

# 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](http://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](http://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



**BUFFALO STATE**

The State University of New York

#### About the program:

- 3 years:
  - 2 academic years onsite
  - 2 summer internships
  - 3<sup>rd</sup> 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

#### If you get an interview:

##### 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



**NYU**

THE INSTITUTE  
OF FINE ARTS

#### About the program:

- 4 years, dual degree:
  - 3 academic years onsite
  - 3 summer internships
  - 4<sup>th</sup> 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:

##### 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

## Winterthur/University of Delaware



### About the program:

- 3 years:
  - 2 academic years onsite
  - 2 summer internships
  - 3<sup>rd</sup> year internship
- Specialties: Paper, Paintings, Objects, Library/Archives, Photographs, Textiles, Wooden Artifacts, Preventive Cons.
- 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...

## 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
  - 3<sup>rd</sup> 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!" ☺**