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Foreword

The Soapstone Carving in China

By Mikhail Ovchinnikov



This professionally prepared introductory essay by my longtime friend and associate, Mikhail Ovchinnikov, is another example of how détente between Russia and America is being maintained through the arts. His carefully researched data concerning the soapstone of China greatly deepens the following manuscript.

Mikhail was my guide in 1991 to his late father's, Vladimir Ovchinnikov, solo exhibition in the Manezh in St. Petersburg, to which the Mayor of the City had invited me as an honored guest for having had my "Memo from an American Gallerist," printed in the exhibition's catalog. Mikhail and I have been associated through the arts and personal friends since that time. We have enjoyed each other's company here and in Russia.

On August 28, 2023, I received this e-mail from Mikhail, in response to my inquiry of how he wishes to be noted as author of his contribution to my book. "Bob, I want to be noted as a man who left his country when it became fascist and who lives and works in Central Asia – the region where I've never been before and where I haven't had contacts before..."

Robert F. Murray

Artistic carving of soft stones is associated primarily with folk crafts and folk style in the art of different countries. Speaking of soft stones, we mean numerous varieties of natural minerals such as talc and pyrophyllite, belonging to the class of layered silicates (phyllosilicates or sheet silicates), as well as varieties of gypsum and anhydrite, classified as sulfates. According to the ten-point scale of mineral hardness, proposed at the beginning of the 19th century by Friedrich Mohs, talc is the softest reference mineral: its hardness is 1. The hardness of pyrophyllite ranges between 1 and 2. The hardness of gypsum is 3, anhydrite is up to 3.5. To compare these minerals with the “hard stones” used in stone-carving, let’s say that the hardness of lapis lazuli is 5, jade – up to 6.5, agate, jadeite and rock crystal – 7. The hardest reference stone is diamond – 10.

Soft stones feel greasy to the touch. Hence their common unscientific names – soapstone, wax stone, lard stone. When referring to the Chinese art of soft stone carving, soapstone commonly refers to agalmatolite (a type of pyrophyllite) and steatite or talcochlorite (talcum rock).

Due to their softness, these stones are easy to work with the simplest tools and do not require the technological methods that are traditionally used when carving hard stones. The latter, already in the Neolithic era, were cut and polished with abrasive powders; soapstone is easily cut with a knife. The relative ease of extraction and processing of soapstone and its analogues (for example, in Russia – gypsum rocks of the Urals) suggests that its history in art is not limited to the creation of unique and expensive articles.

Accordingly, in the modern world, soapstone is primarily associated with inexpensive souvenirs, in which a superficial glance of a tourist sees the “national flavor” of the country he visited. Soft stone souvenirs are typical for such different countries as China, Russia, Mexico, New Zealand, Canada... However, each culture has its own history of soft stone carving, which determines its style and semantics.

In China, the history of this art form is inextricably linked with an amazing phenomenon that can be called the Chinese culture of jade.

One important caveat must be made here. The term “jade” in English-speaking culture serves as a common name for two minerals – jadeite and jade. However, the Chinese term *yu*, which is usually translated into English as “jade”, is a much broader concept, meaning a precious or beautiful stone. In modern Chinese art history literature, one can find such a poetic interpretation of this term: “a stone with a warm, wet sheen, beautiful color, hardness and at the same time transparency, sonorous and melodic

sound.” Numerous stone products belonging to different eras of Chinese history, which have come down to our time, give an idea of what kind of stones were considered beautiful and “possessing virtues”: this was primarily jade (jadeite appeared in China only in the 18th century AD), but also serpentine, agate, rock crystal, turquoise, lapis lazuli and other stones. Among them, we should mention both agalmatolite and steatite – stones that are much softer, but simultaneously do have important advantages: a rich palette of colors and pliability for carving.

The uniqueness of jade culture in China lies primarily in its antiquity. Jade products have been found in Neolithic cultures that existed in China. One of the earliest is the Xinglongwa culture dating from 6200–5400 BC. This means that jade carving has existed in China for over 8,000 years!

