Saint George Killing the Dragon

c. 1434/35

by Bernat Martorell
Saint George Killing the Dragon, 1434/35
Tempera on panel, 61 1/4 x 38 5/8 in. (155.6 x 98.1 cm)
Gift of Mrs. Richard E. Danielson and Mrs. Chauncy McCormick, 1933.786

Saint George Killing the Dragon is the central panel of a now-disassembled altarpiece devoted to the popular saint; the four smaller panels that originally surrounded it are in the Louvre in Paris. The panel was painted by Bernat Martorell, one of the greatest Catalan painters of the first half of the 15th century. Catalonia, originally an independent kingdom and now the northeastern region of Spain, claimed Saint George as its patron saint.

The scene depicted here is borrowed from The Golden Legend, a widely read collection of stories about the lives of saints written in the 13th century. This particular legend centers on the city of Silene and tells of the rescue of the princess and her people from a horrible dragon. According to the legend, sheep and townspeople had been offered as victims to feed the dragon. The town decided by lottery who would be sacrificed. Finally, when only a few people remained—suggested by the scattered bones—the daughter of the king drew the deadly lot.

The panel shows the saint defending the princess from the dragon, while the king and his remaining subjects watch from a distant castle. Even though Saint George lived in the third century, Martorell clothed his subjects in contemporary dress and included symbolic and pictorial detail that would easily be understood by the illiterate medieval viewer. Saint George is fully garbed in dark iron armor, realistically depicted with buckles and rivets. A white (the color of purity) fabric coat-armor or surcoat is tied to the armor, bearing the saint’s coat of arms—a red cross, the symbol of the governing body of Catalonia and formerly the sign of someone who had gone on a crusade to the Holy Land. The knight stands in his gilded stirrups, his lance poised above the dragon. He also wears the gilded spurs of a knight. Behind him, the princess is jeweled and draped in ermine fur and red (the color of sacrifice), standing next to a grazing white ram (a symbolic of sacrifice).

The castle background is shown in meticulous detail. The spectators are in varied and in colorful dress, some with turbans, suggesting the foreign locale, others in contemporary clothing. It is probably spring or summer, as indicated by the vibrant green gardens near the castle. Everything in the countryside is noted with care: the variety of plants in the garden, lizards basking in the sun among the rocks, even a fly that can be seen perched on a bone at the bottom of the panel.

The figure of Saint George is central to the composition. His lance, right arm, and right foot form a strong diagonal, generating a thrust of action toward the dragon and foreshadowing the gruesome ending for this destructive beast. A striking attention to detail is combined with rich color and textural effects, adding drama and excitement to the scene. Stucco (a resilient finish for outside walls composed of cement, sand and lime that is applied wet) builds up the surface of the canvas to emphasize the halo, crown, horse gear, sword, dagger and lance. These raised elements are then gilded or painted. The entire surface of the dragon is modeled in relief; the paint (probably mixed with a sandy material) is thickly applied so that the animal’s frightening features—scales, claws,
eyes—extend above the surface of the canvas and virtually come alive. The paint, in rich tones of green, red, and yellow, is literally modeled like clay. Viewed within a church setting, the painting’s gold would shimmer in the flickering candlelight. The story was meant to excite the imagination and interest of viewers while providing an important church lesson on the triumph of good (Saint George) over evil (the dragon).

Diagram Key

Armor differs in its component parts depending on the period and culture in which it was made, and the function it was intended to serve. The armor worn by Saint George was used for war—a masterful combination of protection, maneuverability, and artistic design, which kept the load borne by its wearer to the absolute minimum.

A armet: a close-fitting helmet introduced in the 15th century, with a visor (shown raised) to protect the eye region, and deep cheekpieces that locked together at the chin, reinforced with an armor plate called a “buffe”

B pauldron with gardbrace: defense for the shoulder and uppermost part of the arm, with an attached reinforcing plate on the front

C cowter: the armor for the elbow

D gauntlets: glove-like armor for the hands

E, F saddle with stirrups: the cushioned seat used by a rider on horseback, with metal stirrups used to assist mounting and provide a more secure platform while riding. War saddles often have armor plates at the front and rear.

G sabaton: armor for the foot, here made of overlapping narrow plates riveted together

H spurs: prods, usually of metal, worn on the rider’s heels, used to direct the horse into a desired response

I greave: close-fitting tube that protected the lower leg and ankle

J cuisses with poleyns: thigh and knee armor, respectively

K tassets: defenses attached to the bottom edge of the torso armor, to protect the front of the hips and upper thighs

L dagger: a hand-held weapon with a relatively short pointed blade

M fauld or skirt: a hoop-like defense of metal bands that protect the hip and lower back regions

N breastplate: plate armor for the torso to just below the waist. In this illustration, the breastplate is covered by a fabric cover called a coat-armor, held by laces.

O lance rest: a shock-absorbing bracket for the lance, fastened to the right side of the breastplate, below the armpit

P vambrace: armored tubes for the upper and lower arm, linked together by the cowter

Q lance: a long spear used by warriors on horseback, consisting of a wooden shaft with a metal head
Classroom Activities and Discussion Questions

• Martorell’s painting shows a scene from a story. Write down a list of characters from a story you are familiar with. Draw a scene from the story using some or all of the characters on your list.

