

Book Review: *Stories In Stone: The Enchanted Gem Carvings of Vasily Konovalenko*

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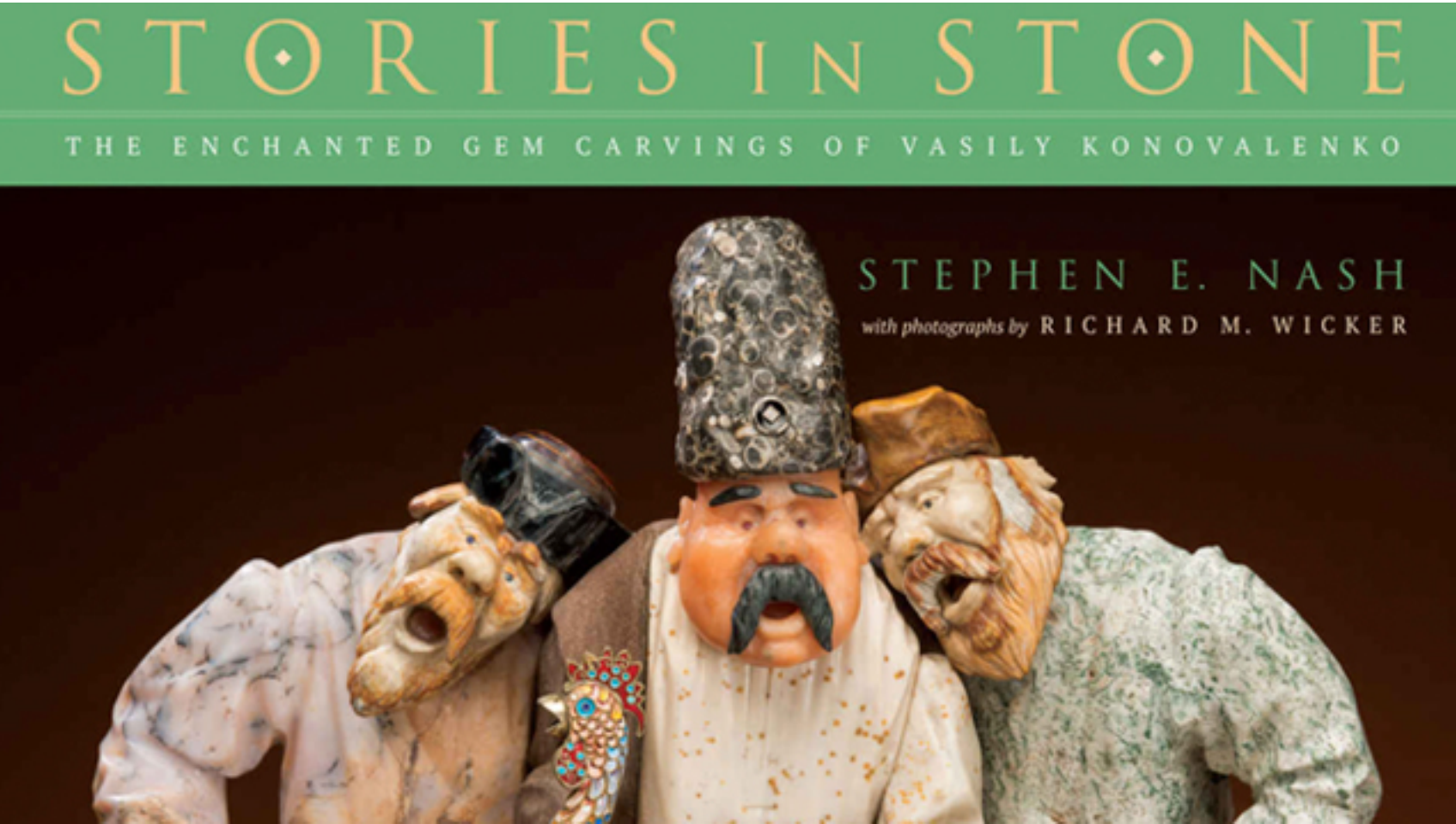
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Stephen E. Nash and Richard M. Wicker, softcover, 304 pp., publ. by University of Colorado Press, Boulder, Colorado, 2016, \$39.95.

Vasily Konovalenko (1929–1989) was a Ukrainian-born artist who spent most of his career in Soviet Russia. His whimsical and charming figures, carved in stone, have delighted collectors and museum visitors alike. *Stories in Stone*, written by Stephen E. Nash, curator of archaeology at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science, gives the reader an in-depth look at the life of this passionate artist. Konovalenko often said, “One can learn to paint with stone.” And paint he did. Through his carving, he created small vignettes of life in the Soviet Union in which he grew up, focusing not on the political dogma that the government demanded from artists, but of the lives of ordinary people, often just village folk in their homemade birchbark shoes, enjoying a drink with friends, playing musical instruments, or ice fishing. Often humorous, and delightfully whimsical, Konovalenko’s characters come to life in his “paintings” in stone. Nash has interviewed Konovalenko’s widow and friends as well as museum academics, and he has researched archival documents for this book. He delves into the incredible journey of Konovalenko’s life, from his early days as a sculptor and set designer at the Donetsk Musical Theater and Stalin Theater for Opera and Ballet in Ukraine, to his successful career at the Mariinsky Theater in St. Petersburg. Nash tells stories of Konovalenko navigating the complex bureaucracy of Soviet Russian politics to bring his art to the public, and his eventual emigration to America in 1981.

