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Cover photo: Wanderer (Old Believer). A dynamic but elderly member of the Old Believers religious sect prepares to cross himself. His two-fingered salute honors the Father and the Son, but not the Holy Ghost, the latter of which became standard in the Russian Orthodox Church after reforms offered by Patriarch Nikon in 1666.

“A Stone Lives On”:
Vasily Konovalenko’s Gem Carving Sculptures at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science

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The Denver Museum of Nature & Science inspires curiosity and excites minds of all ages through scientific discovery and the presentation and preservation of the world’s unique treasures.

Wanderer (Old Believer). A dynamic but elderly member of the Old Believers religious sect prepares to cross himself. His two-fingered salute honors the Father and the Son, but not the Holy Ghost, the latter of which became standard in the Russian Orthodox Church after reforms offered by Patriarch Nikon in 1666.
Stephen E. Nash

with a contribution by
James T. Hagadorn

photography by
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“A Stone Lives On”:
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ABSTRACT—The Denver Museum of Nature & Science (DMNS) has on display 20 wonderful, whimsical gem-carving sculptures by Russian master artist Vasily Konovalenko. To date, very little has been published on the artist or his work, particularly in English. Since 2009, DMNS curator of archaeology Steve Nash and photographer Rick Wicker have been working to fill that gap in our knowledge. They have traveled the world to photograph and fully document the Konovalenko gem-carving sculptures. As of late 2014, they have examined and documented more than 95% of the known pieces, totaling more than 70 sculptures. This paper focuses on the 20 DMNS sculptures by offering background information on the artist and his career, both informed by oral histories with the artist’s wife, Anna, and others. Coupled with Wicker’s high-resolution photographs and a mineralogical analysis by curator of geology James T. Hagadorn, Nash’s research reveals Konovalenko’s remarkable and world-class talent for making silent stones speak.
Prologue

On Thursday, March 15, 1984, Le Petit Gourmet Catering served a lavish Russian-themed dinner for 150 guests and dignitaries at the Denver Museum of Natural History, today known as the Denver Museum of Nature & Science (DMNS; Colwell-Chanthaphonh et al. 2013). The menu included carved-to-order smoked salmon, marinated herring, lamb kabobs, borsch, cucumber soup, and buttered blini with sour cream and caviar, accompanied by Russian desserts, tea, and Stolichnaya vodka shots. The event marked the opening of a temporary exhibition of 18 wonderful, whimsical, imaginative, colorful, and dynamic gem sculptures by the Russian master carver and artist Vasily Vasilevich Konovalenko.

Fast forward to 2014.

On the west end of the Museum’s third floor is a permanent exhibition entitled *Konovalenko: Gem Carvings of Russian Folk Life*. It contains 20 Konovalenko sculptures: *Barré Bath*, *Bosom Pals*, *Bread and Salt*, *Gold Prospectors*, *Grandmother*, *Ice Fishing*, *In the Sultry Afternoon I*, *In the Sultry Afternoon II*, *Laundress*, *Mower*, *On The Stroll*, *Painter*, *Prisoners*, *Sauna I: the Thin and the Fat*, *Sauna II: Woman*, *Spring*, *Swan Song*, *Topper*, *Walruses*, and *Wanderer (Old Believer)*. To those of us who have seen them, “the Konovalenkos” are unforgettable, at once creating compelling personalities, setting dynamic scenes, and capturing snapshots in time, all in stone.

Untrained American eyes often lack the appropriate cultural points of reference and historic contexts in which to interpret the sculptures. No substantive English-language treatment of the Konovalenko gem carving sculptures has ever been published, nor has any reasonably comprehensive Konovalenko biography in English (but see Goldstein 1981; Federov 1994; Nash 2009, 2012a, 2013a; Hagadorn & Nash 2011).

There are several recent Russian publications that include discussions of Konovalenko and his work. Valentin Skurlov and colleagues offer the most complete treatment in a book on Carl Fabergé and his protégés (Skurlov et al. 2009: 272–299). The catalog for a 2011 Kremlin Museum exhibition on the same subject includes a brief treatment of two Konovalenko sculptures; neither is from the DMNS collection (Anon. 2011: 411–413). Chuprov and Yusipov (1997: 62–66) published photos and a few details, in both Russian and English, of 14 of the Konovalenko gem carving sculptures at the State Gems Museum Collection, Moscow.

This publication seeks to address the gaps in the English-language literature on Konovalenko by 1) providing a detailed chronicle of his life and career, 2) considering in detail the nature, meaning, and composition of the 20 DMNS sculptures, 3) offering a brief mineralogical analysis of the sculptures by DMNS Curator of Geology James W. Hagadorn, and 4) answering frequently asked questions about Konovalenko and his works.

Stephen E. Nash, 12 September 2014

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*From the moment [I first started gem carving] I was struck by the beauty of these “precious and semi-precious” Russian stones, and saw, through my carvings, that I could make them even more beautiful…. I can’t live without [gem carving]. To me it’s a very attractive field of art. It’s unlimited because stone will last for thousands of years, like the Egyptian pyramids. A painting dies, but a stone lives on.*

Vasily Konovalenko, quoted in Goldstein (1981: 77–81)
Vasily Konovalenko’s gem-carving sculptures in Denver

Biographic and Artistic Chronicle

Konovalenko’s career can be divided into four phases. The first and longest is from his birth in 1929 until 1973, the date of his first and only Russian State Museum exhibition. The second is from 1973 until 1981 and includes the period during which Konovalenko worked as director of the Laboratory of Small Sculptural Forms at the State Gems Museum in Moscow. The third is the shortest and most intense, bracketed by the family’s emigration from the Soviet Union to New York in early 1981 and the opening of the DMNS exhibition in early 1984. The fourth and final phase, also based in New York, covers the last five years of his life, from 1984 until his death in 1989.

Although this publication focuses on Konovalenko’s sculptures from the third phase, biographical details from the rest of his life are offered because they provide, in toto, the much needed historical and political contexts in which his oeuvre must be considered.

Life Imitates Art, 1929–1973

Vasily Vasilevich Konovalenko was born on July 5, 1929, the fifth child, and only son, of a Russian mother and Ukrainian father living in Petrovka, a small town in east-central Ukraine. When he was a toddler, the family moved to Donetsk, a larger and more cosmopolitan city in eastern Ukraine, to better their lives and opportunities. Konovalenko spent the remainder of his childhood there, save two years during the Nazi occupation from October 1941 until September 1943 when the family evacuated to an undocumented location. They returned to a city effectively destroyed. At fifteen, Konovalenko began work at the Donetsk Musical Theatre. At sixteen, he moved to the larger and more reputable Stalin Theatre for Opera and Ballet. The next year he was admitted to art and architectural school at Donetsk Polytechnic Institute. During these formative years, Konovalenko studied a range of artistic media and applications, from set design and construction to painting and sculpture. Galina Gubanova, an independent scholar in St. Petersburg, makes a compelling case that Konovalenko must have gained gem carving experience during this period, for he was based in the artistic and cultural center of eastern Ukraine, a region home to some of the world’s best gem and mineral sources and which has a long-standing gem sculpting tradition (Gubanova 2013; Moran 2008).

In 1950, at age twenty-one, Konovalenko was drafted into the Soviet navy and served in the Baltic Fleet but was discharged after less than a year for unspecified health reasons. During his brief period of

Figure 1. The Mariinsky Theatre, St. Petersburg, Russia, 2013. DMNS Neg. No. IV.2013-552.D.
Vasily Konovalenko’s gem-carving sculptures in Denver

Nash

On April 25, 1957, the Mariinsky Theatre premiered Sergey Prokofiev’s ballet *The Tale of the Stone Flower*; Konovalenko served as lead set designer. Prokofiev was well-known in the Soviet Union as one of the twentieth century’s greatest composers; he is best known to English-speaking audiences as the author of the children’s musical *Peter and the Wolf*.

*The Tale of the Stone Flower* takes place in the Ural Mountains of central Russia, a landform and region that contains dozens of economically useful gemstones and minerals. The male lead, young Danila, is engaged to beautiful Katarina. Unbeknownst to her, the mythical Mistress of Malachite Mountain woos Danila with a legendary stone flower, said to be the most beautiful in the land. As a gem carver himself, Danila becomes entranced with her stone flower and attempts to make one of his own out of malachite, a beautiful, black- and green-banded, copper-rich mineral native to Russia. In so doing, Danila becomes smitten with the mythical Mistress of Malachite Mountain, and a love triangle ensues. To complicate matters, the drunken Severyan repeatedly torments Katarina; the Mistress of Malachite Mountain ultimately dispatches him in a compassionate gesture to Danila, if not Katarina. In the end, and after a long period during which Danila gains tremendous gem carving skills, he again professes his love for Katarina. Appreciating Danila’s honesty and loyalty, the Mistress of Malachite Mountain allows them to live happily ever after, and Danila goes on to become a world-famous gem carver.

Figure 2. Vasily Konovalenko at the Mariinsky Theater, mid-1950s. Photo courtesy of Anna Konovalenko.

Figure 3. Konovalenko enjoying a Russian winter day with his St. Bernard in the mid-1960s. Photo courtesy of Anna Konovalenko.
Vasily Konovalenko’s gem-carving sculptures in Denver

Konovalenko’s task among many for the production of The Tale of the Stone Flower was to create a large malachite box as a stage prop for Danila. In so doing, he fell in love with his own gem-carving muse. Life imitates art.

The Tale of the Stone Flower earned enormous popular and critical acclaim. Konovalenko’s star shone in particular, for at the age of twenty-eight he led the design and construction of wonderfully colorful and exuberant sets for Prokofiev’s last ballet.

