

'THE MOST IMPORTANT ALEXANDER OF THEM ALL'

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There are few heroes in the history of the world that have not been cast down in recent years, insulted by critical analysis and by shameful 'exposures'. Alexander the Great has, so far, escaped such a fate and even Hollywood (and other) films tell his story with the admiration and reverence of authors of antiquity. Many tribes and peoples in India, Afghanistan and in the Pamir Mountains are proud of their mythical origins among Alexander's warriors.

He has long been not just a great and handsome conquering hero but a symbol of how a clash of cultures can bring positive results. Without apparently bringing harm to anyone

(although that of course is not quite true), Alexander's conquests gave birth in East and West to an incredible synthesis of cultures and even of belief systems. This synthesis – hellenistic culture – was marvellous in itself, but it was moreover that which laid the basis for the world's further development, a development which led to Christian culture in its broadest sense and even to Islamic culture.

'The Age of Alexander' was a century of political, philosophical and artistic creativity. Magnificent states, new towns and cities, brilliant thinkers, amazing artists. For centuries great masterpieces – among them works included in this exhibition – have been connected with the name of Alexander. Graeco-Bactrian art, Greek sculpture, fantastical engraved gems, Sassanid and Byzantine silver, Persian miniatures, and much much more.

The Hermitage is proud of its collection of works with connections to Alexander. We have a great affection for our Hellenism Room. For many years our scholars have been studying the question of the Hellenistic heritage in both West and East. But the imperial museum has another key link to the hero who brought East and West together. The Winter Palace was the residence of three Russian tsars who bore the name Alexander.

Just a few years ago we presented a large exhibition devoted to Alexander I, victor of Napoleon. He was named in honour of Alexander Nevsky, the Russian hero and saint who defended Russia from Western aggression, and of Alexander the Great, who conquered whole worlds. The name he was given at his birth was to play its role in the turn that his life took. Alexander II and Alexander III also made significant contributions to Russian history and to the Hermitage.

With this exhibition, the Hermitage demonstrates the potential of a museum that is not just large, not just universal, but encyclopaedic. The complex cultural and temporal ties demonstrated by the world of Alexander the Great are not merely fascinating in themselves. Today, as the world once brought together by Alexander rapidly falls apart, it is good to recall that globalisation is not always something to regret. This exhibition serves to illustrate that fact.