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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**Figure 42. Prisoners.** Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-20.h. The top of the old man’s hat is 30 cm high; the base is 69 cm long.
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).

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 43.** Prisoners, detail. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-20.aa.
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.
Vasily Konovalenko’s gem-carving sculptures in Denver

**Figure 48.** Sauna I: The Thin and the Fat, detail. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-13.l.

**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.

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**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 semi-circular 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 mas- seur’s switches are visible in the upper right, at the nape of her neck.

A clay model of *Sauna II: Woman* offers a glimpse into Konovalenko’s methods, and his mastery of multiple media (Fig. 54). He made clay models of many of his sculptures in order to study their balance and layout. Tragically, only a few survive, but *Sauna II: Woman* is one of the notable exceptions.

A close-up of the woman’s face in clay is simply beautiful (Fig. 55).
Vasily Konovalenko’s gem-carving sculptures in Denver

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.

Figure 56. Spring. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-14.m. The top of the man’s hat is 25 cm high.
Vasily Konovalenko’s gem-cutting sculptures in Denver

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 sculpture](image)

**Figure 59. Swan Song. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-16.d. The top of the man’s hat is 43 cm high.**
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 tripartite 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. *Topper*. 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.
Vasily Konovalenko’s gem-carving sculpit·ures in Denver

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.

Walruses

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 67. Walruses, detail. Neg. No.IV.DMF.1-8.w.