

## **Speech by Ludmilla Jordanova on the occasion of the launch of the Research & Public History Department, Science Museum Group**

**London, 18<sup>th</sup> September 2012**

I am here tonight with two hats on: I have the honour of being a Trustee of the Science Museum Group (and I chair the Collections and Research Committee) and I am also a researcher, and a researcher furthermore who has a strong interest in public history.

There are many reasons to celebrate and promote the research that is done in museums. I shall come to those in a moment, but I'd like to comment first on the very notion "research". I think it's harder to define than we sometimes think. Sustained nosiness, systematic curiosity that is eventually shared with others in some form, is one definition. Putting it this way hints at how "research" is one aspect of drives and activities that are integral to human lives, how multifaceted and rich it is capable of being, how the extraordinary and diverse collections that the Science Museum Group is privileged to be the custodian of, invite many kinds of research into the objects themselves, those who made and used them, including those who use and view them now.

The vision that kinds of research often kept distinct should be brought into dialogue with each other is bold and exciting. In my own work I am interested in the audiences both past and present for visual and material culture, and in the physical properties of artefacts, the sorts of things that only high quality conservation research can reveal. It is fitting that a group of museums about "science", which in many languages still has the broad meaning of knowledge and learning, should use and foster a wide range of approaches to understanding some of the most central phenomena of human existence, namely science in its more specific sense, medicine and technology.

To put it this way sounds ambitious and so it should. Research is about the aspiration to know more, better - to communicate more effectively and widely the results of such honest toil. As an academic I wish to pay tribute to museums as engines of research. We benefit hugely from collaborations with those who work in museums, and not only in posts that are most obviously concerned with research. The skills in writing good panels and labels are demanding and hard won and the insights to be derived from handling objects routinely, going into stores, dwelling with collections, are immense.

We increasingly recognise how fundamental the knowledge acquired from artefacts is. It is astonishing to me now that when I look back over the more than forty years that I have been interested in the history of science, how absent any sustained engagement with the material worlds of science, medicine and technology has been for much of that time. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, I was mainly taught about abstract ideas; now it is taken as read that embodied knowledge, material and visual culture, and the close analysis of social practices are central to our field. But we must confess that the *full* potential of integrating museum collections and the expertise of museum professionals into academic understanding is yet to be realised.

Museums, then, are homes to research, in a sense whether they like it or not, and in this case, we like it. We like it so much that it is being given considerable priority and prominence within the institution. The launch of this department is one expression of this; it is absolutely central to the group's vision of its future. Research is, if you like, at home here, and by that token it can become home to collaborative research with other institutions. The collections, the multifaceted programmes covering exhibitions,

conservation and learning, and the fact that there is now a dedicated department, make it an attractive partner to those from many disciplines. The history of the institutions that make up the group also invites further research.

So the establishment of the research and public history department, led by Tim Boon, is an expression of long-term commitment on the part of the group to precisely promote and foster serious research. It is, if you like, a way of putting a very big OPEN sign on the door. This evening we invite you to enter, and to look around, to think about whether and how you can join and support us in our quest to extend and deepen the research associated with the group.

Please allow me to say a few words about the Group. I suspect many of you will be most familiar with the institution in which we are now standing, but it is one of five museums, and there are two fabulous storage sites as well: the Manchester Museum of Science and Industry; the National Media Museum in Bradford; the National Railway Museum in York, Locomotion, in Shildon, Co. Durham, Wroughton near Swindon, and the Science Museum and Blythe House in London. Each one is simply brimming with research potential, in both human and inanimate form, sometimes of unexpected kinds. Everyone knows, we hope, that we house the National Photographic Collection in the Media Museum in Bradford, but I suspect rather few people realise quite how wide and deep the visual culture collections across the entire Group are, nor that we have some exceptional architecture, for example in Manchester, all of which invite further research. So please think of us in terms of London, Manchester, York, Shildon, Bradford, and Wroughton, and dream with us about future research possibilities and collaborations.

Finally, I would like to pay tribute to Tim Boon, with whom it is always a pleasure to work, and to offer him warm support and encouragement in his new role, which I observe, involves a great deal of midwifery. While I am tempted to extend the metaphor and talk about the conception, gestation, parturition that research necessarily entails, I shall resist because I hope I have already conveyed, with both emphasis and enthusiasm, the huge potential here for intellectual growth, AND for that growth to take place through conversations between different kinds of professionals, institutions, interest groups and disciplines.

There are noble and important aspirations here and we seek your *active* support in achieving them.

LJJ

Ludmilla Jordanova is the author of *The look of the past: visual and material evidence in historical practice*, Cambridge University Press, 2012.