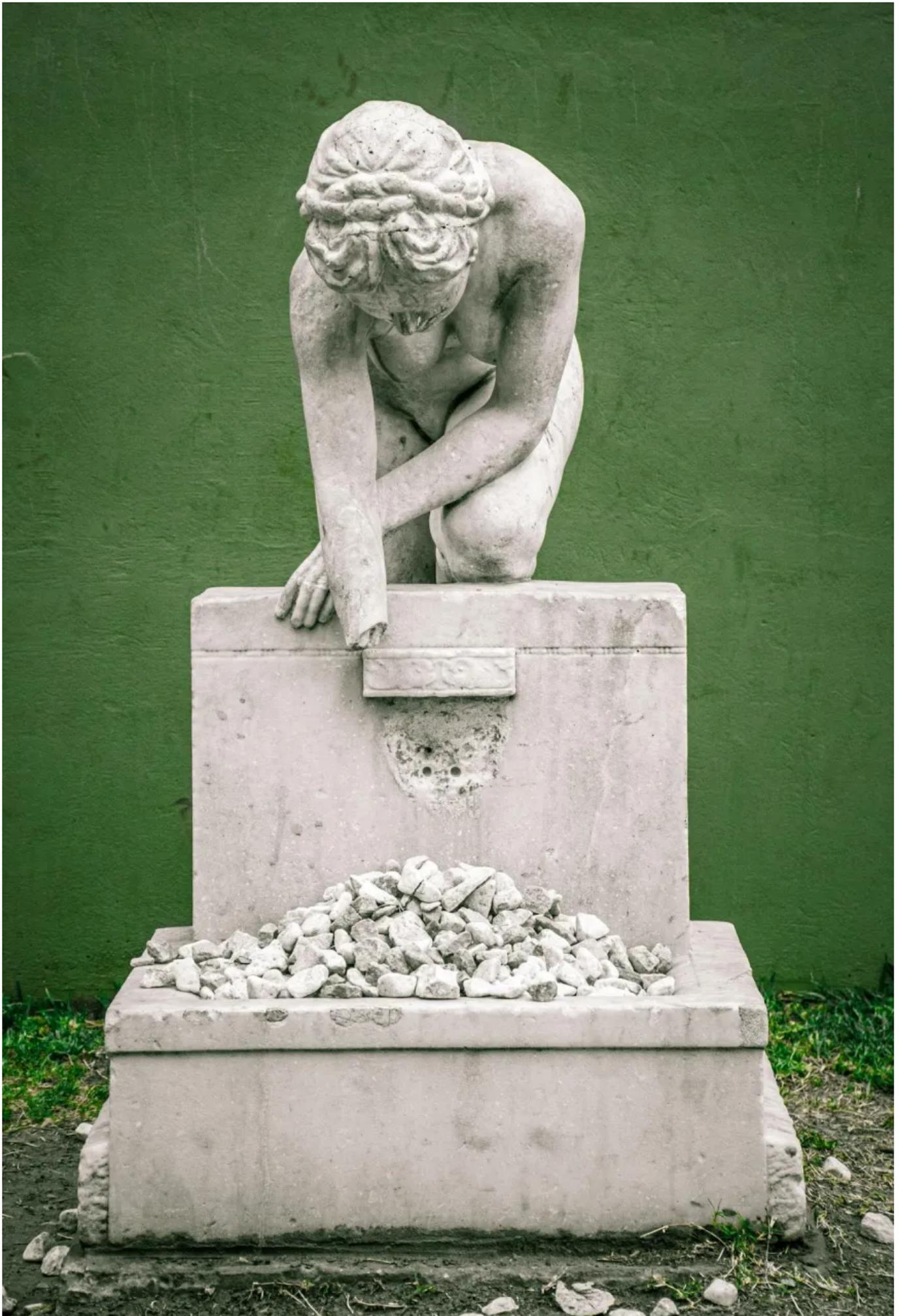


Ergonomics and Conservation's Cultural Master Narratives

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Image



By Sharra Grow

Years ago I was part of a conservation team removing old adhesive from the back of a series of ceiling murals in preparation for their reinstallation. This step in the treatment, which involved several seasoned conservators and interns, required months of scraping the back of the canvases with a small scalpel blade. These were long, hard days, but it wasn't until after the completion of the project that one of the interns revealed that holding the scalpel in the same position for long periods of time and the repetitive motion and pressure of scraping had crushed one of the nerves in her hand leaving her unable to fully extend her pinky finger. In seeing my shock and horror at her confession, she was quick to dismiss the seriousness of the issue, adding that the nerve was healing through physical therapy. But rather than feeling placated, new questions developed in my mind. Why hadn't this intern mentioned the discomfort in her hand before developing prolonged injury? Why hadn't anyone noticed her discomfort? Who was responsible for the well-being of the team members, especially the interns on the bottom rung of the workplace power structure? Considering all the other typical conservation health and safety measures in place, why wasn't there a workplace protocol for preventing this kind of risk?

What is ergonomics?