Over the next sixteen years, while still working in the theatre, Konovalenko continued to make gem carving sculptures, many of which are now on permanent display at the State Gems Museum (Samotsvety) in Moscow. He continued to hone his skills and worked to become familiar with new and different kinds of raw materials. He traveled extensively to visit and collect mineralogical sources in the Urals, Siberia, and Ukraine, to meet with geologists and mineralogists, and to learn more about the science behind the art (Fig. 3).

In 1971, Konovalenko’s reputation in theatrical circles was at its peak; his gem carving reputation, however, was not because his sculptures had never been on public display. In an interview, Ms. Konovalenko states that she and Vasily went to Moscow to meet with Soviet authorities to propose an exhibition. They packed a single sculpture into their bags and took the night train to Moscow, where they went directly to the office of the Minister of Culture. Given the political structure and culture of the USSR at this time, their approach was daring because they went directly to higher-level national authorities without an appropriate letter of introduction from their local party officials in Leningrad. As if their approaching a Minister without a letter of introduction was not audacious enough, the sculpture they brought was an early rendition of Bosom Pals (Figs 10, 11). It was Vasily’s first and favorite sculpture, but it was an insensitive if not disrespectful selection, for it depicts three men partying and is decidedly not in the propagandist Socialist Realism style then favored by the Communist Party. Summarily dismissed by the Minister of Culture and offended but unharmed, they returned home, pondering the impudence of their request.

By March, 1973, they had regained their courage and resolve. Again they traveled to Moscow in the hopes of generating interest in an exhibition. This time, however, they were better prepared. Through mutual acquaintances, Anna secured in advance an introduction to Sergey Mikhalkov, the well-known and well-connected Russian children’s book and fable author, as well as author of the lyrics to the Soviet national anthem. Rather than bringing a single, arguably inappropriate gem carving sculpture, they brought two—one of an ancient warrior and one of Peter the Great’s henchman—which might be better received by conservative party officials with nationalist sentiments.

The Mikhalkov meeting went better than anticipated. He loved the sculptures, and within minutes he was on the phone to arrange a meeting with Mikhail Solomentsev, the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Russian Soviet Republic. Solomentsev loved the sculptures as well. Again within minutes, Solomentsev deemed that an exhibition was warranted, and that it should occur as soon as possible at the Russian State Museum in Leningrad. Given his position atop the Communist Party’s cultural bureaucracy, Solomentsev was the only one needed to grant approval. Once he decreed that the exhibition should take place, all of his subordinates stepped into line to make it happen. Luckily,

Figure 4. Konovalenko with Sultry Midday at the State Gems Museum, Moscow, 1973. Photo courtesy of Anna Konovalenko.
Vasily Pushkarev, director of the Russian State Museum, was already a fan of the artist’s work for he and the Konovalenkos moved in similar social circles in Leningrad. He was thrilled at the opportunity and directive.

By the end of 1973, less than nine months after the Moscow meetings, ten sculptures went on display at the Russian State Museum under the title Vasily Konovalenko: An Exhibit of Jeweled Works from Semi-Precious Stones (Fig. 4).

Celebration and Persecution, 1973–1981
The Russian State Museum exhibition was an unabashed success. Pushkarev produced the exhibition catalog, which featured explanatory text by Mikhalkov. Having their names on the catalog undoubtedly added to its allure: 25,000 copies sold within a week of the exhibit’s opening. The exhibition was heralded because of the wonderful sculptures, but also because the Russian State Museum was again finally displaying the work of a young, living artist, one who had single handedly revived the historically famous but recently moribund gem carving sculptural tradition.

Gem carving experienced its halcyon days in Russia around the turn of the 20th century, especially in Carl Peter Fabergé’s workshops (Anonymous 2011, Skurlov et al. 2009). Fabergé’s workshop “perished after the 1917 [Russian] Revolution, due in part to its close connections to the [Tsarist] Imperial family” (Moran 2008: 595; see also Federov 1994: 64). During the Soviet era, such gem carving traditions fell on even harder times as the Communist Party adopted Socialist Realism, an officially approved artistic style which held that art should glorify the people’s struggle for Socialist progress (see papers in Kolesnikoff & Smymiw 1994; Moran 2008: 601).

Unfortunately for the Konovalenkos, by going directly to authorities in Moscow, who in turn worked directly with Pushkarev at the Russian State Museum, they bypassed local officials, most notably Gregory Romanov, the senior and most powerful Communist Party official in Leningrad. As Ms. Konovalenko remembers all too well, she and her husband inadvertently landed in the middle of long-simmering turf war between Pushkarev and Romanov.

Since becoming director of the Russian State Museum in 1951, Pushkarev sought to have his institution answer directly to high-level officials in Moscow, as he felt a national museum should, rather than to local officials in Leningrad, which he felt was more appropriate for a small regional- or city-focused museum. In this, Pushkarev was successful, and the rapidity with which the Konovalenko exhibit went from idea to fruition is demonstrable proof of his influence and power in the cultural realm.

At the time of the exhibition, Romanov had already been a long-standing member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. He had also recently become a candidate member of the ruling Politburo, the Party’s Executive Committee. He was therefore a political force to be reckoned with, and he had been subverted and ignored in the Konovalenko exhibition development process. To make matters worse, there were lasting hard feelings between Romanov and Pushkarev, stemming at least in part from Romanov’s alleged use of Catherine the Great’s china at his daughter’s wedding, during which a number of pieces were broken.

Because the Konovalenkos and Pushkarev worked the cultural connections with Moscow, Romanov was unable to share in the glory of, and credit for, the exhibition. He did not attend the opening gala, even though he had been sent a special, custom invitation to do so. Instead, he decided to persecute, and hopefully prosecute, Konovalenko as “an especially dangerous criminal” despite the fact that the artist was being publicly heralded as a national hero. Romanov unleashed the powers of the KGB, which went on to interview 1,500 of Konovalenko’s friends and associates, a staggering number by any estimation.

As a technical matter, Konovalenko had broken the letter of Soviet law, for he trafficked and possessed the precious and semi-precious stones necessary to produce his art. If one interprets his artistic style cynically, one might argue that he also broke a law against making fun of the Soviet people, for the figures he produced can be cartoonish caricatures as well as realistic depictions. Finally, he possessed gold and silver, which was illegal for individuals in the former Soviet Union; to do this was by far the most serious offense of the three.
The Konovalenkos suffered from Romanov’s persecution. They were repeatedly interrogated by the KGB. Their house, workshops, and belongings were damaged during a twelve-hour search. More nerve-wracking, however, was the uncertainty. Could Vasily really be jailed for producing fine art?

The Konovalenkos had friends, both prominent and lesser known, who worked behind the scenes to keep Vasily out of jail, and a solution was ultimately reached. On May 24, 1974, Konovalenko signed an agreement with Communist Party officials in which he agreed to “donate” all ten of his exhibited sculptures to the State, to move his family from Leningrad to Moscow, and to take a new job at the State Gems Museum. Ironically, however, American capitalist billionaire Armand Hammer offered to purchase the exhibited sculptures for $150,000 each, in cash, for a total equivalent to $7.6 million in today’s dollars (see Gillette 1981). Party officials declined to entertain the very public proposal. The donated sculptures, as well as more than a dozen others Konovalenko made between 1973 and 1981, remain at the State Gems Museum in Moscow.

Romanov’s report of the KGB investigation worked its way up bureaucratic channels to land on the desk of Roman Rudenko, the Chief Prosecutor of the Soviet Union. Early in his career, Rudenko prosecuted Nazi war criminals at the Nuremberg trials, and was therefore accustomed to adjudicating serious matters. After reading Romanov’s report, Rudenko wrote: “I don’t recall a more cartoonish episode since the time of Stalin’s purges” and summarily dropped all charges. Relieved but still shaken, the Konovalenkos began for the first time to seriously consider finding a way to leave the Soviet Union.

During Soviet times, it was illegal to move from city to city without the State’s prior approval. Alexander Vasilevich Sidorenko, a geologist and academic whom Vasily met long before the 1973 exhibition, was now Vice-President of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR. He answered directly to Alexei Nikolayevich Kosygin, Chairman of the Council of Ministers, and appealed to him for special consideration of the Konovalenkos’ situation and agreement. Kosygin personally approved the Konovalenkos’ living arrangements in Moscow.

Once there, Konovalenko began work as director of the newly formed “Laboratory of Small Sculptural Forms” at the State Gems Museum. To his dismay, much of his daily work entailed making souvenirs and trinkets for Communist Party officials to offer as gifts to colleagues, friends, and other dignitaries. According to Dominque Moran (2008: 592), “skilled workers whose expertise lay in the production of luxury goods, such as gemstone decorative carvings, had to adapt themselves to the Soviet milieu.” Konovalenko was no different. Alexey Timofeev, who was Konovalenko’s pupil for four and a half years, was even more exacting in his assessment:

I came to understand that [Konovalenko left Leningrad] to escape the attention of local bureaucrats. [In the mid-1970s,] jubilees and other official celebrations were a favorite pastime of officials. And what is necessary for a celebration? … They required souvenirs and gifts. Thus, the artist receives an order to create, as soon as possible, an article for a high officer (or, perhaps, for his wife or mother-in-law). If you did that, you were a good guy, and they would love and encourage you. If you refused…. It was not easy to refuse, because your house, studio, raw materials, and tools did not belong to you, but to the State. In other words, you were under complete control of officials. You were not free, but a simple Soviet member of the Union of Artists of the USSR. All your work and even life were under complete control of officials. [Timofeev, quoted in Federov 1994: 62]

Konovalenko was unhappy working for the state. Although his situation was stable with regard to his family and their apartment in Moscow, he worked at the beck and call of Party officials, creating pieces that distracted him from his primary artistic goals and dreams. He was not free, and knew he never would be. He wanted to leave, but had no legitimate grounds under which to apply for an exit visa. Ms. Konovalenko, however, is Jewish, so they applied for exit visas under the Soviet Jewish emigration program. And they waited.
Soviet Jewish Emigration Policy

Since its establishment as a modern country in 1948, and more specifically since passage of the Law of Return in 1950, the State of Israel has had an ‘open door’ policy for all Jews who would like to become citizens and resettle there (Dominitz 1997: 113–114). Jews living in the former Soviet Union have variously taken advantage of that policy since its inception. The number of people being allowed to emigrate often depends directly on the state of the Soviet Union’s relationship with the United States in any given year. It was the Cold War, after all, and Israel was a direct U.S. ally in that effort. When relations were amicable, more Jews were allowed to leave; when relations cooled, fewer were. All told, between 1966 and 1982 some 250,000 Soviet Jews were granted exit visas and fled the Soviet Union (Simon 1985: 1).