With a background in sculpture and set design, Vasily Konovalenko found an art form that ignited his artistic passion. While making a malachite box as a prop for a Mariinsky production of *The Stone Flower*, he fell in love with working in stone. *The Stone Flower* is a story of a young stonecutter Danila, and the trials he endures trying to woo his beloved Katerina with a beautiful stone flower he carves from malachite. Among the 20 Konovalenko sculptures on display at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science is a sculpture of Danila holding a malachite box. Nash states that Danila is “the totemic leader of all of Konovalenko’s sculptures,” perhaps representing Konovalenko himself. Danila, along with many other sculptures in this book, is photographed in great detail. The photographs show these sculptures close-up and from multiple views; as Nash points out, this is something not possible when viewing them in a display case. The reader can see the details of the young Danila’s face carved of Beloretsk quartz, the folds carved in his cacholong shirt with pearl buttons, and the brown jasper boots on a parquet floor, also made from pieces of jasper. The innocence and sincerity of Danila’s character is communicated with great sensitivity in Konovalenko’s carving.

In “Sultry Middyay,” he has created a scene of two heavysset women gossiping over bowls of soup and cups of tea as they sit bathing in a pool of water. Between them on a wood table is an intricately carved crystal samovar with a carved cacholong teapot. This theme of buxom, round-faced

ladies gossiping over tea while bathing is repeated in “Twins.” Here, the charmingly ample-bodied women enjoy bathing in a pool of water created by agate edged by a ring of malachite. But this samovar is gold-plated silver with pastel cloisonné enamel decoration. An umbrella, also made of intricate cloisonné enamel patterns, shades the ladies, showing Konovalenko’s virtuosity in metalsmithing as well as stonework.

His humorous creations include men as well. In “Sultry Afternoon 1,” he has created a portly man sitting in a pool of water eating a slice of watermelon. In “Sauna 1: The Thin and the Fat,” he shows a plump man on a table getting a massage from a skinny man; the juxtaposition between the two is quite humorous. Saunas have been very popular in Russia, and once a person had been in the warm steamy sauna, they emerged only to jump into ice-cold water. In “Walruses,” Konovalenko creates the illusion of a hole in a frozen pond by using layers of agate surrounded by snow made of calcite. Out of the hole pokes the head of a chubby woman wearing a red cap and an expression on her face that one can interpret only as “Brrr!” Standing outside on the ice is her husband, shirtless and wearing only a pair of shorts, boots, and a hat. Hunched over with his arms close to his sides and his hands clasped between his legs, he shivers in the cold winter air. These whimsical glimpses into the lives of everyday Russian people show not only the affinity the artist has for the subject, but also his wonderful sense of humor-- even when living under an oppressive government.

Not all of Konovalenko’s work is humorous; he created some serious and emotionally powerful pieces, too. The sculptural group “Prisoners,” for example, shows two men dressed in prison uniforms made of black and white striped zebra jasper and building a wood shelter in the snow at their Siberian work camp. It was the norm in Stalin’s gulags that new prisoners would be forced to build their own barracks. On the back of each figure is a red target over where their heart would be, in case the order to shoot to kill was given. The red target, made of ruby, is the only bright color in this somber composition. Another moving sculpture is “Bereaved Mother,” commissioned to commemorate the end of WWII. Here, a bereaved mother mourns over the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. The dates 1941–1945 are carved into the tombstone, and white calcite flowers grow in a planter. It has a dark color palette, all set on a large, roughly cut piece of black obsidian. The scarf on the woman’s head is modeled jasper, emulating the colors of traditional Russian headscarves. Poignant pieces such as these show Konovalenko’s empathy for the suffering evident in his Soviet world, and are a strong contrast to the sculptures that show the simple joys of everyday life.

In a chapter “Unfinished Business,” found toward the end of the book, the reader gets a glimpse into Konovalenko’s creative process through sketches of pieces that were never completed. The humorous and whimsical characters he is known for are here in vignettes such as “Family Bath,” which shows a mother and father with children all bathing in a large barrel, and another drawing of two “Gypsy Women Arguing.” His design skills are very evident in these drawings with rich bold colors and larger-than-life characters dressed in elaborate costumes. Konovalenko was always thinking of subjects and compositions he could sculpt, and what gems and minerals he could use to make them come to life.

Stories in Stone documents the life and work of an artist that is little known in America, even though he lived the last few years of his life here creating some of his most interesting pieces. As master set designer, enameler, metalsmith, and “painter in stone,” he has left a small part of himself in every piece. This book is a fitting tribute to Vasily Konovalenko and to his legacy to the Russian tradition of stone carving. This book would be of interest to anyone fascinated by sculpture, stone carving, and gemstones in general; those interested in 20th century Russian history and decorative arts would find Konovalenko’s life story and work particularly intriguing.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Timothy Adams is an independent art historian and Fabergé scholar who has worked in the fine jewelry industry for 30 years. A curatorial consultant and lecturer, he serves on the *Gems & Gemology* Editorial Review Board.