The later Neolithic Liangzhu culture, which existed in 3300–2100 BC in the Yangtze Delta, already had a highly developed jade culture. During the excavations of the burial grounds of this culture, many excellent jade items were found: ritual discs and tools, jewelry and vessels. Liangzhu jade artefacts are already characterized by complex ornamentation and engravings depicting mythological creatures and cosmogonic symbols. It is established that Liangzhu jades were widely exported and influenced other prehistoric cultures of the region.

Numerous discoveries of Chinese archeology in the second half of the 20th century, which resulted in the discovery of many ancient jade artefacts, aroused interest in new research aimed at studying the mineralogical composition of these finds. These studies showed that, along with jade products, archaeologists discovered artifacts made of serpentine, agate, quartz, turquoise and other rocks, including soft ones.

Thus, we see that the use of soft stone for decorative purposes dates back in China to the Neolithic, to the pre-dynastic period. If we talk about soapstone carving as an independent artistic tradition, then the most famous in China and beyond its borders, and at the same time, the oldest is the Shoushan stone carving tradition, which existed already in the era of the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420–589 AD). This tradition was formed in the southeastern province of Fujian, in the vicinity of its modern capital Fuzhou in the mountainous region of Shoushan. Stones that have been mined in this place for decorative use for one and a half thousand years are agalmatolites of various colors, shades, textures and degrees of transparency. Modern masters working with Shoushan stone say that once it was possible to find up to 130 varieties of this stone, and today up to 60 are mined. In the time of Tang Dynasty (618–907 AD), the time of prosper-

ity of Buddhism, Shoushan stone carving was used widely when creating religious sculpture and utensils. Starting around the 13th century, soft stones began to be used to create seals, and this gave an important new direction to the art of Shoushan stone. In subsequent eras – of Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) and Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), the art of Shoushan stone carving flourished, and its main genres developed: miniature sculptural images of people and animals, genre compositions, landscapes and still-lives in high and low relief techniques, mosaics, functional items, adornments, seals, chains and so on.

Shoushan stone carving reached its true heyday in the time of Qing Dynasty, during the reign of Emperor Qianlong (1735–1796). This emperor, who went down in history as an outstanding patron of arts and a collector, was a passionate lover of stone-carving art.

There is a legend that Qianlong once summoned his ministers and ordered them to decipher a dream he had had. The emperor dreamed of three symbols: *fu* (fortune), *shou* (longevity) and *tian* (field). The only one who was able to interpret the dream was an official from Fuzhou. He told Qianlong: “Your Majesty, you must have dreamed of a treasure from my hometown: Tianhuang Stone (yellowish stone dug out from the rice field) from Shoushan (Mountain of Longevity) Village in suburban Fuzhou. It’s the best of the Shoushan stones,” the official said. The emperor, who greatly desired treasure, was extremely pleased with the answer and praised Tianhuang as “the King of Stone.” Qianlong then received many gifts from local officials – art works carved from Tianhuang Stone. The art of Shoushan stone carvings has also become nationally famous as a result of the emperor’s praise.

Tianhuang Stone is one of the most famous varieties of the Shoushan soapstone. Works made from this stone during the Qing Dynasty, and with imperial provenance, are today top lots at auctions around the world. Thus, a pair of seals created during the reign of Emperor Kangxi and owned by Prince Kung at the end of the 19th century were sold at Christie’s auction in 2016 for 10.8 million US dollars. And in 2017, an absolute record was set in Beijing: the largest known Tianhuang stone seal weighing 1.7 kilograms, depicting eight dragons playing with a pearl, and dating from the late years of the Ming Dynasty, was sold for 16.5 million US dollars. It can be said that Emperor Qianlong’s blessing turned out to be long-standing!

The artistic tradition of carving on Shoushan stone is inextricably linked with the classification and evaluation of varieties of this stone. Since we are not talking about scientific classification in the modern sense of the

word, but about connoisseurship, we will only mention its main categories without trying to present them in the form of a coherent system.

Firstly, Shoushan stones are classified according to the area of origin of their deposits. There are Gaoshan (high-mountain peak), Yueyang (Yueyang mountain) and Qishan (Qi mountain) series, each of which includes many subtypes of stones (for example, the above-mentioned Tianhuang stone belongs to the Gaoshan series). Stones are also classified according to their geological properties: there are mountain stones, field stones and water stones. And, of course, connoisseurs find within each of the subtypes many species with different mineralogical composition and color shades.

