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# The Silver Stream in the Foreground\*

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## Abstract

*One of the classical features of landscape in Persian manuscript-illustration is a stream of water. Painted in silver, it winds its way through a picture in a manuscript, punctuating the ground with verdant green on either side, even though the stream itself may have tarnished with centuries of exposure to the air.*

*Among a small group of paintings kept in several of the celebrated Hazine albums in the Topkapi Saray Library in Istanbul, the group that Ernst J. Grube, in 1980, had called ‘Chinese People’, one stands out, the cover-illustration to an exhibition in London in 2005. There entitled ‘Enthronement Scene’, it is unlike its closest companion-parallels, which have unpainted grounds but no naturally occurring water in the landscape: it has a surface almost fully covered in pigment; but at its very bottom can be seen the tarnished remains of ‘a silver stream in the foreground’.*

*Placed variously on a continuum stretching ‘between China and Iran’, since about 1972, the prevailing attribution has been to Aq Quyunlu Tabriz around 1480. Given ‘the silver stream in its foreground’, this article re-examines that attribution and proposes that it may be as much as a century earlier but ‘modernised’, given a fully painted landscape, at Ya’qub Beg’s court in Tabriz.*

**Keywords:** Silver stream; Western Central Asia/Samarqand; pre-Timurid painting

One of the classical features of landscape in Persian manuscript-illustration, from the later Jalayirid period to the end of the Qajar nineteenth century, is a stream of water. It is usually painted in silver (and has therefore frequently tarnished with the passage of time and the exposure to air, often appearing as a disfiguring black); its borders are fringed with abundant trees, shrubs, and colourful clumps of flowers; and it makes its way through the picture-space in a sinuous curve of life-giving water and variegated green foliage, pictorially demarcating

\*This article was first written for delivery at an international meeting on the subject of ‘Nature in Eastern Art’, held in Tehran in December of 2005; it was faintly revised, after a brief visit to the Topkapi Library, and presented at the Second Biennial HIAA (Historians of Islamic Art Association) meeting in 2010, in Washington DC. In 2020, the premise and my conclusions remain unchanged, but the bibliography was partially updated, to take into account several important publications on some of the related paintings, and the related Diez materials in Berlin; other relevant literature has appeared since 2010, and I am exceedingly grateful to the energetic reviewer for additional references that now fill some of the lacunae.

<sup>‡</sup>The original version of this article was published with an error in footnote 11. A notice detailing this has been published and the error rectified in the online and print PDF and HTML copies.

the boundary between oasis and desert that is so prevalent a feature of the lands in which such painting arose. Indeed, the stream is so frequently encountered as to be termed a *topos* in this art.<sup>1</sup>

Images from many dates and places well illustrate its essential features and the way it enhances the pictures in which it appears. In ‘Malikshah Accosted by an Old Woman’, a painting in the celebrated volume of *Masnavis* by Khwaja Kirmani (made in Baghdad, and dated 798/1396), a stream descends from the mountains and feeds trees and flowers in a narrow strip of green that quickly reverts to desert on both sides.<sup>2</sup> In an anthology of poetry traditionally associated with Bihbahan, in Fars Province, and completed in 801/1398, rain clouds, verdant gardens, and serpentine streams flowing into rock-edged pools in the foregrounds are the real subjects of the mysteriously unpeopled pictures painted on pages left blank between the poems.<sup>3</sup> In a painting in a small, jewel-like *Khamsa* manuscript made for Shahrukh in Herat and completed in 835/1431, refreshing pools sit in declivities of the mountains through which the lovelorn sculptor Farhad carries Shirin and her horse on his shoulders.<sup>4</sup> In a double-page painting of Timur’s accession-audience in Balkh, a silver stream winds through the fenced garden, conveying the impression not only of the setting in which the event took place, in the spring of 1370, but also alluding to the many other gardens surrounding Herat, where this picture was painted for Timur’s great-great-grandson Sultan Husayn Bayqara little more than a century afterwards.<sup>5</sup> In an extraordinary—if unfinished—early sixteenth-century Safavid painting no doubt made in Tabriz and usually called ‘The Sleeping Rustam’, the stream again descends from the rocky mountains through the unbelievably lush and flowering landscape, widens into a pool at the feet of the sleeping Rustam, and overflows its banks at the bottom of the picture.<sup>6</sup> Amongst the finest pictures in Shah Tahmasp’s *Shahnama*, painted perhaps around 1530, is ‘Barbad the Concealed Musician’, shown hidden in a tree in the garden where Khusrau Parviz and his court had come to celebrate Nauruz: again, the stream irrigates the verdant meadow on which the shah and his retinue have gathered.<sup>7</sup> The outdoor scenes in Tahmasp’s magisterial *Khamsa*, painted perhaps a decade or so later, almost all include images of the desert-watering stream at its most classically perfect.<sup>8</sup> Silver streams pour out of golden rocks and down over the margins of a sixteenth-century Qazvin double-page scene showing a princely party resting in the countryside, in the course of a day at the hunt.<sup>9</sup> Even in pictures of heroic achievement, streams flow out of rocky outcrops in the foregrounds of paintings in the copiously illustrated *Shahnama* made for a mid-seventeenth century governor of Mashhad,<sup>10</sup> while

