ART CONSERVATION: CAREER 101

What is Art Conservation?
Conservation encompasses all those actions taken toward the long-term preservation of cultural heritage. Activities include examination, documentation, treatment, and preventive care, supported by research and education.

- American Institute for Conservation (AIC) www.culturalheritage.org

What is a conservator?
A conservator...

- Physically saves our cultural heritage
- Trains in a graduate conservation program [with] extensive training in art history, science, studio art, and related fields
- Specializes in a particular kind of material
- Adheres to a strict code of ethics in their work
- Works in a variety of settings
- Often (incorrectly) labeled as “art restorer” or “art doctor”

- American Institute for Conservation (AIC) www.culturalheritage.org

The path toward becoming a conservator: how it (usually*) happens

1. Undergraduate academics:   Major is typically in one of three categories
   - Studio art background: fine arts degree in a variety of media
   - Material culture studies background: art history, history, archaeology, anthropology…
   - Science background: chemistry, biology, engineering…

2. Grad school pre-requisite coursework:   Complete all before you can be eligible for grad school
   - Art history, history, and related
   - Other languages (German, French, Italian; others relevant to interests)
   - General chemistry and organic chemistry; other science (biology, physics, etc.)
   - Studio art (drawing, painting, printmaking, textiles, sculpture, etc.)

3. Pre-program experience:   Try to get varied experiences and work with different materials
   - Internships
   - Volunteering
   - Technician position
   - Job in an allied profession

4. Grad school application process:   See separate program info below; programs are competitive!!
   - Online or paper application
   - Letters of recommendation
   - Writing samples, art/conservation portfolios
   - Invitation to interview
   - Acceptance or waitlist, or apply again next year!
Graduate programs in the United States

Buffalo State College

About the program:
• 3 years:
  • 2 academic years onsite
  • 2 summer internships
  • 3\textsuperscript{rd} year internship
• Specialties: Paper, Paintings, Objects
• 10 students per year
• Student pays some of tuition; stipend
Requirements:
• Art history: 21 units
• Chemistry: 16 units
• Studio arts: 9 units
• GPA at least 2.80 (usually much higher)
• GRE scores at least 300
• Conservation experience

Institute of Fine Arts, New York University

About the program:
• 4 years, dual degree:
  • 3 academic years onsite
  • 3 summer internships
  • 4\textsuperscript{th} year internship
• Specialties: Paper, Paintings, Objects (occasionally Books and Textiles)
• No more than 8 students per year
• Tuition free with living stipend
Requirements:
• Art history: 4 upper level courses
• Chemistry: 4 courses
• Studio arts: not needed on transcript
• Can read French, German, or Italian
• No conservation experience needed

If you get an interview:

Buffalo State College

Portfolio:
• Treatment reports and images
• Variety of specialties including science
Art Portfolio:
• Variety of media
• Bring objects with you, can use images
• Originals and copies of artworks
Presentation:
• Overview of experience
• Go into a few star treatments
• Show hand skills and problem solving

Institute of Fine Arts, New York University

Portfolio:
No conservation portfolio required

Interview:
• Writing exam on an object
  • Condition assessment, placing value, determining acquisition
• No presentation required but if you have conservation experience:
  • 1 treatment, 8 slides, 10 minutes
• Formal interview with committee
• Present art portfolio: only 5 pieces

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**Winterthur/University of Delaware**

About the program:
- 3 years:
  - 2 academic years onsite
  - 2 summer internships
  - 3rd year internship
- 10 students per year
- Free tuition and living stipend

Requirements:
- Art history: 6 courses
- Chemistry: 4 courses
- Studio arts: 4 courses (check requirements)
- GPA at least 2.50 (usually much higher)
- GRE score requirements
- 400 hours of conservation experience

If you get an interview:

Portfolio:
- Treatment reports and images
- Variety of specialties including science

Art Portfolio:
- Follow the checklist on the website
- Bring objects with you, can use images
- Originals and copies of artworks

Presentation:
- Overview of experience
- Go into a few star treatments
- Show hand skills and problem solving
- Interview day has a number of tests including chemistry, drawing, writing...

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**UCLA/ Getty Program**

*OBJECTS SPECIALTY ONLY! Admits students every other year!

About the program:
- 3 years: APPS EVERY OTHER YEAR
  - 2 academic years onsite
  - 2 summer internships
  - 3rd year internship
- Archaeological/ethnographic objects
- 8 or fewer (?) students per year
- Apply for tuition/stipend funding

Requirements:
- Art history: 1 year
- Intro chemistry: 1 year
- Organic chemistry: 1 year
- Archaeology/ethnography: 1 year
- GRE test required
- 200-400 hours conservation experience

If you get an interview:

Portfolio:
- Previous conservation experience
  - Condition reports
  - Treatments
  - Analysis
  - Include a few art pieces
  - Digital, don’t bring to interview

Interview:
- No presentation required
- 30 minute interview
- Panel will ask questions about treatments and experience
I’m interested… what do I do now?

1. Do some research:
   - What coursework do you need? Community colleges are great for affordable courses.
   - What is your 5 year plan? Do you have enough money to support an unpaid position?
   - What opportunities are available locally for pre-program training? Would you have to move somewhere to begin training?

2. Talk to conservators:
   - Find conservators on AIC website or check local museum websites for staff contacts.
   - Cold call/email! Conservators are lovely people who want to help. We get that it’s hard!
   - Ask about their education/training: everyone has a unique path.
   - Get referrals and follow up: contact other conservators if suggested to you.
   - Find an advocate for you! One mentor is sometimes all it takes to help you succeed.

3. Tour different institutions:
   - Visit any lab you can - they all matter. Every institution or private practice is different!
   - Keep track of labs you visit – graduate schools sometimes ask which you’ve visited.
   - Bring a treat like cookies/chocolate to your visit, and send a thank you card afterward!

4. Get pre-program experience:
   - Volunteer or work in related fields: art handling, museum visitor services, gallery…
   - Get museum/library jobs in conservation or other departments.
   - Seek out a variety of opportunities like institutions and private practice.
   - Try different specialties like book/paper, paintings, objects, etc.
   - Take lots of photos! You will need pictures (especially of yourself) for a portfolio.
   - Complete grad school prerequisites where necessary.

Keep in mind…

- **It will be tough to start:** to break into the field, to get pre-program internships (especially paid ones), to balance finishing coursework with your job/life, etc.
- **It will be difficult to get into a graduate program:** there are only a few and they are highly competitive! It can take many years either of reapplying year after year (this is normal!), or waiting to gain experience and then applying.
- **You will likely have to move to find an internship or to attend graduate school, which may feel unsettling, or like you are pausing or upending your life for a few years. But it’s an adventure!**
- Graduating from a master’s degree program does not guarantee you a job! **Jobs are often scarce** and you need to be prepared to roll with the punches until you find one. Again, you may move.
- **Jobs in conservation often do not pay well!** Even if you find one, the **compensation may be low.** Do not go into the field looking to make the same salary as a doctor, lawyer, etc.
- **But mostly keep in mind that conservation is a dynamic, challenging, rewarding career, and it is worth all the trials and tribulations it takes to “make it!” 😊 **