

## Chapter 1



*Saint George  
Killing the Dragon,  
1430/1435*  
Bernardo Martorell  
(Spanish, about 1400–1452)  
Tempera on panel  
Gift of Mrs. Richard E.  
Danielson and Mrs.  
Chauncey McCormick,  
1933.786

# Saint George Killing the Dragon

Bernardo Martorell

## Overview

**B**ernardo Martorell was one of the greatest artists of his time from Catalonia. In the middle ages, Spain was divided into separate kingdoms. The kingdom of Catalonia was in the northeastern region of present-day Spain.

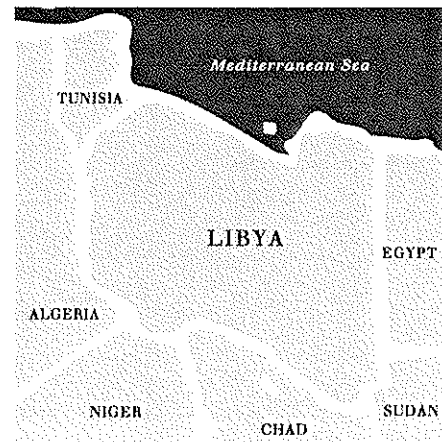
Bernardo Martorell was the son of a butcher. He grew up in a small country village, and later worked in Barcelona, the most important Catalan city. He painted large and small works, and designed stained-glass windows, as well as vestments, clothing worn by priests during religious services. Martorell's son and grandson also became artists.

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Saint George was a popular saint in medieval Europe where the knightly code of conduct emphasized heroism and courtly manners toward women. He became the patron saint of European soldiers and armorers, as well as the patron saint of Catalonia, Portugal, Russia, and England. April 23 is still celebrated regionally as Saint George's Day in some areas of Europe.

## What's the Story?

**T**he legend of the life of Saint George, who is seen in this painting, took place in Silena, a town in the present-day country of Libya in north Africa. According to medieval accounts, a horrible dragon living near the town poisoned everyone who passed by with his noxious breath. To calm the dragon, the



citizens of Silena first offered him two sheep a day, but when they began to run out of sheep, they offered him one sheep and one youth or maiden chosen by lottery. On the day the knight George arrived in the town, the king's daughter had drawn the unlucky lot. The knight offered to kill the dragon if the citizens (20,000 of them) would agree to be baptized as Christians. *Saint George Killing the Dragon* shows the knight defending the princess from the dragon, while the king and his remaining subjects watch from a distant castle.

Accounts of the lives of Christian saints were often written down by monks and elaborated by storytellers and artists. These stories were compiled in medieval Europe by a mid-thirteenth century Italian bishop named Jacobus de Voragine in his book *The Golden Legend*. This collection provided many of the details that appear in Bernardo Martorell's painting. Other details depicted by Martorell are found in a popular Catalan text from the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, called *La historia de la vida de Sent Jordi* (The History of the Life of Saint George).



