Curator interview questions

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What to expect

Curator interviews test your curatorial judgement, collection knowledge and ability to deliver exhibitions with many moving parts. You will be expected to talk about your research interests as well as the practical side of loans, documentation and audience engagement.

- **Process and project questions:** How you take an exhibition from concept to opening, including research, budgeting, loans, design and installation.
- **Behavioural questions:** Examples from your past work managing stakeholders, competing deadlines or difficult negotiations.
- **Scenario and judgement questions:** What you would do when something goes wrong late in a project, such as a withdrawn loan or a sensitive cultural issue.
- **Technical and collection questions:** How you catalogue, document, research provenance and handle copyright or condition reporting.
- **Public and stakeholder questions:** How you work with artists, communities, donors and the media, and how you connect collections to audiences.

Most curator interviews are panel based, often with two rounds. The first may be a conversation with a senior curator or head of collections, sometimes alongside a people and culture representative. You may be asked to give a short presentation on a collection item or an exhibition idea, and a tour of the site is common. Later rounds can include a meeting with the director or a cross-departmental panel, and reference checks follow. Questions usually move from your research background and experience into practical process, technical collection management, scenarios, and finally your fit with the institution's audience and values.

1. Walk us through how you would take an exhibition from an initial concept to opening night.

Why they ask

This is the core curatorial workflow. The panel wants to see that you can balance research, project management, stakeholder input and public outcomes.

How to structure your answer

Use a chronological walk-through with clear stages and decision points. Explain who you involve at each stage and how you build in flexibility.

> **Example answer**
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> *"I start by looking at the collection and asking what story needs telling now, and for whom. That means research into the objects, a scan of what is available, and early conversations with registrars and conservators about condition and feasibility. I write a concept document that sets out the narrative, key objects, audience and rough budget. From there I develop a checklist with the curator or collection manager, and I begin loan requests, which can take months. I work with the design team on layout and interpretive approach, and I keep a schedule that includes installation, lighting and label production. During installation I am on the floor, solving problems with the team. After opening, I build in evaluation so we learn from visitor response and can feed that into the next project."*

2. Tell me about a time you had to manage competing demands from artists, lenders and internal deadlines on an exhibition.

Why they ask

Curators sit between many stakeholders. This question tests your diplomacy, planning and ability to keep a project on track without damaging relationships.

How to structure your answer
Use STAR: situation, task, action, result. Keep the result focused on relationships and delivery, not just the final opening.

Example answer
"On a recent exhibition, an artist wanted more space and a later installation time, while a lender needed their work returned by a fixed date and our design team was already at capacity. I brought everyone together early for a single conversation about the non-negotiables. I mapped out a revised installation schedule that gave the artist a dedicated morning slot and freed up the design team by moving some earlier tasks. With the lender, I agreed on a condition check and a firm deinstall date, and I kept them updated weekly. We opened on time, and the artist later told me they felt heard. The lender has since agreed to work with us again."

3. You learn six weeks before opening that a major lender has withdrawn a key object. How do you handle it?

Why they ask
This tests judgement under pressure, problem solving and communication. The panel wants to see you stay calm, assess options and protect relationships.

How to structure your answer
Use a judgement-under-pressure structure: acknowledge the issue, gather facts, assess alternatives, communicate early, replan and review.

Example answer
"My first step would be to confirm the withdrawal in writing and find out why, without making the lender feel blamed. Then I would assess whether the exhibition can still tell its story without that object. I would look at our own collection for a substitute, or approach another lender who might have a comparable work. If neither is possible, I would work with the curator and designer on a label or digital intervention that explains the absence. I would tell the director and the design team straight away, adjust the schedule, and keep everyone informed. After opening, I would review the loan agreement and our contingency planning so we are better prepared next time."

4. How do you approach cataloguing and documenting a new acquisition in a collection management system?

Why they ask
This is a technical question about collection stewardship. The panel wants to see that you know the standards and can work accurately in a system like Axiell Collections or TMS.

How to structure your answer
Give a step-by-step account from accessioning through to data entry, condition reporting and rights management.

Example answer
"When a new work arrives, I start with the accession number and a condition report, noting any existing damage. I check the donor or vendor paperwork for title, provenance and any copyright or cultural restrictions. Then I enter the object into our collection management system, following our data standards for fields like title, date, medium, dimensions and credit line. I attach images and link related documents. I also record any conservation or display requirements. Finally, I make sure the record is searchable and that anyone who needs access, from curators to researchers, can find it. If there are gaps in provenance, I flag them for further research before the work goes on display."

5. How would you approach consultation with a community about sensitive cultural material in an exhibition?

Why they ask

This tests your understanding of cultural protocols, community engagement and ethical practice, especially with First Nations material.

How to structure your answer

Set out your principles first, then the practical steps you would take. Show that you understand consultation as an ongoing relationship, not a one-off tick box.

Example answer

“I would start by acknowledging that the community has the right to determine how their cultural material is represented. That means early contact, before any exhibition concept is fixed, and an honest conversation about what we want to achieve together. I would ask who the appropriate people are to speak with, and I would follow their protocols for language, images and access. I would also check our obligations under the National Standards and any relevant cultural rights or copyright requirements. Throughout the project, I would keep the conversation going, share drafts of labels and design, and be willing to change course. After the exhibition, I would check back in and make sure the relationship continues beyond the opening.”

6. Why this institution, and how would you connect its collection to new audiences?

Why they ask

This tests your motivation and your audience thinking. The panel wants to know you have done your homework and that you can turn collection strengths into public value.

How to structure your answer

Connect your research interests to the institution's collection or program, then outline a concrete audience strategy. Be specific about the steps you would take.

Example answer

“I have followed this institution's work for some time, and I am particularly drawn to the way it balances scholarship with public accessibility. I would begin by mapping the collection against current audience research and looking for gaps, whether that is regional visitors, young people or communities whose stories are not yet represented. From there I would develop a small number of targeted projects, maybe a touring display or a digital story, that use collection strengths to reach those groups. I would work with the education and public programs team from the start, not as an afterthought, and I would measure success through participation and feedback, not just visitor numbers. My aim is to make the collection feel relevant and open to people who might not think a museum or gallery is for them.”