The most famous field stones are Tianhuang (yellow field) stone, which can be of golden, orange-yellow, egg yolk and other shades of yellow color; Baitan (white field) stone, reminiscent of “mutton fat jade” in its shade, but often having a delicate texture of thin radish veins inherent only to it; and Hongtian (red field).

Water stones are those that have been exposed to groundwater, over time giving them transparency and glitter. Among them, well-known and valued are Crystal Jelly, Fish Brain Jelly, Yellow Jelly, Eel Grass Jelly, etc.

Mountain stones break up into many types, named after the mountain peaks, caves and mines in which they are mined.

It is important to mention that along with Shoushan stone in China, there are other types of soft stone traditionally used to create carved art products. For example, in Qingtian County of Zhejiang Province, Qingtian stone is mined – a soft stone, which is also based on pyrophyllite. Qingtian stones also have a wide variety of colors: there are red, yellow, blue, black and others, it is believed that cyan shades are the most characteristic. Changhua stone comes from the same province of Zhejiang, and the deposit of Balin stone is China’s Inner Mongolia.

The wide geography of soft stone mining in China, their exquisite names, complex classification and multi-level hierarchy of their value are evidence of the existence of both an uninterrupted centuries-old tradition of the art of soapstone carving, and a developed connoisseurship in relation to this art. These traditions live on today, moreover, they flourish as China’s economic and cultural development continues. Today in China, thousands of craftsmen work with soft stone, their works are exhibited, sold in local galleries and at auctions, and end up in museum collections. The Chinese government includes this art form in the official lists of the country’s national treasures. At the same time, surprisingly little is known about this art outside of China. Lovers of antiquity and memorabilia ex-

port from China many elegant products made of soapstone, but they know practically nothing about the origin of their imagery, their symbolic meaning, and the history of this national stone-carving tradition. Therefore, the book written by Robert F. Murray is a commendable attempt to deal with these issues. Since Mr. Murray writes a lot about the topics and semantics of Chinese art, I decided to devote my introductory article to the origin and mineral composition of the Chinese soapstones used for carving, their history and classification. This modest essay by no means claims to be a comprehensive scientific description, it is an attempt only to indicate a large topic that requires scrupulous work of researchers.

Introduction

Hong Kong and Beyond

During the first of my four times in Hong Kong, I found a street vendor selling figurines carved from wood, fish bone, ivory, malachite, and assorted hardstones. Most of his offerings were jade carvings and a few soapstone pieces. I recognized the pale green color and style of the small soapstone vases resembling my grandmother's coveted soapstone figures on the bases of the lamps she had acquired decades ago. These three vases began the extensive Chinese soapstone carving collection. Today, the entire collection contains approximately 250 pieces. About 100 carvings represent carvings from India, Africa, Viet Nam, Pakistan, Meso-America, Alaska, and North America. The Chinese pieces date back as far as the 1800's and up to the early 1900's. A few were carved in the last 10 years.

To keep green the joy of collecting and to share my discoveries, I offer the surprises and findings that opened my eyes to the subtle beauty and mystery in mostly traditional but also some contemporary Chinese soapstone carvings. The more I study them, the greater enjoyment I find as I hope you will too.

This century year old collection is still arranging itself. When I looked over the wide display, I considered it timely, with substantial content to fashion into a photo gallery in a book. Although the text emanates mostly from a limited selection of art books and museum catalogs printed in China, the history, and origins of the nature of the carvings and the artists themselves have their limitations. I urge the reader to look closely at a gallery of pieces included in my collection that appears in the last section of the book. I prefer that the precision, artistry, and uniqueness in each

2 *The Elegance of Nature Softly Carved in Soapstone*

carving be observed and studied without an inscription. The reader then will hopefully appreciate these carvings as I found them to be worth being considered fine art and included in a growing, aesthetically valued collection in the future.