• Draw what you think happened just before the scene in Martorell’s painting, then draw what might have happened afterward.

• Create a drawing of what you imagine to be inside the dragon’s lair or inside one of the rooms in the castle.

• Martorell combined parts of different animals to create the dragon in his painting. Create your own dragon made up of parts of different animals.

• Choose six students to play: Saint George, the Princess, the King and Queen, the Ram, and the Dragon. The rest of the students are the townspeople. Have each student act out this character. They could respond to questions such as:

  Saint George: Why are you here?
  Princess: What would you say to your parents, the King and Queen, before you leave the castle? What would you say to thank Saint George?
  King and Queen: What advice would you give to your daughter?
  Ram: What sounds do you make?
  Dragon: What would you say to Saint George?
  Saint George: How would you reply?
  Townspeople: How would you react when the dragon is finally killed?

• April 23 is Saint George’s Day, honoring this heroic knight and patron saint of armorers, archers, knights, and soldiers in general. This festival is still celebrated in parts of Spain, Portugal, England, and central Europe. Have the class plan a spring Saint George’s Day festival. Discuss with your students the focus of the celebration (a hero’s welcome). What activities would you include in the celebration?
Lesson Plan 1
Unit Goal: Social Studies

LESSON OBJECTIVES
Students will be able to:
• explain the function and meaning of a coat of arms (see Notes below)
• translate concept of coat of arms into their own lives
• design a symbolic coat of arms for a shield

RESOURCES
Three-Quarter Field Armor Poster Packet at Crown Family Educator Resource Center at the Art Institute.

Refer to: “heraldry” in encyclopedias

LESSON PREPARATION
• Briefly discuss life in medieval times

• Describe life in a castle, and how tapestries were used as wall hangings and window coverings to help cut drafts and reduce dampness and noise. View reproductions of works of art.

LESSON CONTENT AND ACTIVITIES

In the galleries
• View Saint George Killing the Dragon by Martorell.

• Look carefully at the knight. If all knights wore armor, how could they be recognized as friends or enemies? Discuss horse coverings, plumes, tunics over armor, and banners.

In the classroom
• Have the students design their own symbols for a coat of arms.

• Have students make a shield using emblems, and embellish it with border designs, plumes, helmets, crossed swords, etc.

• Have students look at contemporary design elements such as sports equipment.

• A knight was meant to be brave, honest and fair—what pictures could you use to symbolize these ideas?

Follow Up
• Have the students make tunics or banners, using coats of arms.

• Design a coat of arms for the school or their family.

• Research coats of arms of famous ruling families.

NOTES
• A knight’s coat of arms became his identification. It indicated pictorially his family lineage and therefore indicated what side he was on. The coat of arms was often embroidered on a cloth tunic, or surcoat, or painted on his wooden shield. Depictions of or invocations to various saints can be found on many pieces of decorated armor.

EVALUATION
• Can students explain the meaning and function of a coat of arms and create their own?
Lesson Plan 2
Unit Goal: Language Arts

LESSON OBJECTIVES
Students will be able to:
• identify Saint George as a medieval hero
• describe characteristics of a medieval hero as depicted by Martorell
• identify and make a drawing of a contemporary hero

RESOURCES
• paper, pencils, colored pencils
• pictures from various aspects of medieval life and religion

LESSON PREPARATION
• In mythology and legend, a hero is someone endowed with great courage and strength, celebrated for bold exploits. Discuss the role of a hero and identify characteristics.

• Discuss how we emulate those we admire and respect, and how we try to be like our heroes.

LESSON CONTENT AND ACTIVITIES
In the galleries or classroom
• While looking at Saint George Killing the Dragon discuss how the artist expresses the emotions of the characters and creates dramatic tension.

• Discuss how Saint George personifies good and the dragon evil. Note Saint George’s command over the situation and how he becomes the princess’s hero.

• Point out symbols of Saint George’s role: the cross or coat of arms; his halo; his size and position in the composition. Would this representation of Saint George fit our image of a hero today? Why or why not?

In the galleries or classroom
• Have students write a story about a contemporary hero.

• Have students draw this hero and devise symbols representing the qualities that make that person a hero (i.e., an oak tree for strength or a dove for peace).

Follow Up
• Have students hang their pictures and read their stories aloud to the class. What qualities does the hero personify? How is the hero representative of today’s world?

• Discuss the range of heroes chosen, from famous people to more personal heroes.

NOTES

• For information on medieval ideals: Bulfinch, Thomas. The Age of Chivalry. Boston: Tilton, 1884. “Chivalry … framed an ideal of the heroic, combining invincible strength and valor, justice, modesty, loyalty to superiors, courtesy to equals, compassion to weakness and devotedness to the Church.”

EVALUATION
• Do students have an understanding of what Saint George represented in the Middle Ages?

• What values of contemporary society do students’ heroes reflect?
Bernat Martorell. Saint George Killing the Dragon, 1434/35

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