

Woodworking Savoir-Faire

The furniture, vessels, and sculpture of Mark Sfirri

BY SUSAN HAGEN

The first thing that impresses me when I walk into Mark Sfirri's shop is how orderly and efficient the place seems. Sfirri, a tall, gregarious fellow with a mop of curly black hair, readily admits to being "an organization freak," and as he ushers me in goes on to explain that he has refined and improved the space many times over the years. His shop is a detached 30' x 30' concrete building on the property where he has lived since the early 1980s. It had originally been a garage and dog kennel, but Sfirri first gutted it, then stuccoed the building and re-roofed it. A skylight now allows natural light to stream down over the lathe and workbench where Sfirri does most of his work. A piece of a wrestling mat provides a comfortable cushion on the floor near the lathe, and plastic tubs storing older work fit neatly under the bed extensions.

All of the space is nicely designed, with a place for everything. Most of his wood is neatly stored on the second floor and labeled with the species and the date of acquisition; smaller pieces are stored on the ground floor, sorted by size in cleverly designed compartments. A row of high shelves holds turned samples of various shapes, so he can access them quickly if needed. Over the years, Sfirri has continued to improve his storage. Around 1990 he added built-in cabinets with 60 drawers for tools and supplies, which keeps them out of the chips and sawdust, clean, and easy to find. Stored drawings and tools are all within easy reach of the workbench.

When he started setting up his shop it took two or three years to buy a first set of used equipment; then he gradually traded all of them, up-grading each time. He has gone through several different lathes, but now owns a Oneway with two full-bed extensions, the most recent added in 2003. This permits him to turn a 13' length of wood.

As he shows me around the studio, Sfirri

jokes: "Life is good. I tend to be positive and that really annoys people." Actually, Sfirri is well-liked and highly respected in the woodworking world, and has been a key player in the development of both contemporary woodturning and studio furniture. Since the 1980s, he's become known for his skillful multi-axis turnings, his pioneering of the collaborative method, and his novel use of painted surfaces, narrative, and humor. He's also a committed educator, an active community member, and a dedicated *bon vivant*.

Sfirri credits his positive outlook to a happy childhood. He was always interested in drawing and making things, enjoyed math and art history, and collected baseball cards and travel brochures on cities around the country. He remembers making a woodcarving and a small two-drawer chest in 7th grade, and a spun metal bowl in 8th grade, but it was his high school art teacher, Claude Falcone, who really hooked Mark. The classes worked with many different media and materials, studied art history, and traveled to museums in Philadelphia, New York and Baltimore. Falcone, an important mentor, encouraged Sfirri to apply to art school.

Sfirri set off for the Rhode Island School of Design to study architecture. Once there, he realized he disliked the department because of "the lack of contact with materials" and after about a year changed his major to industrial design and transferred most of his efforts to the Furniture and Wood Department. His two great influences in the department were Tage Frid and Alphonse Mattia. Mattia was a graduate student there, and Mark was immensely impressed by his work ethic, design and craftsmanship skills. Sfirri studied with Frid from 1972-78, and worked as an assistant in his shop and at the school.

Sfirri made furniture at first but remembers Frid pointing out to him that "the lathe



Mark Sfirri, whose woodworking talents reach from furniture to turning to sculptural objects, at work on a series called "The Little People."

PHOTOS BY JOHN CARLANO EXCEPT AS NOTED



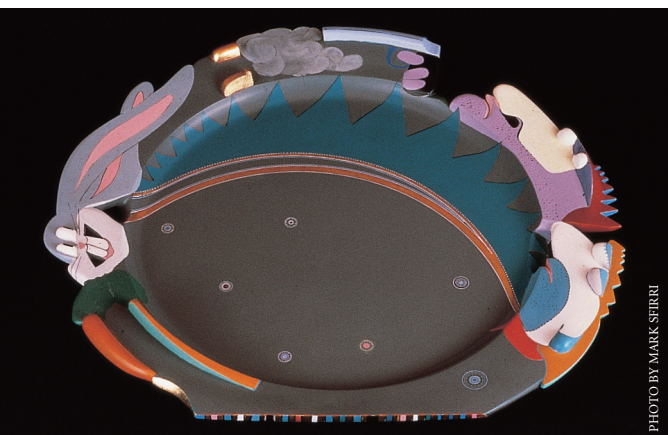


PHOTO BY MARK SFIRRI



"Bugs and Thugs" (1988) [with Robert Dodge];
Poplar, paint, gold leaf; 4" x 20" x 20".