Chapter 1

About the Collection and Soapstone Itself

It never dawned on me that my collection of soapstone carvings had any significant connection to any other kind of carvings until I heard Mikhail Ovchinnikov, former deputy Director of hard stone carvings of the Faberge Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia, present his lecture about Karl Fabergé's hard stone carvings of the "Russian types," at the Hillwood Museum in Washington, D.C. in mid-October 2018. Then I began to realize how my Chinese soapstone collection could be considered as of the "Chinese types" of soft stone carvings with similar and unique appeal that figurative carvings evoke in several cultures.

Our study may be considered a short history of Chinese soapstone carving. My collection of soapstone, however, is testimony to the worth and excellence of the anonymous carvers themselves. Since early boyhood I have been haunted by their antiquity and unique beauty.

It was a clear day at George Washington's River Farm, home of the American Horticultural Society, when a visiting family from the heartland of China, came to the exhibit named, "More Moments of Art." While we engaged in conversation about the paintings of on the wall, it became apparent that two of them spoke English. Here, I thought, was an opportunity to tell them about my writing project concerning my collection of Chinese soapstone carvings. I showed them the many shots I had on my cell phone a large selection of the soapstone carvings with the hopes they would comment on them. Not to my surprise, for I had an earlier understanding of their remarks, they said they had never seen them before except maybe in a museum and they thought they were jade. They said they must be very valuable and that it would be unusual to see them in a normal home in China, that they were likely to be found in the houses of the rich. They thereby confirmed again to me that these types of items, carvings and accessories were not seen today in homes in China, generally, and that they were not collected or ever seen by the general population who live in very small

spaces and only have room for basic living items and their computers. It has been said recently that most Chinese live in spaces of only 78.9 square feet on the average void of non-necessities.

Were you to ask why, in my eighties, I am still collecting mainly figurative Chinese soapstone carvings of a certain era, I would say it was my maternal grandmother's doing since it is she who introduced me to what I have always called, the Lady Lamp from China. It was a mystery to me why for over thirty adult years, why this family heirloom was so important to me.

Over the Years

For several decades I have built a collection of soapstone carvings, mainly figurative and carved in China probably from 1900, possibly earlier. A few of them could be designated dynastic pieces. Their style is somewhat artistically unique but surely evidence of a legacy carried forward by a recognizable school or group of artists, not known to most, to Westerners. These Chinese artists had access to mines that yielded gray-green and brownish tones of soapstone that is disappearing from the world marketplace. Through research, I attempted to locate these mines and to identify that group of regional artists who created the finely carved figures or figurines that carry such a close and stylistic resemblance to one another.

I harbor a curious, old, deeper motivation behind a growing desire to learn the origin of my soapstone sculptures that I called a "figurine" collection. Why this fascination? Early Chinese culture of soapstone carvers as well as Indian, Pakistani, Asian, African, Central and South American artists have for centuries been using soapstone for their art works. Regions of the Americas and Northern Europe have large deposits of soapstone, but the material is infrequently quarried and used today. The Inuit and the Norwegians, for instance, have stone deposits like soapstone. Since soapstone is reputed to be comparatively soft and fragile, its choice as a long lasting and durable stone was passed over until recent years for industrial utility items in lieu of artwork. Without really knowing their background history, I took an intuitive, serious interest and investment in soapstone carving when I started to travel internationally in my later twenties. Surprisingly, I began to find soapstone.... greenish carvings resembling the pair of Chinese figurine lamps of pale green soapstone acquired by my grandparents. I began to purchase the ones I could conveniently carry in my luggage.

Some pieces in my collection speak for themselves as finer art figures. Recently I learned the distinction between the “fine art” pieces and those that trend off to the category of “figurine” pieces. Most of the carvings I have treasured come from the Far East. The very first aforementioned piece, The Lady Lamp, was brought back from China by my grandmother in the early years of the twentieth century. This surviving figure is approximately 12 inches tall, of mellow gray-green soapstone and is a finely carved rendition of a traditionally dressed Chinese lady holding a fan. It was part of a pair that graced my grandparent’s home in Pennsylvania where my maternal grandfather established a successful silk printing business before WWII. His business required association with producers of silk in China. My grandmother’s magically creative hands fashioned oval, pastel-toned lamp shades for this pair of figures made into prominent art objects as lamps seen on onyx-topped side tables in their sitting room. My parents inherited these lamps when my grandmother died during WWII. The lost, corresponding lamp was a noble gentleman soapstone on a silvered-toned base and disappeared when my parents moved from Pennsylvania to Washington in 1947 after my dad sold our department and furniture store founded by his grandfather at the turn of the twentieth century. I’ve always remembered both lamps for their serene appearance and quiet elegance. It makes me realize now that it is possible to intuitively treasure what has been broken or lost to the past.

