

# Gemcutting: A Lapidary Handbook

## 11 | *How to Cut Cabochons*

**C**ABOCHONS are ordinarily begun from sections of sawed slabs but they may also be cut from single pieces of rough of considerable thickness, as is usually the case with precious opal, star sapphire, ruby, garnet, and other pieces which do not occur in large masses. When buying slabs or sawing your own, remember that larger stones need thicker slabs. Thin slabs can be used for large cabs but the extremely shallow curvature required for the top is difficult to grind and difficult to sand. On the other hand, an overly thick slab requires much grinding to bring the crown to ideal proportions. The useful range of slab thicknesses runs from  $\frac{3}{8}$  to  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch but exceptionally large cabochons may need slabs up to  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch or more. It is best, when sawing, to cut some thin and some thick to cover all possibilities.

Remember to clean the oil from slabs immediately after sawing. A greasy surface hinders marking of outlines and causes other difficulties later. Most slabs have sharp projections left from sawing. Snap these off with a pair of pliers to permit the marking template

to lie flat on the slab. At this stage, some amateurs lap one side of the slab, prior to marking, to remove saw marks and leave the surface sufficiently smooth so that no further finishing is necessary. This step has much in its favor, but unless the saw marks are extremely deep, it is preferable to wait until later.

The choice of the best place on the slab to cut a cabochon must be practical as well as artistic. It does little good to mark the most beautiful pattern or spot of color if a large flaw or crack passes through it. Before outlining, examine the area to see that it is the best available, then turn the slab over to see that the other side is the same quality. The most common fault is trying to make a larger cab than can be reasonably expected. Some gem material is deceptive as far as flaws are concerned and only very careful examination shows the fine, hairline cracks that must be avoided. Massive granular material is most troublesome, while smooth-grained types such as agate and jasper show flaws plainly. When found, flaws should be marked to be sure that

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