<sup>1</sup>Eleanor Sims, *Peerless Images: Persian Painting and its Sources* (with contributions by Boris I. Marshak and Ernst J. Grube) (London and New Haven, 2002): the topic is discussed briefly on pp. xi–xii, and illustrated throughout the volume.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, no. 73, pp. 158–159. London, The British Library, Add. 18113, folio 85r.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, no. 74, pp. 159–160. Istanbul, Museum of Turkish and Islamic Art, MS 1950, folio 250v.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, no. 235, p. 314. Saint Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum, VR-1000, folio 100r.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, no. 33, pp. 116–117. Baltimore [MD, USA], The Milton S. Eisenhower Library of Johns Hopkins University, John Work Garrett Collection, folios 82v–83r.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, no. 78, pp. 162–165. London, The British Museum, 1948.12.11.023.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, no. 233, pp. 312–313. London, The Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art, MSS 1030.9.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, nos. 96, pp. 182–183, and 127, pp. 214–216. London, The British Library, Or. 2265.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, nos. 18, p. 104, and 133, pp. 222–223. Divided: the right half in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, 14.624, and the left half in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 12.223.1.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, no. 161, pp. 245–246. Windsor, The Royal Library, MS 1005014, folio 279v.

on the walls of the Chihil Sutun in Isfahan, lovers converse in a glade with a rock-edged pool at their feet.<sup>11</sup> And in the background of an oil-painted portrait of the young Nasir al-Din Shah Qajar, painted by Muhammad Husayn Afshar in 1276/1859–60, again a stream winds down from the Alburz Mountains behind him and widens into a pool behind his feet.<sup>12</sup>

Where a silver stream is notably absent is in the landscapes of a small group among some still problematic pre- or early Timurid paintings on paper or silk, paintings that were never intended as manuscript-illustrations. The core group—six large and imposing paintings, together with a number of similar but smaller, or otherwise less imposing, pictures—is found in two large albums in the library of the Topkapi Saray in Istanbul;<sup>13</sup> two related paintings on silk (perhaps, once, even preserved in the same albums) are now, respectively, in the Dar al-Athar in Kuwait<sup>14</sup> and The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.<sup>15</sup> The core-group includes some of the largest, most striking, most memorable images of ‘Eastern’ painting that exist, anywhere: ‘The Duel’,<sup>16</sup> ‘A Falconer’,<sup>17</sup> ‘The Lady Travelling’,<sup>18</sup> ‘The

<sup>11</sup>Sims, *Peerless Images*, no. 195, pp. 277–278.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, no. 145, pp. 229–232. Present whereabouts uncertain, formerly in the Chihil Sutun in Isfahan.

<sup>13</sup>In Hazine 2153, they are mounted on folios 3v–4r, 6v, 15v, 24r, 90v, 91r, 130v, 131v, 138r, 138v and 164v–165r; in Hazine 2160, on folios 77v and 89v. The connection with the Timurid world, for many paintings and drawings related, in one way or another, to these seven images, began almost as early as the Munich exhibition of 1910: see p. 17 in *Islamic Art I* (1981), devoted to ‘The Problem of the Istanbul Album Paintings’ (also published as Colloquy No. 10—*Between China and Iran*—in the series of Colloquies on Art and Archaeology in Asia, hosted by the Percival David Foundation, University of London, in June 1980), especially the comments on the silk painting that would shortly be acquired by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, 14.545, there attributed to Herat at the beginning of the fifteenth century. Many more of these paintings and drawings were studied by Ivan Stchoukine and published in 1935: ‘Notes sur les peintures persanes du Serail de Stamboul’, *Journal Asiatique* 226 (1935), pp. 117–140; some figure amongst his ‘École Transoxianaise’ and ‘Peintures de Style Chinois’; he too thought of ‘Turkestan’ as a likely place for the production of some of them and commented on the ‘Timurid, 15th-century quality of the costume’ but largely considered the majority as rather later, mid-sixteenth century in date. As an important sub-group and altogether, the ‘Chinese People’ group was first discussed by Ernst J. Grube in 1978, after some years of study that had begun as early as 1959 and was, in part, presented to the VIth International Congress of Iranian Art and Archaeology, held in Oxford in 1972: *Persian Painting in the Fourteenth Century: A Research Report*, Supplement no. 17 of the *Annali*, Istituto Orientale di Napoli, Vol. 38, 1978, fasc. 4, Part II, pp. 47–52, Figs. 80–101 (hereafter, *Annali*, 1978); this was reprinted (with minor typographical corrections) in a compendium volume of some of Grube’s articles, as *Studies in Islamic Paintings* (London, 1995), VII, pp. 158–289, with the original figure-numbers for illustrations retained.

