



EMERGING PROFESSIONALS NETWORK

Interview and Portfolio tips and resources 2023

This resource was compiled by consulting with emerging conservators and established heritage professionals, who contributed through social media, by asking experienced colleagues, and by offering their own experience. We encourage you to seek advice, guidance and interview tips from your own network of heritage professionals. If your university does not offer job or portfolio preparation sessions, why not ask for them!

Section 1

Online resources

- Podcast: The C Word, Series 12: Episode 1.
<https://thecword.show/2022/09/14/s12e01-job-interviews/>
"Together with Beth Gillions we put on our best confidence clothes and talk about job interviews: what it's like asking the questions, what do you do when you forget everything about yourself, and what are the practical assessments like for job seeking conservators? We share our top tips and some great advice from our followers on Twitter too!"
- The conservators portfolio <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9xd7WYZXEAU>
- Starting in conservation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PcfOL6LB85U>
- ICON's creating a portfolio and advice for jobseekers:
<https://www.icon.org.uk/careers/student-resources.html>
- While this resource is aimed specifically at interviews within the heritage sector, there are many non-heritage interview resources online which can help. For instance:
<https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/interviewing/good-questions-to-ask-at-the-end-of-an-interview>



Section 2

Some examples of interview questions

These questions were gathered through a social media questionnaire, and are here as an example of the kinds of questions which are/have been asked. It is a good idea to remember that the interviewer wants to understand your thought process, and how you might apply your experience to a situation, rather than having the perfect answer. This is a good opportunity to show that you have thought through issues such as cultural value, stakeholders requirements, ethical issues, risks to the object and various conservation options, rather than suggesting a set solution.

- Tell us about a time when you had to communicate conservation to a non-specialist audience.
- Tell us about a time when you had to persist with a proposal because one of the stakeholders was very resistant.
- How would you prepare an area to receive an archive of objects.
- Tell us about a time you worked in a team and what 3 qualities were really important for making it work.
- Tell us about a time you worked in a team and what your role was.
- Why do you want to work here and what 3 qualities make you right for the job. Why do you want the job? What appeals to you about this role?
- What area of your skillset do you think you need to improve, and what steps are you taking to do this? What would you say are your weaknesses at the moment?
- Describe a time when you worked on a project which had a non-flexible deadline.
- Describe a situation when your resources were very limited, and how you got around the issues - what decisions did you have to make?
- How would you manage your time during a project? What tools do you use to manage your time?
- Describe a time you worked in collaboration with other conservators to achieve your goals. Can you give an example of team working, what your particular role was and why it mattered in that project.
- Tell us about a time when you worked with a client on a project/object and how you managed this?
- Tell us about your experience with specific equipment (for example a digitisation role).
- Tell us about a time - if you can - when a treatment has gone wrong and how you solved this.

Section 3

Skills which interview panels are searching for, how they can be demonstrated and advice from the interviewers.

These suggestions are gathered from conservation professionals who interview applicants, and are not an exhaustive list. Again, ask your network of heritage professionals what they search for in a good applicant.

- Relevant qualification or experience as demonstrated in case studies displayed in the portfolio. Not necessarily a whole project from start to finish, but different aspects of the treatment, briefly and clearly labelled. You could use bullet points. Don't use too much text.
- Practical, hands-on experience is an advantage over academic qualifications with little or no practical experience. This can be demonstrated through your portfolio, which should correspond to the job spec and role.
- Demonstration of CPD and willingness to learn. List your relevant experience.
- Enthusiasm and passion for the subject and for working at that particular institution. I.e. be familiar with the work of the institution or their collections, and be ready to talk about them.
- Eagerness for the role, 'positive energy', pro-activity and the suggestion or examples of your activities (mentioned both in covering letter and CV) that you would be a good team member. This doesn't have to be heritage-related and could be volunteer roles you have in your community or roles you have undertaken in other areas of life.

Advice from the interviewers:

- Candidates are often asked to undertake a visual assessment of an object and propose treatment. Be prepared to go through this process, and familiarise yourself with the type of objects which the institution works with. This is where you are being asked to show your knowledge, so you can refer to relevant projects you have worked on, and talk through your reasoning.
- Use the STAR method (Situation, Task, Action, and Result). It's recommended to have answers in the bank, things like a challenge you've overcome, your proudest achievement, and examples of teamwork.
- It's useful to know different conservation approaches to a particular problem. Often we're taught one way of doing things and become quite regimented in this approach, but it's a big plus to talk about alternative options and research you may have read about, and to discuss different levels of intervention. Remember that it's a real skill to know when *not* to treat an object.

Section 4

Preparation for your interview and advice for presenting your portfolio.

There isn't one set way to present your portfolio, we have tried here to suggest some broad guidelines, and you may want to search online or ask your colleagues and tutors for their advice. Further resources are suggested in the Online Resources section above.

