

Nature Note

SOREL the
"Designers'
Fan"

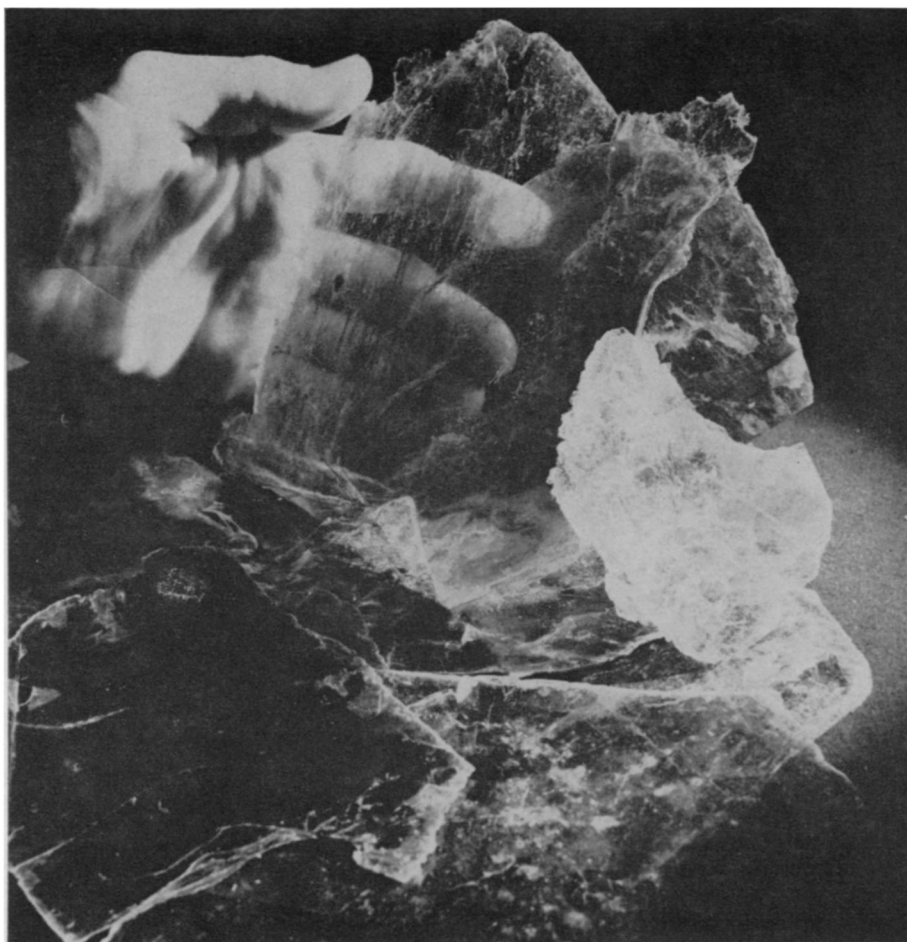


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Mica

Once used in the tiny windows of houses of the Middle Ages to let some light into the dark interiors, mica is now used in many varieties of electrical equipment. It also is a source of our artificial Christmas snow.

Mica is a group of minerals with the remarkable property of being able to be split into paper-thin, transparent sheets. A sheetlike arrangement of the mineral atoms result in the cleavage or breakage along rather definite planes paralleling one another with a very close spacing. Thick crystals of mica are sometimes called books, since their many thin sections resemble pages in a volume. These fine transparent sheets of mica can not only be bent, but they also are elastic and spring back when released.

The minerals are formed of potassium-aluminum silicates that give off water when heated. Mica is found in many different colors because of the variations of the chemical formula.

Muscovite, also called isinglass or

white mica because it is colorless or transparent, especially when peeled into fine sheets, has the simplest chemical formula. Muscovite is a soft flaky mineral with a pearly or silky luster. Crystals as long as 33 feet have been found in Ontario. In Germany it is called *glimmer*—an apt name for this shining material. The name Muscovite comes from the fact that quantities of the window-making material were sent throughout Europe in the old days from the Grand Duchy of Muscovy, Russia.

Another common form of mica is biotite or black mica, which is usually a dark brown or black. It is this color because of its combination of both iron and magnesium. Pieces of this black mica sparkle like black jet in granite when the sun shines on it.

When the aluminum in the mica mineral is replaced with magnesium, the mica is brown or yellowish brown, and called phyllogopite. Another kind of mica is a beautiful pink or purple, called lepidolite or lithia mica.

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