In conclusion, let us look now at the culture that created these images. What did it wish to demonstrate? What pleasures, or indeed what lessons did it wish to convey? If we leave aside thirteenth-century Arabian painting and certain aspects of seventeenth-century painting in Iran and India—apart from a few exceptions—the art of painting in the lands of Islam was a phenomenon associated with the royal courts and one that focused on Iranian literary traditions.

Let us consider in more detail this miniature from a sixteenth-century manuscript of the poems of Nizami (opposite). A queen is seen seated on a throne on a raised platform next to a pool either constructed or fed into the garden. A prince seated in front of her is looking at the image of an equally aristocratic figure. All around we see the typical groups of figures that make up our scene: servants bringing dishes of food, drinks being prepared, a hunter with a hawk, men plowing, military and civilian officials, young women in the queen’s entourage and trees and bushes in bloom. Everything is shown in a two-dimensional space and the lack of understanding of perspective has bizarrely transformed the decorative canopy over the throne into a large, richly colored lozenge forming the main axis of the composition. The image’s iconography is relatively simple. The queen is showing Iskandar [Alexander the Great] the portrait she has secretly had made of him so that she would be sure to recognize him. There are numerous variations on this classic tale in Iranian folklore: for example, in the legends surrounding Iskandar, Khosrow and Shirin other heroes were also captivated by images, or used images to find their beloved or identify a prince in a crowd. In terms of art, the subject is an interesting one as it touches upon the question of the creation of images as reflections of reality. Iskandar is also one of the great subjects of Iran’s epic history, a role he shares with Solomon, the mythical kings of Iran such as Gagumarth and Sam, and indeed the historical Sassanid kings Bahram Gur and Khosrow; all were transformed into mythical heroes pursuing extraordinary romantic adventures inspired by hopes that were rarely fulfilled but always exhilarating. All these figures became part of Iranian epic tales and of great lyric and mystical stories such as those of Nizami’s Khamsa.

Indeed, once removed from its immediate written context, this image can be interpreted in several different ways. It could be the beginning of a love story, an episode in Iskandar’s epic conquests, or a visit to an ideal world, a prelude to Paradise, prepared for by the magic of a secretly created image. As with many examples in our album, this painting can be explained in mystical terms as the representation of an ideal world to which one aspires though is unable ever to reach or, more prosaically, as the illustration of a romantic tale. This uncertainty or rather this dual possibility of interpretation is partly the result of a culture that valued references to the past and whose spirituality blended legends and symbols, history and genealogy, archetypes and innovations, military values and saintly devotion and the practical life with mystical hope. And all of this is offered for the enjoyment and imagination of all those who view it.