Close up, individual pieces in my present collection appear belonging to another world. As a collector, I hold well over 200 pieces. Their beautifully subtle visual effect has, seemingly, been lost from the attention of day art lovers?

Most of my collection represents the greenish soapstone of a soft gray-green, oily, silky-smooth nature. A few pieces are brownish and variegated in tone while others have coral-to-brown tones that graduate to darker reds or lighter tan, brownish colors. It was noted in a publication about Art in the Ancient Americas that GREEN stones were the most highly prized in ancient Mesoamerica and lower Central America, particularly in the Montagna Valley of Guatemala. The few African soapstones I possess are a pale pinkish-tan color, the random Indian and Pakistani pieces are coral, white and light gray as well as dark gray, blackish greens and black. Most of the Chinese pieces I prefer are the green-gray stone that are only found in certain older mines in China, at least that is what is rumored. I prefer green stones and am finding that among my collection there are green stones that are more valuable nephrite or jadeite, i.e., jade, mistaken as soapstone.

The pieces I try to find in estate sales and antique dealerships are obscure when mixed among other hard stone figurines like jade whose colors are more intense. If I didn't have an intuitive collector's eye for them, it would be easy to miss them in antique shops where I found most of them in different parts of the world. Frequently I spot one in an art glass collection or mixed in a mishmash of souvenir items. To me they are a rare find even though they are, apparently, not always estimated to be of any appreciable worth.

Soapstone carvings are found throughout the world. Soapstone itself today is more popularly seen and used in the making of furnishings for kitchens and bathrooms. There has been a resurgence in soapstone utility usage. It's durability is often questioned. In fine art, the sculpture of stone figurines, the more precious, jewel-toned jade is preferred for it retains its rarity and high value. Among my stone collection I hold over seventeen jade carvings of different colors and quality. The most prized is a pair of peregrine falcons in black jade found in China, although much of this jade traditionally comes out of Turkestan.

There is a recognizable similarity in the designs of Chinese soapstone figures. Most have front sides, carved, and finished off in detail while the back sides are flat and smooth and well-polished.

The suggestion is they are meant to be used as shrine objects and seen from the front alone. Even if the sizes vary, the common vase designs are similar in the revered feminine shape and a delicate style that has been repeated for hundreds of years. To understand this collection, I had to explore the nature and use of "figures or figurines" as an art form and why anyone is attracted to collecting them or having them around at all.

Though my soapstone collection is an obscure body of work that, I think in time, it will become more highly valued. Right now, it is apropos for me to suggest in writing, the collection as meaningfulness for whomever inherits it. My wish is for the collection to be preserved, displayed or not, but passed on again to another appreciator of the finely carved soapstone of this this collection from China along with some comparative pieces from other countries.

Stone Artist's Material

A *Stone Artist* carefully selects a solid block of stone. He may retain much of its mass or "carve" or take some of the stone away, making shapes or form. Like any sculpture, stone carving is an art of a mass with volume,

contour, and surface treatment. It has power in its proportion according to its simplification, clarity (realistic or abstract) and, if its size applies, its monumentality. For instance, the huge white soapstone of Christ with outstretched arms over Rio's harbors is monumental whereas the pieces in my modest collection fall into a category of small, tabletop, display, collectible figures. Some I consider fine art and other fine craftworks. In recent art fairs on the U.S. East Coast, I have seen large, several hundred pounds, grayish soapstone sculptures by artists from North and South Carolina who said they acquired their soapstone in the Carolinas. These fine art pieces were priced from several hundred to several thousand dollars.

