

## About Soapstone

### *What is Soapstone*

Soapstone or steatite is a metamorphic rock that is primarily composed of talc, along with other minerals such as chlorite, magnesite, and amphibole. It is named "soapstone" due to its soapy or waxy feel. This unique texture is a result of the high talc content in the rock. In its raw state, soapstone exhibits a dusty gray-white hue. However, when oil or wax is applied to its surface, the rock's vibrant and natural colors are revealed.



### *Properties of soapstone*

Soapstone is a soft and very easy to carve rock. It is highly heat-resistant and can withstand high temperatures without cracking. Soapstone has excellent thermal conductivity, which means it can absorb and distribute heat slowly and evenly over time. This stone is chemically inert and non-porous and it does not absorb liquids or stains. Being a natural material soapstone is non-toxic, recyclable, and does not emit harmful chemicals.

## **Colour**

The color and veining of soapstone can vary depending on the specific quarry and region from which it is sourced. This stone can occur in various colors such as shades of gray, green, brown and even black.



## **Soapstone use throughout the ages**

The history of soapstone stretches back thousands of years and spans across different continents.

Ancient civilizations, such as the Egyptians, Vikings and indigenous peoples of the arctic regions (Inuit, Chukchi, Yupik) were among the earliest known users of soapstone. These early civilizations recognized soapstone's softness, smoothness, and resistance to heat, and they utilized it for various practical and artistic purposes. For example, the ancient Egyptians used soapstone to create small figurines, vessels, and cosmetic containers. The Vikings employed soapstone for casting metal items like knife blades and spearheads.



Soapstone's unique heat resistance made it ideal for creating cooking and storage vessels. In regions where soapstone was abundant, such as Scandinavia and parts of North America, people carved pots, bowls and cooking slabs from soapstone.



Soapstone bowls- National Park Service photo, Grand Teton National Park.



Soapstone bullet mold- Image from the Guilford Courthouse National Military Park, National Park Service.

In addition to its functional uses, soapstone also had cultural and ritualistic significance. For instance, indigenous peoples in North America often carved soapstone pipes for ceremonial and smoking purposes. The Inuit people of the Arctic regions crafted intricate soapstone carvings depicting animals and scenes from their daily lives. Soapstone was also used for creating amulets and talismans believed to possess protective or spiritual qualities.



Photo by [William A. Turnbaugh](#).

Nowadays, soapstone is commonly used as a material for countertops, sinks, flooring tiles, and architectural elements, electric panels and more. It is valued for its natural beauty, durability, and unique properties.

## **Tools**

When carving soapstone, artisans typically use a combination of hand tools and power tools to shape and sculpt the stone. Some common hand tools used in soapstone carving are rasps, rifflers, chisels, knives and carving gouges. Power tools can speed up the carving process and help remove material more efficiently. Pneumatic and rotary tools are often used by carvers.



Hammer and chisels.



Carving rasps.

Sandpaper of varying grits is used to smooth the surfaces of the soapstone and refine the details of the carving. Starting with coarse grits and progressing to finer grits creates a polished and refined finish.

### ***Finding soapstone***

Soapstone is found in nature as a naturally occurring rock. The harvesting and mining of soapstone involves extracting the rock from the earth's surface in open pit or underground mines. Deposits can be found in various parts of the world, primarily in regions with specific geological conditions conducive to its formation. Some notable locations where soapstone is known to occur are Brazil, India, USA, Canada, Finland, Norway, China and Zimbabwe.



Dorset Soapstone mine, Canada.

## ***Soapstone in Canada***

Canada has soapstone reserves found in the Arctic regions as well as in the provinces of Quebec, British Columbia, and Ontario. Soapstone in the Canadian Arctic, particularly in regions like Nunavut and the Northwest Territories, has been utilized by indigenous communities for thousands of years. Nowadays artisans create soapstone carvings and sculptures that are highly sought after by collectors and art enthusiasts around the world. The art market has provided income and cultural preservation for these communities. The province of Quebec is known for its abundant soapstone deposits used in the creation of countertops, sinks, tiles, and other architectural elements.



Frontenac Mine, Quebec, Canada



Soapstone slabs from Brazil.

## ***About our soapstone***

In our workshops we use Brazilian soapstone. Brazil is one of the largest producers and exporters of soapstone in the world. Brazilian soapstone is pure, soft and easy to carve and offers a great range of colour variations. Soapstone is primarily found in the state of Minas Gerais in southeastern Brazil. This region is renowned for its rich deposits of high-quality soapstone.