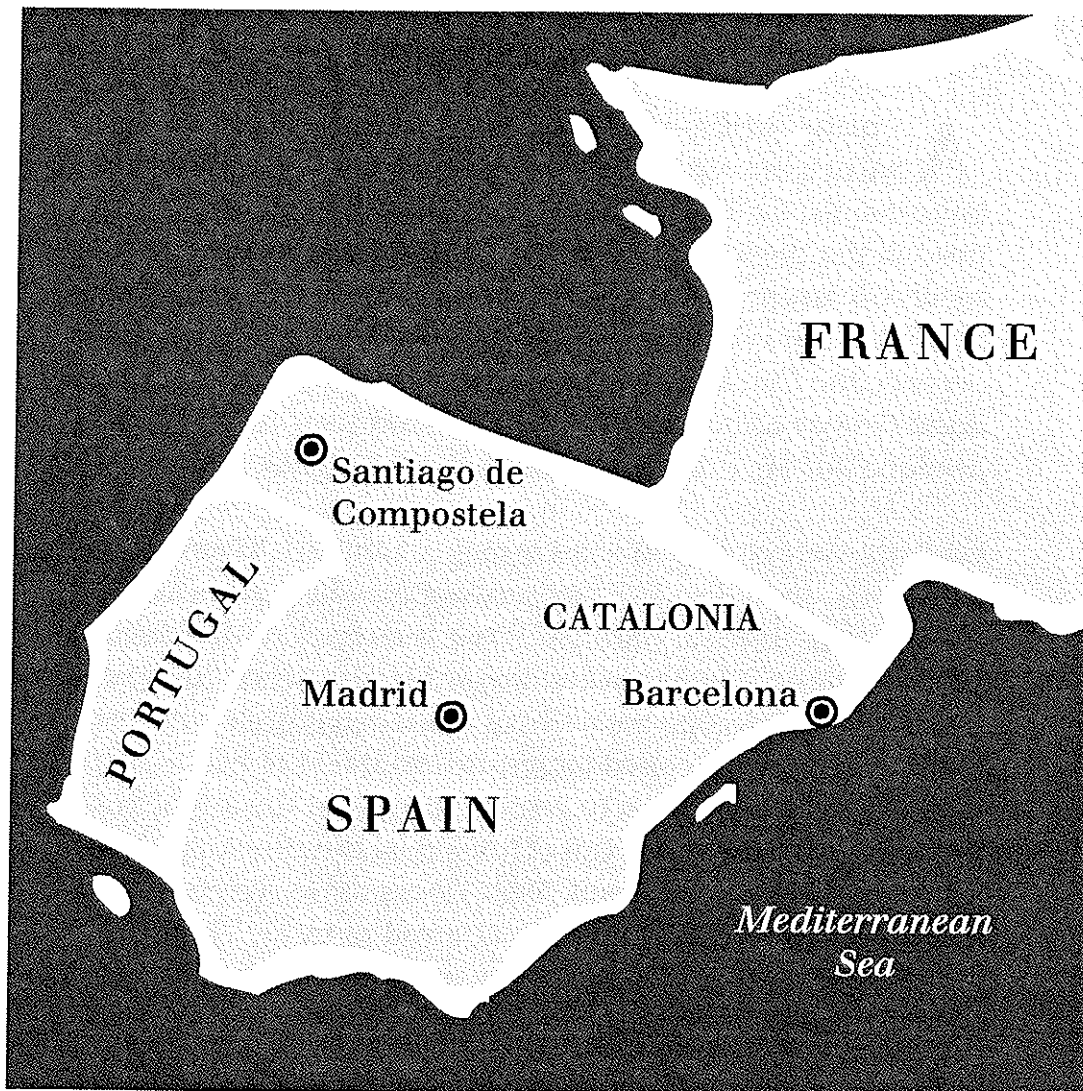
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## Why Is This Story Told on a Spanish Altarpiece?

Celebrating soldiers was important in the Middle Ages in Europe because feudal society was built on military allegiances. In Martorell's day, military values were particularly honored on the Iberian peninsula (present-day Spain and Portugal), because the land was divided into Christian and Muslim kingdoms, which had been fighting each other for hundreds of years. The Reconquest, as Spanish Christians called it, was completed only in 1492, when the armies of King Ferdinand of Aragon and Queen Isabella of Castile — the joint rulers of Christian Spain — captured Granada, the last Iberian kingdom under Muslim control.

The knight had a special place in medieval culture in this context of constant warfare. Chivalry's code of conduct, with its emphasis on heroism and courtly manners toward women, inspired high standards for knightly behavior. These standards were appealing to the Christian Church, which made the knighting ceremony a religious occasion with a church vigil and purifying bath. The story of the man who became Saint George is of a knight who acted according to the highest ideals of Christianity and chivalry, and therefore was featured in many works of medieval Christian art.

