



Saint George Killing the Dragon

c. 1434/35

by Bernat Martorell

The Art Institute of Chicago

Department of Museum Education
Division of Student and Teacher Programs
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Bernat Martorell

(Spanish, c. 1400–1452)

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 “bufe”

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

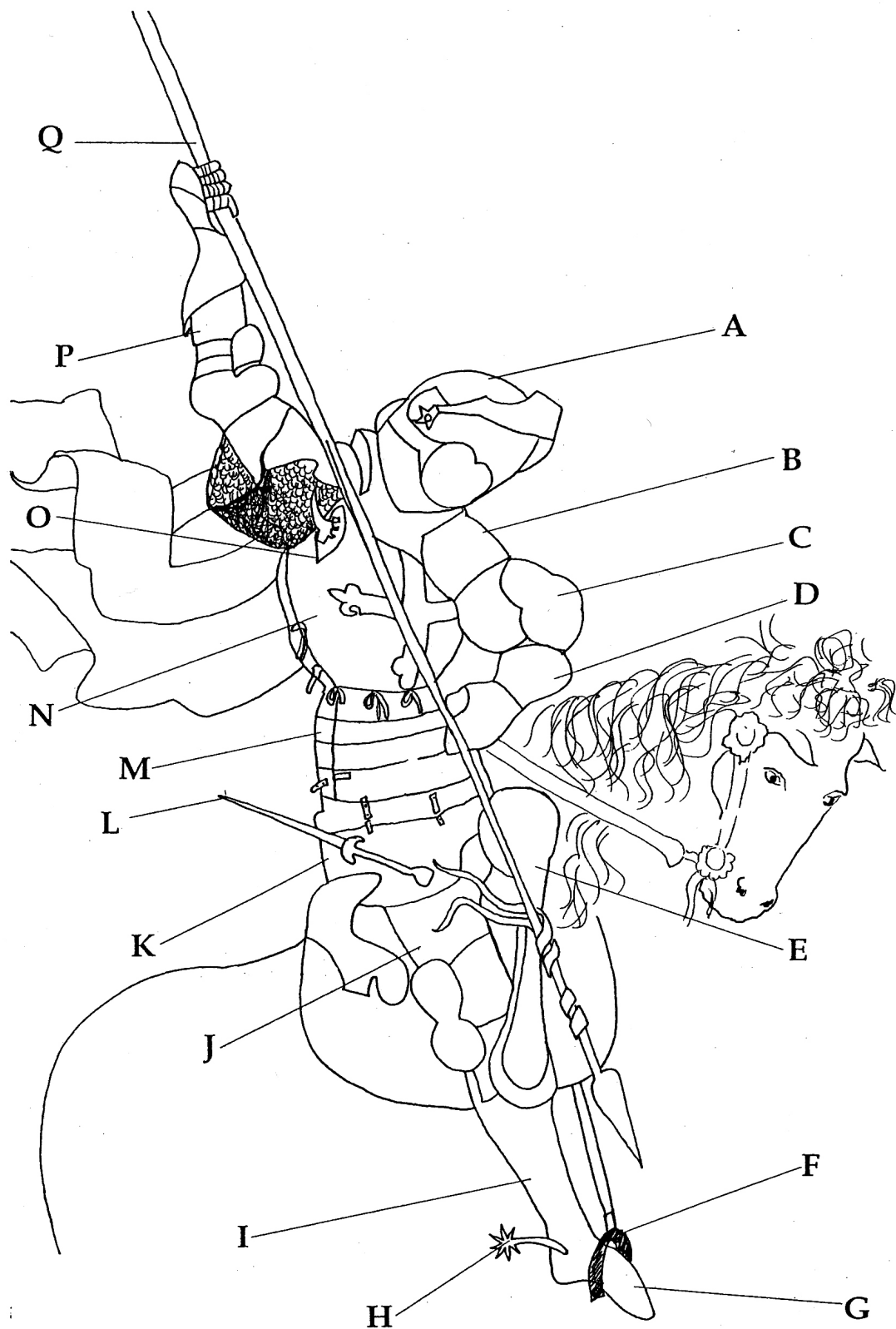
M fauld or skirt: a hoop-like defense of metal bands that protect the hip and lower back regions

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?

- 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. What are some of the 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? What qualities does the hero personify? How is the hero representative of today's world?

- If all knights wore armor, how could they be recognized as friends or enemies? Discuss horse coverings, plumes, tunics over armor, and banners. 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. Students can design their own symbols for a coat of arms and a shield using emblems, border designs, plumes, helmets, crossed swords, etc. Students can look at contemporary design elements such as sports equipment and compare the techniques of distinguishing oneself in a public competition. A knight was meant to be brave, honest and fair—what pictures could you use to symbolize these ideas?

Bernat Martorell. *Saint George Killing the Dragon*, 1434/35

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