When they emigrated, all first went to Vienna. Those who wished to go to Israel did so with logistical and monetary assistance from the Jewish Agency there. Those who chose to go elsewhere went to Rome for further processing. There, much to the Jewish Agency’s and Israel’s chagrin, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society helped people find passage to other nations, particularly the United States, Canada, and Australia (Cohen & Haberfeld 2007: 651). Families and individuals who chose not to go to Israel became known as “dropouts” because they had been allowed to leave the Soviet Union with the understanding that Israel would be their final destination, but then changed course midstream and chose to go elsewhere (Aronson 1990: 31; Dominitz 1997: 118–119, see Table 5.1). Generally speaking, those with higher education levels and specialized skills, like the Konovalenkos, chose to “drop out” and go to the United States; those with less education and fewer skills tended to go straight to Israel (Cohen & Haberfeld 2007). By the late 1970s, the drop-out rate was significant, with less than one-third of Soviet-Jewish émigrés actually going to Israel, an embarrassment to all governments involved (Dominitz 1997).

On an otherwise non-descript day in February, 1981, the Konovalenko’s emigration visas arrived. Their excitement was palpable; Vasily flew to Vienna the next day, then took the night train to Rome three days later. Anna and the children joined him within two weeks. Given that Anna’s brother Naum Nikolayevsky was already established in New York, and because they felt that Vasily’s artistic opportunities were greater in the United States than in Israel, they “dropped out” and proceeded to Rome for through-processing to the United States. Fortuitously, Vasily used their nearly two-month layover in Italy to visit some of the world’s great art museums, exponentially expanding his understanding of art beyond Soviet theatre and gem-carving.


In the mid-day hours of Thursday, April 16, 1981, a Trans-World Airlines flight from Rome landed at John F. Kennedy airport in New York. Vasily, Anna, Vasalisa, and Anna’s son Sergey, were all on board, nervously anticipating their new life in the United States. They arrived with $200 and a few prized family possessions, including Vasily’s fishing poles, in tow. Finally, it appeared that Vasily would be able to pursue his artistic freedom.

While working in Moscow several years earlier, Vasily met Raphael Gregorian through a mutual friend. Gregorian was an Iranian-born and Russian-speaking American medical supplies dealer who often did business in the Soviet Union. Seeking a way to support their family, Vasily and Anna called Gregorian soon after arriving in the United States. Gregorian then contacted Michael Kazanjian, a Los Angeles-based diamond dealer and friend who was aware of Vasily’s work through his own trips to Moscow but had never had the chance to meet the artist. Gregorian and Kazanjian then called Jack Ortman, a New York-based diamond dealer. Together, Gregorian, Kazanjian, and Ortman, agreed to sponsor Konovalenko and his work. Kazanjian and Ortman would provide capital and raw materials; Gregorian would provide much needed translation and cross-cultural support services.

Despite all appearances and expectations, things were not as good as they seemed. Unfamiliar with American business practices, the Konovalenkos signed a 37-page, English-language contract they did not fully understand. The contract committed Konovalenko to produce a large number of sculptures in a very short period of time; he slept only three or four hours a night.
as a result. The stress almost killed him and he suffered his first heart attack in early 1982, less than a year after arriving in New York. Nevertheless, he fulfilled the terms of the contract, and in so doing produced some of his finest pieces, the majority of which are now at DMNS.

Ortman’s lengthy client list included celebrities such as Liza Minnelli, Frank Sinatra, and Queen Elizabeth II; it also included Alvin Cohen, a Denver-based construction magnate. Cohen was a DMNS trustee, and could therefore fill a gap in the sponsorship program—the display and permanent disposition of the Konovalenko sculptures. Cohen’s plan for an exhibition in Colorado began to take shape in the late spring and early summer of 1983. The exhibit was to open with a private gala on November 2, 1983.

No one could have foreseen the tragic events of September 1, 1983, when Soviet Air Force fighter jets shot down a wayward Korean Airlines 747 en route from New York to Seoul. This violent act instantly created the tensest moment of the Cold War since the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, and it made no sense for the Museum to open an exhibition heralding Russian art, much less that of a living artist and recent Russian émigré. Although the opening was delayed for just over four months, work continued behind the scenes, and 17 Konovalenko sculptures arrived safely at the Museum in late October, 1983: Barrel Bath, Bosom Pals, Hunter on the Mark, Ice Fishing, In the Sultry Afternoon I, In the Sultry Afternoon II, Laundress, Mower, On the Stroll, Painter, Prisoners, Spring, Sauna I: the Thin and the Fat, Sauna II: Woman, Toper, Walruses, and Wanderer (Old Believer). (The original Swan Song broke en route to Denver. Konovalenko had to recreate it nearly from scratch.) They remained in secure storage for several months.

Korean Airlines Flight 007 (KAL 007)

After a series of ground-based technical glitches and pilot error caused a course deviation that compounded with distance, a Korean Airlines 747 was already well into Soviet airspace when first intercepted by Soviet Air Force fighter jets. After frenetic deliberations, military authorities in Moscow ordered the plane destroyed. Two air-to-air missiles struck and incapacitated the plane, and it plunged into the Sea of Japan during the early morning hours of September 1, 1983. A total of 269 passengers and crew were killed, including Lawrence McDonald, a sitting Democratic U.S. Congressman from the seventh district in Georgia (Anonymous 1984; Hassan 1984; Hersh 1986; Young & Launer 1990).

The destruction of KAL 007 led to a significant escalation in anti-Soviet sentiment in the U.S., coming as it did on the heels of President Ronald Reagan’s proposed Strategic Defense Initiative, the planned deployment of Pershing II missiles in West Germany, and the FleetEx ’83 war game exercises in the North Pacific, all of which the Soviets considered military provocations. The destruction of KAL 007 occurred in the midst of the highly visible if strategically insignificant Olympic boycotts, during which the United States and dozens of allies boycotted the 1980 Winter Olympics in Moscow. In return, the Soviet Union and fourteen of its allies boycotted the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles.

![Figure 5. Konovalenko with Grandmother at the Denver Museum of Natural History, 1984. Neg. No. ATR.4.3-2-5.](image)
The Denver Exhibition

On Thursday, March 15, 1984, the Konovalenko sculptures went on public display in the United States for the first time. Konovalenko was on hand to demonstrate his skills for appreciative audiences who had never seen anything quite like his work (Fig. 5). Artists and art historians from local universities offered their insights on the broader Russian gem carving genre. Local newspapers, including the *The Denver Post* and *The Rocky Mountain News*, heralded the opening gala, events and exhibition (Barrett 1984; Price 1984).

Somewhat surprisingly, no one had given much thought to the exhibition’s future. The plan was to keep the sculptures on display for a year, but then what? Given its popularity with visitors, the exhibition was extended for one more year, then another, and yet another. Two new sculptures, Grandmother (Figs 20–22) and Bread and Salt (Figs 13, 14) were added to the display in 1988. Another, Gold Prospectors (Figs 15–19) was added in 1989, when Hunter on the Mark was removed. (It is now in a private collection.) Might there be a way to make the Konovalenko sculptures a permanent fixture at the Museum?

Just as he had done in 1983, Cohen came to the rescue in 1989. He bought the entire collection from Ortman, who had bought Kazanjian’s and Gregorian’s positions on the contract in early 1984. In 1999, the Cohens donated all 20 sculptures to the DMNS Foundation.

Konovalenko died on January 27, 1989, five days after suffering a cerebral hemorrhage from which he never recovered consciousness. Four months shy of his 60th birthday, he left Anna a widow with their young daughter Vasilisa, as well as Anna’s two sons from a previous marriage (Fig. 6).

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**Figure 6.** Konovalenko self-portrait, bas relief, silver on marble, 1984-1989. Private Collection. Photo courtesy of Alan Duras.
The Sculptures
There are many ways in which the Konovalenko sculptures might be presented in a publication such as this. Konovalenko created all of the DMNS sculptures between 1981 and 1984, so the date of manufacture is effectively held constant; thus a chronological approach is not informative. A thematic approach might work, given that several of the sculptures (e.g., Ice Fishing, In the Sultry Afternoon I, In the Sultry Afternoon II, Sauna I: the Thin and the Fat, Sauna II: Woman, Toper, etc.) represent people engaged in leisure activities, whereas others (e.g., Gold Prospectors, Prisoners, Mower, etc.) depict people at work. To keep things simple, however, the sculptures are presented alphabetically; the reader is invited to discover her or his own patterns, themes, and icons while considering each sculpture individually and then as a part of a collective.

Figure 7. Barrel Bath. Neg. No. IV.DMF.1-6.d.
**Barrel Bath**

Enjoying a hot barrel bath, an elderly man cries out, for he has run out of tea (Fig. 8). A tidy, balanced, and elegant sculpture, *Barrel Bath* demonstrates a mastery of raw material selection that is as pleasing to the eye from afar as it is upon close examination. It also includes cloisonné as decorative trim on the samovar. Cloisonné is an ancient metalworking technique in which small gemstones or, in Konovalenko’s case, porcelain enamel are used to decorate compartments separated by fine metalwork lines.

