

Selecting a conservator

Choosing the right conservator to look after a collection or a treasured item is an important decision; the wrong choice could result in permanent damage or loss in value whether that is monetary, historical and cultural significance or sentimental value.

The information below will help you understand what to expect when you work with a professionally qualified Conservator.

Steps to success

1. Outline your requirements.
2. Contact possible Conservator with relevant experience.
3. Meet with Conservator-Restorer in presence of object to enable the Conservator to prepare a treatment proposal and quotation.
4. Decide on most suitable candidate taking into account factors such as experience (supported by references), cost and availability.
5. Ensure that the Conservator has appropriate security arrangements and insurance cover in place.
6. Agree a written contract including timeframes.
7. Keep in contact with Conservator once work commenced.
8. On completion of the project ensure that all work has been fully documented in the 'Project Report'.
9. Pay Conservator's final invoice once the final Project Report has been received.

Things to consider

Brief

Depending on the extent of the work required, you may have produced a short brief. Decide whether to approach a single Conservator, or request quotations from a number of Conservators.

Experience and Accreditation

Look for evidence of appropriate training and experience. In addition to initial training, a Conservator may be Accredited by Icon. This means that they are subject to regular professional development reviews, assessed by their Accredited peers, to verify that they are keeping in touch with the latest techniques and advances in the sector. To find out if they're Accredited, search for them by name on the Conservation Register.

Scope of work

You should agree the work to be carried out and ask for a written treatment proposal to be submitted with the estimate. Additional charges may be made for extensive documentation. Depending on the size of the project, you may also be consulted periodically during the course of the work. You should expect to be consulted before the treatment proposal is altered or any additional work is carried out.

Place of treatment

Conservators work in a variety of locations and conditions. However, the workspace should always be self-contained and fitted out for the purpose.

- Does the workspace appear well-ordered, with careful handling and storage of the objects undergoing or awaiting conservation?
- Does the Conservator operate within current health and safety legislation and guidelines? (For example, you could look for toxic fume extraction apparatus.)
- Does the Conservator have an emergency response plan in case of fire, flood or building damage?
- Do they operate in a professional and efficient fashion?

If the agreed work is undertaken on the Conservator's premises, the Conservator shall be responsible for the risk of damage to or loss of the Item whilst in the Conservator's custody. The Client shall be responsible for arranging transit of the Item to and from the Conservator's premises unless otherwise agreed and the Client shall be responsible for the insurance of the Item whilst in transit. If the agreed work is undertaken on the Client's premises, then

- (a) the Conservator shall be responsible for any loss or damage to the Item caused as a result of the Conservator's negligence, or
- (b) in all other circumstances the Client shall be responsible for any loss or damage to the Item and shall take all necessary steps to insure the Item.

Contracts

The Contract (or 'Work Order') document should include a description of the treatment plan and expected start and finish dates plus any other relevant terms and conditions. The cost quoted should be broken down and VAT clearly shown. The payment structure will differ depending on the Conservator and the value of the work. It is usual to pay a deposit at the outset with additional payments made at specific stages or upon completion of the work. The value of work should also be stated. Conservators often know about the history and composition of objects and may be able to advise on the significance of the object, but for a valuation you should consult an auction house or a valuation expert. The Conservator may request to see proof of ownership documentation.

Where items are being treated off site you may wish to view the treatment in progress by prior arrangement. On occasions you may be contacted during treatment for example if the Conservator has uncovered something particularly interesting or unexpected or where a Conservator decides during treatment that changes should be made to their initial treatment proposal.

Record keeping

The Conservator should always keep careful records of work carried out. This is what is expected of a professional and is vital if the object requires work at a later time. You should expect a final report which, along with any photographs, can be kept with the item or collection.