"Secrétaire" (1988) [with Robert Dodge];
Lacewood, purpleheart, mahogany, gold leaf, paint;
48" x 48" x 19.

"The Mark and Mikey Show" (1993)
[with Michael Hosaluk];
Assorted hardwoods and paint; various sizes.



PHOTO BY RANDI BYE

has many possibilities." He made several pieces of furniture with turned components (including a dining room table with chairs that he still uses), about 30 bowls, as well as some double-rimmed platters that were subsequently hand carved. "My main motivation in turning was to speed up the carving process. I was combining the turning with carving so that the pieces would be taken away from the fully round symmetrical form. The resulting pieces were somewhere between round forms and fully carved forms." About this time, Sfirri read Stephen Hogbin's book *Wood Turning: The Purpose of the Object*, which powerfully confirmed Frid's statement about the possibilities of the lathe.

After receiving his bachelor's degree in 1974, Sfirri began working in the RISD woodshop while he continued work on an MFA. He also began teaching summer classes at RISD, as well as filling in as needed for some of the faculty. He found it was exciting to watch students develop and, "influenced by Frid's positive style of teaching," wanted to make that his career—though teaching jobs were scarce at that time. Then he mar-

ried Lucy Green, an architectural designer, and moved to Rochester, New York where he took a job that evolved into Director of Design and Engineering for an office furniture manufacturer. "The three years I spent in this position were my engineering education. Designing and making things in college required drawings that were good enough for me to interpret. In business, the drawings were sent out to vendors, so they had to be complete enough that no one needed to ask me a question. It was a much different way of looking at things."

Though Sfirri learned a great deal about furniture design and production, he was frustrated that he hadn't made any work of his own since finishing school. Seeking to remedy this, and to escape the harsh weather of upstate New York, in 1981 he took a job teaching woodworking in the newly developed Fine Woodworking Program at Bucks County Community College, in Newtown, Pennsylvania. He and Lucy moved into a pre-1720s farmhouse with old pine floors and a huge cooking fireplace located a few miles from the school and south of New Hope. The

rooms are full of light. The house is charming, understated and tasteful—offering a surprising counterpoint to the wacky humor that pervades much of Sfirri's work.

In the early 1990s, Sfirri created the first of his off-centered candlesticks, consisting of a series of irregularly stacked disk and egg forms. These were created by a technique of multi-axis spindle turning, where part-way through the turning process, the piece is repositioned on the lathe using a different set of centers (a new axis) [see sidebar]. "One of the limitations of 'regular' woodturning for me is that the resulting form is perfectly round and symmetrical. A pad foot leg from the early 1700s is a great example of a result that I find far more interesting. It is an early example of multi-axis turning that is not perfectly round and one where the form has a more organic feel to it. The geometry that I used for my candlesticks was very similar to this—turn part of the form on one set of centers and turn another part on a different set of centers. The look is very different, but conceptually it is very similar. I wanted



PHOTO BY RANDI BYE

to create the illusion that a 'straight' turning looked bent."

When his wife commented "I can't wait to see what this will look like in a piece of furniture," Sfirri was at first offended but then came to realize it was an exciting new direction. "Lucy really started me thinking about expanding this idea. I used the same concept of the different axes of the candlestick and stretched it into a leg for a table. The forms changed, but the geometry is the same. From one view, both of these forms—and the pad foot for that matter—appear curved and not symmetrical, but if they are rotated 90°, they are symmetrical. The reason for this is the fact that all of the centers (two at each end) are in the same plane."

The early multi-axis "Spider Table" has the simplest relationships, with bilateral symmetry from one point of view, like a traditional ball-and-claw foot. Some of his later pieces, such as "Bench" (which was commissioned for Yale University), achieve a much more fully sculptural three-dimensional effect by more complex combinations of multi-axis turning. Sfirri explains: "I thought that if I moved the two axes into different planes, I might be able to create a different kind of movement or animation to the work—the illusion of the pieces walking or twisting."

Sfirri likes the intellectual challenge of figuring out how to make complex shapes and has taken pains to analyze the multi-axis turning process so that he can apply the technique to any piece of furniture or sculpture. "I really enjoy working on the initial concept



and design. Once that is complete, the work gets broken down into a series of steps. It is no different than if one were making a traditional ball-and-claw foot table. It is all serious work and following the steps to the end. It is only then that I can stand back, look at it, and maybe smile (if I intended the piece to be humorous) and see if the piece accomplished what I set out to do." The impact of all these multi-axis forms on viewers is complex: we anxiously imagine impending disaster from these precarious-appearing forms, but on closer examination we are reassured by their solidity—not unlike the fears and comforts we experience in our daily lives.

