Major Commercial Exhibitions: 
A Curatorial Perspective

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EXAMPLES DRAWN FROM
ALEXANDER THE GREAT: THE MAKING OF A MYTH

- 21 October 2022 to 19 February 2023
- Paccar 1 Gallery, British Library, London
- Gallery size: 420 m$^2$
- Charged entry – full price £19 (approx. €22)
EXAMPLES DRAWN FROM
ALEXANDER THE GREAT: THE MAKING OF A MYTH

• **Theme:** 2,300 years of storytelling around Alexander the Great
• **Cultures:** items in 22 languages
• **Countries:** items from 25 countries
• **Formats:** Books, manuscripts, comics, film, music, paintings …

BABYLONIA, 331-330 BC
Astronomical Dairy
British Museum

ENGLAND, 11TH CENTURY
Latin texts about Alexander the Great
BL Royal MS 13 A

MALAYSIA, 2022
Reimena Yee, *Alexander, the Servant and the Water of Life*
Digital graphic novel
THE EXHIBITION PROCESS

Outline proposal
Approval
Scoping
Content development
Design & build
Delivery & promotion
Review
STEP 1: OUTLINE PROPOSAL

What makes a good proposal?

• An idea with broad appeal.

• Accessible to non-specialists.

• Good fit with the British Library brand, where we can provide a unique perspective through our collections.

• Opportunities to highlight the breadth of our collection.

• Obvious marketing angles.

Anyone can submit a proposal, but only a few can be successful.
STEP 1: OUTLINE PROPOSAL (cont.)

EXHIBITION PROPOSAL FORM
(to be filled in with reference to the Exhibition Proposal Form Accompanying Notes)

1. Working title
   Alexander the Great: Lost in Legend

2. Proposed by (include full team):
   Adrian Edwards, Ursula Sims-Williams, Peter Toth

3. Date and version:
   August 2019, Version 5.0

4. Exhibition space (please tick all that could apply):
   Paccar 1

5. Proposed slot:
   April 2022—August 2022, or October 2022—February 2023 (subject to future discussion)

6. Give a brief overview of the exhibition concept:
   Alexander the Great lived over two thousand years ago but his name continues to fuel passionate debate. In less than 10 years he conquered the Ancient world from Greece to India, but was dead by the age of 33. Although his vast empire did not last, Alexander’s legacy has endured through the stories told about his life and conquests. Storytelling began shortly after his mysterious death, and by the Middle Ages had developed into the *Alexander Romance*, a narrative featuring Alexander as the all-conquering hero who fought mythical beasts and explored the unknown using submarines and flying chariots. These tales spread across European, Islamic and Asian cultures: new adventures were added and the figure of Alexander was continually re-shaped into whatever kind of ideal hero people wanted him to be. The legend continues to evolve even today, as artists, novelists and filmmakers project him as a hero in tune with the values of our own age, often exploring his sexuality.

- Curatorial team established during the process of developing the proposal
- 3 curators at the beginning, with a mix of knowledge and skills: an ancient papyrus specialist, an Islamic Persian specialist, and a Western Early Printed Book specialist
- (Later joined by a 4th curator, focused on social media, video-game collaboration, and web content development)
- Developed the proposal together
- This happened during the course of early 2019
STEP 2: APPROVAL

- Exhibitions Commissioning Group meets four times a year; they consider suggestions within the context of a wider events programme.
- Batches of new ideas are audience tested to see what the great British public thinks.
- The Commissioning Group might approve or reject the idea…
- …or they might request a feasibility study before going any further.
STEP 3: SCOPING

- Identify key messages and target audiences.
- Overview of narrative and star objects.
- For sharing.
- For audience testing.
STEP 3: SCOPING (cont.)

SCOPE OF EXHIBITION: Alexander the Great: a Life in Legend (working title)

21 October 2022 – 19 February 2023

Paccar 1

Overview

Alexander the Great lived over 2,000 years ago but his name continues to fuel passionate debate. In less than 10 years he conquered the ancient world from Greece to India, but was dead before his 33rd birthday. Although his vast empire did not last, Alexander’s legacy has endured through the stories told about his life and conquests. Storytelling began in his lifetime, and by the Middle Ages had developed into the Alexander Romance, a narrative featuring Alexander as the all-conquering hero who fought mythical beasts and explored the unknown using submarines and flying chariots. These tales spread across European, Islamic and Asian cultures: new adventures were added and the figure of Alexander was continually reshaped into whatever kind of ideal hero people wanted him to be. The legend continues to evolve even today, as artists, novelists and filmmakers present him as a hero in tune with the values of our own age, often exploring his sexuality, motivation, and leadership qualities.