<sup>14</sup>‘A Princely Couple With Attendants Around a Tree’ (or—as in *Peerless Images*—‘The Maiden, Her Duenna, Her Lover, and His Page’), LNS 77 MS: first published by Arthur Upham Pope, ‘A fifteenth-century Persian painting on silk’, *Apollo* XX (July–December 1934), p. 207; *A Survey of Persian Art*, Vol. V (Oxford, 1938) (reprinted as Vol. X), pl. 878 in colour; *Islamic Art I* (1981), Fig. 130; Sims, *Peerless Images*, no. 151, p. 236; Adel T. Adamova and Manijeh Bayani, *Persian Painting: The Arts of the Book and Portraiture*. The Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah, the al-Sabah Collection, Kuwait (London, 2015), colour cover, and Cat. 16, pp. 166–170; after conscientiously reviewing eight decades of varying opinions on the date, pp. 169–70, and also noting that it ‘has been cut out all around (irregularly at its lower right-hand corner)’, Adamova assigns it to ‘Tabriz, second half of the fifteenth century’.

<sup>15</sup>‘A Princely Couple with Attendants Around a Tree’, 57.51.24: first published by M. S. Dimand, ‘A fifteenth-century painting on silk’, *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 28 (December 1933), p. 213; Grube, *Annali*, 1978, Fig. 101; *Islamic Art I* (1981), Fig. 128; illustrated in colour in a special issue of the *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* (Fall 1978), Islamic Painting, p. 18; and also in colour, together with the now-Kuwait painting (note 14 above), in Thomas W. Lentz and Glenn D. Lowry, *Timur and the Princely Vision: Persian Art and Culture in the Fifteenth Century* (Los Angeles, 1989), p. 186 (where the general attribution is to ‘Timurid Iran or Central Asia, c. 1425–50’).

<sup>16</sup>H. 2153, folio 138r, on paper: Grube, *Annali*, 1978, Fig. 101; *Islamic Art I* (1981), Fig. 45; Sims, *Peerless Images*, no. 15, pp. 101–102; *TURKS: A Journey of a Thousand Years 600–1600* (Catalogue of a Loan exhibition at the Royal Academy, Burlington House, in London), (ed.) David J. Roxburgh (London, 2005), Cat. 159, pp. 212 and 416, captioned ‘c. 1470–90, Tabriz (?), Iran’.

<sup>17</sup>H. 2153, folio 6v, on silk: *Islamic Art I* (1981), Fig. 47; *TURKS*, Cat. 162, pp. 212 and 417, captioned ‘c. 1478–90, Tabriz (?), Iran’ and said to be in the manner of the Turkman painter Shaykhi.

<sup>18</sup>H. 2153, folios 3v–4r, on silk: Grube, *Annali*, 1978, Fig. 96; *Islamic Art I* (1981), Figs. 49 and 51; Sims, *Peerless Images*, no. 113, pp. 201–203; *TURKS*, Cat. 216, pp. 252 and 431, captioned ‘c. 1470–90, Tabriz (?), Iran’; but see

China Cart',<sup>19</sup> 'The Monastery',<sup>20</sup> and the perennially intriguing 'Divs Carrying Solomon and the Queen of Sheba'.<sup>21</sup> A seventh picture, here called 'A Princely Gathering'<sup>22</sup> and the focus of this study (see [Figure 1](#)), appears to stand both within, and outside, the group.

The figures in all these paintings have a decidedly East Asian appearance—hence the sobriquet 'Chinese People', sometimes used to define the group, whose coherence is established by the images of fully painted personages with East Asian features presented on unpainted paper or silk grounds. Often the clothing approaches what is also seen in Timurid manuscript-painting; figures handle objects and ride in conveyances that could hark from anywhere in Asia, but they act near to or inhabit buildings whose forms and decoration are clearly those of the architecture of later fourteenth-century Central Asia. In one picture, 'The Lady Travelling', the sky is painted a deep night-time blue; in another, a large tree in the background is fully coloured, as are clumps of flowers; otherwise, the paper or silk grounds are always left bare, the hilly contours of the high horizons separated from the sky but defined only by reddish dabs and dots and streaks of paint.

Like most of the other paintings and drawings in the Istanbul Albums, the 'Chinese People' group has long resisted attribution to a specific place; instead, a plethora of suggestions are found in the literature, the geographical continuum stretching 'between China and Iran'. Nonetheless, the depicted material culture—clothing but especially the architecture—seems to suggest that the 'Chinese People' group (as distinct from evidently later copies of some of them executed on very white, polished paper and mounted in the same albums) date from just prior to the beginning of the great series of illustrated manuscripts of the Timurid period,

now the review by Ernst J. Grube and Eleanor Sims, 'Demons and nomads', *Hali* 139 (2005), pp. 107–109, Fig. 5, and *idem*, 'Signposts to Central Asia', *Hali* 140 (2005), p. 23, where the left portion—missing in *TURKS* and the prior *Hali* number—is illustrated.

<sup>19</sup>H. 2153, folio 130r, on paper: Grube, *Annali*, 1978, Fig. 92; *Islamic Art I* (1981), Figs. 384 and 400; *TURKS*, Cat. 217, pp. 252 and 431, captioned 'c. 1470–90, Tabriz (?), Iran'. The picture is also widely illustrated in studies on Ming and Timurid blue-and-white ceramics.

