



## Museum for Art in Wood

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### MUSEUM FOR ART IN WOOD PRESENTS **MARK SFIRRI: LA FAMIGLIA**, A NEW SOLO EXHIBITION OF SCULPTURAL WORKS BY CELEBRATED ARTIST AND WOODTURNER MARK SFIRRI

*The Bucks County-based artist developed numerous sculptures centered around the theme of family, exploring its many definitions and meanings.*

*"I remember exactly what I did on first seeing Mark Sfirri's work: I smiled." Glenn Adamson, renowned curator and writer*

Photos: [HERE](#)

**Philadelphia, PA | September 23, 2024** – On November 1, the [Museum for Art in Wood](#) (141 N. 3rd Street, Philadelphia, PA 19106) unveils [Mark Sfirri: La Famiglia](#), the first museum-organized solo exhibition of work by celebrated artist and woodturner [Mark Sfirri](#). These new, never-before-seen sculptures by Sfirri center around the theme of family, exploring its many definitions while also reflecting on the immigrant experience, belonging, and the eventual passing of one generation to the next. **Mark Sfirri: La Famiglia** is curated by the Museum for Art in Wood's Executive Director and Chief Curator **Jennifer-Navva Milliken** and is on display in the Museum's gallery from November 1, 2024, to February 16, 2025.

Based in Bucks County, PA, Sfirri is an esteemed figure in the world of woodturning and woodworking. Born with an innate passion for craftsmanship, creativity, and artistic collaboration, he is renowned for his innovations in art in wood. Sfirri earned a BFA and MFA in Furniture Design at Rhode Island School of Design, where he began to explore ways to incorporate lathe-turned parts into furniture and turned double-rimmed platters. As an MFA student, he made a set of six dining chairs constructed of off-center turned elements, which planted the seeds for his future experimentations. This includes one of Sfirri's frequently used techniques, multi-axis spindle turning, which involves using more than one set of centers to hold a piece while turning it on a traditional lathe to create complex shapes and surfaces.

In **La Famiglia**, Sfirri invites the viewer to consider the many interpretations of family and their meanings, including the families we're born into versus the ones we choose, inherited traits and species (trees and wood types), and formations of communities biological and chosen, with their own histories and backgrounds. The artist embraced a spontaneous, free-flowing process, crafting a series of objects that followed a general concept while allowing room to experiment with different creative directions and techniques. Using this approach, each object Sfirri created informed the next, leading to many series – or "families" – of sculptures. The respective families come in various shapes, designs, and colors, ranging in size from two to 67 inches tall, each developed through a particular combination of woodturning, carving, and surfacing processes.

**"La Famiglia's** theme is based on family, both in the literal sense and in terms of forms that relate to one another," said Sfirri. "Each object made informs the next. I had no specific number of pieces for each series, so I just kept going until I felt the collection worked both individually and as a group."

One of the larger groups of *La Famiglia* taps into the immigrant experience. Sfirri is the grandchild of four first-generation Americans, who all came through Ellis Island around 1900 before settling in Chester – the oldest city in Pennsylvania. This history inspired the series “Ellis Islanders,” consisting of 29 figures created from holly wood using multi-axis woodturning. Referencing old photographs of immigrants at Ellis Island, Sfirri developed twisting figures, each wearing hats and serious yet determined expressions, reflecting the people who had traveled great distances in pursuit of opportunity.

Similarly, the artist developed a series titled “The Pawns,” which were modeled after chess pieces and created in different scales to represent a family. These figures represent the first generation of immigrants who came from adversity but found opportunity in America. Another series in the exhibition, “Family Tree,” comprises a grouping of 14 hand-carved and painted faces made from yellow cedar. Sfirri sets each of the unique faces against a detailed frame, creating an almost three-dimensional portrait and offering a more playful direction while clearly demonstrating his rigorous technique.

True to his passion for collaboration, Sfirri’s exhibition also features a project called *The Immigrant Series* that includes the work of 45 artists and colleagues. Each invited artist was asked to contribute a two-dimensional, four-inch portrait depicting an “immigrant” of their choice, whether a person or an idea. These contributions were then arranged into five 30-inch square frames carved by Sfirri. In some cases, the subject is indigenous to the land in which they and their descendants were born and raised; in others, the immigrants are the artists themselves—all serve to challenge assumptions and deepen conceptions toward immigration, families and lineages, and influence. In addition to their artwork, the participating artists were asked to share the story behind each subject, displayed alongside the five frames.

In addition to the new collection in *La Famiglia*, Sfirri curated a selection of works from the Museum of Art in Wood’s expansive permanent collection into a companion exhibition titled “Inspirations, Influences, and Collaborations.” Each piece was created by artists who have collaborated, influenced, or shared artistic backgrounds and practices with Sfirri.

*La Famiglia* is accompanied by a full-color catalogue published by the Museum for Art in Wood. The catalogue includes essays by artist Miriam Carpenter and writer and curator Craig Edelbrock, along with writings by Sfirri and documentation on the works in the exhibition.

“It is a long-awaited honor to present this work by Mark Sfirri,” said **Jennifer-Navva Milliken**, Chief Curator and Executive Director of the Museum for Art in Wood. “In considering this body of work, Mark dove deeply to create these loving expressions of those who inspire him most: his ‘family.’ While US political discourse on immigration continues to be polarizing and incendiary, *La Famiglia* invites another way of thinking about this subject—one that has impacted and shaped every US citizen and resident in some way—made in his trademark tender humor with astounding virtuosity and craft.”

Sfirri’s work has been exhibited in prestigious galleries and museums worldwide and is held in numerous public collections, including the Museum of Arts & Design (New York City, NY), Carnegie Museum of Art (Pittsburgh, PA), the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum (Washington, DC), the Minneapolis Institute of Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Yale University Art Gallery (New Haven, CT), and the James A. Michener Art Museum (Doylestown, PA). As a maker, researcher, and writer, he has conducted demonstrations and lectures throughout North America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand.

In addition to his career as an artist, Sfirri is a professor emeritus at Bucks County Community College (Newtown, PA), where he taught full-time for nearly 40 years. He has received three national awards, including the “Distinguished Educator Award” in 2010 from the Renwick Alliance and, in 2012, the “Lifetime Achievement Award” from the Collectors of Wood Art, and this year received the prestigious “2024 AAW POP Merit Award” from the American Association of Woodturners.

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**About the Museum for Art in Wood:**

The Museum for Art in Wood is the international leader for contemporary art and creativity in the material of wood. The Museum engages, educates, and inspires the public through the exhibition, collection, and interpretation of contemporary art in wood. Founded in 1986 and sited in Philadelphia, the Museum for Art in Wood serves a local and international community. It has built its reputation by providing opportunities for makers and visitors to experience craft directly, through participatory programming; seminal exhibitions and documentation; and the growth, conservation, exhibition, and care of its permanent collection. The Museum’s practice of keeping these resources free and available to the public emphasizes its commitment to building a democratic and inclusive community. Visit [museumforartinwood.org](https://museumforartinwood.org) to learn more.