It is not unusual across the world to find art students using various colors of soapstone for their compositions of the human figure, animals or abstract compositions. Many art schools purchase very affordable lots of uncut soapstone from local quarries and stone dealerships. A stone dealer in the Washington D.C. Metropolitan Area informed me that he travels to many world quarries for subtly beautiful soapstone deposits to be cut specially for contractors to use in designer kitchens and bathrooms. Today the use of marble, granite, lava, soapstone, and many compositions of stones are considered by noted interior designers for decorative use. Many of us, born in the 1920's and 1930's, are familiar with the frequent use of whitish soapstone furnishings and decor in bathrooms, kitchens, and hotel commercial space décor. When the Washington Willard Hotel offered its interior furnishings for sale before it was renovated, many walked away with a collector's dream in fixtures and counter tops of marble and decor. Most of what I recall from earlier nineteenth and twentieth century soapstone furnishings and decor was whitish in tone, often yellowish from use or poor care, thickly cut with little decorative elements, but durable yet often seen with immutable stains or chipped. One piece in my collection of two young standing figures of children is typical of the kind of shallow-toned soapstone found in buildings in early eighteenth and nineteenth century America.

Soapstone is Steatite.

Soapstone or *Steatite* is a precious stone having a massive amount of *talc* that makes the stone appear grayish-green or brown-toned in color. It is also described as a soft mineral that is a basic magnesium silicate, usually whitish, greenish, or grayish coloration with a soapy feel. It occurs in foliated grainy or fibrous hard masses. A less descriptive suggestion shows soap-

stone having a soapy feeling stone composed essentially of talc, chlorite and of some magnetite.

Talc is a soft mineral that is a basic magnesium silicate usually whitish, in shades of green, gray, or rusty browns. Polished or unpolished, it has a recognizable feel to the touch. In many parts of the regions where it is found, it is mined for industrial use as an electrically insulating porcelain compound largely of steatite.

Considering Art Objects of Soapstone

I am proposing that soapstone figurines may be studied as --- Sculptures.... Depictions of What is Unpaintable.... A Form of Symbolic Art.... Substitutes for Religion.... Expressions of Nature.... Parallels to Painting.... At An Interchange with More Realistic and Abstract Art Forms of Sculpture. The information in this document completely covers many of the above categories.

A Gallery of Selected Soapstone Figurines appears later in the document with brief commentary where applicable. Ovchinnikov's recent acceptance as the recipient of my collection will require each piece to be accompanied with a list showing a photo, measurement, purchased price where possible and comment. Shipment of the collection is still to be determined.

By the time this manuscript is finished, I will likely have added more pieces. It is said, "Once a collector, always a collector." My collection is only lightly representative of soapstone carving over the centuries from when and where soapstone was discovered. The Chinese excelled in the fine artistic use of the medium up to this point in time. It does not appear that the stone type and style of carvings from China are the same as many in my collection that I believe contains carvings from the late 19th and early twentieth century, possibly much earlier. I have been led to believe that many Chinese provincial soapstone mines have been depleted or closed for other reasons. It was suggested to me by a young Chinese architect studying now in Canada, that the collecting and display of figurines in their homes is discouraged in China and considered to be politically incorrect or shunned upon as unnecessary displays of wealth. Soapstone, it appears, is not valued or coveted anywhere near the reverence or possession of jade. It is seen as too soft, fragile, and too subdued in color to be worth having. I disagree.

Soapstone Sculpture

Sculpture in general is like painting in that its origins were the forming of primitive magic figures, perhaps even as a language, and for mythical and religious rituals. It was the hope of the sculptor that some mythical or revered god or goddess would come into the figure to be a part of the sculptor's life. He thought that the better, more valued materials used to create their image would more so invite, the deity to do what people wanted. So, a gold, silver, bronze, ivory and precious stone sculptured figure and figurine would even more oblige the gods to merge into the figure; the better it was carved, the more present, and alluring it would be.

