

Instructions for Gravestone Rubbing

What Is Gravestone Rubbing?

Rubbing is what you do when you place a scrap of paper over a coin and bring up the coin's design by covering the paper with pencil strokes. Using different materials, this technique can be used to reproduce the relief design of any surface. It is an ancient technique which originated in the Orient and which, like etching and other printing techniques, is employed by artists today to make original prints. Using this technique to make a print of the carving on a gravestone is gravestone rubbing.

Why Make A Rubbing?

A gravestone rubbing is an excellent document, accurately reproducing, lifesize, the design and surface condition of the stone. Rubbings are, therefore, useful as records. Some rubbings are even considered works of art in their own right and are in the collections of galleries and museums.

The Association for Gravestone Studies offers this introduction to gravestone rubbing because the increasing popularity of the activity without guidance is a threat to the stones. In addition, it is our hope that getting to know the stones through rubbing will encourage respectful interest in them and result in strong community support for their care.

Materials Needed for Rubbing

Kits containing rubbing supplies are sold at stationery and art shops in areas where stone rubbing is popular. However, all you really need for a good start is:

- Masking tape
- Scissors for cutting your paper
- A bottle of water and soft brush for gently cleaning dust and bird droppings from the stone
- Paper. For the beginner an average weight wrapping paper works well and is cheap. Later you may want to try a rice paper, vellum tissue or even a thin pellon (interfacing material).
- Rubbing wax or lumberman's chalk. Rubbing wax is available in many art supply stores. Inexpensive lumberman's chalk can be found in most hardware stores. If you use chalk you may want to spray your finished rubbing to prevent smearing. Art stores sell fixing spray.

Choosing A Stone

Beginners often choose stones from which a good rubbing cannot be made. If you choose a "good" stone, you have an excellent chance of producing a satisfying and encouraging print on your first try. **Avoid rough stones, stones which are eroded or otherwise damaged, stones on which there are lichen.** To get a good, clean-line print. the stone carving must be sharply but not deeply cut. Rounded, high relief carving will cause you to tear the paper as you rub, and you will risk defacing the stone with color. Note any hollowness or separation or flaking on the face of the stone. **Any pressure or friction on the face of an unsound stone can seriously damage it.**

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Procedure

- Cut a piece of paper considerably larger than the stone or the part of the stone you plan to rub. Be generous with the paper; it protects the stone from your chalk or wax.
- Wrap the paper tightly and securely to the clean stone. It is best to fold the paper over the sides and top of the stone and tape its edges to the back of the stone.
- Using the broad flat area of your chalk or wax lightly stroke the paper and watch the design appear.
- When you can see the design rather well, use the end of your chalk stick or wax bar to fill in and darken your print. You will decide when your rubbing satisfies you and is finished.
- Remove your print and put it where it will be protected from sudden showers or gusts of wind while you are in the graveyard.
- You will want to record the name of the deceased, death date, location of the graveyard and the date the rubbing was taken. If you rub only the ornamental carving rather than the whole stone, you may want to copy the stone's full inscription for your record.

Caution And Responsibility

As you practice and improve your skill you will probably try other techniques and materials, eventually choosing for yourself those which best suit your rubbing style and your taste. A first and vital consideration as you experiment with materials and techniques is the protection of the stones. Some papers and coloring materials allow color to penetrate onto the stone. Experiment elsewhere. Do not use questionable methods on the gravestones.

Because old gravestones are an important part of our national heritage you should be as careful with them as you are when handling other ancient folk art treasures. Many rubbers are not careful. For this reason, some cemetery associations do not allow stone rubbing. Some require the rubber to register. You will want to respect the graveyard's requirements and leave the stones and the area as you found them.