirri also created the bride's bouquet, then the groom's boutonniere. In perfect form, Mark created a spectacular floral display for the wedding, but to no surprise this was only the start of a new inquiry into the possibilities the format presented.

Sfirri engaged in the creative potential of the flower format by articulating and acknowledging that there are two basic ways of looking at flowers: from the top and from the side. The side view reveals three-dimensional forms, and the top view appears flatter in dimension; he approached his next phase of flower production anew by focusing on the top view equally as much as the side view.



Bridal Bouquet, 2022, Holly, brass, 15" x 6" x 6" (38cm x 15cm x 15cm)

Collection of Kim Sfirri



Neuf Fleurs, 2023, Holly, pear, French boxwood, pink ivory, pau amarillo, brass, poplar, paint, 9¾" x 8" x 6" (25cm x 20cm x 15cm)

Collection of the Artist



Spring Hopes Eternal, 2023, Holly, brass, mahogany, paint, 6" x 6" x 6" (15cm x 15cm x 15cm)

Collection of the Artist

He added movement and gesture to the flower stems by forgoing the rigid stalks of bamboo used in the wedding bouquets for malleable brass, which he forged on a pitted anvil to leave impressions and texture reminiscent of nature. *Neuf Fleurs* brings all these aspects to fruition. The arrangement, like a natural bouquet, includes flowers ranging in size, color, character, and placement. The white holly flowers punctuate the arrangement through their almost luminescent quality, and the small pod-like flowers serve well to create texture and fill space, much like baby's breath in a natural arrangement. Sfirri's use of his slate finish vase allows the complex flower shapes to be the focus.

The blossoms throughout the series range stylistically from complex and dynamic, much like an exotic flower, to simple, almost pod-like forms. *Spring Hopes Eternal* includes the widest range of stylistic approaches combined with the carved tray forms he is also known for. Mark's ability to breathe life and movement into his works, including his flowers, is evident in *One Dozen*. The clean white forms of the holly appear much like origami or a pleated garment folding and unfolding to reveal the stylized and elegant blossoms. His attention to detail and precision are remarkable, as can be seen in the way he carves the intersection of petals or the implied mass and swell of swollen forms; individually they are special, collectively they are spectacular.

Wall Flowers I exhibits a unified blending of techniques common in Sfirri's work: woodturning, carving, and humor. The floral arrangements are set against a carved background from which a highly animated multi-axis vase form emerges. The way in which he has carved the vase results in an interesting, somewhat skewed and exaggerated aerial viewpoint, much like a cartoon drawing. The sculpted flowers are similarly animated, with their dynamic stems twisting and arcing fancifully.

Insatiable creativity

Upon reflecting on his two upcoming exhibitions, one can see how Mark Sfirri's life experiences and creative path have influenced his work. His extensive training, curious mind, insatiable creativity, and disciplined studio practice have led to a remarkable collective body of work. Sfirri's development and refinement of techniques,

scholarly and artistic contributions, impactful teaching, and his prolific production have attracted well-deserved attention and praise, including the 2024 POP Merit Award. ■

Kimberly Winkle is a woodturner, furniture maker, and professor of art at Tennessee Tech University, where she serves as the director of the School of Art, Craft & Design and its satellite campus, the Appalachian Center for Craft.



One Dozen, 2024,
Holly, brass,
mahogany, paint,
17" x 8" x 7"
(43cm x 20cm x 18cm)
Collection of the Artist



Mark Sfirri's New Work on View!

La Famiglia

- November 1, 2024, to February 16, 2025
- Museum for Art in Wood, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- Curator: Jennifer-Navva Milliken
- Learn more: museumforartinwood.org/exhibition/mark-sfirri-la-famiglia

The Flower Show

- December 14, 2024, to May 4, 2025
- The James A. Michener Art Museum, Doylestown, Pennsylvania
- Curator: Laura Turner Iggoe, Ph.D
- Learn more: michenerartmuseum.org/mam_exhibitions/mark-sfirri-the-flower-show

Wall Flowers I, 2024, Mahogany, brass, holly, boxwood, pear, paint, 16¾" x 8" x 6" (43cm x 20cm x 15cm)

Collection of the Artist