As the purpose of Christian altarpieces was to inspire and educate worshippers, depiction of the moving events of Saint George's life and his eventual death for his Christian faith would have provided an appropriate example to the faithful. For the many Christians in the Middle Ages who could not read, altarpieces such as *Saint George Killing the Dragon* told the story of the triumph of good over evil and of the virtues of knighthood in a dramatic and satisfying way. In addition, Saint George's story, told as though he were a Catalan knight fighting on behalf of his faith, enhanced the painting's connection to the highly placed citizens of Catalonia, who commissioned the altarpiece.



In the early fifteenth century, the *Diputacio*, or Catalan parliament, began to renovate a series of modest houses in Barcelona into a magnificent municipal palace, the *Palau de la Diputaci3n*. *Saint George Killing the Dragon* was probably commissioned for the palace's Chapel of Saint George, which still stands. Masses in such chapels were held to honor a community's patron saint and, through that patron, to help ensure the salvation of its members. Other images of Saint George, the patron saint of Catalonia, were also part of the chapel's decoration, including a sculpture of Saint George on the keystone of the vaulted chapel ceiling, and an embroidered altar frontal, a cloth cover for the front of the altar.

## A Knight in Shining Armor

As many medieval artists did, Martorell painted the story's participants in clothing of his time embellished with symbolic details, even though the story tells us that Saint George lived in the third century. Saint George wears a complete set of medieval armor called *l'arnés blanc*, "white armor" (although it was not always white). During the first half of the fifteenth century, the Catalan *Consellers* (councilors), who commissioned *Saint George Killing the Dragon*, ordered their armorers to produce this type of suit for the region's knights.

On Saint George's head is an armet, a compact, visored helmet. Pauldrons, shoulder defenses, protect his chest and shoulder blades. Note that the right pauldron is shaped so that Saint George's lance can be tucked under his arm when he is not in combat. Saint George wears long jointed gauntlets over his hands. Solid plates called tassets are attached to his breastplate with straps and buckles, to protect the gap at the top of the thigh armor. The entire suit is jointed so that the knight can move, but still be protected. Saint George also wears golden spurs, which only knights were allowed to wear. Thus, the armor and sword of Saint George, and his horse's gear, identify him as a knight and a high-ranking member of medieval society.

A white vest called a *huca* was tied over the armor to identify individual knights and to protect the metal breastplate from overheating in the sun. The red cross on Saint George's vest and on the cloth tied to his lance is his own symbol as well as that of the *Diputació*, the parliament of Catalonia, and of those who had gone on Crusade to the Holy Land. The battles between Christians and Muslims for control of the kingdoms on the Iberian peninsula were considered to be part of a larger effort during the Middle Ages, in which Christian Europeans fought holy wars against people believed to be enemies of Christianity as well as to recover sites Christians considered holy.

Behind Saint George and the dragon is the princess identified as Cleodolinda in *The Golden Legend*, who wears an ermine and red cloak called a *hopa*, a fashionable robe with trailing sleeves from the early fifteenth century. She wears flowers and a crown decorated with jewels over her curly red hair, which is long and uncovered because she is still a maiden. According to the Catalan version of the Saint George story, her hands are clasped together in distress as she weeps in fear. The princess stands next to a grazing white ram who, in contrast to her, is oblivious to his fate as a sacrificial victim for the vicious dragon. In the Middle Ages, the color red symbolized sacrifice, while white symbolized purity. Both Saint George and the princess wear these two colors.

The King and Queen wait on the balcony of a castle decorated with banners. Typical of a medieval manor, it is circled by a moat that is sprinkled with swans and surrounded by walled orchards and gardens. The lush foliage suggests that it is summer. While some spectators are wearing turbans, suggesting non-Christians or foreigners, others wear contemporary Spanish clothing.

