

# ART IN TRANSITION

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## SAFETY IN THE CLAY ART STUDIO

There are many factors to consider when creating a safe and comfortable work environment. Some are obvious, some a bit more subtle. This month, we are going to discuss the basic issues involved in providing ergonomic comfort while creating beautiful art.

**Please remember, I am not a doctor, nor do I play one on television. Please consider this information to be a springboard for further experimentation in the area of ergonomics. If you have specific questions, they should be thoroughly discussed with a health care provider.**

### **Table height:**

Keep your table height such that your elbows remain in a ninety-degree angle. This may mean putting your table on small risers, such as 2x4" blocks, or PVC tubing with a radial block. My PVC tubes have a hole drilled from side to side, with a bolt secured through the tube. The table legs then are placed inside the tubes, which are set on end, and voila, the table is the perfect height.

### **Standing:**

Do you prefer to stand when you work? Take a moment to assess your situation. Do you wear 3/4" wedge heeled shoes or do you work barefoot? Do you have ample arch support or are you in bedroom slippers? Do you periodically do a few tippy-toe stretches or are you firmly planted for the duration of your clay day? Do you balance on your heels, or are you rising from the floor like a marble statue?

Keeping the blood flowing to your feet gives you the best chance of avoiding serious foot complications. Do what medical care professionals do, and periodically raise one foot, then the other, on a raised surface, such as a 6" box, for a 15-minute rest. Still have those old hard-sided cosmetic cases? Perfect footrest, **and** it stores more clay!

### **Sitting:**

If you sit when you clay, pay attention to your choice of chair or stool. Try to select furniture that is comfortable but supportive. Shop the thrift stores for a bar stool with a back and arms. Add a sturdy cushion to your secretarial chair to add comfort during prolonged claying periods. You may have to add a lumbar support if you find your back tires easily. You'll know. If the chair seat is too deep, add a back cushion to bring your body closer to the support of the chair. Your goal is to have your hips and back against the chair or stool, and your thighs supported all the way to your knees.

Take care to keep your legs from dangling. If you have a stool, make certain the foot support is adequate. Make any necessary adjustments to keep your knees at 90 - 110 degrees. Nail on a 2x4 board if necessary. (You can always cover it with clay if it is esthetically annoying). If your toes don't touch the ground, or if they do but they still aren't happy, try a footrest. Many people find a triangular wedge shaped footrest to work well. A free one might be found in your firewood pile!

### **Arm support:**

Would you benefit from arm supports? Are your shoulders in your ears? Is that big muscle on either side of your Adam's apple made of steel? If this sounds familiar, try supporting your arms while you work. Put armrests on your bar stool or your chair. Pad them with dense upholstery foam until your shoulders relax at a natural position and your arms are well balanced at 90 degrees from your torso. Make certain the chair arms are close enough to your body that the chair is doing the work, not your muscles. Save those muscles for your art!

Are you aware that the muscles from your upper back go not only to your spine and neck, but extend to your scalp and face as well? Respect these muscles and you'll reserve future facial wrinkles for your clay characters!

### **Table Tips:**

Treat yourself to a clean and organized work surface. That said, and probably ignored, at least treat yourself to a safe work surface! Some people do well with a horizontal and level work surface. If this is for you, remember to keep it at a correct height (see above). Also, do your best to assure the work surface is level. Nothing is more irritating than your roller taking off without you, eh?

If you do better with a sloping work surface (similar to a computer keyboard setup), try to keep it at an angle no greater than 20 degrees. Make modifications to keep your round tools from rolling off the table by using baskets, cups, or other barriers.

Regardless if you work level or sloped, remember to keep your wrists in a neutral position and to refrain from reaching further than your natural arm length.

### **Dandy Digital Delights:**

Clayers use their hands and arms more than other limbs. Stop what you are doing right now and take an inventory of your hands. Are your fingers relaxed or are you imitating the Queen Mother during tea? Many of us channel a lot of our muscular tension into our hands or feet and rarely realize it.

Roll your wrists in slow circles until you feel increased blood flow into your hands. Condition some imaginary (or real!) clay in your hands for a few seconds. Clasp your hands together in an interlocked prayer fashion, and then push them in and out, hinge style, until you can feel the tension leaving your fingertips.

If you still cannot reroute your blood, hence oxygen, into your hands, run a little warm tap water over your wrists. Think of this "warm up" the same way as a runner prepares for a race. Inadequate warming up is the surest way to promote wrist and digital injury.

One caution: If, while doing these exercises, you feel pain or discomfort, hear clicking, experience unfamiliar spasms or numbness, you should consult your health care professional and discuss the possibility of repetitive activity injury. Conditioning clay, especially the firmer brands, can create problems of this nature, which should be addressed. If you are concerned or want preventive methods, you can always switch to a softer clay, condition with a food processor, or ask your family for "pre-conditioned" clay for your birthday!

### **Good Posture:**

You've been working at your clay station for an hour. You've been concentrating on your Skinner blend or your Elissa Cane. If you were to look in a mirror, you might resemble a miniature clay pretzel. Stop and take another inventory of your physical state. You have to put your body's weight somewhere...just where have you chosen to put it?

Posture is a personal habit developed in childhood. As we grow, ahem, "wise with years", it is important that we become more aware of our old habits. To the best of your physical abilities, try these exercises:

- Stretch your head from side to side.
- Shrug your shoulders up and down.
- Rotate your shoulders in big circles, both forward and backward.
- Reach each arm over your shoulder and down the middle of your back.
- With hands on hips, gently twist from side to side.
- Cat arch your back, then slowly bend at your waist toward the front.
- Bend your knee and hold your foot behind your back with your opposite hand, alternating sides.
- Do a couple of well-supported deep knee bends.
- Stand tippy-toe a couple of times.
- Draw nice slow circles with your toes, bringing blood flow to your ankles.
- If your arches are tired, try rolling your bare foot over a frozen orange.

In just a few minutes, you will be refreshed, have overcome some of those old posture demons, and be ready to create something wonderful! An hour later, repeat these exercises.

### **Good lighting:**

Use clear natural light whenever possible. Avoid shadows, which will make you squint and strain your facial muscles. Invest in a full spectrum light bulb if you really want true, shadow-free lighting. Take periodic breaks and evaluate the tension you are carrying in your face. Look up from your work and focus on items across the room.

Do a couple of face scrunches, bigmouth bass stretches, and jaw infinity circles. (These are made-up names for simple facial exercises. Use your imagination when trying to imitate the exercise's name, and you'll immediately know if you have them right.)

### **Preventive measures:**

There are several steps you can take to not only ensure you take frequent breaks but also decrease exposure to repetitive activity injury. Although some consider it luxurious to have all their tools within a short space, decide for yourself which set-up would be most beneficial for your particular situation.

Is it better for you to use a lower back twisting motion to reach from pasta roller to oven to buffer, or would you be better off if you placed these tools further apart so you must take a few steps to use them? Is your oven and mini-fridge at a height that allows you to reach naturally into them, or do you have to squat while balancing your work?

Think about your studio space and see what works best for you. Be careful to avoid unnecessary physical

irritants, wherever they may lurk.

## **See Your Doctor**

As before, these are "unofficial" exercises, designed to alleviate tension, raise awareness and increase blood flow to your digits. It's non-medical advice, and we at Polyzine urge you to consult your health care provider whenever you notice a change in your abilities to enjoy playing with clay or doing any other activity of daily living. Prevention is the key to avoiding permanent, life-altering changes.

Have a healthy clay day!

NEXT MONTH: Insider Tips on Increasing Physical Access At Retreats and Lectures

