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.


Stephen E. Nash
photography by Richard M. Wicker
"A Stone Lives On":

Vasily Konovalenko’s Gem Carving Sculptures at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science

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, borscht, 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 Carving. It contains 20 Konovalenko sculptures: Barrel 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, Toper, 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
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
On April 25, 1957, the Mariinskiy 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 Severan 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.
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 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 & Smyniw 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 Nuremburg 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 Konovalenko’s situation and agreement. Kosygin personally approved the Konovalenko’s 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.
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).

![Figure 6. Konovalenko self-portrait, bas relief, silver on marble, 1984-1989. Private Collection. Photo courtesy of Alan Duras.](image-url)
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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**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).

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*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).

![Bread and Salt](image)

*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.
Vasily Konovalenko’s gem-carving sculptures in Denver

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.
Figure 19. *Gold Prospectors*, detail. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-3.dd.