The scene is from Vasily’s childhood. In Donetsk, his hometown in Ukraine, there was no reliable plumbing during the 1930s. In order to take a bath, one had to fill a barrel with hot water, and after getting in, cover oneself with a towel or thick rug to retain heat. Adults often enjoyed a cup of tea in the process.

The barrel is made of petrified wood, and is perfectly proportioned. It rests on a base of uniformly red jasper beams. The floor is agate, the circular patterns of which look like with soap bubble or water stains. The base is trimmed with more agate.

The man’s agate moustache, hair, and eyebrows are classic mid-20th century Russian (Fig. 7). His face and hands are Beloretsk quartz. Note how Konovalenko used natural flaws and inclusions in the stone to create a “five o’clock shadow” on the man’s lower jaw—like he does for the young man in *Prisoners* (Fig. 44). Konovalenko has a remarkable eye for detail, carving wrinkles into the man’s face and forehead which, along with the gray hair and moustache, indicate middle age. The man’s face is nothing if not dynamic, with pleading sapphire eyes,

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*Nash*

Figure 8. *Barrel Bath*. Neg. No. IV.DMF.1-6.b. The top of the man’s head is 22 cm high.
an extended lower lip as if he is yelling out, and a row of imperfect cacholong teeth in his mouth. The bowl is cacholong, with silver trim. A gold-plated silver samovar rests on a petrified wood table; the tree-rings in the wood are clearly visible in cross-section (Fig. 9). The man’s gold-plated slippers lie on the floor at lower right; Konovalenko used natural variability in the agate or jasper floor to make it appear, even from this oblique angle, as if the floor is covered soap bubbles and water.

Figure 9. *Barrel Bath*, detail. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-6.e.
Figure 10. *Bosom Pals*. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-15. The top of the rich (center) man’s hat is 28 cm high.

Figure 11. *Bosom Pals*, reverse. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-15.f.
**Bosom Pals**

*Bosom Pals* includes three revelers singing merrily (Fig. 10). (The traditional, ideal number for such a Russian group is three, never four, and certainly not two.) The man on the left holds a balalaika; the man on the right holds a horn. The man in the middle is wealthier than his friends, evinced by the stylistic and material differences in their shoes and hats. His hat is fur and his shoes are leather, whereas his friends wear wool caps and lapti, or classic, woven peasant slippers with thick socks. The face and hands of the man in the center are made of Beloretsk quartz; those of the other men are probably jasper, the mottling and coloring of which makes them look older and more weathered. He holds a chicken-shaped cloisonné punchbowl, out of which they have been drinking. The balalaika is gold, enamel, diamond, ruby, and tiger eye. The horn is silver, gold, and enamel.

*Bosom Pals* demonstrates that Konovalenko sculptures are meant to be seen in the round, for details in the back enhance those in the front (Fig. 11). From the rear, their shirts drape and flow much more visibly than in the front, where they are cinched with belts.

The man on the left in this view awkwardly holds a cloisonné ladle that matches the punch bowl in the front. His shirt is green jasper; his pants nephrite. The man on the right wears a rose agate shirt, a tiger eye hat, and banded jasper pants. Both wear lapti of gold-plated silver and cacholong. A ruby feather, invisible from the front, juts from the rich man’s hat, an additional indicator of his wealth.

A close-up of *Bosom Pals* illustrates Konovalenko’s mastery of cloisonné, as well as the dynamism of their mouths as they sing a classic Russian or Ukrainian drinking song (Fig. 12).

![Image of Bosom Pals sculpture](image-url) *Figure 12. Bosom Pals, detail. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-15.u.*
Figure 13. *Bread and Salt*. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-12.d. The top of the man’s hat is 27 cm high.
**Bread and Salt**

*Bread and Salt* is the most static of Konovalenko’s sculptures at DMNS. A man receives guests in his home with a traditional welcome tray of bread and rock salt (Fig. 13). In design, the man resembles those in *Bosom Pals* and other sculptures, except that his mouth is closed and he stands quietly, with anxious eyes, awaiting his guests.

His hat is made of jasper; his jacket is jade, with opal buttons. His pants are banded jasper, overlying white quartz socks and lapti of gold-plated silver. Note how the towel drapes realistically over his right forearm. The bread is a calcite nodule. The unmodified cortex, or weathered outer layer, of the nodule looks cleverly like the crust of an artisanal loaf of bread.

His hair, mustache, and beard are milky quartz; his skin is Beloretsk quartz, and his beautiful blue eyes, sapphire (Fig. 14).

*Figure 14. Bread and Salt,* detail. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-12.g.
Gold Prospectors

Two old but excitable miners rejoice at the prospect of future riches, even as their daily grind is full of hardship and ill-health (Fig. 15). One, enjoying a smoke from his pipe, holds a gold nugget, or more likely a flake that is too small to see, while he regales his friend with tales of the many near misses of his long panning career. The man’s loyal but irascible burro brays its displeasure at hearing, yet again, tales of what might have been. The kneeling miner in the foreground pans away, fruitlessly continuing his search.

The standing miner is the more vigorous of the two; his agate hair retains some of the blond he wore as a younger man (Fig. 16). His gaze is perceptive if not analytical; his oversized hands testify to years of hard labor. The body of his pipe is carved out of a piece of horn, the only time Konovalenko used such material. His zebra jasper shirt, jasper conglomerate vest, and sodalite pants suggest more success than that enjoyed by his besotted friend (see Fig. 19).

Gold Prospectors is the only Konovalenko sculpture with an American theme. According to Ms. Konovalenko, her husband worked especially hard to ensure that the faces are characteristically American, not Russian. Gold Prospectors is also one of only two—Swan Song (see Figs 59, 60) being the notable exception—in which an animal plays such a central role. In Konovalenko’s sketch rendering of this sculpture, only the two miners were present; the burro was added at Alvin Cohen’s behest. Perhaps because of Cohen’s personal interest in the burro, the level of detail Konovalenko invested in the animal is nothing short of astonishing (Fig. 17). Its body is jade, the saddle blanket on its back is made of septarian, a mineral commonly found in Wyoming and Colorado and one favored by amateur carvers for its pattern and texture. The burro’s eyes are ruby and its muzzle agate, with cacholong teeth. The pickaxe handle is petrified wood.

Konovalenko’s clay model of Gold Prospectors is in the DMNS archives. A close-up of the burro shows how true to form Konovalenko stayed in rendering the burro out of stone, but that he used differences in color and texture to add depth and complexity to the animal (Fig. 18). The clay model is beautiful in and of itself, particularly because Konovalenko’s fingerprints are preserved in the soft clay of the burro’s neck and ears.

The kneeling miner’s hair, beard, and hat are agate; his shirt is Indian agate (Fig. 19). His scarf, barely visible under his beard, is made of dinosaur bone, the only instance in which Konovalenko used a fossil other than petrified wood in his sculptures. His gold-rimmed, sapphire eyes and wizened, Beloretsk-quartz face is earnest, if not gullible, and the mottling of his face suggests many years of exposure to the hot, Western sun.
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Figure 15. *Gold Prospectors*. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-3.i. The top of the young man’s head is 34 cm high.

Figure 16. *Gold Prospectors*, detail. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-3.r.
Figure 17. *Gold Prospectors*, detail. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-3.

Figure 18. *Gold Prospectors*, detail. Neg. No. IOS SCULP 132-4 D.
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Figure 19. Gold Prospectors, detail. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-3.dd.
Grandmother

A stern grandmother sits outside, spinning wool from a petrified wood distaff (Fig. 20). The wool is rutilated quartz, the filaments of which appear as wool fibers. Her dress is snowflake obsidian; her kerchief amethyst. Her wool-lined vest is jasper lined by grape agate. She sits productively on a petrified wood log and unmodified malachite ground surface, making it appear she is working outside. The fine thread she is working is made of gold filament.

A close-up of Grandmother reveals a sternly majestic but toothless visage; she is intently focused on her delicate task. Note the fine woolen thread emanating from her left hand (Fig. 21).

Although Konovalenko was once criticized for making oversized hands, many of his later sculptures silently but definitively deflect such criticism. In this case, the Grandmother’s hand is expertly rendered, complete with fingernails, wrinkles, and near-perfect proportions (Fig. 22).

Figure 20. Grandmother. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-1.h. The top of the woman’s head is 22 cm high.
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Figure 21. *Grandmother*, detail. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-1.q.

Figure 22. *Grandmother*, detail. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-1.x.
Ice Fishing
One of Konovalenko’s many fishing sculptures, Ice Fishing is notable for its stark color palate (Fig. 23). At first glance it seems rather plain, with a middle-aged man placidly enjoying a winter day on a frozen lake. On further examination, compelling details become apparent, including the infusion of color in the use of ruby for his mittens and lapis lazuli for his scarf. The ice is rutilated quartz, the filaments of which make the surface appear crazed and cracked. The man’s hat is agate, his coat labradorite, and his boots obsidian. His fishing pole is silver; the fishing line is gold.

A close-up view of the man’s face in Ice Fishing reveals a startling similarity to that of Leonid Breshnev, the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union from 1964 until his death in 1982 (Fig. 24). It may just be a coincidence, as Konovalenko created a quintessentially Russian/Ukrainian face, but it is possible that Konovalenko was working on this sculpture at the time of Breshnev’s death in 1982. Konovalenko had a history with Breshnev. Picking Mushrooms, one of Konovalenko’s sculptures on display at the State Gems Museum in Moscow, was commissioned by Breshnev to honor one of his favorite pastimes—picking mushrooms with his grandchildren.

Ice Fishing is one of the few sculptures in which Konovalenko included animals. In this case, he put two dead fish on the ice alongside the fisherman (Fig. 25). They are simply made of agate; one even lacks an eye. Ms. Konovalenko says her husband believed that fishing was about the process, not (necessarily) the product. As such, the imperfectly rendered fish in this sculpture are allegorical, reflecting the fact that the pastime can be enjoyed even without catching trophy-sized fish.

