



Soapstone: Awash with Possibility

Soapstone – a stone used to make soap? No. In fact, soapstone has nothing to do with soap; its name comes from its greasy, soapy feel. Soapstone is made up of mineral components, including talc, chlorite, dolomite, and magnesite. It is a metamorphic rock – a rock that has been changed from a preexisting state by influencing factors such as pressure, temperature, and the chemical composition of fluids in the rock.

There are actually two different materials popularly called soapstone. Talc, one of the softest minerals on Earth, is the variety commonly used in cosmetics, sculptures, and everyday items such as toothpaste, baby powder, and even chewing gum. With a hardness of 1 on the Mohs Hardness Scale, talc can be carved using conventional wood and masonry cutting and finishing tools.

Talc has been carved for centuries all over the world. Egyptians carved figures and bowls of soapstone to put into the tombs of pharaohs. Soapstone seals of Indian origin have been found in Bahrain and Ur. Paleoeskimos were mining this stone to make bowls and lamps on Newfoundland's Baie Verte Peninsula 1600 years ago and Native American Indians throughout North America carved soapstone into ornamental pipes and bowls.

Steatite is the other form of soapstone, generally found in shades of grey. While primarily composed of talc, it contains other minerals that harden it, making this soapstone suitable for mixing bowls, countertops, sinks, masonry heaters, flooring, stair treads, and other architectural applications. It is a very dense (non-porous) stone — more so than marble, slate, limestone, and even granite — making it impermeable to liquid. This quality makes steatite a material of choice for chemistry lab-tops and acid rooms. Due to its excellent heat retention characteristics, it is often used for cookware, cook tops, oven floors, masonry heaters, and fireplace liners.

Soapstone colours vary throughout the world, due to the local associated minerals that leach into the talc, creating the hues and markings often admired in a sculpture. China has pale green and pink soapstone, while Russia and Alaska produce a black variety. Montana is the source of soapstone with the look of moss growing through it, and the eastern townships of Quebec provide dark green and black specimens.

Mining Matters thanks Canadian sculptor Sandy Cline for sharing some of his knowledge about soapstone to assist with this article. For a comprehensive look at

soapstone, soapstone carving, sources of soapstone, and other related information check out Sandy's Web site at <http://www.sandycline.com> or watch for Sandy at the Waterloo Gem and Mineral Show this November. Another carving resource, the craft book *Soapstone Carving for Children* (Gosse, 2003), provides children with step-by-step instructions for carving, and clues about handling soapstone.

Other Sources of Information About Soapstone

- www.greenmountainsoapstone.com/about_soapstone.html
- www.newworldstone.com/soapstone.html
- www.soapstones.com/soapstone.html