

STORIES IN STONE



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My first glimpse at the work of Vasily Konovalenko came in the form of an email from Steve Nash, curator of archaeology at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science.

It was March 2013, a cold and blustery late winter evening in Moscow, a time when stories with color and warmth are especially welcome. Konovalenko's work had both.

Steve and his colleague, photographer Rick Wicker, were in Moscow in pursuit of gem-carving sculptures by Konovalenko. Their museum is home to the only public display of Konovalenko sculptures outside Moscow, and they were in town to photograph pieces at the State Gems Museum (Samotsvety) and the Reserves of the Diamond Fund (Gokhran).

Steve's email included photographs of some Konovalenko pieces and hinted at some of the Cold War intrigue surrounding Konovalenko's career—all of which added depth to the potential story.

FOREWORD

Corey Flintoff, Correspondent,
National Public Radio, Moscow





FIGURE 0.1. Corey Flintoff (left) and Steve Nash (right) at the State Gems Museum, March 2013 (DMNS Neg. No. IV.2013-543.D)

My wife, Diana, is a painter; her interest was as piqued as mine. We met Steve and Rick at the Samotsvety one afternoon (Figure 0.1). As luck would have it, Anna Konovalenko, the artist's widow, was at the museum with them, and I had the opportunity to talk with her in view of nearly two dozen of her late husband's sculptures.

My story on the Konovalenko Project aired on National Public Radio in early April 2013, but I haven't forgotten about the sculptures or Steve and Rick's project. In fact, I've been looking forward to the final product of their efforts.

This book is that product, and I hope you enjoy learning about the life and art of Vasily Konovalenko as much as I have. Simply put, Konovalenko is an underappreciated master artist with a wonderful gift: the ability to render human emotion in some of the hardest materials found in nature.

His figures are vibrant and theatrical—people observed and rendered with humor and compassion, scraps of Russia's collective memory shown in broad strokes and vibrant colors.

Give yourself some quiet time with this book. Enjoy these remarkable, surprising, and whimsical gem sculptures as I first did those many months ago. You won't be disappointed.

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Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world and [he] walks into mine.

—HUMPHREY BOGART AS RICK
BLAINE, *CASABLANCA*, 1942

IMPROBABLE BEGINNINGS

I became chair of the Department of Anthropology and curator of archaeology at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science (DMNS) on October 16, 2006. Having just come from the Field Museum in Chicago, where I served as a post-doctoral research scientist and then head of collections in the Department of Anthropology, I was familiar with the wonderful feeling of discovery that comes from working in a great museum. The long history of anthropological and archaeological research in North America means that our museums are filled with collections that thrill, that challenge one's perspective, and that make one ponder the grandeur of the human existence. It's one of the reasons I love working in museums.



On the west end of the third floor of the DMNS is an exhibition titled *Konovalenko: Gem Carvings of Russian Folk Life*. In it are twenty wonderful, imaginative, colorful, and theatrical sculptures by Russian artist and émigré Vasily Konovalenko, and they've been on display for more than thirty years. As I worked to familiarize myself with the museum's anthropology holdings, which include significant archaeological collections amassed by Hannah Marie Wormington and others, and the Mary and Frances Crane Collection of ethnological and archaeological objects, my attention kept coming back to "the Konovalenkos," as they have affectionately come to be known at the museum (see Colwell-Chanthaphonh, Nash, and Holen 2010; Hagadorn and Nash 2011; Nash 2013a, 2014; Nash and Konovalenko 2013). What were they, really? Why were they in Denver? What do they mean? The post-colon modifier of the exhibit title is indeed accurate, for many of the sculptures depict scenes of Russian folk life, but my untrained American eyes lacked the appropriate points of reference to properly interpret and appreciate the sculptures.

In early 2008 Heather Loughlin, a recent graduate of the University of Colorado at Denver, walked into my office seeking a volunteer project. I took her visit as a chance to try to fully understand the Konovalenko sculptures, and I asked Heather to conduct research on them. She began on the Internet and came up empty. She continued in the museum's archives and thankfully came up with materials that helped put the collection, at least as it relates to DMNS, in greater context. Remarkably, however, we could find very little in the way of serious scholarship published on either the sculptures or the artist. The more I knew, the more I wanted to know and to share.

Late in 2008 I became involved in the museum's Science and Collections Initiative, one component of the major expansion project that culminated in the construction of the Morgridge Family Exploration Center on the south side of the museum's existing building. The new addition includes the Avenir Collections Center, a belowground, state-of-the-art, 60,000-square-foot preservation facility for the museum's priceless and irreplaceable collections. A large number of new employees were hired for the initiative, and I had the privilege of serving on the committee that searched for a new photographer. In early October we (re)hired Rick Wicker, who had worked at the

museum from early 1990 to December 2000 and who had a special talent for bringing out the best in our collections through his wonderful photographs.

After continuing to scour the literature and trying to find English-speaking scholars with any familiarity with the Konovalenko sculptures—there apparently are none—Rick and I decided to produce the first comprehensive English-language book on the Konovalenko collection. I would do the research and writing; Rick's photographs would illuminate the volume.