Figure 23. Ice Fishing. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-9.d. The top of the man’s coat is 24 cm high.
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Figure 24. *Ice Fishing*, detail. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-9.j.

In the Sultry Afternoon I

An obese man gorges on watermelon while enjoying a cool soak on a hot afternoon (Fig. 26). His skin is Beloretsk quartz; his eyes sapphire, the towel draped over his arms, jasper. The water pool is rendered by a slice of agate with gold-plated silver trim; the barrel is petrified wood and silver. Note the uncut green watermelon floating in the pool behind the man’s left arm.

A close-up view shows the man’s soft, fat hands, indicating a life of leisure. He enjoys a single-minded, yet vacuous focus on the watermelon (Fig. 27).

Figure 26. In the Sultry Afternoon I. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-18.d. The top of his head is 19 cm high; the base is 36 cm in diameter.

Figure 27. In the Sultry Afternoon I, detail. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1.18-h.
In the Sultry Afternoon II

A buxom woman enjoys a cup of tea while soaking in a pool (Fig. 28). She is much more animated and social than her male counterpart in In the Sultry Afternoon I, and is talking with an invisible companion. In terms of balance and execution, this is one of Konovalenko’s masterpieces, for he combined color and texture to produce a vibrant scene that is equally compelling and humorous from all sides, including the top.

The pool is agate, surrounded by gold-plated silver trim. The rings in the agate nodule are used to look roughly like ripple marks expanding out from the woman and her table.

The woman has just poured agate tea into a cacholong cup; she has a lump of sugar in her left hand, ready to dunk into the tea in classic Russian fashion (Fig. 29). Konovalenko used natural flaws in the raw material to make it appear she has spattered tea on the cup. Her hair is rutilated quartz, held back by a turquoise band. Her bathing suit is lapis.

Demonstrating that Konovalenko’s sculptures are to be seen from all sides, even a partial top view reveals a masterpiece (Fig. 30). The umbrella is decorated with small, incredibly detailed cloisonné, demonstrating his mastery of yet another artistic technique.

The woman’s face is expressive; her sapphire eyes sparkle with delight as she actively engages in conversation with her unseen companion (Fig. 31). The faces Konovalenko produced during his time in the United States are some of the most expressive he ever created. Although this is certainly a function of his maturation as an artist, Ms. Konovalenko says that it is also because they were created during the happiest period of his life.
Figure 29. *In the Sultry Afternoon II*, detail. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1.10-p.

Figure 30. *In the Sultry Afternoon II*, detail. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1.10-z.
Figure 31. *In the Sultry Afternoon II*, detail. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1.10-w.
Laundress

The Laundress stares into oblivion, resigned to the monotonous plight of a routine and mundane task (Fig. 32). Her feet are immersed in cool but murky water; her favorite pyrite washing stone and petrified-wood washboard close at hand. The base is agate, rimmed by malachite.

The size of her hands and forearms, and the masculine robusticity of her back, testifies to a laborious life. Her unblemished skin, by contrast, testifies to youth. A feminine touch, in the form of a delicate pearl necklace, graces an otherwise pedestrian wardrobe and silently mocks her predicament.

A close-up view of her face reveals Konova-lenko’s mastery of Beloretsk quartz (Fig. 33). Her face is delicate but expressive, embellished only by her sapphire eyes. Her kerchief is turquoise, her blouse aventurine.
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Figure 33. Laundress, detail. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1.17-h.
The *Mower* sings while he works, a not-so-grim reaper following the rhythms of an agricultural lifestyle, harvesting the season’s rye (Fig. 34). His pants are agate, his shirt beryl, and his satchel’s strap is ruby. The pile of rye is rutilated quartz.

A close-up of his face reveals compound eyes (Fig. 35). The pupils are sapphire, surrounded by gold irises. The sclera, or white portion of the eye, is undifferentiated Beloretsk quartz that also forms his head. The man’s mustache, and possibly eyebrows, are rutilated quartz; his hat snowflake obsidian.

The *Mower* has perfectly rendered feet; note the nails and wrinkles Konovalenko has carved on the toes (Fig. 36). Konovalenko used natural flaws in the Beloretsk quartz to yield a calloused heel. Variations in the agate pants look like faded denim.
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Figure 35. *Mower*, detail. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1.11.z.

Figure 36. *Mower*, detail. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1.11-p.
Figure 37. *On The Stroll*. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-4.c. The top of the man's hat is 30 cm high; the base is 26 cm by 21 cm.
**On The Stroll**

Vibrantly colored, *On the Stroll* illustrates a couple strolling into the forest (Fig. 37). The man seems confident; the young woman sings innocently as she plays a balalaika, but the surprise on her face indicates she has begun to understand his ulterior motives. They walk on a rough chalcopyrite ground surface characteristic of a forested environment. His shoes are sapphire, hers are red picture jasper. Her blouse is varicite, paired with a horizontally banded nundoorite skirt. His opal shirt is overlain by a lapis lazuli jacket.

Her youthful face is Beloretsk quartz; her wavy hair is onyx, which Konovalenko rarely used, overlain by a goldstone kerchief (Fig. 38). Her tripartite eyes, like those in *Swan Song* (see Fig. 62) and *Wanderer* (see Fig. 70) have sapphire pupils, gold irises, and agate scleras. This leads to significant differences in the expressiveness of her eyes compared to his, which are simply sapphires set into Beloretsk quartz. His cap is white jasper, his hair is agate.

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**Figure 38.** *On the Stroll*, detail. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-4.z.
Figure 39. Painter. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-2.a. The man’s hat is 26 cm high; the base is 36 cm long by 23 cm wide.

**Painter**

Modeled on memories of a man Konovalenko hired to paint his Leningrad apartment in the early 1960s, *Painter* is a forlorn yet strangely proud old drunk, trying to convince his client that he has done a wonderful job when in fact his work is a disaster (Fig. 39). His thin physique, pale complexion, and gaunt appearance belies years of hard labor with noxious chemicals, coupled with alcohol intake and poor nutrition.

The genius in this sculpture has to do with how Konovalenko made use of internal attributes and characteristics of the stones to add detail to both the man and the scene. *Painter* stands on a dirty, canvas-covered floor made of petrified wood. The wood cells have been replaced with jasper, milky quartz, and other minerals, giving it a mottled appearance. Just to the right of the paint bucket, visible in its shadow, Konovalenko has taken advantage of natural variations, perhaps tree-rings, in the petrified wood to make it appear as if the bucket has been pushed to the right, causing the canvas to bunch up. When compared with the uniformly white paint in the bucket, it is clear that the *Painter* has made a mess of the floor.

The *Painter*’s jasper face shows significant signs of age and toil (Fig. 40). Konovalenko used natural variations in the stone to create a reddened beard, while also making it look like the man has burst capillaries in his nose and around his eyes, perhaps from excessive alcohol consumption. As with so many other sculptures, the eyes are sapphire. Unlike so many others, however, Konovalenko has made the right eye opaque as if it was injured in the past, or is beset by a cataract. Note the detail with which Konovalenko rendered the amethyst and quartz paint brush located just below the man’s right jaw. The hat is snowflake obsidian, trimmed with grape agate to give it a rough edge.

A close-up of *Painter* reveals yet again that Konovalenko used natural variations in the stone to make it appear that the man has spattered paint all over his right hand and on his apron (Fig. 41). Konovalenko carved a tiny circular button on the lapis lazuli shirt, just above the apron center.
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Figure 40. *Painter*, detail. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-2.g.

Figure 41. *Painter*, detail. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-2.z.
Prisoners

Cold and lonely prisoners build a shelter at a Siberian labor camp (Fig. 42). Clearly the most macabre sculpture in the DMNS collection, Prisoners is notable for its dull color palate. The Prisoners black, gray, and white world is broken only by the dull brown of the wood on which they are working. As counterintuitive as this might seem, shelter construction was standard practice at the gulag: “Your first task [as prisoners],” Colonel Uskakov said to a newly arrived prisoner at Camp 303, “will be to build barracks for yourselves. How quickly you get inside [and] out of the weather depends on your efforts. It is up to you.” (Quoted in Rawicz 2010: 63). Ms. Konovalenko notes also that this scene is modeled on images in Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s once-banned 1973 book The Gulag Archipelago, which documents the author’s personal experience in a Siberian labor camp from 1958 to 1968.

Partially visible in overview, protruding from behind the younger man’s right shoulder, is a brilliantly rendered hatchet of petrified wood and silver (Fig. 43). Its presence begs the question of why prisoners would be allowed to have a hatchet, but Ms. Konovalenko turns that question on its head, wondering whom the men might attack with the hatchet if they were so inclined. Gulag guards were heavily armed with guns, and there was nowhere for prisoners to run to if they attempted to escape.

Prisoner 0.842 is younger and less jaded than his partner (Fig. 44). Glad to be working on a project, any project, to keep warm and stay productive, his jasper hands tightly grip a petrified wood saw handle.

Stalin-era labor camps were full of smart, industrious people, including scientists, artists, politicians, and military men, not the type who would be content to sit around all day. As Solzhenitsyn (1973: x) wrote, it.
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was possible to come to terms with such a situation: “I have come almost to love that monstrous world.” The man’s serial number is made of silver; his eyes are sapphire. Konovalenko brilliantly used imperfections in the Beloretsk quartz face to indicate the stubble of his beard (cf. Barrel Bath, Fig. 7).

Figure 43. Prisoners, detail. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-20.aa.

A ruby target marks a fleeing prisoner’s heart, should shoot-to-kill action be necessary (Fig. 45). The beautiful magenta ruby stands in stark contrast to the zebra jasper uniforms and obsidian belt.