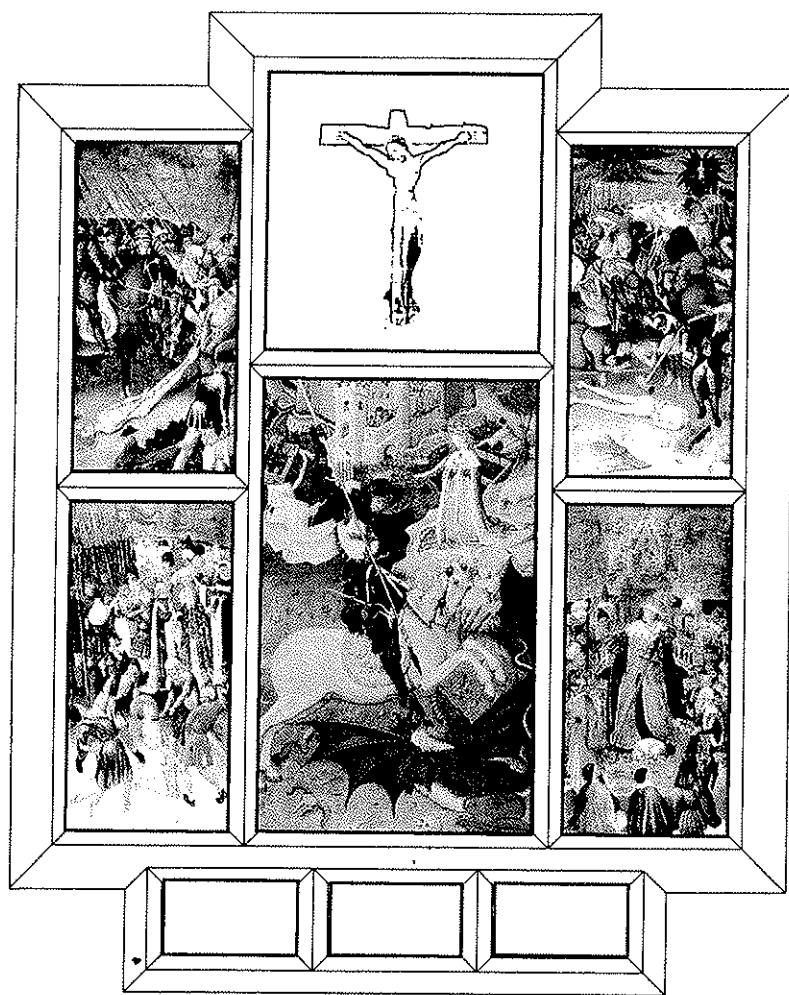


*Detail*  
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*Saint George Killing the Dragon* was the central panel of an altarpiece, flanked by four smaller panels, which are today in the Musée du Louvre in Paris. These panels show episodes from the saint's martyrdom, including *Saint George Dragged Through the Streets* (upper left), his death by beheading, *Decapitation* (upper right), *The Flagellation of Saint George* (lower left), and *The Judgment of Saint George by Dacian* (lower right). Martorell chose these scenes from many other gory and dramatic events elaborated in the written accounts of the saint's life, which tell of his being tortured to death and

resurrected four times before his final beheading.



Above the central scene of *Saint George Killing the Dragon* there would have been another image (now lost) relating to an important event in the Christian faith, possibly the *Crucifixion* or the *Coronation of the Virgin*. Below the main images there would have been a series of smaller paintings (also lost), which supported the altarpiece and might have included depictions of other saints

or other incidents from Saint George's life. Surrounding all of the paintings would have been a *guardapolvos*, or dustguard, a carved frame that would probably have been painted with the coat-of-arms of the city or donor, and silver-gilt roses on a blue background, according to Catalan custom of the time.



## Bernardo Martorell (c. 1400–1452)

**B**ernardo Martorell is considered to be the greatest Catalan painter of the first half of the fifteenth century. He was the son of a butcher from San Celoni, a small village in the kingdom of Catalonia. Martorell worked principally in Barcelona, the capital of Catalonia, from the 1420s to 1452. He painted altarpieces and miniatures and designed stained-glass windows and vestments. His son Bernardo II and grandson Juan also became painters.

### How Was the Altarpiece Made?

**A** late medieval Spanish altarpiece was called a *retablo* or *retable* (ree-table), from the Latin *retro tablum*, meaning “behind the (altar) table.” Painting or sculpture behind the altar was popular from the fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries, when priests stood in front of the altar during religious ceremonies, instead of behind the altar as had been the earlier custom.