The issue in this remembered event is of health and safety, but not of topics we, as conservators, usually jump to first; this was not an issue of exposure to chemicals or improper PPE but was a portion of health and safety that often gets left out of the conversation; ergonomics.

Ergonomics, for the purposes of this paper, is defined as the study of how people interact with their workspace, leading to the development of solutions to eliminate discomfort and risk of injury, modifying the environment to fit the worker and not the other way around. The discomfort and injuries are generally described as **musculoskeletal**, which include those affecting muscles, nerves, tendons, joints, cartilage, and the spine. Musculoskeletal issues can be **traumatic** (a sudden, often violent, physical injury with immediate symptoms) or **cumulative** (gradual-onset injuries due to repetition, with symptoms slowly developing and worsening over time).

Traumatic injuries tend to be easier to identify and acknowledge in our profession (throwing out your back when trying to move a heavy bronze sculpture through the lab, or accidentally hammering your finger instead of that stainless steel staple on the stretcher bar). It is the cumulative injuries, which can feel more subjective, that we have a harder time pinning down and acknowledging to ourselves and to others; your neck is sore on Saturday morning after a week of hunching over a 200-year-old tapestry, or you have trouble focusing your eyes—and not to mention a headache—as you drive home after a long day of inpainting an *in situ* mural. Maybe you just slept funny on Friday night, or maybe you just didn't drink enough during the day (I mean, who does when you are working on-site away from the studio?). It can be quite easy to explain away cumulative pain and injury.

The ergonomics hole in our field

In gathering information and research on this topic (ergonomics in relation to cumulative musculoskeletal discomfort and injury), it became clear how little ergonomics has been considered within our profession. Within the limited sources of information I could find, even those researchers commented on the dearth of information available on this topic relating to conservation.

A few years ago, The C-Word: The Conservator's Podcast put out an episode dedicated to the "Aches and Pains" of our profession ([S10E05](#)). In conversation with episode guest host Emma le Cornu (conservator and yoga instructor), permanent host Jenny Mathiasson observed, "It's funny because conservators are so health & safety minded with so many other things, you know like, the chemical safety, and we've gotta wear gloves and not breath in mold spores, and we've gotta not eat asbestos... and all of those things, we're super good with. But the physical body aspect we sort of... we forget and don't talk about, and I desperately tried to find people who had written about this or even surveys that had been done or... just void. People are not really doing much about this, which is another reason I wanted to do this episode. I think we need to talk about this."

Kloe Rumsey, also a C-Word permanent host, supported Jenny's observation saying, "I think there's a lot to be said about how physical conservation is... and that's not something that's really talked about, particularly when you're training... the number of ways that injury can mess up your work life... it can just put you out, because you are constantly using your body for your job." Not only is there very little research on ergonomics within the conservation profession, but it is not sufficiently discussed with students as they enter the field. In a survey of 135 conservators, conducted by Portuguese conservator Catarina Pinheiro, when survey participants were asked if they thought their academic training in conservation had included sufficient training and knowledge in health and safety generally, 71% answered "no". A [2018 paper](#), presented by Emily England, Joy Erdman, and Melissa Miller, surveyed 189 museum studies academic programs based in the United States and found that 76% of the institutions offered "museum studies programs without any clear attention paid to the issue" of health and safety in the workplace.

If the majority of conservators believe they are under-trained in health and safety generally, it should be alarming how ill-trained we are as a profession to address the sub-topic of ergonomic health and safety, which has very little literature when compared to the information available on, for instance, handling harmful chemicals and materials. As an example, there is a fantastic annual conference held at the Smithsonian in Washington DC (USA) called The Safety and Cultural Heritage Summit: Preserving our Heritage and Protecting our Health (in fact, I'm happy to say a review of the latest Summit is featured in this *NiC* issue). In reviewing the seven years of Summit presentations, I found many on topics such as mold remediation, fire safety, handling objects containing pesticides, proper PPE, etc., and I was also pleased to find at least one talk that focused on ergonomics in conservation. While the Summit series shows that we are beginning to recognize ergonomics as part of conservation health and safety, it also shows we still have a long way to go; our profession does not sufficiently acknowledge the pervasiveness and importance of ergonomic issues.

Cultural master narratives

My purpose in writing this paper is not to relay or regurgitate the available research on ergonomic issues within conservation and the proposed solutions. I have created a bibliography with several papers and articles which expertly address this topic ([you can download the bibliography here](#)), and I encourage you to dive in and begin (or continue) your own education on this essential subject within our profession.

Instead, I will discuss a different question; why is there so little information and focus on the topic of ergonomics within the conservation profession? If virtually every conservator, at some point, experiences these work-related aches and pains, why are ergonomic practices and tools not engrained into the very fabric of our profession?

In order to address this question, I will first introduce the concept of cultural master narratives as it relates to the culture of the conservation profession (In this paper, I frame our professional culture using my American, female, and white lens and acknowledge that others may have different perspectives and lived experiences within our collective professional culture). A cultural master narrative is an expectation or ideology that dictates acceptable behaviors within a specific culture. The cultural master narrative framework helps to illuminate these invisible codes of conduct.