A close-up of Prisoner 0.857 reveals a diseased complexion and lusterless eyes (Fig. 46). He is perhaps incapable of helping the younger man given the extreme cold, but he also seems to suffer the physical consequences of a lack of activity and now a lack of will. Konovalenko used natural variation in the Beloretsk quartz to make the man appear jaundiced. He also created puffy eyelids as if to indicate sickness; the prisoner’s right eye is nearly shut.
Figure 44. *Prisoners*, detail. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-20.r.

Figure 45. *Prisoners*, detail. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-20.y.
Figure 46. Prisoners, detail. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-20.u.
Sauna I: The Thin and the Fat

A thin masseur struggles against the literal and metaphorical weight of his client, a Party official who enjoys the benefits of his position while failing to actually do, or produce, anything of consequence (Fig. 47). He is a man of leisure, whose comfort is built, quite literally, on the backs of workers. The contrast between the two individuals could not be more extreme.

The base of the sculpture is made of agate, obsidian, and tiger eye. The bench on which the fat man rests is agate; the barrel in which his foot rests is petrified wood with calcite used to indicate frothy, soapy water.

A view from the top reveals again that Konovalenko sculptures were designed to be seen from all sides (Fig. 48). Both men are carved out of Beloretsk quartz, their respective blemishes draw attention to the fat man’s stomach and the thin man’s back. Both men have a variety of scars, age spots, and imperfections, making them appear even more human. The fat man’s hair is mahogany obsidian.

Ms. Konovalenko remembers that the masseur is modeled after a New York City policeman that Konovalenko befriended in the early 1980s (Fig. 49). His mittens are rose quartz; his apron is cacholong. Again, Konovalenko took advantage of natural flaws in Beloretsk quartz to make the old man’s face appear pock-marked and aged.

Figure 47. Sauna I: The Thin and the Fat. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-13.d. The top of the masseur’s head is 24 cm high; the base is 29 cm long by 19 cm wide.

Figure 49. *Sauna I: The Thin and the Fat*, detail. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-13.t.
Figure 50. Sauna II: Woman. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-7.d. The top of the birch switch is 36 cm; the base is 29 cm long by 20 cm wide.

Sauna II: Woman

Sauna II: Woman depicts a woman of leisure being pampered by a member of the working class (Fig. 50). She is relaxed and contented despite her immodesty and vulnerability. One of the more colorful Konovalenko sculptures, the man’s hat, gloves, and shorts are jasper. His shirt is rose quartz; his boots obsidian. The floor is made of agate and jasper; the barrel is petrified wood and agate. The man’s beech switches are gold plated silver.

A close-up view of the man reveals professional discretion—he is careful not to look down at his nude client (Fig. 51). His eyes are sapphire; his moustache jasper. Note the detail in strings that tie the base of his silver birch switches. Such switches are characteristically Russian accompaniments to steam baths, saunas, and massages to facilitate exfoliation.

Barely visible in the lower right of the overview photograph of Sauna II: Woman (Fig. 50), the woman’s clogs look comfortable enough to wear, with a petrified wood sole covered by agate suede semicircular uppers (Fig. 52).

The woman’s Beloretsk quartz face is pure, relaxed happiness (Fig. 53). Her eyes are sapphire, her hair band aventurine, and her hair rutilated quartz. Delicately detailed silver birch leaves from the masseur’s switches are visible in the upper right, at the nape of her neck.

A close-up of the woman’s face in clay is simply beautiful (Fig. 55).
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Figure 51. *Sauna II*: Woman, detail. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-7.y.

Figure 52. *Sauna II*: Woman, detail. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-7.p.
Figure 53. *Sauna II: Woman*, detail. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-7.m.

Figure 55. *Sauna II: Woman*, clay model. Private collection. Neg. No.IV.2012-463.
**Spring**

In a classic Russian love scene, a young man awkwardly woos a young woman, singing while strumming his balalaika (Fig. 56). He is formally dressed, wearing a closed-necked shirt, decorative vest, and immaculate hat, yet he wears lapti, the classic peasant footwear. The hands are curiously large while the head is oddly small. His clothing is nearly perfect, with zebra jasper pants, shungite jacket, obsidian vest, and cacholong hat. The balalaika is gold-plated silver and enamel, and is exquisite.

A close-up of the young man illustrates Konovalenko’s brilliant attention to detail (Fig. 57). The cacholong teeth are slightly irregular, and Konovalenko masterfully used an imperfection in the Beloretsk quartz as a mole on the lower right side of the man’s jaw, much like the beauty mark that served American super-model Cindy Crawford so well in the 1980s.

*Spring* provides another chance to learn about how Konovalenko worked his mineral magic. He sketched many, but not all, of his compositions in advance. He then worked to find the right raw materials for color balance, texture, and depth. As originally designed, the young man rested on a petrified wood stool (Fig. 58). One day while working in his shop, however, Konovalenko spotted a piece of amethyst that looked like a bush in spring bloom. Instantly, he decided to use it as the base for *Spring*. Note that the sketch also includes a rose on the left side of the man’s cap, but this was not included in the final composition.

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**Figure 56.** *Spring*. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-14.m. The top of the man’s hat is 25 cm high.
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**Figure 57.** *Spring*, detail. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-14.n.

**Figure 58.** Sketch of *Spring*. Courtesy of Anna Konovalenko.
**Swan Song**

A hunter strikes a triumphant yet melancholy pose, pointing to a fleeing black swan, whose mate he has just killed (Fig. 59). The fleeing mate sings a final song as it flies away, knowing that it would rather be dead than alive without its lifetime partner. The man’s hat is tiger eye, his shirt red jasper with an obsidian patch in the armpit. His belt is ruby, his pants sodalite. The white jasper and gold-plated silver footwear is identical to that worn by many of Konovalenko’s subjects.

The swan plays a subtle but central role in this sculpture, and its rendition is nothing short of remarkable (Fig. 60). It is made of black jasper; as is the arrow with fletching that pierces its breast. Its beak is serdolic agate; its eye closed in death.

![Swan Song](image-url)
A close-up of the hunter’s quiver of arrows again reveals Konovalenko’s astonishing attention to detail (Fig. 61). The feather fletching of the arrows is perfectly symmetrical, and the swan’s curvilinear feathers are nearly perfect. A small portion of the man’s ruby belt is barely visible in center right, just below the arrow fletching.

The man’s face in Swan Song is nearly perfect (Fig. 62). His tripertite eyes have sapphire pupils, gold irises, and cacholong scleras. His tiger eye hat and Beloretsk quartz skin are flawless; his black jasper beard is long but well-groomed. His red tongue is visible inside his mouth.
Figure 63. Toper. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-5.b. The base of the vodka bottle is 34 cm high.
**Toper**

A comical, Russian reveler holds an inverted, nearly empty bottle of vodka over his mouth, while strolling down a non-descript lane (Fig. 63). He is not staggering, but he is clearly not sober either. He combines the insolence of youth with a single-minded focus on the vodka. His obsidian boots are not scuffed enough to suggest he is destitute. Indeed, his kalkanskaya jasper pants, ruby sweater, malachite shirt, tiger eye and silver belt, blue jasper jacket, and serdolic agate cap all suggest comparative wealth, perhaps with parental and social safety nets that continue to prop him up in spite of himself.

Konovalenko captures a moment of truth as a snapshot in time. The *Toper* is nearly finished with the last drop of vodka that has separated from the bottle, the label of which reads “Moscow Vodka” (Fig. 64).

The incredible detail evident in a top view should resonate with anyone who has had too much alcohol in one gulp, as the man’s eyes are ever-so-slightly crossed, indicating the burn that results from chugging (Fig. 65). The top of a second vodka bottle is visible poking out of his right hip pocket at the center-right of the photo. His winter cap is quintessentially Russian. His tripartite eyes are made of sapphire, agate, and cacholong; his hands and face of Beloretsk quartz. Konovalenko included many details on the man’s hand, including fingernails.
Many Russians, and indeed people around the world, enjoy the health benefits of a cold-water plunge after steam baths, saunas, or massages. Here, a slapstick husband-wife team takes a plunge in frigid water (Fig. 66). The pool is made of alternating layers of agate; the surrounding snow drifts are calcite. While the Beloretsk quartz husband waits to the side, wearing obsidian boots, aventurine trousers, and a jasper hat, the wife is immersed, with only a rhodondite kerchief visible for clothing. Her lapti are gold-plated sliver and to the left of the pool.

A close-up view of the woman reveals her shocked, if not pained, expression as the cold water affects her circulatory system and skin (Fig. 67). Konovalenko used layers of agate and crystals to create depth in the pool’s surface. The ladder is silver; Konovalenko has even included the small rope ties that hold the ladder’s rungs and side rails together.

Figure 66. Walruses. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-8.i. The top of the man’s hat is 23 cm high; the base is 47 cm long.
Vasily Konovalenko’s gem-carving sculptures in Denver

Figure 67. Walruses, detail. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-8.w.
Figure 68. Wanderer (Old Believer). Neg. No.IV.DMF.1.19.h. The top of his right hand is 34 cm high.
**Wanderer (or Old Believer)**
Ms. Konovalenko states categorically that *Wanderer* is misnamed and actually represents an Old Believer, a member of a fundamentalist group that first splintered off from the Russian Orthodox Church in 1666 (Fig. 68). It is one of her favorite sculptures because the man is “being absolutely honest, not depending on anybody, just blessing the people for a good future… He is clean as a whistle. His soul and his heart [are clean as well.] He wants to forgive everybody for everything, forget everything, and just bless them for a better future.”

*Wanderer* is poetic and thought-provoking, but the genius lies in the details and the rumpling of his clothing, particularly the amethyst shirt and turquoise undershirt. They appear disheveled, but are held in place by a malachite belt.