<sup>20</sup>H. 2153, folio 131r, on paper: *Islamic Art I* (1981), Fig. 409; Barbara Brend, 'Christian subjects and Christian subjects: an Istanbul album picture', *Islamic Art I* (1981), pp. 121–129 and Fig. 409; Sims, *Peerless Images*, no. 104, pp. 190–191; *TURKS*, Cat. 219, pp. 254 and 432, captioned 'c. 1470–90, Iran'. An immensely important study by A. S. Melikian-Chirvani, 'The Iranian painter, the metaphorical hermitage, and the Christian princess', *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 16 (2002), pp. 37–52, takes many of us to task for not having recognised the inscriptions on the building as poetry, and builds for us the literary context into which these inscriptions function (although he never actually tells us the precise folio nor the album in which this painting is found; and he consistently refers to its origin as a 'manuscript': 'a single page torn away from a manuscript', p. 37); his conclusions are that '...the painting may be safely placed in Tabriz and dated...between July 1468 and November 1474...' (pp. 47–48). James White, 'A sign of the end time: "The Monastery"', Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi H. 2153, f. 131b', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 27.1 (October 2016), pp. 1–30, leaves the reader in no doubt as to his subject's location, suggests a far earlier date—810/1407–8 (pp. 7–8 and 29)—and places the painting in Qara Qyunlu Tabriz around that date, with specific references to the young son of Qara Yusuf, Pir Budaq, symbolically (and numismatically) invested as sultan in 810 (pp. 20–21, no. 106, although he 'is reported to have pre-deceased his father in 816...', p. 20, no. 140). An important illustration in Gülrü Necipoğlu's 'Persianate images between Europe and China', in *The Diez Albums: Contexts and Contents*, (eds) Julia Gonnella, Friedrike Weis and Christoph Rauch (Leiden/Boston, 2016) is on p. 588: both 'The China Cart' and 'The Monastery' are shown as they appear, facing each other on successive pages in their parent-album, H. 2153.

<sup>21</sup>H. 2153, folios 164v–165r, on silk: Grube, *Annali*, 1978, Figs. 97–99; *Islamic Art I* (1981), Fig. 250; Nancy Shatzman Steinhardt, 'Siyah Qalem and Gong Kai: an Istanbul album painter and a Chinese painter of the Mongolian period', *Muqarnas IV* (1987), pp. 59–71; Sims, *Peerless Images*, no. 247 A–B, pp. 324–326; *TURKS*, Cat. 141, pp. 187–188, and 412, captioned 'c. 1400–50, Iran or Central Asia'.

<sup>22</sup>H. 2153, folios 90v–91r, on paper: *Islamic Art I* (1981), Fig. 131; *TURKS*, Cat. 218, pp. 212 and 431–432 and the colour-cover, captioned 'c. 1470–90, Tabriz (?), Iran'; again, in colour, in a review of the exhibition by Tim Stanley, *Hali* 139 (2005), p. 104, Fig. 1.



Figures 1a and 1b. 'A Princely Gathering', Samarqand, late fourteenth century, overpainted in Tabriz between 1478 and 1490, ink and colours on paper. Source: Topkapı Sarayı Museum H. 2153, folios 90v–91r, with permission of the Topkapı Sarayı Museum and the Presidency of National Palaces Administration, Istanbul.



Continued.

in the very last decade of the eighth/fourteenth century and early in the ninth/fifteenth. Yet the courtly milieu proposed for the origin of these seven images varies widely in both time and place: between the time of Timur, from about 1380, to the end of the fifteenth century and, geographically, from Timur's Samarqand to the Qara or Aq Quyunlu courts in Tabriz, at the other end of the Timurid-influenced world.<sup>23</sup>

In an introduction to the published papers from a meeting devoted to the overall problem of the 'Istanbul Album Paintings' in 1980, Ernst J. Grube restated the broad chronology of these paintings and drawings as he then saw it:

The final step in this chain of 'development' appears to be a group of paintings that combine aspects of all the groups so far discussed to which they add yet another new element—the traditional mannerism of Islamic painting. These pictures are best characterised as attempts to create a new and truly integrated style that makes use of the manner and the iconography of all the groups but fuses these elements into pictures that come exceedingly close to the traditional formulas of Persian painting of the later 14th and the 15th centuries... Most of these pictures do not succeed in creating a complete image: they are really pastiches, composed of independently functioning elements rather than fully convincing compositions in a coherent style... Yet in other instances... all the disparate elements come together in a coherent unit that has very much the appearance of the beginning of Timurid painting.<sup>24</sup>