The Chinese allure for jade carvings is much greater and historically a sign of great wealth. In the northern regions of China, the darker shades of jade are preferable whereas the lighter shades of jade are more sought after in the southern regions. The most precious is Imperial jade with its rich vibrant green color, a color likened to the rich vibrant green seen in emeralds. Since soapstone carvings generally don't get the preferential treatment like jade, it is not clear if there is any preferred shade or type of soapstone in the regions of China. And, since there is often the confusion of jade and soapstone with the mineral nephrite, it takes experts to tell the difference. Certainly, if the considerations of spiritual values are being applied, jade carvings are felt to be imbued with a transfigured spirit. We see this clearly in the quantities of jade figures depicting Buddhist personages. In general, jade reigns supreme over soapstone although there is as much spiritual symbolism in fine soapstone figures and figurines.

Home & Office Use of Soapstone

One unique characteristic of soapstone itself is its feel to the touch. It is very appealing, oily, and smooth touch. Today, that is one reason why soapstone countertops have come back into their attraction in kitchen design. Although soft, as stone goes, soapstone has made its way back to home and commercial designers; the myths of its impracticality have been dismissed. Much of soapstone's durability for decorative commercial use depends on the way it is extracted from a quarry and specifically cut for a particular project. One stone contractor in Virginia, I personally know, travels to national and foreign mines or quarries to select the stone and its cut to fit the specifications of the interior designer or landscape architect of their client.

The Lady Lamp from China
By Bob Murray

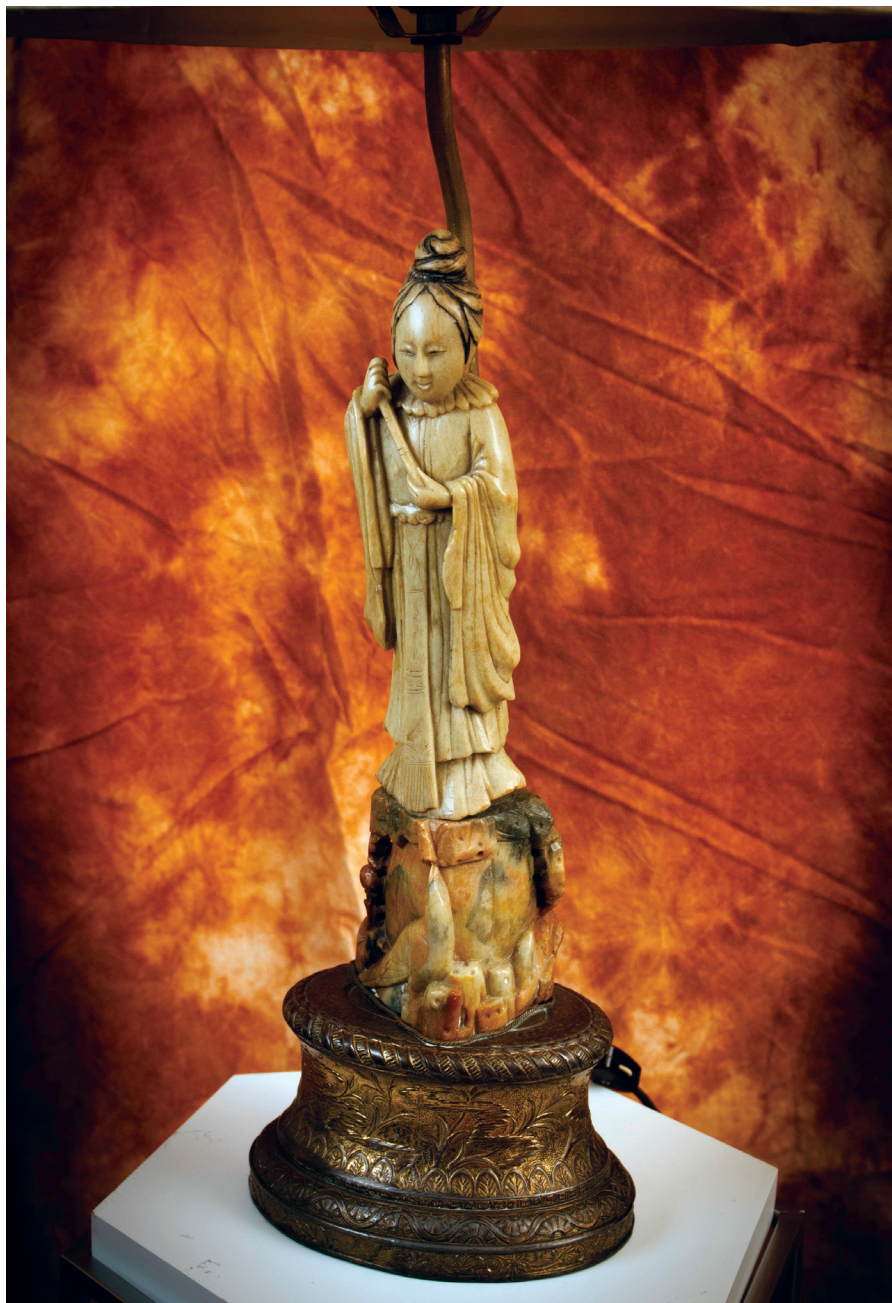
*She may have crossed
the Great Silk Road
on a lumbering ship of the desert,
though she did sail the blue Pacific
on a wooden vessel of the seas
with American silk trade merchants.*

