



**Office of Partnerships**  
Career Development Services  
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# BECOME A CONSERVATOR

*From The American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC) - the national membership organization of conservation professionals [www.conservation-us.org](http://www.conservation-us.org)*

## **What is a Conservator?**

Conservators are responsible for the long- term preservation of artistic and cultural artifacts. They do this by analyzing and assessing the condition of cultural property, understanding processes and evidence of deterioration, planning collections care or site management strategies that prevent damage, carrying out conservation treatments, and conducting research in all of the areas previously indicated. Conservation is an interdisciplinary field involving studio practices, sciences, and the humanities.

## **A conservator's responsibilities may include:**

- examination procedures to determine the materials, method of manufacture, and properties of objects or structures and the causes and extent of deterioration or alteration
- scientific analysis and research to identify historic and artistic methods and materials of fabrication, and to evaluate the efficacy and appropriateness of materials and procedures of conservation
- documentation procedures to record the condition of an object or site at a specific time, or before, during, and after treatment, and to outline treatment methods and materials in detail
- treatment, including interventive procedures, as well as passive measures to stabilize an artifact or retard its deterioration
- restoration to bring a deteriorated or damaged object or structure closer to a previous or assumed appearance or function
- advising on procedures for the safe exhibition and travel of cultural materials

## **Career Options in Conservation**

Conservators often specialize in a particular material or group of objects such as paintings, art on paper, textiles, archives, books, photographs, electronic media, sculpture, decorative arts, architecture, built environments, archaeology, natural science, or ethnographic materials and work in a variety of environments including museums, regional facilities, heritage institutions, libraries, universities, archives, laboratories, government agencies, and private conservation enterprises. Related job titles are conservation administrator, conservation educator, conservation scientist, conservation technician, and collections care/preservation specialist.

**Conservator:** A professional whose primary occupation is the practice of conservation and who, through specialized education, knowledge, training, and experience, formulates and implements all the activities of conservation in accordance with an ethical code such as the AIC Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice.

**Conservation Administrator:** A professional with substantial knowledge of conservation who is responsible for the administrative aspects and implementation of conservation activities in accordance with an ethical code such as the AIC Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice.

**Conservation Educator:** A professional with substantial knowledge and experience in the theory and techniques of conservation whose primary occupation is to teach the principles, methodology, and/or technical aspects of the profession in accordance with an ethical code such as the AIC Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice.

**Conservation Scientist:** A professional scientist whose primary focus is the application of specialized knowledge and skills to support the activities of conservation in accordance with an ethical code such as the AIC Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice.

**Conservation Technician:** An individual who is trained and experienced in specific conservation treatment activities and who works in conjunction with or under the supervision of a conservator. A conservation technician may also be trained and experienced in specific preventive care activities.

**Collections Care/Preservation Specialist:** An individual who is trained and experienced in specific preventive care activities and who works in conjunction with or under the supervision of a conservator.

Education and training for such careers should provide technical and scientific knowledge of materials and deterioration processes, develop appropriate aesthetic and perceptual abilities, and instill an essential ethical perspective.

## Types of Education and Training

### Apprenticeships and Internships

Before the establishment of graduate degree programs in conservation, apprenticeships were the primary method of training, and apprenticeships and internships continue to be an excellent source of education and training. Today, **graduate education** has become the more recognized route into the profession. A traditional apprenticeship refers to an in-depth, long-term training period. A student may elect to pursue a traditional apprenticeship or series of apprenticeships as an alternative to a graduate program. This approach often takes longer than a degree program to acquire comparable education. To acquire a complete conservation education, the student must supplement practical training with readings, course work, and research.

The term **internship** refers to workplace training at any level of a conservator's development. Introductory level internships, often referred to in the profession as pre-program internships, help prepare individuals for more advanced study. Graduate internships are part of a degree program curriculum.

### Graduate Programs

Graduate degree programs generally require two to four years of study. North American education programs in the conservation of cultural property offer either a master's degree in conservation or historic preservation or a master's degree in a related discipline along with a certificate or diploma in conservation. These programs require four to six semesters in residence (or the equivalent) and may also require summer internships. Many of these programs require a full-time, internship in the final year in which students work under the guidance of experienced conservators.

