

Conservator interview questions

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What to expect

Conservator interviews blend a portfolio or practical review with panel questions about treatment judgement, ethics and collection care. Employers want to see how you think through an object, how you document decisions and whether you can hold a considered position with curators, registrars and lenders.

- **Portfolio and treatment walkthrough:** You talk through past treatments, often with images, explaining condition, options considered, materials used and outcomes.
- **Technical and analytical:** Questions on materials, instruments such as XRF and FTIR, solvent testing, reversibility and reading environmental data.
- **Ethics and professional judgement:** Scenarios about intervention limits, contested objects, provenance and when to stop or escalate.
- **Behavioural:** Past examples of working with curators, handling disagreement, managing competing deadlines or recovering from a mistake.
- **Scenario and emergency response:** Hypothetical salvage, pest outbreak, mould or climate failure situations, testing how you prioritise under pressure.
- **Stakeholder and client-facing:** How you brief registrars, lenders, artists or community groups on handling, loans, display conditions and treatment timelines.

Typically a first conversation with a conservation manager or team lead, then a panel interview that may include a curator, registrar and a conservation colleague from another specialisation. Many employers ask for a portfolio review or a short practical exercise, and some set a written treatment proposal or condition report task beforehand. Site or lab tours and informal meetings with the wider collection team often follow for shortlisted candidates.

1. Walk us through a treatment you completed recently, from the first examination to the object going back on display.

Why they ask

This is the core of a conservator interview. It shows your examination method, how you weigh treatment options, your bench skill and how well you document decisions.

How to structure your answer

Chronological walk-through: object and context, condition and risks identified, analysis performed, options considered and why you chose one, treatment steps, materials and testing, documentation, and the outcome plus any monitoring that followed.

Example answer

"The object was an early twentieth century textile sampler with failing silk and a distorted backing. I started with a condition report and photographed it under raking light, then examined the fibres under magnification and tested the dyes for solubility before anything wet came near it. The silk was too fragile for consolidation with a wet adhesive, so I chose a laid-on support using a reversible adhesive and toned a fine tissue to match. I documented every stitch and material in TMS as I went. The object came back to a stable, flat state and went into a sealed display case with a light level capped at the curator's request. I set a six-month check, and it has held without movement since."

2. You arrive to find a pipe has burst above a storage bay holding mixed collection material. What do you do in the first hour?

Why they ask

Employers need to know you can act calmly and in the right order when a collection is at risk. It also reveals whether you understand triage and salvage priorities.

How to structure your answer

Judgement under pressure: make the area safe and stop the source, assess scale and materials affected, prioritise by vulnerability and significance, act on the most at-risk items, then communicate and record.

Example answer

"First I would make sure no one is at risk and get the water shut off, then call the facilities and collection managers so the response is coordinated. I would assess what is wet and what is simply at risk, because those need different handling. Priority goes to items that will deteriorate fast or are the most significant: wet paper, textiles with fugitive dyes, anything with active mould risk. I would set up a triage table away from the leak, interleave wet material, bag and label items, and start drying or freezing depending on what the material can take. Throughout, I would keep a running log of what was moved, by whom and what was done, so the treatment history survives the event. Once the immediate risk is contained, I would write up the incident and flag any item needing a full condition report."

3. Tell me about a time you disagreed with a curator about how an object should be treated or displayed.

Why they ask

Conservators work in a shared decision-making environment. This question tests whether you can advocate for the object without damaging the working relationship.

How to structure your answer

STAR: situation and the object involved, the task or point of disagreement, the action you took to present evidence and options, and the result including how the relationship held up.

Example answer

"A curator wanted a light-sensitive watercolour on long-term display in a bright gallery. I was concerned about fading and did not want to simply refuse, because the display mattered to them and to the audience. I put together a short written assessment setting out the light sensitivity of the pigments, backed by spot testing and the fading rates we would expect, and offered three options: a shorter rotation with a facsimile on display in between, a lower light level with UV filtering, or a different object from the same series. We went with the rotation and a filtered case. The curator got the work on the wall, the original is still in good condition, and we now build rotation schedules into exhibition planning from the start."

4. How do you decide how far to take a treatment, particularly when cleaning could remove more than it reveals?

Why they ask

This probes your grasp of minimal intervention and reversibility, the principles that separate conservation from restoration.

How to structure your answer

Decision framework: state the principle, explain what you test or evidence you gather, describe how you set a stopping point, and note how you document and consult.

Example answer

"My starting point is that anything I do should be reversible and should not remove original material or information. Before cleaning, I examine under magnification, test on a small, discreet area and check the material with the relevant instrument or solvent series. I set a stopping point before I begin, and I check against reference photographs as I work so I do not over-clean by eye. If the cleaning is revealing something unexpected, such as overpaint or an earlier repair, I stop and consult the curator"

before going further. I record what I did, what I stopped short of and why, so the next conservator understands the decision rather than guessing at it."

5. A lender is asking for conditions you cannot meet for an incoming loan. How do you handle that conversation?

Why they ask

This is a stakeholder question. It tests whether you can explain technical constraints clearly to people outside conservation and find workable alternatives.

How to structure your answer

Client-facing structure: understand the lender's underlying concern, explain the constraint in plain terms, propose options, and confirm the agreed position in writing.

Example answer

"First I would ask what sits behind the request, because it is usually a concern about light, handling, security or environmental stability rather than the specific number itself. Then I would explain what our spaces can actually hold and why, in plain language, rather than quoting a standard and leaving it there. I would offer options: a different case with tighter control, a shorter display period, a rotation with a facsimile, or a courier-approved handling arrangement. If we can meet the intent but not the exact wording, I would put that in writing and get it agreed by both sides before the loan agreement is signed. Lenders usually respond well when they can see the object is being thought about, not just managed."

6. Tell me about a time you made a mistake during a treatment or a documentation step, and what happened next.

Why they ask

Conservation is high-trust work. This question checks honesty, your reporting instincts and whether you learn from error rather than covering it up.

How to structure your answer

STAR with an emphasis on the action and the result: what went wrong, how you noticed, what you did immediately, and what changed in your practice afterwards.

Example answer

"Early in my training I used a solvent mixture on a painted surface without running the full test series first, and a small area of glaze lifted. I stopped immediately, did not try to hide it, and reported it to the supervising conservator the same day. We consolidated the area and it stabilised with no visible loss, but I wrote it up in full in the treatment record and in our team's error log. Since then I run the complete solvent test series every time, even on a material I think I know, and I build test time into my project schedules so it is never the step that gets squeezed. My supervisor now uses that example when training new staff, which is a fair outcome."