

# Mark Sfirri in profile

We meet **Mark Sfirri** and find out about his unusual multi-axis turnings



PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK SFIRRI

**M**ark Sfirri is a Pennsylvania-based woodworker who incorporates lathe-turned forms in his furniture and sculpture. He studied furniture design under Tage Frid at Rhode Island School of Design, where he received both his BFA and MFA. His speciality within turning is the use of multiple axes, which has allowed him to create forms that are more sculptural than one would expect from the lathe. He is also a professor and has been the coordinator of the Fine Woodworking Programs at Bucks County Community College in Newtown, Pennsylvania since 1981.

## Education

Mark grew up in a suburb of Philadelphia and was interested in drawing and art from a very early age. He took this interest further at school. "I had a fabulous art teacher in high school named Claude Falcone who really helped me to develop a strong portfolio because of the rigour of the art programme. It is the only public high school that I am aware of where one could major in art, taking it five days a week." After such a good start to his education, Mark's goal was to get into the Rhode Island School of Design, which he achieved. At first, he majored in architecture because of a

deal he had struck with his parents to be able to go to the college. However, after a year he felt disillusioned with architecture and started looking around for an alternative. "I made a point of visiting every studio in the school to see what sparked my interest, and it was the woodshop. The fact that Tage Frid was the teacher was not a factor as I did not know who he was at the time. There was a graduate student there named Alphonse Mattia who was also a huge inspiration."

## Starting woodturning

Mark began studying at the Rhode Island woodshop in 1972, learning

'Building Blocks' column in white pine (*Pinus spp.*), aluminium, plywood and poplar (*Populus spp.*), 3.66m tall



traditional joinery and doing a lot of carving. This was also where he first tried woodturning. "On a whim I tried doing some turning – just simple small plates. I was pleased with the speed of making but really wanted to get away from the predictable roundness that resulted." So he started making experimental turnings and a few years later, he began to incorporate these turnings into furniture. "Most of that early work was faceplate turning, I even did some multi-axis faceplate turnings in 1976. I did some spindle work in 1978 but that has become the focus of my turning for most of my career.



Coffee table in bubinga (*Guibourtia demeusei*) and mahogany (*Khaya ivorensis*) with split-turned legs. Turned, split on the paper glue lines and then bandsawn out and shaped, 405mm tall × 1,065mm wide × 460mm deep

Folding screen in curly maple (*Acer saccharum*) and poplar (*Populus spp.*) with hand-shaped columns, 2,133mm tall × 1,370mm wide × 405mm deep



My serious investigations into multi-axis turning started in 1992," he says.

## Turning style

In terms of his style, Mark explains that most people associate his name with his 'Rejects from the Bat Factory' series and his offset candlesticks, so multi-axis spindle turning is what he is most known for. However, he also incorporates turning into furniture and sculpture, and his artistic range extends to non-turned wooden work, watercolours and block prints.

Mark told us that his work is constantly changing, "My work has changed a lot since I first started

turning but it also changes a lot from year to year. I really enjoy trying out new things. Reproducing old themes keeps me in shape but the challenges of the new are what excite me most.”

Mark takes an interesting approach to his work: “Throwing a pot in clay and blowing glass have some similarities to turning but the materials and results are so different. In wood, symmetry and roundness are an absolute result from day one. In ceramics and glass those properties are not a given and it takes a lot of practice to make a symmetrical object. I enjoy the miscues of early glasswork. A goal of mine in turning is to break away from the radial symmetry to produce objects that seem to have characteristics of glass or ceramics,” he explains.

### Inspiration and influences

Mark finds inspiration in a variety of sources, including popular culture, current events and music of many kinds. He is particularly inspired by the works of his favourite sculptor Constantin Brancusi, and Wharton Esherick, the founder of the studio furniture movement in the US. “I get excited by work that is innovative and breaks new ground. In the turning world, that would be Stephen Hogbin and Michael Hosaluk. I’ve collaborated with both of them, more with Michael,” he says.

### Workshop and tools

Mark has an 84m<sup>2</sup> studio, which is located right next to his house. It is a full woodshop with a tablesaw, jointer and planer, as well as a 2036 Oneway lathe with two bed extensions. When asked which tools he could not do without, Mark replied: “A lathe, a router, carving tools and rasps, the list goes on and on!”