A formal contract was necessary to begin making an altarpiece. Negotiations between the Catalan government and Martorell would have included a visit by officials to the workshop to consult with Martorell, another meeting when Martorell presented a *mostra*, a sketch of the proposed work, a third meeting to approve the final design and price (which would be paid in three installments), and a final meeting with a notary to draw up the contract.

*Saint George Killing the Dragon* was made like most late medieval altarpieces. Martorell began with wood panels joined together, and covered them with a coating of white gesso (a chalk- or gypsum-based layer similar to plaster). Martorell shaped many of the features of the painting, especially the dragon and Saint George’s armor, in an unusually high amount of raised, modeled gesso called *embutido*. He painted on the gesso with tempera paint, made of minerals ground by hand in his workshop and bound together in a liquid medium such as

egg yolk. The gold in the painting came from thin, delicate sheets of gold leaf. To make haloes around the figures' heads, Martorell used compasses to create the circles, added gesso to raise the surface, placed gold leaf over the gesso, then stamped in the patterns on the gold leaf with tools called punches. In the medieval chapel, the gold on the painting would catch the flickering candlelight, suggesting a heavenly glow around the figures.

Martorell painted in a style that we describe today as International Gothic. It was popular throughout Europe in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries and combines elegant figures and curving rhythms with careful observation of naturalistic detail in a manner that suggests the first stirrings of the Renaissance. Here, Martorell represented the walled gardens and orchards, the fly resting on a bone, and the reflections of the swans in the waters of the moat with great attention to texture and detail. At the same time, he did not try to reconcile the several different points of view within the painting — he depicted the castle and fields from a bird's-eye view to include the most detail possible, while presenting Saint George straight on to create a clear and memorable image for the worshipper.

## Glossary

**Altar:** An elevated table or structure upon which the Christian ceremony of the Mass, which commemorates the Last Supper, takes place.

**Altarpiece:** A painting or carving placed above and behind an altar.

**Armet:** A medieval light helmet with a neck guard and movable visor.

**Barcelona:** Capital city of the kingdom of Catalonia in northeastern Spain.

**Catalan:** The adjective describing things or people from Catalonia, Spain.

**Chivalry:** The medieval institution of knighthood and its qualities, such as bravery, courtesy, and honesty.

**Crusades:** Holy wars fought by Europeans from the eleventh through fifteenth centuries against people who were believed to be the enemies of Christianity and to recover sites considered holy by Christians.

**Dacian:** A Roman provincial governor during the reign of Diocletian (Gaius Aurelius Valerius Diocletianus, lived A.D. 245–313). Dacian was one of the magistrates of the Roman Republic, elected for a term of one year. In his duties of administering and enforcing the law, Dacian was known for persecuting Christians. There have been longstanding debates about whether Saint George is a historical figure or a legendary one, but in the Middle Ages he was believed to have suffered martyrdom on the orders of Dacian.

**Feudal:** The political and economic system in Europe from about the ninth to the fifteenth centuries. In this system, a

vassal held land in return for homage and service to his lord.

**Gauntlet:** A protective glove, sometimes with a cuff, worn with medieval armor.

**Gesso:** A mixture of chalk or gypsum and glue used as a surface for painting, or to build up low relief as in the dragon and Saint George's halo in Saint George Killing the Dragon.

**Golden Legend:** A popular compendium of saints' lives, written by Jacobus de Voragine in the thirteenth century.

**Halo:** A luminous ring of light surrounding the heads or bodies of sacred figures, such as saints, in religious paintings.

**Manor:** The lord's residence or landed estate and the district over which he ruled in medieval western Europe.

**Martyrdom:** The state of being a martyr, a person who chooses to die, often after a great deal of suffering, rather than renounce religious beliefs.

**Mass:** The Christian ceremony that commemorates the Last Supper of Jesus with his Disciples. The Mass takes place in a church at the altar.