- Don't be afraid to make contact with the institution before you apply - there will always be an email address for further questions. Ask any questions or for clarification if you aren't sure about anything on the application form, and show that you are interested and engaged. Interviewers will remember those who showed initiative before applying.
- Typically interview questions are based on the job criteria, which is set in advance. The best thing to do before the interview is to go through the job description, identify these points, and prepare examples.
- Learn about the institution, their vision, core work and projects. Familiarise yourself with specific collections, particular projects and even objects so that you can talk about these and demonstrate your engagement with their work.
- Make sure you put the most relevant images/info for the job at the front of your portfolio as you might not get to show all of the portfolio in the allotted time.
- A simple portfolio layout is important. Include large photos and brief information. This way you can talk through your work and the information will act as reminders because it's easy to forget every detail of how you managed that project or treatment.
- To show a wide variety of skills, you could display individual treatments on different objects (cleaning, a chemical treatment, reconstruction, colour matching etc) rather than treatment of a whole object from start to finish. Interviewers want to understand your reasoning (why you chose that treatment) and skill levels rather than to see before and after images.
- You could bullet point each image, for instance Treatment, Ethical considerations, Challenges, Reasoning, etc. You can elaborate on each of these during the interview.
- Often the application will tell you how many portfolio pages they want to see. Don't make your portfolio longer, as they will not look at it!
- You can take reports or other lengthy written work such as your dissertation with your portfolio to show you're capable of this, but don't expect the interviewer to read through them.
- A digital portfolio is increasingly common and can be sent in ahead of the interview. This won't be looked at before the day of the interview though as the panel should treat all applicants the same regardless of whether you have a digital portfolio or a physical portfolio.

Section 5

Advice for Applications

- Always address all of the job criteria and be succinct in your answers. Even if something seems really obvious such as IT or writing skills, don't skip these. One of the best ways to do this is to give examples in your answers, as it means the shortlister can easily identify that you meet the criteria.
- Don't repeat yourself.
- Give examples of your soft skills, if they are asking for them. These are transferable skills which you may have gained from a non-conservation job, and are just as important as your conservation skills. Examples are: good team member, good communicator, interpersonal skills, leadership, problem solving, adaptability, work ethic, project and time management. You will need to give solid examples of when you have demonstrated these skills, why your contribution mattered, and what the outcome was.
- Read between the lines. If the person spec and job role repeats that you will be working in a team, or autonomously, or able to communicate well, these are core soft skills which they are seeking.
- You will be given a word count for each part of the application, which you should stick to.

Advice for Practical sessions

- The main aim of most practical sessions is to establish your skill levels. The interviewer knows that you might be nervous within the pressurised setting that is an interview, but try to pace yourself, prepare your area, remember your PPE and ensure you have assessed the object and issue fully before you start.
- Practical sessions should match the job role, so you can prepare by making sure you have a firm understanding of the job criteria.
- Practical sessions often have an additional hidden aim, for example if you're told to package an object or make a box it might be observing your handling skills with different material types, or your manual dexterity skills, or how well you deal with an unknown material.

Section 6

During the interview

- Depending on the workplace, the interview panel will likely not be all conservators, there may even be no conservators on the panel, so be mindful of technical language. Balance expert knowledge and involve the whole panel with your language and eye contact. If something appears to get the panel's interest, for example if they ask follow up questions, it's a sign that it's relevant and you should expand on the subject.
- Some interviewers will prompt you further if they think you have more to give. This is an opportunity to pause and reconsider the question. They often won't do this more than once, so listen to what they are saying.
- If you know there's a desirable criteria you don't have, such as accreditation, it's better to acknowledge it and be honest rather than avoid it, for example you might say "I don't have accreditation but I am keen to work towards this...".
- Often there will be a mix of questions both conservation related, and not conservation based. There's no pressure to relate all the questions to conservation examples. The interviewer is looking for a well rounded team player, and non-conservation answers are just as valid. As graduates and emerging conservators you'll often be applying alongside your course-mates with similar experiences so an answer that delves into your experiences outside of conservation will give you more context and tell the interview panel who you are, making you stand out.
- Take your time when answering, don't rush into talking. Ask for the interviewer to repeat the question so you have more time to consider, and they might repeat it in a way that emphasises exactly what they want you to tell them. You can pause for a few seconds (even if that feels wrong in an interview), then tell the interview panel how you are going to answer the question, for example "To answer your question I am going to talk about this example, and this other example".
- You can go back to questions even at the end of the interview if you remember something that would have been a better answer or adds more to the answer you gave. Sometimes the panel will say "is there anything more you'd like to add" or is there anything that they've not covered in their questions that's relevant to the job.
- While notebooks or cue cards are often not a problem to take into an interview, some interviewers might not look favourably on it, so it's best to check with them before the interview starts. If you do take in cue cards, don't just read from a script. Notebooks can be useful to note down the interviewer's question so you can have it visually in front of you while you answer to make sure your answer is relevant and fully answers the question as sometimes a question might have multiple parts.

Section 7

Advice for Tours

- During tours, the organisation is trying to sell themselves to the candidate as much as the candidate is selling themselves to the organisation. It's more of a two-way situation than it might feel.
- Be aware the entire time you are there will be a part of the assessment including the tour, so be interactive, polite, and ask questions.
- Tours are a great opportunity to gain information that may help you in the interview. Or you can ask questions in the interview about something you see or hear in the tour that interests you, then you can ask for the interviewer to tell you more about that.

The 'Do you have any questions for us?' section.

One of the most important sections of every interview is 'Do you have any questions?' at the end.

This is your opportunity to show the interviewer that you're engaged with the organisation and keen to work there, but it's also - and perhaps more importantly - your opportunity to make the interview work for you. The question section of your interview is your turn to drill down into the details so you can make an informed decision about accepting a position if it's offered to you. This is also your opportunity to find out about your potential employer, so do ask the questions which weren't made clear in the job advert.

- What's the work culture like? What's the managerial style?
- What makes the interviewer proud to work at the institution? What do they look forward to at work every day?
- What would a successful first six months in the position look like? Can you tell me more about the general day-to-day duties and what does a typical day look like?
- Can you tell me more about the CPD opportunities available to me through this place of work? Does this workplace support (and fund) accreditation? Are there opportunities to go to relevant conferences?
- Is there anything about my application which isn't clear, or you would like to discuss further?