As explained by [Dr Elizabeth Ostler](#) in her research on the subject, “Cultural master narratives are one of the ways that we know how we’re supposed to behave and be in order to be accepted or belong within a particular culture. They are often expectations, archetypes, and stereotypes. Cultural master narratives are not neutral.” It is important to also acknowledge that a master narrative is accepted as truth within its culture but is based on limited or simplified perspective and therefore only partially true at best, but, as Ostler observes, “Belonging is often at stake. Those who follow or align themselves with the cultural master narrative will likely experience a greater sense of belonging than those who don’t. Not aligning with a cultural master narrative can lead to disconnection, ostracization, or expulsion. Cultural master narratives are so well known within a culture that they are invisible. They are the water that we are all swimming in.”

Like all cultures, our professional conservation culture has many master narratives, and I suspect one to be the idea that **our work-related aches and pains (specifically cumulative musculoskeletal) are an expected and accepted part of our work**. These aches and pains are so pervasive, so common in our profession, that they have been normalized. Rather than seeing the discomfort or injury as a problem that needs to be solved, it is instead just the water we swim in, and to those of us in the water, the problem becomes invisible and therefore silenced.

Catarina Pinheiro created a diagram showing a cycle of inaction in relation to ergonomics within conservation. The cycle begins with conservators who feel they are unable to invest time or money in learning about and improving ergonomic issues often due to work deadlines or lack of allocated budget and institutional support. Because ergonomics is low on their priority list, there is little action on this subject within the workplace which is subsequently interpreted by the research field as lack of interest or lack of need. As we all know, it’s the squeaky wheel that gets

the oil, not the silent one, thus this results in little or no research being conducted, which explains the dearth of ready information for the conservation professional to access, and the cycle begins again.

This observed cycle of inaction demonstrates how my hypothesized master narrative of work-related aches and pains has shaped the way we as conservators tend to dismiss ergonomics in our profession and the resulting lack of education and awareness on this issue even though it is woven into the fabric of our daily practice.

Kloe Rumsey recognized this lack of awareness (in S10E05 of The C-Word Podcast) in her comment that, "If you don't say 'I'm having arm pain', or something, no one knows." This illustrates that not only are we unaccustomed to talking about our work-related aches and pains, but we are also unequipped with the skills to recognize these injuries in others (and perhaps often unable to recognize them in ourselves) because such a skill holds no purpose within our profession's master narrative. And we cannot address an issue that we cannot even see.

Who is potentially left out of our cultural master narratives?

I acknowledged earlier in the article that this paper is written from my own perspective as a white female conservator living and working in Western culture. Along with this perspective, I would add that conservation professionals are predominately white presenting and female presenting. In fact, of the ten students who were in my graduate-level conservation class, all ten of us fit into these categories. Such a high percentage of our professional population falls into this narrow description that perhaps this depiction of a "typical" conservator could also be part of a master narrative in our field. How would this description, as a cultural master narrative, affect those who are considered to be within our professional culture but who are outside of the "typical" narrative?

The desire to conform to master narratives within a culture is strong since, as stated in Ostler's research, nonconformity can lead to disconnection from the culture and a sense that one does not belong (or even that one's livelihood is at stake). There are many ways that members of our conservation community may feel they do not belong; for this paper, I will focus on BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) to demonstrate my point. In an article on workplace burnout of BIPOC employees, author Kelli Washington explains that "despite evidence of success, imposter syndrome is common for BIPOC in a predominantly white workspace... and being one of the only BIPOC in the space may cause an internalized fear of not being qualified."

If a conservator does not fit one of the dominant master narratives of the professional conservation culture (the proposed example here being "the typical conservator is white and female"), they may overcompensate in conforming to other master narratives to demonstrate their belonging to other members within the culture and perhaps to themselves. Washington goes on to explain, "The burden of exceeding expectations and being the representative for an entire marginalized group can create the need to push oneself beyond reasonable expectations or an appropriate work-life balance, thus leading to burnout." The cultural pull to fit into my hypothesized master narrative of conservators expecting and accepting work-related aches and pains, for instance, may be heightened for those who are minorities in our field, falling outside of

other cultural master narratives. These conservators may be even more likely to hide or downplay work-related aches and pains, may take fewer breaks than generally prescribed, and may therefore be more prone to unrecognized and untreated work-related injury.

My experience of discovering an intern's dismissed injury and the resulting questions have haunted me for years. It is only now that I am developing the vocabulary and tools to understand why. While cultural master narratives can help to create and unite a cultural community, they can also do harm if they are left unrecognized and unexamined. By examining the possible cultural master narrative that our work-related aches and pains (specifically cumulative musculoskeletal) are an expected and accepted part of our work, I hope to inspire us to identify and dissect this and other narratives our profession has constructed. Only then can we recognize what aspects of our professional culture do not serve all members of our conservation community and which aspects are based on truths worth holding onto.

Author bio

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Read the article and see the ergonomics survey results in the April-May 2024 "News in Conservation" Issue 101, p, 10-17.