Many graduate programs require the fulfillment of academic prerequisites, including courses in:

- **Chemistry:** one full year each of general and organic chemistry with laboratory work is typically required
- **Humanities:** at least four to six courses are typically required such as art history, anthropology, architecture, and/or archaeology

### **Graduate Programs (Cont.)**

- **Studio art:** upon application to a graduate conservation program, candidates are expected to present a portfolio demonstrating manual dexterity, knowledge of techniques, and an understanding and affinity for art materials
- **Languages:** reading proficiency in one or two foreign languages may be required
- **Additional Coursework:** courses in museum studies, drafting, and library science may also be recommended

Potential candidates should contact the programs directly for details regarding prerequisites, application procedures, and program curriculum. In addition to required course work, graduate programs strongly encourage students to obtain some conservation experience, which can be gained through an undergraduate introductory internship or fieldwork. Appropriate experience may include conservation work in regional, institutional, or private conservation laboratories.

### **Programs in the United States:**

**Buffalo State College:** Art Conservation Department, Master of Arts degree and Certificate of Advanced Study in Art Conservation

[www.buffalostate.edu/depts/artconservation](http://www.buffalostate.edu/depts/artconservation)

**University of Arizona,** Graduate Program in Heritage Conservation Science

[www.mse.arizona.edu/heritage/index.html](http://www.mse.arizona.edu/heritage/index.html)

**Columbia University,** Historic Preservation Program Graduate School of Architecture Planning and Preservation

[www.arch.columbia.edu/programs/historic-preservation](http://www.arch.columbia.edu/programs/historic-preservation)

**University of California Los Angeles/Getty Conservation Program,** Archaeological and Ethnographic Conservation

[www.ioa.ucla.edu/conservation-program](http://www.ioa.ucla.edu/conservation-program)

**University of Pennsylvania,** Graduate Program in Historic Preservation

[www.design.upenn.edu/historic-preservation](http://www.design.upenn.edu/historic-preservation)

**Harvard University,** Straus Center for Conservation Harvard University Art Museums

[www.artmuseums.harvard.edu/study-and-research/researchcenters/straus.dot](http://www.artmuseums.harvard.edu/study-and-research/researchcenters/straus.dot)

**University of Texas at Austin,** Library and Archives Conservation, Kilgarlin Center for Preservation of the Cultural Record School of Information

[www.ischool.utexas.edu/kilgarlin/about.php](http://www.ischool.utexas.edu/kilgarlin/about.php)

**Johns Hopkins University,** Dept. of Materials Science & Engineering

[www.materials.jhu.edu/index.php/graduate](http://www.materials.jhu.edu/index.php/graduate)

**University of Texas at Austin,** Historic Preservation, School of Architecture

<http://soa.utexas.edu/hp/intro>

**New York University IFA,** Art Conservation

[www.nyu.edu/gsas/dept/fineart/ifa/curriculum/conservation.htm](http://www.nyu.edu/gsas/dept/fineart/ifa/curriculum/conservation.htm)

**Winterthur/University of Delaware,** The Department of Art Conservation

[www.artcons.udel.edu](http://www.artcons.udel.edu)

**Smithsonian/Museum Conservation Institute,** Conservation Research and Technical Studies

[www.si.edu/mci/index.html](http://www.si.edu/mci/index.html)

### **Programs in Canada:**

**Fleming College**, Collections Conservation and Management/Museum Management and Curatorship  
[www.flemingc.on.ca/index.cfm/go/programs/sub/display/code/CCM.cfm](http://www.flemingc.on.ca/index.cfm/go/programs/sub/display/code/CCM.cfm)

**Queens University**, Art Conservation, Department of Art  
[www.queensu.ca/art/programs\\_artc.html](http://www.queensu.ca/art/programs_artc.html)

For more information on applying for a graduate school, see our handout: **The Art of Applying to Graduate School**

### **Employment Statistics from US Bureau of Labor Statistics**

Average Annual Salary: Museum Specialists and Technicians, **\$62,520**; Archives Technicians, **\$43,662** (2009)

Technicians and Conservators Median Annual Wages, **\$36,660** (2008)

Museum Technicians and Conservators Number Employed 2008: **11,100** Projected Employment 2012: **13,900**

**Please Note:** Keen competition is expected for most jobs because qualified applicants generally outnumber job openings.