### A typical day

There isn’t really any such thing as a ‘typical’ day for Mark, as he goes on to explain: “I teach full time at a community college, but it gives me ample time to work in my studio several days a week and the summer. But with researching, writing, demonstrating, photographing, etc., there is always something different going on, which is exactly how I like it. I really enjoy the diversity of my endeavours and like the diversity within those endeavours.” There is

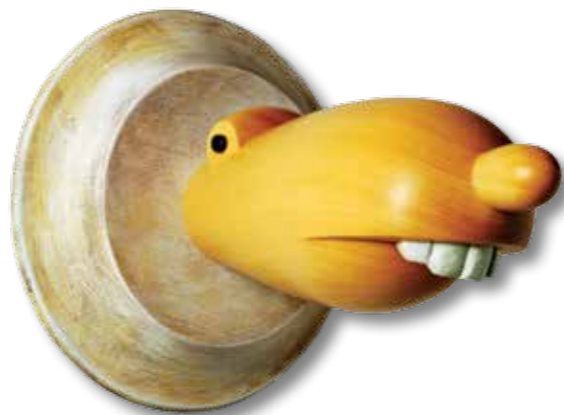


‘Continuous Column’, single axis turning in poplar (*Populus spp.*) and ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*). It was hand carved after turning, 635mm tall × 140mm × 140mm



‘Rejects from the Bat Factory’. This series began in 1993. The bats are turned on multiple centres, 965mm tall × 610mm wide × 150mm deep

“Throwing a pot in clay and blowing glass have some similarities to turning but the materials and results are so different”



From an ongoing series called ‘Game Hunting in North America’, 150mm tall × 150mm wide × 220mm deep



The legs on this hall table were turned on three different axes but they are all the same, just rotated 90° from one to the next, 915mm tall × 1,040mm wide × 380mm deep



Bat in quilted maple (*Acer saccharum*) turned on two sets of centres with no special jigs or chucks, 150 × 535 × 75mm



‘Curved Bench’, walnut (*Juglans regia*) bench. The columns were angled out to make the bench top seem more bent than it actually is, 535mm tall × 2,057mm wide × 305mm deep

no such thing as a typical piece either – a piece can take anything from an hour or two to several hundred hours to complete.

### Woodturning highs and lows

Mark has experienced very few lows in his career. He has been disappointed when his work has occasionally been overlooked by particular exhibitions or publications, but he has learnt not to get upset and to just move on. Fortunately, there have been many highs. “I feel like I got into the field at the right time and have made the most of it. I’ve gotten several national awards, which were surprises. I’ve had some great demonstrating opportunities around the world and have had some wonderful exhibitions as well,” he says. For Mark, the best thing about woodturning is being part of the worldwide turning community. He believes that the number of people practising turning has led to an improvement in equipment. “It has resulted in the design of equipment and tools that are so superior to what I started working with. It has also opened up the door for so many to take part in it.”

### Promotion

“I should have a website, but I don’t, I should have a video, but I don’t!” Mark says. Instead, he promotes himself and his work through writing. “I write articles on technique, design and history, something that I’m able to do because my wife is such a great editor. I love doing the research. That was a real surprise to me, as I hated anything to do with writing or reading when I was growing up.”

He believes that the unusual nature of his work makes it easier to promote: “I’ve tried to keep my name out there and I do work that is outside of the norm. The fact that it is spindle turning alone would make it out of the norm, but doing multi-axis turning pushes it even further outside the norm.”

### Future plans

Mark says that he does not have any specific aims or aspirations for the future: “I’ve made a career of not setting goals for myself so I don’t think that I’ll be starting now. I do survey the landscape and look for opportunities and try for them. I did that much more earlier in my



A variation of an inside out turning in oak (*Quercus robur*) and poplar (*Populus spp.*), 510mm tall x 305mm wide x 150mm deep

Foyer table in bubinga (*Guibortia demeusei*) and maple (*Acer saccharum*). The columns were turned on a single axis and then hand carved, 840mm tall x 1,525mm wide x 305mm deep

career but less of it now.” Also, the versatile and experimental nature of Mark’s work makes it hard for him to say what his future plans are. “I’m not sure where I’m heading tomorrow!” he said. “I’ve worked large and small and in between. I only work on furniture on a commission basis and have been doing a fair amount of that lately. I also enjoyed working on some large sculpture.” We look forward to seeing the new forms that Mark comes up with! ●

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‘Little People’, multi-axis turned figures, variety of sizes: largest is 185mm tall x 100mm wide x 85mm dia.

## TOP TECHNIQUE

My favourite technique would be figuring out multi-axis turning and what the possibilities and limitations are. I’ve spent many years experimenting with this and I still find it complicated. It’s easy to produce something that I didn’t want. It keeps me on my toes!

## Handy hints

1. Use a safe centre, such as the Oneway cup centre, as a driver for all spindle work. It is safe and if you were to have a catch, the wood stops moving and you just tighten up the tailstock
2. Use a cup centre in the tailstock. This is far superior to a cone centre
3. Learn how to sharpen your tools correctly and be willing to adapt the grinds to ones that work better for you
4. Take notes when you’re trying out new things and take process photos for future reference for yourself

## LIKES & DISLIKES

### Likes:

- The challenge of trying new ideas
- When new forms emerge, although sometimes that’s the result of a mistake
- I like mistakes and don’t consider them that because sometimes they can be modified to create something new and completely different from the original idea

### Dislikes:

- Taking a great piece of wood and making a mess of it. I generally try out new ideas on scrap wood of similar proportion and do my experiments with that so the result is known before taking that great piece of wood and making something more to my liking
- Mistakes that truly have no redeeming qualities and are just trash. I dispose of them