



OIL LAMPS



Burning oil lamp. Alutiiq Museum archives.

From Kodiak to Greenland, coastal peoples once heated and lit their houses with stone oil lamps. On Kodiak, ancient artisans made lamps from large, water rounded beach rocks of sandstone, slate, granite, and a greenish-gray stone called tonalite. Craftsmen formed lamps by pecking - banging one cobble against another, and sanding the surface of a stone. This was a time consuming task, but one which resulted in many

beautiful pieces. Some artists decorated their lamps with elaborate figurines and geometric designs. Seal heads and human faces are some of the carvings that emerged from the oil as a lamp burned.

Alutiiq lamps come in many sizes. Household lamps were usually large, heavy pieces, about the size of a modern mixing bowl. Travelers used smaller, more portable lamps (about the size of your fist) that they could squat over for warmth, trapping heat inside their long, robe-like parkas. Children played with small replicas of lamps about the size of a walnut.

According to Alutiiq Elders, lamps were filled with sea mammal oil and lit with wicks of twisted moss or cotton grass. On Kodiak, Alutiiks rendered lamp oil from the blubber of harbor seals, sea lions, and whales. They melted the blubber over a fire, chewed it, or allowed it to decay to release its oil. When not in use, people stored their lamps upside down to keep the object's spirit from escaping. At ceremonies, Alutiiq people lit lamps of many sizes to symbolize prosperity and illustrate the enduring ties between people and animals.

Some of the oldest known lamps in the Eskimo-Aleut world come from the Kodiak archipelago. At Zaimka Mound, an archaeological site on the shore of Womens Bay, archaeologists unearthed a boat-shaped sandstone lamp more than 6,500 years old. The rim of this lamp was still encrusted with soot from the burning sea mammal oil that illuminated a Kodiak evening thousands of years ago.