In late 2009, working with a host of employees from the museum's exhibitions, security, and earth sciences departments, we began to take the Konovalenko sculptures temporarily off display so that Rick could photograph them. Simply put, his photographs are revelatory. On display, the sculptures are presented underneath secure hexagonal cases to protect them from a variety of threats, including theft. Unfortunately, the cases necessarily restrict a visitor's ability to truly enjoy the sculptures' exquisite detail and subtle grandeur. As well, the cases and layout of the hall restrict a visitor's ability to move freely around the sculptures, which are three-dimensional and meant to be seen "in the round," from all sides. As but one early example of the revelatory nature of Rick's work, not to mention the genius of Konovalenko's artistry, when looking at the display it is impossible to completely see the *Toper's* face, for the sculpture is displayed at eye level and the man is looking up while chugging vodka (see Plate 133). Once off display, we could look down onto the man's face, and we realized that Konovalenko had crossed the *Toper's* eyes ever so slightly—he's chugging vodka, after all—and pooled the vodka in the back of the man's throat (see Plate 135). Whimsical revelation!

At that point we knew that the Konovalenko Project, as it came to be called, was on to something special. I said to Rick, "We're going to get photographs of every known Konovalenko sculpture in the world, and we're going to publish them." With a few minor exceptions, we have met that goal, and this book is the result.

Konovalenko's life and career divide neatly into four phases that form the primary structure of this volume. Chapter 1 covers the first and lon-



gest phase, from his birth in 1929 through theatrical employment in the 1950s and 1960s, up until the Russian State Museum exhibition of ten of his sculptures in 1973. This phase includes the years in which Konovalenko first came into gem carving, assiduously working to become familiar with the intricacies of a new medium.

Chapter 2 covers the second phase, from the end of the Russian State Museum exhibition in 1973 until 1981. It therefore focuses on Konovalenko's work while serving as director of the Laboratory of Small Sculptural Forms at the State Gems Museum (Samotsvety) in Moscow. Chapter 3 covers the shortest and most intense phase, beginning when the Konovalenko family emigrated from the Soviet Union in February 1981 and ending with the opening of the DMNS exhibition in March 1984.

Chapter 4 considers the sculptures Konovalenko made during the last five years of his life, from 1984 to 1989, when the artist was free to work in the absence of contractual constraints.

Chapter 5 examines many of the sketches of unfinished sculptures Konovalenko left behind after his untimely death.

In Chapter 6, James W. Hagadorn, the Tim and Kathryn Ryan Curator of Geology at DMNS, offers a geologist's perspective on Konovalenko's work with gems and minerals. Finally, in Chapter 7, Tatiana Muntian, Fabergé Collection Curator and Senior Researcher at the Kremlin Museum, offers a detailed comparison of Konovalenko's work with that of other Russian gem carvers, particularly those who worked under Carl Fabergé around the turn of the twentieth century.

The first four chapters begin with a brief overview of significant events that affected Konovalenko and his work during the period in question; sidebars provide additional contextual information on particularly important aspects of the Konovalenko story. These sidebars are necessarily concise, giving the reader more time to focus on the wonderful sculptures the artist produced during each period. Each sculpture produced during the phase in question is then presented alphabetically. Overview photographs provide a

general feel for the piece; detail shots document important aspects of, and discoveries about, the sculptures that we made while examining the pieces up close.

The amount of text provided for each sculpture varies considerably based on the level of documentation and interpretation available from published and unpublished sources. Unfortunately, many of these details followed the artist to his grave, but oral histories we collected with his wife, Anna, in 2012 provide the next-best level of insight (Nash 2012; see also Nash 2013b). The DMNS collection gets the most extensive treatment, for archives, mineral identifications, and other contextual documents are well preserved at the museum (see Chapter 3). Pieces from the State Gems Museum collection in Moscow are less well documented, though some component mineral names provided in English labels at the museum are reproduced herein (see Chapters 1 and 2). Pieces in private collections are even less well documented, but Anna Konovalenko provided insights on all of them during the course of this project (Nash 2013b; see Chapters 2 and 4).

Mineral identifications presented in this volume must, in many instances, be considered tentative. Properly performed, mineral identifications require scratch tests (to measure hardness and color) and specific gravity measurements that simply cannot be performed on priceless pieces of art.

Of all the museums in all the towns in all the world, and we end up together at DMNS. The work of the late Vasily Konovalenko, an artist of world-class talent. Rick Wicker, a photographer of undeniable skill. Steve Nash, an archaeologist, curator, and historian of science who knows a gap in the literature when he sees one. Our goal is to introduce the English-speaking world to Konovalenko's enchanted gem-carving sculptures. To use a term from art history, we offer this volume as a *catalog raisonné*, a comprehensive, annotated listing of Konovalenko's oeuvre, rather than an in-depth art historical treatment. It is therefore offered as an entrée point to deeper work by scholars in art, art history, folk art, folklore, and other disciplines whose interest gets piqued by this volume. We hope we achieve these goals.

