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 is 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.

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**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’niki, 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 mottling 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 uses 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 rutile 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 zoesite. 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). Rutilet 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 Prospects; 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 weeklong 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.

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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.


Stephen E. Nash

photography by
Richard M. Wicker