

Five Questions to Ask Any 3D Scanning Vendor

A plain-language checklist for libraries, museums, and historical societies evaluating a scanning project.

These are the questions we'd want a client to ask us, and a good vendor will be glad you asked them.

1. How will our objects be handled, and by whom?

Why it matters: Artifact scanning itself requires no handling and no surface treatment at all. The process should be completely non-contact: the capture is photograph-based, nothing touches the object, and if it is safe to photograph, it is safe to scan. Handling, positioning, and moving objects is a separate matter from the scan, and it helps to be clear about who is responsible for it.

A good answer sounds like: The vendor confirms the capture is fully non-contact, then describes the handling arrangement plainly. Two arrangements are common and both are reasonable: your staff positions the objects under your institution's own protocols and the vendor works around them, or the vendor includes object handling by a certified professional as a distinct, named part of the service. What matters is that the answer is specific, rather than handling being an afterthought. Capture on-site at your building is the norm; if a workflow involves transporting objects, it is worth talking through packing, transit insurance, and why the trip is necessary.

Also ask: Does the vendor carry liability insurance, and will they name your institution as additional insured for the session?

2. What resolution is the geometry, and what resolution is the texture?

Why it matters: A 3D model has two separate layers of quality: the geometry (the measured shape, expressed as point spacing or polygon count) and the texture (the photographic color layer, expressed in pixels). A model can have beautiful color draped over crude geometry, and it will look fine in a web viewer right up until you try to measure, print, or zoom. These are two different numbers, and it is fair to ask for both.

A good answer sounds like: Specific figures for each layer, and an explanation of how they will be matched to your intended use. Detail requirements differ between a web exhibit, a replica, and a condition record.

Also ask: Can we see a finished model of a comparable object, in a viewer, where we can zoom all the way in? A model you can explore yourself tells you more than portfolio images can.

3. Exactly what files do we receive, and who owns them?

Why it matters: The files are the product. Some institutions have finished scanning projects holding only a link to a model on someone else's platform, which leaves the collection's digital record dependent on that platform staying online.

A good answer sounds like: You receive the full-resolution archival master files in open, standard formats (such as OBJ, PLY, or glTF), plus web-optimized versions. Ownership and full usage rights transfer to your institution, in writing. It is normal for a vendor to keep a copy for their portfolio; the important thing is that your institution holds the masters too.

4. Is the deliverable finished for our intended use, or is it raw data?

Why it matters: Raw scan output needs cleanup: stray geometry from stands and backgrounds, holes, oversized files that no website can load. The gap between “we scanned it” and “you can use it” is where projects stall, especially at institutions without 3D staff.

A good answer sounds like: The quote states the end use (web embed, print file, archive) and the deliverable arrives ready for it, with setup help included or clearly priced. Quotes can differ widely on exactly this step, so it is worth confirming what is included. Ask what happens after delivery if a file does not work in your website, printer, or exhibit.

5. Will this still work in ten years?

Why it matters: Platforms change hands and change plans. Sketchfab, for years the default home of museum 3D models, was folded partly into Epic Games' Fab marketplace in 2024. The viewer and free hosting still work well today, but the episode showed the heritage field how much of its digital collections sat on a single company's roadmap. A plan that depends on one platform staying online is a display plan, not a preservation plan.

A good answer sounds like: Your institution holds the full-resolution masters on your own storage, in open formats that any future software can read. Online viewers and hosting are treated as replaceable display layers on top of the files you own, not as the archive itself.

Prepared by Museum Scan (museumscan.com), a 3D scanning and fabrication studio in Waltham, MA serving museums and cultural institutions. These questions apply to any vendor, including us. Free to share.