An intriguing double-page painting (fig. 1) appears near the beginning of a manuscript made in 1339 that contains a collection of Arabic and Persian alchemical texts. The odd formal features of the painting, as well as the elusive inscriptions on it, confront the viewer with visual and textual puzzles. This paper seeks to explain these puzzles in terms of the intellectual and artistic traditions that were familiar to the anonymous painter and calligrapher who made the manuscript, and in terms of the purpose of the painting. The painter and calligrapher combined broad cross-cultural traditions with other references that were specific to the cultural context in which the painting was made: the Islamic lands under Mongol rule. This combination conveyed the purpose of the painting, which, I argue below, was to persuade the viewer of the legitimacy of alchemy.

When viewed in isolation, the painting initially seems very strange. The formal relationship between the two pages on which it appears is puzzling. Each side is framed by a different architectural device: the right side by a pointed arch and the left side by a post-and-lintel construction with a dome. A masonry wall with large blue and peach stones runs directly across the gutter where the two pages join, but it is interrupted in front of a large figure holding a tablet, and again at the doorway at the far right. Just below the wall, a continuous blue strip unites both pages. On the right page, nine eagles fly through the wall supporting the arch and towards the left side of the painting. Above these eagles, a woman looks towards the left side from an open window, and below them, four men gesture towards the left. The eagles, woman, and men all direct the viewer’s attention toward a figure who is jar-ringly different in scale and style: he looms so much larger than the men on the right that one of their faces is barely as big as one of his knees. Whereas the smaller figures find their closest parallels in fourteenth-century Jalayirid Persian manuscripts, the larger figure on the left resembles a medieval author portrait of a Christian evangelist. He sits on a chair and wears a heavily draped garment, and his head, slightly inclined, is perfectly round, as if his thick hair has been painted into the outline of a halo. He holds a tablet with an odd assortment of symbols, which include a pair of birds interlocked like yin and yang, mysterious gold and white circles, and a silver crescent moon. (This moon is now difficult to see against the black ground of the tablet because its silver pigment, tarnished with age, has darkened; but it is barely visible, directly between the pointed beard of the evangelist-like figure and the white circle beneath his beard. Also somewhat difficult to see are three faint rays of gold that descend from the two gold circles at the top of the opposite side of the tablet.)

The inscriptions surrounding this tablet comment on its symbols in an elusive manner, adding textual puzzles to the visual ones. The inscription toward the gutter above the tablet reads “They are two vapors: the light and the heavy. They are the steam and the smoke. They are the dry and the moist. The smoke is the dry; the steam is the spirit; the moist.” The inscription above the tablet on the upper left presents the following confusing numerological statement: “Water, air, and fire: therefore they have drawn it as three, to indicate thereby that it is one, within which is three. They became five in number. And the five is from two. Thus, they have said that the earth is of two substances and the water is of two natures. And they drew it as five.” The inscription at the lower right of the tablet, another inscription reads “The female is the spirit, extracted from the male, carrying it, flying away with it.” Damage to the last long inscription, written at a steep angle near the outer red post, has made the middle part illegible. The first part reads “The explanation of this black earth deems that it was white...” After several words, among which only the word for “crescent moon” is legible, this inscription continues
Fig. 1. The Silver Water painting. Compilation of alchemical texts, probably Baghdad, 1330, Topkapı Palace Library, A. 2975, fols. 2b–3a. (Photo: courtesy of the Topkapı Palace Museum, Istanbul)