*Together, as a pair with her gentleman companion,
they were fashioned to stand as lamp bases
under pale silk shades
in a Pennsylvania sitting room,
one on either end of a divan.*

*In soft tones of a precious shade of green,
a sage green, a light olive
or muted-moss jade green,
these stately soapstone figures
graced the homes of the von Brahler and Murray family
for over one hundred years.*

*Inspired by the ancients,
these intricate carvings
became known as
Nana's Lady and Gentleman Lamps
from somewhere in China.*

*Somewhere, someway, without notice,
During a family move,
The Gentleman Lamp disappeared.
but the Lady Lamp remains.*



1. Carved Chinese soapstone figurine, Guanyin Kwan Yin, 15" high.

The “Lady Lamp from China” — the first and most prominent piece in the collection

In 2018, I made an inquiry from Dingwen Sun, an architectural student from Beijing if he knew of or had ever seen a soapstone piece like the one in my home. I showed him a picture of the Lady Lamp and he said he would forward the image to his associates. The following is the reply he received and forwarded to me.

“According to Chinese Alababa Website, the Chinese green soapstone comes mostly from the Shushogou smectite mine in Toksun County, Xinjiang Province, China. It seems like we are no longer using soapstone in sculpture or art, but mostly for the chemical median and electrical parts. And it seems, the only company in China that is allowed to mine soapstone is called “Xingiang Togmar Colloid Co., Ltd.” Nowadays Chinese people don’t usually value soapstone on the art market since the softness is hard to maintain. Therefore, it has been unpopular and very hard to find many relative records online.”

In 2018, Dingwen returned to China and later went to Canada and Sweden to finish his studies. I learned that his grandfather was a noted architect in China who worked on the development plans for the many new cities being built in China today. Dingwen said that he would let me know what else he discovered about soapstone use in Chinese art today. At the time of this writing, I have not heard back from him.

Photogallery of the Soapstone Collection

More of the significant pieces of the Murray collection follow in photos. Some pieces have origins outside China. The muted green Chinese pieces with very similar artistic application, standing posture and style of carving, from the same mining region, appear to date from the 18th century into the early 20th century.

For the purposes of the collection, the figures will be removed from their lamp bases that were made in more recent times and probably in America. With respect to these pieces (see photos below) there have been unconfirmed suggestions that they may emanate from earlier Chinese Dynasties. In any case, every piece from China may be considered as the “Chinese type” of carving, be they contemporary or traditional in style in any selection of formerly or recently mined stone.



2. Double soapstone vase with flowers, 4" high.
3. Pair figurines, 5" high.



4. Soapstone double vase, 6" high.



5. Assorted carvings including jade horse.



6. Small soapstone vase, 2 florals with stand.



7. Jade censer, 5" high.

8. Two soapstone vases and monkeys, 4.5" high.



9. Two soapstone on stands, 8" high.



10. Soapstone vase with brush wash and small vase, tallest 4" high.



11. Round soapstone with signature stamps, 6" high.