**Medieval:** Pertaining to the Middle Ages. Some scholars give the beginning of the Middle Ages the approximate date of A.D. 476, when Romulus Augustulus, the last emperor of the Western Roman Empire, was deposed. However, the new and distinct Western civilization, which is called medieval, developed from classical, Christian, and northern European cultures over a number of centuries. The Middle Ages is called by some the "age of faith," because so many of the intellectual, artistic, technological, and economic achievements of these centuries developed through religious institutions. Gradually society, economies, and culture became more secular and humanistically oriented, progressing into the centuries that are today called the Renaissance. This transition happened at different times in different western European countries, although sometimes the closing date of the Middle Ages is given as A.D. 1453,

when Constantinople was conquered by the Turks.

**Pauldrons:** Shoulder defenses in medieval armor that protect the shoulder blades and chest.

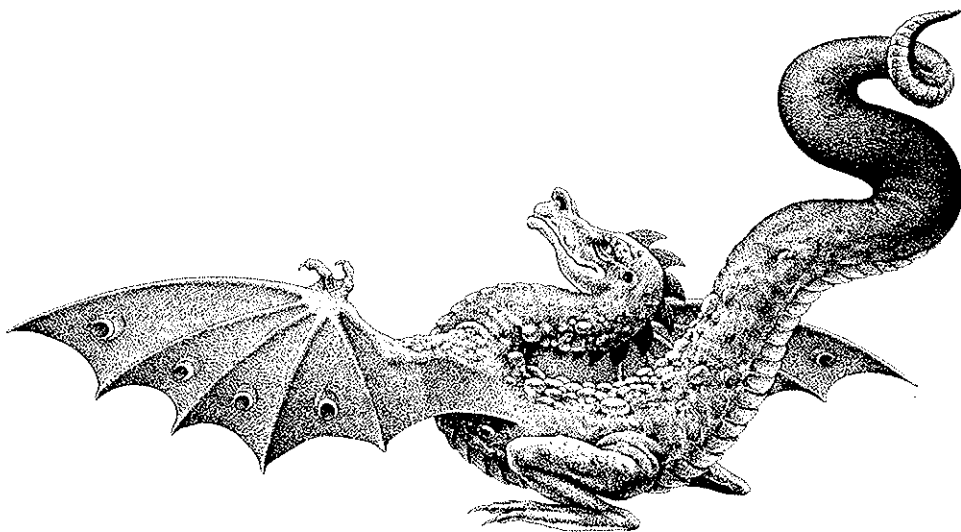
**Retable:** A type of altarpiece that is distinguished by a structure that contains niches for lighting or ornaments, or a frame to enclose painted panels.

**Spurs:** A pair of spikes or spiked wheels attached to a rider's heels used to urge the horse forward.

**Tassets:** Solid plates attached to the breastplate of medieval armor with straps and buckles, to protect the gap at the top of the thigh armor.

**Tempera:** A painting medium in which ground pigment is mixed with a water-soluble binder such as egg yolk.

**Vigil:** A defensive watch kept during normal sleeping hours, or a devotional watch observed on the eve of a religious festival.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### *St. George Killing the Dragon* by Bernardo Martorell

- ❖ Name the things in the painting decorated with gold.
- ❖ If you had a choice, who in the painting would you like to be?
- ❖ Read the story of St. George and the Dragon below.

Find in the painting the characters mentioned in the story.  
Tell your own version of an ending for the story.

*Outside the walls of a town there dwelt a horrible dragon. To calm the fury of this monster, each day the king, queen, and townspeople offered it one sheep and one person. The unfortunate person's name was drawn in a lottery, and the lot for this day had fallen upon the daughter of the king.*

*"Take ye my gold and my silver, and half my kingdom," cried the king to his people, "but give back my daughter, that she may be spared so dreadful a death!" But no one would take her place, and the princess went and stood with a sheep before the dragon's lair.*

*St. George, wearing armor and the cross of a Christian knight, happened upon the princess. He asked the cause of her trouble. She replied, "Brave knight, get away with all speed, lest thou die the same death that awaits me!" "Be without fear," said St. George, "for in the name of my church I will save thee!"*

*Suddenly, the dragon emerged from its lair. Under its wings were strewn the many bones of its past victims. St. George, holding high his pointed lance, set bravely upon the dragon and...killed the monster with one blow!*

Another version of the story tells that St. George pinned the dragon to the ground and led the defeated beast to the king.