Sfirri credits his son Sam, born in 1987, for giving him the idea for one of his ongoing series of pieces. The year was 1993, Sam was playing Little League baseball, and the Philadelphia Phillies were successful in the pennant race for the first time in many years. Six-year-old Sam saw a bat that was hollowed on the end of the barrel, and pestered his dad to make him one. After he complied, Sfirri

ABOVE—Sfirri's stores "shorts" in a stepped rack that is 1' deep at eye level, 2' deep above his head and 3' deep above that. He only sacrifices 1' of footprint, he uses the "wasted" space above his head, and he can see into the short rack so that nothing gets lost.

BELOW, LEFT TO RIGHT—
"Spider Table" (1993);
Lacewood, curly maple; 33" x 21" x 13".

"Rejects From the Bat Factory" (1994);
Bubinga, pink ivory, wenge, shedua, curly maple,
mahogany; 33" x 26" x 5".

"Glancing Figures" (1997);
Cherry, ash, walnut, other hardwoods; H: 48"–72".

"Bench" (1998);
Ash, purpleheart, brass; 27" x 68" x 20½".

"Homeland Security" (2002);
Poplar, paint; 4" x 18" x 4".



PHOTO BY MARK SFIRRI



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Multi-axis Candlestick

by Mark Sfirmi



PHOTO BY RANDI BYE

IN 1992, I HAD THIS IDEA of creating a spindle turning that looked bent. I thought that it might make for an interesting candlestick, so I experimented with this in mind and came up with a fairly finished-looking product.

There were some slight modifications that were made—some aesthetic and some based on the limitations of the process, but I figured out how to design within those limitations.

For all of my spindle turnings, whether multi-axis or not, I turn with a cup center in the headstock. I never use a spur center. Never! I also use a ball bearing live center in the tailstock that is also a cup center. This combination is very important. It's much safer. If you have a catch, the wood most likely will stop but the lathe will keep spinning. You simply have to tighten the tailstock up and keep turning. I turn the majority of the piece with a 5/8" bowl gouge sharpened at a 30° angle. You might wonder why not use a spindle gouge, but the reason is that the toolrest would have to be so far away from the work that it tends to cause tool vibration when turning, resulting in an uneven surface. The last pass is done using a 1/2" detail gouge, with the toolrest angled in to minimize this vibration.

The first set of centers are at the safest maximum distance away from center. Safe to me means having the full cup of the cup center on the wood—about 3/8" in from the edge. The wood is placed on a diagonal in order to maximize the "bent" effect. On this axis, most of the bottom portion is turned and sanded. The piece is then repositioned on a different axis that is about 7/8" in from the opposite edge at the top, and on true center at the bot-

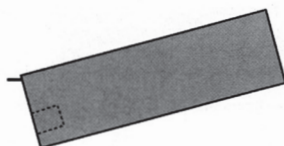
tom. It's not as close to the edge at the top because a hole needs to be drilled that's about 7/8" diameter. It's centered at the bottom so that the piece can be as large a diameter as possible at the bottom, therefore making it more stable.

The initial stock is about 3-3/8" x 3-3/8" x 12". I typically pre-drill the hole on the mortiser (but it could also be done on the drillpress) and place a plug in it to turn the final center. The hole actually needs to be drilled parallel to the final axis, which means the hole is drilled at an angle on the initial rectangular block. Starting with such a large block, but wanting a finished piece that had some elegance to it, I wanted to have some areas that were thin. It would have been easy for the piece to have looked chunky. I also wanted several areas that utilized the full dimension of the stock. Logically, the base was one of those areas (for stability), the other was a result of the initial set of centers. The only place to have the wood at that maximum dimension was right in the middle. If you look at the second drawing, it shows the piece spinning and this was the only area where a full diameter was possible. Sometimes, as in this case, the positioning partly determines where a detail can occur.

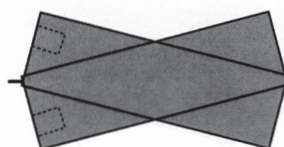
The repetition of the process and the morphing of one shape to the next provides me with an ongoing, evolving vocabulary of form that is in response to the process. In a sense it has become my three-dimensional sketchbook. I admire the spontaneity of the process of turning and I have attempted to capture spontaneity of design by designing while turning. I used to sketch on paper a lot, but now most of it is done in the form of sample pieces that I turn. The biggest obstacle is remembering what I did to get there! At first, I wrote things down and made sketches, but after looking at many sketches that I kept, I realized that I had no idea what they meant. Now, I lay out two pieces, one that I will turn, and one that has the centers laid out. I keep that as my reference.