A decade earlier, in the early 1970s, the 'Chinese People' grouping was not so evident as it now seems. Even had it been, the double-page fully painted 'A Princely Gathering' would not have appeared to belong to a group of pictures whose primary feature was the contrast between fully painted figures set against virtually bare ground: its surface instead is entirely covered with pigment, from its deep-blue sky to the dense arboreal foliage and flowering greensward to the tarnished area in the foreground, at the very bottom of the painting. Moreover, the best parallels for the white parasol-tent patterned with blue *chinoiseries* are, with those in a number of later fifteenth-century paintings, of the provincial variety that has come to be called 'commercial Turkman'.<sup>25</sup> In fact, by 1972 this picture had elicited

<sup>23</sup>The earliest date, and the most Eastern, attribution, were first adumbrated by Pope in 1934; this view was sustained by Grube in 1972 and published in *Annali*, 1978, pp. 51–52; restated in *Islamic Art I* (1981), pp. 8 and 11, and reiterated in a review and a successive letter to the editor by Grube and Sims, *Hali*, 139–140 (2005) (see note 18 above); the later date and most 'Western' attributions also appeared in print in 1972 (see note 27 below). The later date and the Tabriz attribution are maintained by Melikian-Chirvani's 2002 study on 'The Monastery', while White's, of 2016, returns us to very early in the fifteenth century—if in the same Western Iranian city (see note 20 above). Adamova briefly, and generally, summarizes some of the varying attributions in the Kuwait catalogue of 2015, pp. 169–170, although neither study was immediately relevant to the Kuwait silk-painting; more to the point, she also comments on two important shared features, the uncoloured grounds and the manner of delineating the edges of the landscapes (p. 170).

<sup>24</sup>Ernst J. Grube, 'The problem of the Istanbul album paintings', *Islamic Art I* (1981), p. 6.

<sup>25</sup>The white tent with blue *chinoiseries* can be seen in paintings from the late thirteenth century onwards: in Diez Album A folio 70, S. 8, no. 1, in colour in *The Legacy of Genghis Khan: Courtly Art and Culture in Western Islamic Art, 1256–1353*. Catalogue of an Exhibition held at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, (eds) Linda Komaroff and Stefano Carboni (New York, New Haven and London, 2002), Cat. 31, Fig. 134; in the Great Mongol *Shahnama* painting now in the William Rockhill Nelson Gallery of Art in Kansas City, 55.103, Ernst J. Grube, *The Classical Style in Islamic Painting* (n. p., 1968), pl. 10; and in the series illustrated in *Islamic Art I* (1981), Figs. 355–357, 359–360; what distinguishes the earlier versions from that in this picture is the chevron-patterning of the lower edge, which seems to be a Turkman feature, as in *Islamic Art I* (1981), Fig. 359, as well as B. W. Robinson, "'A magnificent MS": The British Library *Shahnama* of 1486', *Islamic Art V* (2001), pp. 167–176, and colour plate VD, 'The Enthronement of Nushirwan' (it was Robinson no doubt who

an attribution, by S. C. Welch, that responds to these later fifteenth-century Turkman parallels but must, in part, also have been based on Zeki Velidi Togan's earlier comments connecting H. 2153 with the Aq Quyunlu Turkman prince Ya'qub Beg.<sup>26</sup> Welch proposed that the central figure seated on the carpet under the large parasol-tent in the centre of the composition could actually be identified as Ya'qub Beg Aq Quyunlu—who ruled from 884/1478 (when he was but 14 years of age) to 896/1490—and thought the painting could be placed in Tabriz about 1480.<sup>27</sup> Shortly thereafter, Filiz Çağman and Zeren Tanindi concurred, perhaps in the context of the 'discovery' of Turkman Court painting that was then taking place.<sup>28</sup> The later fifteenth-century Tabriz attribution largely persists, still: it is probably Welch's thinking, and writing, about 'A Princely Gathering' that underlies the continuing adherence to this particular date and place<sup>29</sup>—unlikely as it has come, now, to seem acceptable.

His reasons for the attribution, first stated in print in 1972, are several. He compares some of the figures in it to those in paintings found in an exceptionally fine copy of Nizami's *Khamsa*, the text of which was completed in Muharram 886/March 1481 in Tabriz, although its illustrations were being worked on throughout the next quarter of a century.<sup>30</sup> He also focuses on the landscape: "Most characteristic is the vegetation that forms a dynamic tapestry beneath...the assembly. Such flowers, trees, and foliage are among the most telling marks of the Turkman idiom..."<sup>31</sup>

Indeed they are—as they also epitomise the problem with this now-famous painting. For it is the vegetation, 'completed' by the stock landscape-element Welch did not name—the silver stream in the foreground—that now seems to tell us, loudly and clearly, that the landscape was actually painted over an earlier picture belonging to the 'Chinese People' group. Perhaps the deed was done around 1480 in Tabriz, at the Aq Quyunlu court of Ya'qub Beg, but whether or not this is so (or may ever be firmly established), I have few doubts that a later fourteenth-century picture of the 'Chinese People' group lies underneath the fully painted

also coined the name 'Commercial Turkman', in his 'The Turkman School to 1503', *The Arts of the Book in Central Asia*, (ed.) Basil Gray (Paris/London, 1979), pp. 243–244.

