

Naniq – OIL LAMP



From Kodiak to Greenland, coastal peoples once heated and lit their homes with stone oil lamps. On Kodiak, artisans made lamps from large, water-rounded pieces of sandstone, slate, and several kinds of granite. Craftspeople formed lamps by pecking—banging one cobble against another, and sanding the surface of a stone. This was a time-consuming task, but it 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 lamps burned.



Burning oil lamp. Photo by Amy Steffian.

Alutiiq lamps come in many sizes. Household lamps were large, heavy pieces, about the size of a modern mixing bowl. Travelers used smaller, more portable lamps (the size of your fist) that they could squat over for warmth. 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, Alutiiq people rendered lamp oil from the blubber of harbor seals, sea lions, and whales. When not in use, people stored their lamps upside down to keep the object's spirit from escaping.

Some of the oldest known lamps in Alaska and Canada come from the Kodiak Archipelago. At Zaimka Mound, an ancestral 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.

Today, a burning oil lamp symbolizes culture and prosperity. The natural materials in the lamp provide light and heat that push back the darkness and cold. A burning lamp is also symbolic of cultural pride and perseverance. Alutiiq people light stone lamps at gatherings to illuminate their heritage, and shine the light of culture far into the future. An Elder and a young person light the lamp together to represent the passage of knowledge between generations.

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Kal'unek—From Karluk, Kodiak Alutiiq History and the Archaeology of the Karluk One Village Site. 2015, by Amy Steffian, Marnie Leist, Sven Haakanson Jr., and Patrick Saltonstall. University of Alaska Press, Fairbanks.