People often ask me about making two pieces the same and my response is that if the centers aren't the same, it's impossible, but if they are the same, it's a possibility. I believe it to be no more difficult than making two pieces the same that are on one axis.

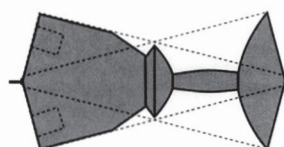
Multi-axis turning of a candlestick:



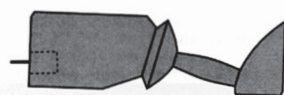
Blank mounted on first axis



Blank spinning on first axis



Blank turned on first axis



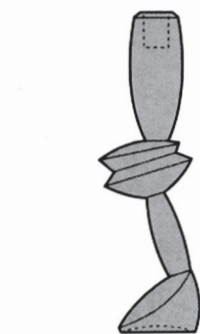
Blank mounted on second axis



Blank spinning on second axis



Blank turned on second axis



The completed multi-axis turned candlestick

realized that the bat form presented some very interesting sculptural possibilities. So he started working on a series of contorted bats, and has returned to the theme a number of times over the years. "Rejects from the Bat Factory" (1994) is one such set, each bat twisted and deformed into a different and impractical shape. "I thought that this might be a good way to explore some of the 'serious' forms that I was making by integrating them into a very recognizable form. It was a good fit for me, since I was very interested in sports, particularly baseball, and I finally found a way to combine it with my creative work."

Inspired by a 3-D design class that he taught at Bucks, Sfirri started making sculpture more seriously in 1995. Though he has continued to make furniture and practical turned objects, Sfirri describes sculpture as "a growing interest." In 1996 he began work on a series titled "Glancing Figures," which started out about 8" tall and grew to 4'-6" tall. These sculptures were technically challenging because the centers of some turned sections were not on the object itself and required the addition of waste wood on the end(s) in order to mount the piece to the lathe. The shapes are severely elongated and simplified, but are still clearly recognizable as abstractions of the human form; they are reminiscent of Modernist artists like Brancusi and Boccioni, but made with a tongue-in-cheek postmodern sensibility. Though Sfirri claims he didn't set out to make figurative sculpture, the associations started to emerge once he began his complex off-center turning techniques.

In the late 1990s, Sfirri began another series, making cartoonish, nonfunctional "vessels." He explains: "The contemporary turning movement is pretty much centered around the vessel form. I had a real problem just jumping on the vessel bandwagon because it was the thing to do. When I came up with the idea for some painted vessels

that were more animated and gave me the opportunity to create some graphic labels, I got really excited about it. Back around 1975, I fell in love with woodworking and more or less abandoned all of my painting and drawing, except as it related to designing furniture. This was an opportunity to bring that back into my work. It was also an opportunity to make some commentary on things going on in the world."

Two different series of leaning and twisting objects have evolved. The first is a light-hearted series with puns and jokes for titles, based on the tempting exoticism of food and drink bottles he saw during his travels in France. "Fromage Wiz," which makes a light-hearted comparison between the cuisines of the United States and France, is an example

of a piece from this series. The second group explores more serious issues, including topical events and political issues. "Weapons of Mass Destruction" was made in 2003 during the period of political posturing and build-up prior to the Iraq War.

Teaching is more than just a "day job" for Sfirri, and he feels fortunate to be at BCCC. "I don't think of myself as a natural teacher. I get very nervous in front of a group. What has really helped me is doing it year after year. I love teaching. Communicating ideas through demonstrations and lectures and seeing a student develop design and technical skills in a relatively short period of time (typically two years) is very rewarding to me. It has also been good for my own development as a designer because teaching forces



"Figurati (Go Figure Yourself)" (2002)
[with Amy Forsyth];
Walnut, paint, coffee, misc. exotic woods;
54" x 24" x 17".

"Chemical and Biological WMD" (2003);
Mahogany, paint; H: 16½" & 14½".

"The Little People" (2002);
Various hardwoods; H: 3"-7½".



Mark Sfirri at his lathe, a Oneway to which he has added two full-bed extensions for a 13' capacity.

me to verbalize what I am doing in an effort to make the demonstrations as clear as possible. Like my engineering experience, it has evolved into a tool for communicating ideas."

His students give Sfirri high marks in the classroom. Bernard David, who took classes with Sfirri at Bucks for several years, told me that one of the most memorable and entertaining demonstrations in Sfirri's advanced turning class was when he made "an extremely long thin turning with lots of beads and coves and rings—and he just kept going and going and going..."