<sup>26</sup>Zeki Velidi Togan, 'On the miniatures in Istanbul Libraries, Istanbul' (Publications of the Faculty of Letters of the University of Istanbul, N. 1034/Publications of the Department of General Turkish History, N. 2, 1963): English version, prepared for the Second International Congress of Turkish Art, of a proposed—but never printed—Turkish text, pp. 7, 13–14.

<sup>27</sup>Stuart Cary Welch, *A King's Book of Kings: The Shah-namē of Shah Tahmasp* (New York, 1972), Fig. 3, pp. 38–39; commented upon in Grube, *Annali*, 1978, p. 53.

<sup>28</sup>Filiz Çağman and Zeren Tanindi, *Topkapi Palace Museum: Islamic Miniature Painting* (Istanbul, 1979), no. 47, p. 30. Two more, recent, if contradictory, opinions on the date of the assembly of this album come first from Ilse Sturkenboom, to whom I am much indebted: one is that of the Japanese scholar, Yoshifusa Seki, who believes that it (and H. 2160) both date from the time of Ya'qub Beg, his argument based on the evidence of calligraphers' names and dedications in both albums: 'Āthār-i khwushniwīs dar du murāqā'-i Sulṭān Ya'qūb: yādgarī az 'aṣr-i Qarāqūyūnlūhā wa Āqqūyūnlūhā', *Nāma-i bahārīstān* 11–12 (2007), pp. 75–172; and secondly, Gülrü Necipoğlu, who contends that both were compiled under Selim I: 'The composition and compilation of two Saray albums reconsidered in the light of "Frankish" images', in the English-Turkish facsimile publication *From China to Europe: Two Unique Topkapi Palace Albums (Hazine 2153 and 2160)*, (ed.) Zeynep Atbaş (Istanbul, forthcoming).

<sup>29</sup>As could be observed in *TURKS*, staged in London in the spring of 2005: consider the most recent attributions for these pictures, in notes 16–22 above.

<sup>30</sup>Istanbul, Topkapi Museum Library, H. 762; Robinson, 'A magnificent MS', pp. 242, 247: MS 10; the long colophon, detailing the progress of the manuscript's sponsorship, from the Timurid mid-fifteenth century to the early days of the Safavids, in about 1505, is translated by Wheeler Thackston, *A Century of Princes: Sources on Timurid History and Art* (Cambridge MA, 1989), pp. 333–334.

<sup>31</sup>Welch, *A King's Book of Kings*, p. 39.



‘dynamic tapestry’ of the Turkman landscape that is so striking a feature of ‘A Princely Gathering’.

I must confess that I have always found its Turkman attribution puzzling: to my eye, many aspects of it sit uneasily within the context of this relatively late date and place. So when, in the early months of 2005, ‘A Princely Gathering’, with the other six pictures of the core-group removed from their host-album, was on display in London with ample opportunity to see all the paintings of the group in one place, I looked long and hard at this picture. That it had been chosen as the colour cover of the catalogue proved immensely helpful after the exhibition closed: I could continue to look at, and reflect upon, what this picture might tell us. And I believe that its landscape has much to say. Indeed, it is the landscape that focused my uneasiness about its later fourteenth-century attribution, so I now turn to this remarkable ‘tapestry’ of verdure that covers the ground on which 11 men are disposed in a row.

Like ‘The Lady Travelling’,<sup>32</sup> and ‘The Duel’,<sup>33</sup> ‘A Princely Gathering’ is horizontally oriented: it measures 39.2 cm in height and, as a double-page, spreads to a width of 61.4 cm. Its horizon is very high and the contours are defined by dabs, dots, and streaks of reddish pigment seen on a narrow and meandering ‘ribbon’ of still-bare paper, running between the deep and intensely blue sky and the dense greensward. This foliate and flowering ‘carpet’ was painted in a darkish green with innumerable flowering plants and leaves outlined in either black or yellow and further articulated in yellow. This too, is a convention of later fifteenth-century Turkman painting, both of the commercial as well as the courtly variety.<sup>34</sup> In ‘A Princely Gathering’ it spreads inexorably over the three high mounds of the landscape and virtually obscures their edges but, if the painting is very carefully examined, the unpainted contours of the high horizon (sometimes further obscured with dark smudges—probably from oxidised white pigments) can be made out in places between the dark-blue sky and the dense yellow-green carpet of foliage. A smaller unpainted ‘ribbon’ was left to run along the ground at the foot of the large mature tree, on the left of the painting and, less obviously, at the foot of the tree on the right, while a tiny bare area can also be seen through the fleshy lower leaves of a mauve-flowered plant, at shoulder-height of the two men in white turbans, standing to the right of the mature, silvery-barked tree on the left side of the painting.

This tree is placed towards the dip between the first and the second hill on the high horizon. It has a peculiar shape, especially short but straight and quite thick. Its bark is a silvery greyish-green, with broad serrated leaves painted either in a greenish-turquoise edged in white or a darker black-hued green edged in yellow. Perhaps the shortness of the trunk is to permit its leaves to spread out into the available space between the mounds of the hills on the left of the painting: the upper foliage is neatly fitted into the space at the top of the picture and set against the dark-blue sky. As a cautionary comparison, let us note that the tree at the left of ‘The Duel’ has the same colouring of bark and foliage, although here its curving shape is used to close the composition at the left, framing the extraordinary

<sup>32</sup>See note 18.