**Old Believers.** The Russian Orthodox Church experienced its “Great Schism” in the mid-17th century after Patriarch Nikon introduced controversial changes in the way the church was to practice mass and perform other activities (Dolitsky & Kuz’mina 1986: 224; Robson 1995). One particularly visible Nikon-introduced reform was the manner in which churchgoers were to cross themselves. Traditionally, church members used a two-fingered configuration that represents the Father and the Son, but not the Holy Ghost. Nikon proposed a three-fingered alternative to honor the Holy Ghost as well. Konovalenko’s *Wanderer* uses two fingers.

A church council accepted Nikon’s sweeping changes in 1666; the state, led by Tsar Alexis, approved the changes shortly thereafter. As a result, anyone not following the reforms might be found guilty not only of religious crimes, but crimes against the state as well.

**Figure 69.** *Wanderer (Old Believer)*, detail. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1.19.m.
This left objecting church members little choice but to withdraw from society. Members of this splinter group came to be known as Raskol’nik, or Old Believers, and “stubbornly pointed out that they were not splitting away from the church, but that the reformers [under Nikon] were drawing the church away from the true, orthodox ritual” (Dolitsky & Kuz’mina 1986: 224).

There remain hundreds of thousands of Old Believers in Russia, Ukraine, and further afield, including Brazil and Alaska; there is even a 10,000-member Old Believer community in Oregon. Old Believers are prohibited from communicating with and intermarrying representatives of other faiths, from drinking wine and tea, from smoking, and even shaving.

Wanderer’s lapti are beautifully made of gold and gold-plated silver (Fig. 69). His filthy socks are either cacholong or Kalmuck agate, the motting of which suggests a depth, and therefore temporal element, to the dirt and stain. Tucked into those socks are red- and black-banded jasper pants that maintain their proper vertical orientation even as Wanderer shuffles slowly across the landscape.

Wanderer’s face is expressive but distant (Fig. 70). It is made of Beloretsk quartz, selected so that the darker skin tone and blemishes on his face indicate long years of exposure to the elements, as does the unkempt, rutilated quartz hair, eyebrows, and beard. Perhaps most expressive, however, are the eyes. With agate scleras, gold irises, and sapphire pupils, and with a line-of-sight just slightly off parallel, the tripartite structure of his eyes makes it clear he is appealing directly to a higher authority.

Wanderer’s right hand and wrist, rich in detail, demonstrate the man’s age, yet they are curiously clean (Fig. 71). The unique crazing illustrates the dry skin that comes with age and outdoor living. Tendons are visible in the wrist.
A Mineralogical Maestro
James W. Hagadorn, Curator of Geology

Minerals are our planet’s inanimate building blocks: all rocks and fossils are composed of them. Like girders in a building, a mineral’s atomic structure and chemical composition control how easily it breaks, its crystal shape, its color, its shininess, and how readily it can be carved.

Konovalenko was a master of minerals, exhibiting an uncanny command of their idiosyncrasies. In some sculptures he took advantage of natural defects and staining in the minerals, demonstrating that he had insights into the crystalline structure of minerals that might only be expected of a lapidarist or mineralogist (see, for example, the mole on the man’s face in Spring (Fig. 57), which was created by a natural flaw in the stone, not an addition or application). He polished and cut stones in ways that blatantly defied minerals’ natural cleavage tendencies. For example, the sodalite pants in Gold Prospectors (Fig. 15) show lapidary skills on par with rarified masters.

Most of Konovalenko’s materials are composed of the same type of minute mineral crystals, packed together in a cryptic and uniform mass, like the crystallites of quartz found in window glass. These “amorphous” minerals include hard substances like agate, jasper, and obsidian, and softer ones like malachite and cinnabar. Many of the silica-rich amorphous minerals Konovalenko used to depict human skin are called “Beloretsk quartz”, after the Russian region from which they are known.

A minority of Konovalenko materials contain a variety of different tiny crystals. These do not appear like the salt-and-pepper texture of granite, though, but rather suggest wear in some object, like clothing, and cloth variety such as the lapis used for the man’s jacket in On the Stroll (Figs 38, 39). A few of his materials are composed of homogeneous masses of big crystals, arranged like giant pointed teeth to accentuate naturally jagged or bumpy textures. The amethyst bush in Spring (Fig. 56) and grape agate fur linings in Painter (Fig. 40) are striking examples.

What distinguishes Konovalenko from his peers is the way he leveraged natural flaws in the materials to great advantage. In depicting fluids, he used banded crystalline staining in amorphous quartzes to mimic rippling water in In the Sultry Afternoon I (Fig. 26). Elsewhere he uses quartz staining to evoke froth rings in a cup of tea in In the Sultry Afternoon II (Fig. 29) and to produce soap bubbles in Sauna I: The Thin and the Fat (Figs 47, 48). Together with patchworks of tiny vesicles in sculptures such as Barrel Bath (Fig. 8), he makes mineral stains burble, like the soapy and foamy water in Laundress (Fig. 32).

In depicting animals and plants, Konovalenko conjured organic from inorganic. Witness the different vanes on the Swan’s plumage in Swan Song (Fig. 61), his use of a flaw in the stone for the arrow wound (Fig. 60), and the hemmed rows of cut grass created from rutilated quartz in Mower (Fig. 34). Stone watermelons in In the Sultry Afternoon I (Fig. 26) are depicted by ruby enveloped by a natural rind of zoisite. In clothing, mineral laminations yield not only texture but patterns such as the jasper and agate shirts in Bosom Pals (Fig. 11) or the zebra jasper shirt on the standing man in Gold Prospectors (Figs 15, 16).

It is worth emphasizing that while painters enjoy a wide range of infinitely variable colors, Konovalenko had to use what nature gave him, making his achievements all the more remarkable for their fidelity to reality.

In depicting human body parts, Konovalenko works inclusions and diagenetic alterations into lifelike features. Such features accentuate graying hair in the jasper mustache on the man in Barrel Bath (Fig. 7) and in the disheveled hair, beards, and moustaches of Bosom Pals (Fig. 10) and Wanderer (Fig. 70). Rutilated quartz yields blonde hair in In the Sultry Afternoon II (Fig. 29).

Konovalenko had an exceptional ability to use to his advantage apparent flaws in raw material. It sometimes seems as if he could literally see into...
opaque stones. The best example of this skill can be found in the peasant men flanking the wealthier man in *Bosom Pals* (Fig. 10). In multiple pieces of raw jasper, Konovalenko circumnavigated the mineral’s natural staining to create edges of faces, lips and facial hair. A less exacting sculptor would have simply glued different colored pieces together to create these effects and attributes. Elsewhere rosy noses and ruddy cheeks are formed by jasper in *Painter* (Fig. 40) and *Bosom Pals* (Fig. 10). Fractures and staining in Beloretsk quartz accentuates wrinkles on the back of well-used hands in *Grandmother* (Fig. 22) and *Wanderer* (Fig. 71).

Konovalenko audaciously used minerals, rocks, and fossils, with seeming impunity for their defects and ‘rules of cleavage’. Like every artist, his work and technique evolved, and as he built his professional network, his access to materials improved with time. Thus, his later works, including those on display at DMNS, contain fewer mineral defects that distract from the intended lines of his work. With the exception of petrified wood, fossil agate, and the occasional pearl, Konovalenko worked exclusively with unforgiving, inorganic materials – minerals. He used more than forty different minerals from all seven of the known crystal systems, and used them together in collages that never occur in nature and seldom do in art. He embraced, rather than avoided, mineral characteristics and imperfections and brought them alive with risky carving, subtle polishing. By seeking their flaws, Konovalenko greatly enhanced the stories he told with these stones.

**Conclusion**

Bawdy, but not salacious. Subversive, but not subservient. Political, but not diplomatic. Whimsical, and occasionally slapstick, but startlingly realistic. Konovalenko’s dynamic and theatrical sculptures stand alone in the gem carving world. Indeed, Konovalenko did more than simply resuscitate a dormant artistic genre; he invented an entirely new form of Russian gem carving (see Aleksander Panin, quoted in Federov 1994: 66). The loss due to his untimely death at age 59 is incalculable.

The collection of Konovalenko sculptures on display at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science is the largest and finest public display of his sculptures in the world. The DMNS sculptures are collectively unparalleled in their design, composition, depth, dynamism, and execution. Although individual sculptures, particularly those he produced between 1984 and 1989 and which are now in private hands, may meet or exceed some of the DMNS pieces in individual quality, the collection as a whole represents the pinnacle of Konovalenko’s works.
Frequently Asked Questions
When visitors first encounter the Konovalenko sculptures, their questions often follow a predictable order, focusing first on process and meaning. How did Konovalenko make the sculptures? What do they mean? Once these questions are addressed, they turn practical: Where did he get the raw materials? How long did it take to complete a single sculpture? Finally, some want to know where, given the body of work on display, does Konovalenko stand in relation to the broader tradition of Russian gem carving?

How did Konovalenko make the gem carving sculptures?
The artist’s own words offer a good summary:
At first, I don’t sleep at all because I carry the idea everywhere—in the subway, at the table, in bed, everywhere. When the idea is clear, I make a drawing. After the drawing I make a plaster form, and then I divide the form into small pieces. Every part is separate. I cut the stones first roughly, then finer, polishing them, and then finally I piece them together by drilling deep holes and placing rods with a special compound to glue them together.

There are many problems, especially in polishing. When I polish, the faces begin to disappear, and I run the risk of having a figure with an egg-like head. [Quoted in Goldstein (1981: 77–81); see Spring (Fig. 56) for a possible example of an egg-like head.]