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Bernardo Martorell created *Saint George Killing the Dragon* with a paint called egg tempera.

## ART ACTIVITY:

### *Egg Tempera*

Create an egg tempera painting using colored chalk and eggs.

- ❖ Crush pastels or colored chalk into a fine powder. Put each powdered color in a paper cup.
- ❖ Mix the powdered color with water to achieve the consistency of paste.
- ❖ Separate the egg yolk from the egg white. Discard the white and keep the yolks in a glass jar.
- ❖ Mix an equal amount of yolk and the already mixed color in a clean paper cup.
- ❖ Using the egg tempera, paint your own version of "Saint George Killing the Dragon" or illustrate a scene from your favorite story.

NOTE: Egg tempera dries quickly. The colors should be used as soon as they are mixed. Because of the transparent quality of the paint, more than one coat of a color may be needed. The painting can be done on a small piece of white construction paper or illustration board (about 6"x9").



In order to create the altarpiece, Bernardo Martorell learned all of the stories about Saint George's life. In the middle ages, these stories were also acted out in the courtyard of the local church on Saint George's Day and other festive occasions.

### **WRITING ACTIVITY:**

#### ***A Script for Saint George and the Dragon***

Write your own play based on the characters, the action, and the setting found in the painting.

- ❖ Choose the villain, the victim, and the hero. Write dialogue for each character.
- ❖ Include the beginning, the middle, and the end of the story.

### **COLLABORATIVE ACTIVITY:**

#### ***Act it Out***

Produce a play using one of the scripts written by the students. Different students can be responsible for different aspects of the production.

- ❖ Create the set. Choose students to draw or paint scenery on large pieces of paper.
- ❖ Make costumes for the actors. Choose students to make costume elements such as Saint George's armor or the dragon's tail.
- ❖ Choose actors for the play.

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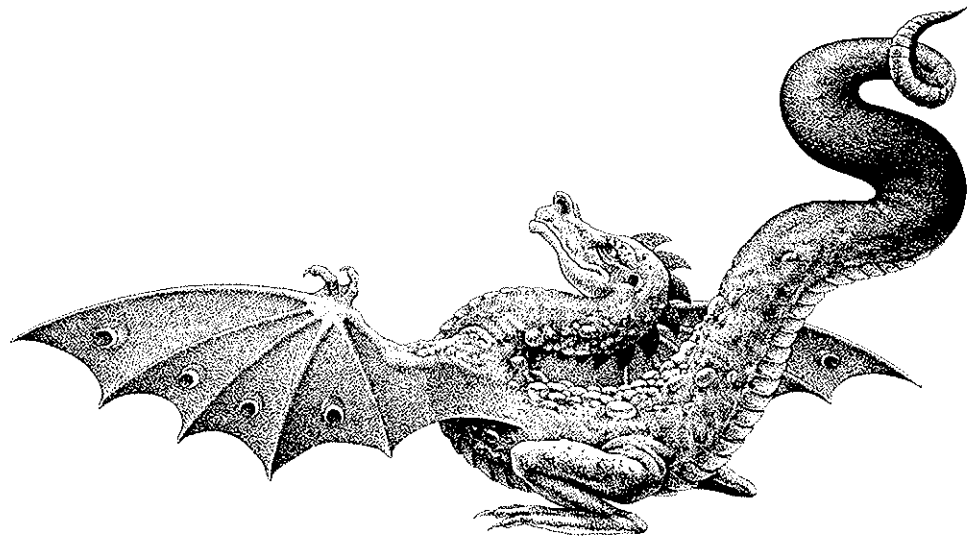
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