Objectives, messages and audiences

Internal objectives

• To mount the first ever exhibition about the myths and legends of Alexander the Great
• To collaborate across Western and Asian collection areas, reflecting the multiculturalism of Alexander stories
• To integrate heritage and contemporary items in a variety of media including sound, film, 2D and 3D works
• To present AV and videogames in an innovative and immersive way within a...
STEP 4: CONTENT DEVELOPMENT

Outline proposal

Approval

Scoping

Content development

Design & build

Delivery & promotion

Review

**STEP 4: CONTENT DEVELOPMENT (cont.)**

Exhibit long list

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<th>DATE</th>
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<th>AUTHOR</th>
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<td>1471</td>
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<td>92-7-498</td>
<td>Curtius Rufus, Quintus</td>
<td>Historiae Alexandri Magni [Incipit: Inter hec Alexandri ad conducendum ex peloponeso militem Cleandro cum peca...</td>
<td>Venice</td>
<td>Historical biography. Curtius. Original Latin</td>
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<td>n/a</td>
<td>Hartlieb, Johann</td>
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<td>Augsburg</td>
<td>Alexander Romance [Pseudo-Callisthenes]. German translation</td>
<td>With frontpiece portrait of Alexander as a vampire</td>
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STEP 4: CONTENT DEVELOPMENT (cont.)

Inward Loans

• 36 loan items
• 18 lenders

Shown here:
• 14th-century Greek manuscript of the Alexander Romance (Istituto Ellenico, Venice),
• Armour of Prince Henry Frederick, 1607 (Royal Amouries),
• Rolls Plaque, Liège, c.1160 (V&A),
• André Bauchant’s 1940 painting of Alexander’s funeral procession (Tate)
STEP 4: CONTENT DEVELOPMENT (cont.)
Rich Audio Visual Material
STEP 4: CONTENT DEVELOPMENT (cont.)
Writing panels and labels, with the Interpretation Manager

PANEL TEXTS
85–100 words.

Journey’s End
Threatened with a potential mutiny in Punjab, Alexander was forced to turn back and lead his army through the desert to Babylon. On arrival, they were met by bad omens and Alexander became fatally ill. The cause of his death remains unknown, although there are plenty of stories. His body was transported on a magnificent carriage to Egypt, where it was eventually placed in a mausoleum at Alexandria. The tomb is now lost, but the sarcophagus that once held his body may have been identified.

LABEL TEXTS
70–80 words.

Alexander in Britain
The French medieval romance Perceforest contains a long account of an unexpected diversion made by Alexander. His ship is blown off course in a storm and he lands in Britain: an island of dark forests and evil enchanters. Alexander eventually brings order to its people by appointing two of his followers as kings of England and Scotland. The illustration, suggestive of Alexander and his companions arriving in Britain, is probably recycled from another work.

Perceforest. Paris, 1528. 85.k.5–6
STEP 5: GALLERY DESIGN & BUILD

- 3D designers appointed
- Graphic designers appointed
- Construction company appointed
- Audio-visual and interactive developers appointed
STEP 5: GALLERY DESIGN & BUILD
3D Design by Drinkall Dean
STEP 5: GALLERY DESIGN & BUIDL
Gallery layout and colour template

SECTION 1 – The Man and the Myth
SECTION 2 – A Conqueror in the Making
SECTION 3 – Building an Empire
SECTION 4 – Alexander’s Relationships
SECTION 5 – Mythical Quest
SECTION 6 – Journey’s End
STEP 5: GALLERY DESIGN & BUILD
Exhibition Build
STEP 6: DELIVERY & PROMOTION

- Opening event, then...
- Media tours and interviews
- VIP and group tours
- Promotion for the exhibition book
- Associated events programme (talks, performances, parties)
- Associated adult learning programme
- Associated schools learning programme
- Associated conferences and academic workshops
- Responding to comments, compliments and complaints
- Constant, constant promotion through engagement with the media, with social media, with marketing campaigns, etc.

Outline proposal → Approval → Scoping → Content development → Design & build → Delivery & promotion → Review
STEP 7: REVIEW

• Employ an external company to provide a ‘summative external review’ throughout the run of the exhibition.

• For Alexander, company called BVA-BDRC won the contract, and undertook:
  - 1,161 quantitative exit interviews
  - 18 in-depth qualitative interviews
  - 1 day of ethnographical research observing visitors

• Reported on type of visitors, what their expectations were, and whether they had been met.

• Learned, for example, that 3 in 5 of the visitors to Alexander were women – which is slightly more mixed than for the average exhibition in that gallery.
THANK YOU