<sup>33</sup>See note 16.

<sup>34</sup>For instance, *TURKS*, Cat. 209, on p. 247, a copy of the *Khamsas* of Nizami and Amir Khusrau Dihlavi, with dates of 895/1490 and 896/1491 made in Shiraz.

encounter. But within the core-group of the ‘Chinese People’, these two large examples are otherwise unique, although slenderer trees of similar colouring appear in several of the less imposing pictures associated with the group, while on the unpainted grounds of the other core-pictures may be seen the small, leafless plants so typical of the Central Asian desert.<sup>35</sup>

The large tree to the right of ‘A Princely Gathering’ seems less remarkable in colouring and shape: its reddish-brown trunk has lighter markings not unlike moiré, and its leaves are thinner, with more rounded serrations, uniformly green in colour with black-edged yellow veining and yellow edges. It is less evidently ‘fitted’ into place, against the mounded horizon and the deep-blue sky with its whorl of white Chinese-style clouds at the upper right; yet one of its branches also waves in front of the tent. This suggestive detail along with two others—the absence of both white cloud-whorls and large, leafy trees in any of the other ‘Chinese People’ paintings—should also be kept in mind.

As for the blossoming ‘carpet’, its low but exuberant forms bear flowers of many shapes, in colours of red and mauve, orange and yellow, white and blue. The foliage is usually shown as low clumps of varied forms, although the formulaic colouring is that already seen in the foliage of the two large trees on either side of the composition, green with yellow edges, and greenish-turquoise with white edges. Contrasting edges also characterise another plant in this tapestry, the lotus- or lily-pad leaf with five divisions (but a most un-lily-like small reddish flower), seen above the heads of the two attendants at the right, and at both front corners of the carpet; dots of a lighter colour punctuate the leaves’ scalloped edges. Occasionally a taller stem emerges from a flowering clump, particularly towards the back of the painting, but only once do we find the almost diagnostic tall, orange day-lily with bent leaves, a specific motif known for over a century, from the Jalayirid period.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, while it is relatively rare in Turkman Court painting, a significant example can also be seen in a key picture from the *Khamsa* of 886/1481, ‘Bahram Gur in the Green Pavilion’, where it also has two blossoms and multiple buds.<sup>37</sup> The same orange lily is also to be found in yet another unusual painting whose foliate background should also be brought into the discussion, the very large ‘Princely Couple’, painted on paper and now usually considered a Jalayirid picture of around 1400.<sup>38</sup> It is a useful comparison: the horizon is low, beginning just above the knees of the two figures, and the foliage is different from ‘A Princely Gathering’, more limited in the plants represented, while its framing trees are the more characteristic blossoming fruit-trees of early Timurid painting—which, we might also note, are completely absent from ‘A Princely Gathering’.

The underfoot carpet of blossoming verdure ought to signal the presence of water somewhere within this picture. Yet it is nowhere to be seen—until the blackened, uneven passage at the very bottom of the picture is recognised for the once-silver stream of water it must have been: if not a stream, then perhaps a pool. Whichever it was originally, its location

<sup>35</sup>Hazine 2153, folios 24v and 47v, *Islamic Art I* (1981), Figs. 129 and 132, the trees a mirror-image, but probably deriving the detail of the single branch, high up on one side of the silver trunk, from the painting now in Kuwait (note 14 above), although its smaller leaves are dark-green tipped with yellow.

<sup>36</sup>Grube, *Annali*, 1978, p. 30.

<sup>37</sup>On folio 189v; Gray (ed.), *The Arts of the Book in Central Asia*, pl. LXVII in colour, and also colour-cover.

<sup>38</sup>Also in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 57.51.20: first published in the *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* NS, XVI (1958), p. 231, variously in black and white and, most recently in colour, in Sims, *Peerless Images*, no. 156, pp. 241–242.

is strange and has the unmistakable look of an afterthought, placed at the very bottom of the picture when all else had already been covered with lush greensward and a profusion of blossom. Not that the *topos* was unknown in the library or the painting ateliers of Aq Quyunlu Tabriz: a classical example can be seen in ‘Bahram Gur in the Green Pavilion’, already noted (above) for other natural comparisons. In this now-famous picture, the stream arises in the mountains high at the right, winds downwards in two places, joining in a pool, then disappears, to reappear in another rocky flower-edged pool at the bottom right of the picture, where the orange day-lily with the bent leaf also grows. But within the ‘Chinese People’ group of paintings, water—apart from being fetched from a well or carried in vessels of gilded metal or blue-and-white ceramic, in particular water naturally occurring in a stream or a pool—is otherwise utterly unknown.

