

# Family Activity: What a Relief!

Provided by the Art Institute of Chicago Department of Museum Education

## Introduction

In Bernat Martorell's painting, *Saint George Killing the Dragon*, most of the picture is flat, but the skin of the dragon and parts of Saint George's armor pop out from the surface. In Alessandro Vittoria's *Annunciation*, the whole image comes forward. Vittoria and Martorell have used a technique called relief to make objects or figures extend out from the background. In some places the relief is low. In others, the relief is raised very high above the painting's surface. In both works, the relief is highest around the most important parts of the images.

## Discussion Questions

Read the story of Saint George and the Dragon (below).

- Look at the painting. Which areas in Martorell's painting are in relief? Are these areas important to the story? Why or why not?
- Using the "close-up" view, examine Vittoria's sculpture carefully. It shows the Christian story of the angel Gabriel coming down from heaven to tell Mary she will give birth to the son of God. Which parts of the relief are raised the highest? Are these areas important? Why do you think so?

## Activity

Make your own relief image.

### Materials Needed:

- Hard, flat surface, such as cardboard or thin plywood, about 10" x 12"
- Salt dough (see below for recipe)
- Paper
- Standard aluminum foil
- Black tempera paint (more colors if desired)
- Steel wool
- Paper towel

**Steps:**

1. Think of a story you want to tell. (It may be from a book or a tale you've read.) Think of the most exciting moment in the story.
2. Make a drawing of this moment on the cardboard.
3. Using the salt dough, build up your drawn forms so they come out of the surface. Make the most exciting part of the image the highest.
4. When your relief work is finished, place the object in a warm area to dry thoroughly. (It may take a few days, depending on the thickness of the dough.)
5. When the dough is dry, you may either:
  - A:
    - Cut a piece of aluminum foil that is larger than your board. Starting from the center, cover the entire surface with aluminum foil, making sure to press the foil fully into your design.
    - Paint the foil with black tempera paint.
    - When the paint is dry, rub the high areas with steel wool or wet paper towel to make them shine. Leave the low areas dark to mimic the look of Vittoria's bronze sculpture.
  - or B:
    - Paint the relief in bright colors to mimic the look of Martorell's painting of Saint George.

***Saint George and the Dragon***

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.

Riding his horse, Saint George 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 Saint George, "for in the name of my church I will save thee!"

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

## **Glossary**

### **armor** (*n*)

a defensive covering for the body, made of metal and used in battle during the Middle Ages, Renaissance, and Baroque periods

### **background** (*n*)

the part of a painting or drawing representing the space behind figures or objects that are close to the viewer (in the foreground)

### **relief** (*n*)

a piece of sculpture that features a molded, carved, or stamped design that stands out three-dimensionally from a background surface

## **Salt Dough Recipe**

1 cup table salt

2 cups all-purpose flour

1/2-1 cup cold water

In a large bowl, mix salt and flour ingredients with a spoon. Gradually add 1/2 cup of water and continue to mix. Adding remaining water gradually until the mixture can be rolled easily into a ball. Knead for a few minutes. Add a drop or two of water to moisten if necessary, but don't make dough too moist.