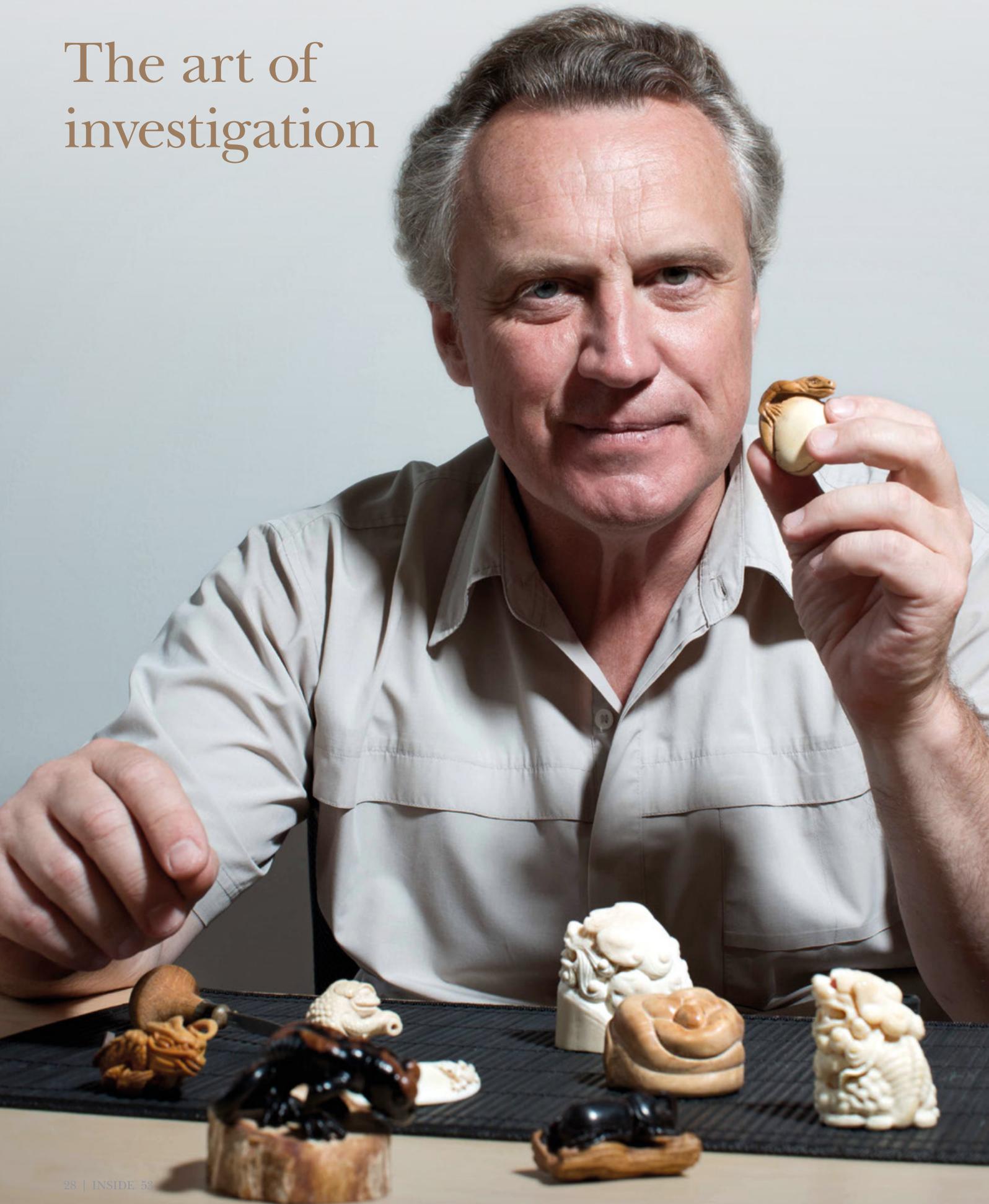


OLEKSANDR KOTLYAREVSKYY

The art of investigation



What is the link between art and crime-fighting? Meet Oleksandr Kotlyarevskyy of the Diverted & Seizure Investigation unit.

Oleksandr Kotlyarevskyy could easily serve as the inspiration for a fictional detective – imagine him in trench coat and trilby, perhaps a cigarillo in the corner of his mouth, filmed in moody black and white. In a cynical world, he fights unerringly for the cause of justice – a Fabio Montale, a Jules Maigret, a Commissario Brunetti. A misunderstood figure, only indulging his creative streak enables him to escape the harshness of reality...