Alexey Timofeev, one of Konovalenko’s few pupils, offers an informed third-person perspective on the creative process, emphasizing the special Soviet-era logistical challenges they faced:
[Konovalenko] began by drawing graphic sketches [e.g., Fig. 58]. It was interesting to observe an idea maturing from one version to the next. The following stage
Why did Konovalenko make the sculptures?
Konovalenko’s words again speak volumes:
From the moment [I first started gem carving] I was struck by the beauty of these ‘precious and semi-precious’ Russian stones, and saw, through my carvings, that I could make them even more beautiful…. I can’t live without [gem carving]. To me it’s a very attractive field of art. It’s unlimited because stone will last for thousands of years, like the Egyptian pyramids. A painting dies, but a stone lives on. [Quoted in Goldstein (1981: 77–81)]

What do the sculptures mean?
Like any work of art, an individual Konovalenko gem carving sculpture may be interpreted in many ways. There is no “correct” answer, for each will be observed and interpreted differently by each viewer. Complicating matters further, only one of the sculptures on display at the Museum (Gold Prospectors; Figs 15–19) depicts an American scene. The rest depict Russian or Ukrainian scenes and themes, and can be difficult for Western eyes to understand.

The sculptural interpretations offered herein document the artist’s original ideas as they are remembered by his wife, Anna, in oral histories recorded in 2012 and subsequent conversations. There are indeed stories behind the stones, some of which are inherently more familiar to viewers in Russia and Ukraine than they will be to other viewers. Nevertheless, there is a whimsical universality to the sculptures, such that any viewer will likely see friends in the stone faces.

Where did Konovalenko get the raw materials?
Gem- and mineral-carving traditions have a long history in Russia, as in many other parts of the world (Jackson 2004, Moran 2008). Once Konovalenko began gem carving, he simply had to tap into existing gem and mineral markets in Leningrad, Moscow, and New York, in order to pursue his art. He received help from individuals around the world, from the State while in the USSR, and his formal sponsors while in the United States. Ms. Konovalenko remembers that geologists and mineralogists often took personal pride in providing her husband with materials, particularly when the material was used in a sculpture.

How long did it take to finish a sculpture?
Konovalenko once noted that if he was working on one sculpture exclusively, it might take six to nine months to complete, depending on its size, complexity, and number of figures it contained (Goldstein 1981: 77). Ms. Konovalenko remembers the situation differently, suggesting that two to three months was a more accurate number for the completion of a single sculpture. Certainly, this latter estimate must have been closer to Konovalenko’s average while working on the pieces in the DMNS collection, 18 of which were completed during a three-year period from mid-1981 to early 1984,
for an average of about one sculpture every two months. Ms. Konovalenko notes also, however, that her husband considered a sculpture finished if he had a complete image of it in his head; the manufacturing process was necessary only to make that image manifest.

**Where does Konovalenko stand in relation to the broader tradition of Russian gem carving?**

Aleksander Panin (quoted in Federov 1994: 66), former professor of art history at the Stroganov Moscow State University of Arts and Industry, says that Konovalenko was “undoubtedly unorthodox.” He notes that Konovalenko’s lack of orthodoxy stems from the fact that he broke three unwritten rules of Russian sculptural tradition (quoted in Federov 1994: 64). First, he broke the rule of material uniformity, wherein the ideal sculpture is made of a single substance, such as marble, jade, or metal, not a combination thereof. Second, Konovalenko used color to its full and dramatic effect, whereas color has traditionally been of secondary importance in Russian sculpture. Third, traditional Russian sculptures are not supposed to be eclectic; Konovalenko’s gem carvings are nothing if not eclectic. Although he has often been compared to the gem carvers who worked for Carl Fabergé in the early twentieth century, Tatiana Muntian, Fabergé Collection Curator and Senior Researcher at the Kremlin Museum, believes that such comparisons are unfair if not inappropriate (see also Timofeev, quoted in Federov 1994: 62). Konovalenko’s work is arguably unique given the whimsical theatricality and dynamism of his pieces, and the fact that his sculptures are truly three-dimensional, meant to be seen in the round. Indeed, most of Konovalenko’s sculptures are best read as complete scenes of daily folk life, rather than as static figurines or portraits of dignitaries, soldiers, or aristocrats, as was more common in the Fabergé workshops. In conclusion, Panin (quoted in Federov 1994: 66) states categorically that “not every artist is capable of creating a new form of art. Konovalenko succeeded in doing just that.” Konovalenko was indeed in a league of his own.

**Which sculpture was Konovalenko’s favorite?**

Ms. Konovalenko says that her husband’s favorite was always “the next one,” thus revealing the source of his inexorable energy and drive to continue producing fine art year after year.
Acknowledgments

I became chair of the Department of Anthropology and curator of archaeology at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science (DMNS) in 2006. As I worked to familiarize myself with the Museum’s anthropology holdings, which include wonderful objects from around the world, my attention kept coming back to the exquisitely whimsical Konovalenko gem carvings and our collective lack of knowledge about them. My research interests lie in the archaeology of the American Southwest, but also in the history of museums, and I began to wonder how and why the Konovalenko gem carvings ended up in Denver. What are they, really? Thus began a research odyssey that continues to this day.

In October, 2008, the Museum hired photographer Rick Wicker. Rick has a talent for capturing the best of our objects in his images. Rick and I recognized that the Konovalenko sculptures had never been comprehensively and properly photographed, studied, or published, thus the Konovalenko Project was born. We decided to produce the first English-language book on the Konovalenkos, with Rick’s photos serving as core of the volume. That comprehensive volume includes photos, descriptions, and analysis of more than 70 Konovalenko pieces from around the world and is forthcoming with the University Press of Colorado. The current publication serves as an introduction to and overview of the 20 DMNS sculptures exclusively.

In late 2009, working with staff from the Museum’s exhibitions (Chad Swiercinsky), security (Thom Cooley), and earth sciences departments (Logan Ivy), we took the Konovalenko sculptures off display so that Rick could begin to photograph them. On display, the sculptures are presented beneath secure hexagonal Plexiglas cases as protection from a variety of threats. The cases necessarily restrict a visitor’s ability to examine their remarkable detail and subtle grandeur. As well, the cases and layout of the hall restrict a visitor’s ability to move freely about some of the sculptures. This is troublesome because the sculptures are truly three-dimensional and meant to be seen “in the round.” Simply put, Rick’s photographs are revelatory. They allow the reader to engage the sculptures much more deeply than is otherwise possible, even in first-person viewing.

James Hagadorn, the Tim and Katherine Ryan Curator of Geology, arrived at the Museum in 2010. He too enjoyed a sense of discovery when he first saw the sculptures. As a geologist, however, his eyes focused on Konovalenko’s stunning ability to imbue precious and semi-precious stones with life-like qualities in spite of, and in some cases because of, their structural qualities and imperfections. James enlisted the expertise of Bruce Geller, Director of the Colorado School of Mines Geology Museum, as well as Bill Hutchison, Bob Jordan, Jack Sliemers, and Morgan Sonsthagen, to improve the mineral identifications of the DMNS sculptures.

The artist’s daughter Vasilisa Konovalenko Duras and her husband Alan Duras graciously opened their home to me and Rick, and to our spouses Carmen Carrasco and Mary Zang, respectively, during a week-long visit to their home in Europe in March, 2012. While Rick took photographs of sculptures in their private collection, I recorded more than a dozen hours of oral history with Anna, Vasily’s widow, regarding her husband’s life and work (Nash 2012b).

In 2013, Rick and I traveled to Moscow to meet with Anna, and to photograph sculptures at the State Gems Museum (Samotsvety), the only other place in the world where Konovalenko gem carvings are on public display. Galina Gubanova, an independent scholar from St. Petersburg, shared an unpublished manuscript and her knowledge of Konovalenko’s early career during an interview in Moscow. Gubanova’s research is critical to this effort for she discovered detailed biographical information, including a curriculum vitae hand-written by Konovalenko, in archives at the Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg. The Konovalenko papers at the Mariinsky contain previously unpublished and critical details about his early life and career. Tatiana Muntian, Fabergé Collection Curator and Senior Researcher at the Kremlin Museum, shared her insights about Konovalenko’s oeuvre in an unpublished manuscript and over coffee in Moscow.

DMNS volunteer Pat Martin transcribed many hours of oral histories I recorded with Ms. Konovalenko and with two of Konovalenko’s sponsors, Michael...
Kazanjian and the late Raphael Gregorian, whom I interviewed in early 2014 and late 2012, respectively (Nash 2013b). Volunteer Heather Loughlin did initial background research on the Konovalenko display at the Museum, as did Marc Levine, former DMNS Assistant Curator of Archaeology, and Sam Schiller, the DMNS archivist. Kelly Rafferty, Meg O’Donnell, Ruslan Geary, and the late Oksana Mushinsky translated Russian manuscripts for the Project.

DMNS Curator of Anthropology Chip Colwell, volunteer Linda Feiman, volunteer Pat Martin, Curator of Geology James Hagadorn, and Curator of Zoology and DMNS Annals editor-in-chief Frank-T. Krell provided comments on various drafts of this manuscript. Krell also designed this volume. Yale Peabody Museum Curator and Professor of Anthropology Anne Underhill provided a much-needed external review. Kirk Johnson, former Vice-President of Research and Collections, supported the project from its inception; Scott Sampson, who currently holds that position, has continued in this vein.

The Konovalenko Project would not have been possible without the financial support of the Jim and Elaine Wolf Family Foundation, Jane Quinette, Ed and Pat Martin, and the Denver Museum of Nature & Science. James Hagadorn provided financial support for several trips to New York through his research funds.

Ultimately, thanks are due to the late Vasily Konovalenko, for avidly pursuing his art and his passion, and for providing us with an opportunity to spend time in his wonderfully bizarre world.
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The Denver Museum of Nature & Science inspires curiosity and excites minds of all ages through scientific discovery and the presentation and preservation of the world’s unique treasures.

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Cover photo: Wanderer (Old Believer). A dynamic but elderly member of the Old Believers religious sect prepares to cross himself. His two-fingered salute honors the Father and the Son, but not the Holy Ghost, the latter of which became standard in the Russian Orthodox Church after reforms offered by Patriarch Nikon in 1666.


Stephen E. Nash

photography by
Richard M. Wicker