

Anton Chekhov in Wood

By [John Freedman](#)

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Leonty Usov works in a large hall on the first floor of a common-looking apartment building in Tomsk. It may have been a produce store in a previous incarnation, but if so there are no traces of that left now.

With light flooding in from all sides through the large ceiling-to-floor windows, this space could not be confused for anything but a sculptor's workshop. The exuberantly chaotic space is covered with wood chips, and stacks of sculptures, some completed and some still in progress, are packed away in niches on shelves against the back walls.

Usov, who was born in 1948, began his career as an actor. From the early 1970s to the late 1980s he acted in various cities, including such colorful-sounding places as Achinsk, Gorno-Altai and Ioshkar-Ola. The last city in which he acted was Tomsk, and that is where he now makes his home.

Theater runs in this sculptor's blood, something that is evident not only in the themes of his sculptures, but in their execution. Extravagant wood busts of Shakespeare, Nikolai Gogol,

Alexander Pushkin, Cervantes and many other writers, composers and artists are filled with humor and attitude. They almost always have a story to tell in addition to providing the likeness of a face.

Of all the subjects Usov has taken on over the years, Anton Chekhov is clearly a favorite.

His most famous Chekhov statue stands on the banks of the Tom River in Tomsk. Entitled "Anton Pavlovich Chekhov Through the Eyes of a Drunken Peasant Who is Lying in a Ditch and Has Never Read the Story 'Kashtanka,'" this work caused a bit of a scandal [when it was unveiled in 2004](#). Its depiction of a disheveled Chekhov with monstrously bare feet struck some as sacrilege. The sculpture, an utter delight to behold &mdash I spent twenty minutes walking around it and didn't want to leave &mdash has stood the test of time, however. It is now one of the top tourist draws in a city with many reasons to attract visitors.

In connection with the Chekhov International Theater Festival, Usov is now exhibiting a large collection of his wood sculptures of Chekhov. The exhibit is being held in the second-floor foyer of the Stanislavsky Drama Theater and it is open until June 20.

Holding down the central position of the exhibit is a wood copy of the famous bronze statue in Tomsk. Around it are another dozen or so fanciful pieces that play with themes from Chekhov's life and works.

The next stop for this small exhibit, incidentally, is London. It will open at the Pushkin House on Bloomsbury Way in October.

To see images of Usov's work browse through the small gallery of photos above, or go to [Usov's site](#) and click on the dates that are listed in the left-hand column.

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