Teaching at Bucks also brought Sfirri into contact with other turners. He recalls that in his first semester at the school he was informed that his department would be hosting a turning conference. This was one of the early symposia co-organized by Alan and Albert LeCoff (who later founded the Wood Turning Center) and the late woodturner Palmer Sharpless, a vital personality and active community member in Bucks County. These symposia brought together established but somewhat isolated woodturners from all over the United States and had a tremendous impact on the development of a cohesive woodturning field. Within the first few years of the 1980s Sfirri started attending and participating in other turning workshops and conferences.

Sfirri has been credited with making collaboration (and community) an important and unique feature of the woodturning field. Between 1986 and 1991, he collaborated with Robert Dodge, an artist and fellow teacher at Bucks County Community College. In "Bugs and Thugs" and "Secrétaire" (both from 1988), Dodge's colorful painted patterns and cartoon characters accentuate the wacky asymmetry of Sfirri's off-center turnings. As a result of this collaboration, Sfirri began painting his work with outland colors and decorative elements, becoming

one of the first contemporary woodturners to undermine the aesthetic idealization of natural wood. Later, Sfirri teamed up with Canadian woodturner Michael Hosaluk in a very fruitful (and also very colorful) long-term collaboration and a series of exhibitions titled "The Mark and Mikey Show."

The idea for the Emma Lake events in Saskatchewan, Canada was partially shaped by these collaborations, beginning with a key 1992 workshop featuring Sfirri, Hosaluk, Del Stubbs, Giles Gilson, and Richard Raffan. They all agreed the night before the workshop was to begin that they didn't want to follow the typical demonstrator/audience format; they wanted everyone to work and learn together. This model has been used ever since in the biennial workshops at Emma Lake. More recently, Sfirri has been a co-organizer of the Echo Lake Collaborative Workshop, an annual event in Bucks County that works on a similar principle. Sfirri told me: "I've learned so much from seeing how different people do things...collaboration is a great form of education for artists."

Sfirri enjoys speaking, writing and demonstrating. As he puts it: "I like the excitement of juggling entertainment, danger, and education in front of a group of people." Over the years, he has given woodturning demonstrations at conferences in France, Ireland, Canada, and England, as well as five times at the annual conventions of the American Association of Woodturners. He has also been extensively involved with the Wood Turning Center and the Furniture Society.

In spite of Sfirri's involvement and unmistakable pleasure in teaching, collaborating, and many other aspects of the wood-working world, he enjoys the solitude of his work in the studio most of all. He had several

people working for him in the late 1980s, but decided that he "needed his solitude to really concentrate and so would settle for a slower pace with less productivity." He enjoys an ongoing dialogue with his wife Lucy, crediting her as one of his most lucid critics. He strives for balance between the solitude and social activities of his professional life; he states: "I am very organized, obsessive about avoiding anxiety, and careful about commitments, and I try to plan realistically on a two-year cycle...I like to be very involved, but am also very aware of my limits. It is a delicate balance."

When I last visited Sfirri's studio, he showed me a new series of small figures—reminiscent of chess pieces and Brancusi sculptures—that evolved from a recent collaboration, called "Figurati," with architect/furnituremaker Amy Forsyth for *Cabinets of Curiosity*, a joint WTC/Furniture Society exhibition. He started the series, titled "The Little People," in January of 2004. For each of 16 different figures, he has selected a different species of wood. Sfirri commented that, after painting his work almost exclusively for a number of years, he enjoyed working with natural wood again. The pieces are small and gem-like, with the presence of his larger figures compressed into an object that fits easily in your hand. The effect of this shift in scale is a little jarring at first, but it makes the sculptures into more personal, intimate objects, like amulets.

In his recent work, Sfirri has begun to combine the techniques of turning, furniture and sculpture with more and more fluidity. Sometimes this process seems to take place almost subconsciously—collector Fleur Bresler recalls Sfirri exclaiming with surprise "My heavens, it has a slipper foot!" when he saw one of his more sculptural pieces installed in her apartment. His diverse early interests, from baseball cards to architecture, may have provided the groundwork for Sfirri's ease in aesthetic travel—between art, design and craft; popular culture and good taste; comedy and serious political issues—which for many people remain in rather rigid categories. Perhaps it is his skill and knowledge in each of these areas that make this possible. Or it could just be his positive outlook. Sfirri clearly knows what he's doing, makes it look easy...and has fun doing it.

Susan Hagen is a sculptor and writer; she lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.