Why then, in ‘A Princely Gathering’, is water depicted? Does its presence confirm that the attribution of the picture to Aq Quyunlu Tabriz is closer to the truth than this sceptical eye has ever been able to accept? Or might there be another explanation: that this striking picture originally had the more usual, unpainted ground and bare, cloudless sky of the ‘Chinese People’ group, which someone in the Aq Quyunlu library or painting atelier in Tabriz in the reign of Ya’qub Beg decided to ‘modernise’? Was this large but ‘old-fashioned’ horizontally aligned picture, of interest among so many other interesting paintings and drawings, when laid under the eye of painters and patrons passionately interested in pictures, perhaps seen as a candidate for being ‘brought up to date’: given a fully painted sky with contorted Chinese-style white clouds floating at one corner, and a rich green flowering ground, as well as a ‘modern’-looking parasol-tent, anchored—however implausibly—in the middle of the equally ‘modern’-looking large-patterned small carpet<sup>39</sup> set foursquare in the lower middle of the composition, perfectly parallel with the bottom line of the picture. Why not? Having transformed the painting into a simulacrum of a thoroughly ‘modern’ manuscript-illustration (albeit still horizontal rather than vertical in shape) but—unaccountably—forgotten the *topos* of the stream, the painter then added it at the very bottom of the picture; and perhaps working in haste, he prepared the silver pigment imperfectly so that, quickly, it tarnished black. Might such an alternative explanation better account for the landscape peculiarities in ‘A Princely Gathering’?

Certain other passages in the picture also suggest a later ‘touching-up’. The face of the man in yellow, at the left margin, seems to have been entirely repainted, while the smudged black beard of the fifth man from the left (perhaps modelled on that of the man at the margin, in yellow), and the wispy white beard of the old man in the early fifteenth-century Shiraz-like turban, seated to the right of the prince, both also seem to have been painted over the original surface of the faces. Still other features of the clothing seem old-fashioned for the last third of the fifteenth century: the forthright primary colours of the garments and their extensive gold-embroidered *chinoiseries*, even the golden mandarin square on the breast of the attendant in green, at the right. And the quantity of miniver linings—in three robes—is remarkable, even for a Turkman Court painting: Bahram Gur’s cloak, in the *Khamisa* painting, has no miniver lining, nor does that of the seated prince in ‘A Princely Gathering’, whereas the cloak of ‘The Lady Travelling’ has a lavish miniver collar and lining and is

<sup>39</sup>Gray (ed.), *The Arts of the Book in Central Asia*, pl. LXIX in colour, p. 233.

almost powdered with gold, as are the garments throughout this picture and likewise, ‘The Duel’. Again, these are features of the earliest ‘Timurid’ pictures—or, more precisely, of the best Jalayirid and early fifteenth-century Shiraz painting,<sup>40</sup> and again the comparisons seem telling.

Other aspects of the figures in ‘A Princely Gathering’ present anomalies that would, ideally, require more observation and study but which time, means, and opportunity have not yet permitted: the condition of the surface of the painting, and the presence of ‘edges’ of pigment where none might be expected; the disposition of the 11 figures and what might lie underneath any of them; the early fifteenth-century Shirazi shapes of several turbans—that worn by the old man seated to the right of the prince, and the blue one of the second man to the left, for instance. Yet if, under enhanced or specialised light, careful personal examination, and further technical assistance, this proposed interpretation will prove to be sustained, it is then intriguing to reflect upon which period of painting would benefit more from this proposed redating: Turkman Court painting of the 1470s to 1490s? Or the now-celebrated, earlier, and still problematic but perhaps truly Samarqandi group, on paper or silk to which—I firmly believe—‘A Princely Gathering’ belongs?

Personally speaking, I have no doubt that further examination will help to establish just why it is that this picture, together with some of the other ‘core-paintings’—‘The Duel’, ‘The China Cart’, ‘The Monastery’, and especially ‘The Lady Travelling’—are still so fundamentally different from classical Timurid and Turkman painting of the eighth/fifteenth century: the conception of landscape seen in each of these paintings is still alien to that characteristic of paintings from the Iranian heartland, in which the images and implications of water play so important a role. To be geographically specific, the conception lies, still, west of the Oxus River. It is close but has not, as yet, been assimilated: I shall go so far as to say that the painters have reached Timur’s Samarqand but have not yet crossed the Oxus, travelled from Turan into Iran, at least in their pictorial thinking. And what tells us that this is so—I dare to suggest—is the presence of the silver stream that only runs, like an inadvertent afterthought, at the very bottom of ‘A Princely Gathering’.

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<sup>40</sup>For instance, lining the cloaks of Nushirwan and Buzurjmihir, in that celebrated British Library *Divan* of Khwaja Kirmani completed in Baghdad in 798/1396, see Sims, *Peerless Images*, no. 105, pp. 190–193, and of the ‘Princely Couple’ (note 36 above); of Shirin, in the small anthology made in Shiraz for Iskandar-Sultan and dated 813–14/1410–11, also now in the British Library, Sims *Peerless Images*, no. 239, pp. 317–318; and of Nushaba, in Shah Rukh’s little *Khamsa* of Nizami, dated 835/1431 in Herat, illustrated in *ibid.*