



# CARVING STONE

1

## Then and Now

Long ago, the Inuit people used carving stone to make everyday household items, such as cooking pots and lamps. Stone was also carved into amulets, jewellery, and small toys - things that could be carried easily between the summer and winter camps. Today, Inuit sculpture has earned an international reputation as a major art form. Because it is difficult to transport, most carvers try to use stone from quarries nearby, moving it by boat in the summer and by snowmobile in the winter. Many communities are scattered across the vast northern land, and the carvings from each differ in style and in the stone used to create them.



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## Outside? In the Winter?

**It's true. Most carvers work outside, even in the winter! Working the stone creates clouds of very fine dust that can irritate the lungs, especially these days when carvers sometimes use chainsaws and other power tools as well as the traditional ones.**

Artist David Rubin, Paulatuk

Alabaster cliffs, Victoria Island



Rob Rainbird, NRCan

Rob Rainbird, NRCan

## Victoria Island Alabaster

Finding good carving stone is not always easy. Recently, Dr. Robert Rainbird of the Geological Survey of Canada and his assistant Wayne Goose (brother of artist Rex Goose) were studying the rocks on Victoria Island when they decided to have a closer look at some huge white cliffs in the distance.

At the foot of the cliff, blocks of white rock had fallen into a creek. In the pale sunshine, the smooth, naturally sculpted blocks looked like chunks of ice in the water. Rainbird and Goose both thought of the same thing: alabaster! This type of rock is a prized carving stone all over the world. The local carvers, delighted with the find, promptly got out their tools and set to work.

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2



Artist Mary Muckpa, Pond Inlet

E. Rutley, NRCCan

## How is Carving Stone Formed?

The stone used for carving varies across the Arctic, but can be grouped into two main types. Both are metamorphic rocks, meaning that they have been transformed or changed by Earth processes involving increased heat and pressure, and percolation by water-rich fluids, into something different than they were originally.

The first type forms by melting deep in the Earth. The molten rock moves upward and either cools and solidifies beneath the Earth's surface, or flows onto the surface as lava during volcanic eruptions. When it cools and becomes solid, it is much too hard to be used for carving. But during

metamorphism, heated water percolating through the rock transforms its minerals into softer, hydrous minerals like serpentine, talc, and chlorite. The process produces rocks such as soapstone and serpentinite. People often talk about 'soapstone' carvings, but in reality soapstone is too soft to be a good carving stone. The somewhat harder serpentinite is commonly preferred. It can take various finishes, including a smooth polish, and comes in a variety of beautiful colours, from black and dark green to yellowish green.

The second type of stone comes from sedimentary rocks. When these rocks are buried in the Earth, higher temperature and pressure transform them into beautiful light coloured marble and alabaster. Even mudstone can be transformed into lovely, finely banded, dark coloured argillite by relatively low-temperature metamorphism. Argillite is the second most common carving stone used in the Arctic. It ranges in colour from light green to nearly black, and takes a fine polish.



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