Well, it's not quite like that with Russian-born Oleksandr, but he is certainly an unusual character of many talents, one of which is truly unexpected: the Japanese art of netsuke carving. But let's not jump the gun. Born near Moscow in 1963, Oleksandr comes from a St Petersburg family of artists and musicians, and finished his studies at Kiev art school in 1980. "But I realized very quickly that my possibilities were limited," he says, "so I enrolled at the law faculty of Kiev University."

With a law degree in his pocket and some knowledge of foreign languages, Oleksandr was then sent by the Soviet state to join the police force, rapidly forging a career that culminated in his appointment as a senior detective for Interpol in the Ukraine. "At that time, in the mid-1990s, several 'new' types of crime were emerging – credit card fraud, intellectual property theft, and computer crime," says Oleksandr. "It was an exciting period when I was able to participate in creating special units in national police forces in Ukraine.

"When the time came, I took the opportunity to leave the police force and go into private enterprise, working in the music and cosmetics industries. Based in Kiev, I also worked all over Eastern Europe and the Balkans – including ex-Yugoslavia – as well as in Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and China. So I've spent half my career in law enforcement, and half in private industry. Maintaining effective co-operation between the two is a very difficult, but not impossible, task."

Oleksandr joined JTI's newly created Diverted & Seizure Investigation (DSI) unit in Anti-Illicit Operations as Manager in

November 2010. Now based in Vienna, his main role is seizure inspection and investigation. "We cooperate very well with law enforcement to combat smuggling and contraband," Oleksandr says with pride, "and I enjoy combining all my previous experience with new technology, such as i2 analytical software, which is also used by law enforcement agencies. The charts it produces are also works of art in their own right," he notes, ever the connoisseur.

Masterpieces in miniature

Speaking of art, Oleksandr's own exquisitely carved netsukes can only be described as masterpieces in miniature. How did it all begin? "I started carving in 2002. I'd been interested in Japanese culture from a very young age and even learned some Japanese. As I travel a great deal, carving was ideal, since unlike drawing or painting it doesn't require a lot of space. Netsukes are small, portable and compact, and are all about touch and texture. The act of carving and polishing them is a meditative process, like many things in Japanese culture. It is time-consuming, but that is also perhaps part of its appeal. In ten years, I have produced around 50 pieces. Some of them took a few months, some even years. Obviously, I don't work full-time on them; even if I did, one piece would take at least two or three weeks to finish."

"Investigation and netsuke carving are closely linked."

Oleksandr uses an astonishing variety of materials to create his netsuke, which can represent anything from mythical beasts to the humble mouse. And where does he find his inspiration? "My inspiration essentially comes from the material I am using, which in turn will depend on my location. I never use artificial colors, but work with those present in the materials themselves. For example, I carved my salamander from ebony, which is yellow on the outside and black on the inside. Using the two colors, I was able to recreate

the distinctive, flamed markings on the salamander's skin. Mammoth ivory, boar's tusks and whale's teeth are easily available in Russia, so when I am there I will tend to work in these media. I also use driftwood, boxwood and am currently trying some semi-precious stones like jade. The most important thing for anyone carving a netsuke is to use very hard, small-grained materials to reproduce delicate details.

Fascinating symbolism

"Netsukes have many meanings – they might help or protect the bearer, or grant them wealth and wisdom. But my choice of subject isn't limited to Japanese references," Oleksandr adds. "The mystical salamander, for example, is in fact a European symbol, associated with fire and survival. Many people have a favorite animal, such as a dog, so a netsuke representing the animal in question would be an appropriate gift. The tortoise, for example, is associated with longevity and symbolizes wisdom, so would be a suitable present for a respected elderly person.

"It may sound strange, but I believe that investigation and netsuke carving are closely linked. Both are about being creative and pursuing perfection; they might look different, but are essentially the same thing," he muses. "The findings of an investigation are its physical 'shape.' The meditative act of creating a netsuke helps me to relax and regain my balance, thus enabling me to work more effectively."

Continuous quest

With a wife, two children and five grandchildren to think of besides his extremely demanding role at JTI, you might think Oleksandr had enough on his plate. Far from it. "I'm very happy to continue combating illicit trade," he says, "but I also need other stimuli in my life. I love travel, hiking, boats, photography, drawing, *bonsai* and *suiseki* art. I've now started carving in marble, and I enjoy painting, usually mountains and trees. I'm constantly searching for new interests, knowledge, people and places. And I'm hugely attracted to the mystery of Japan. Visiting the country could be a new life project..." Crime writers, here is your inspiration. □