

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.

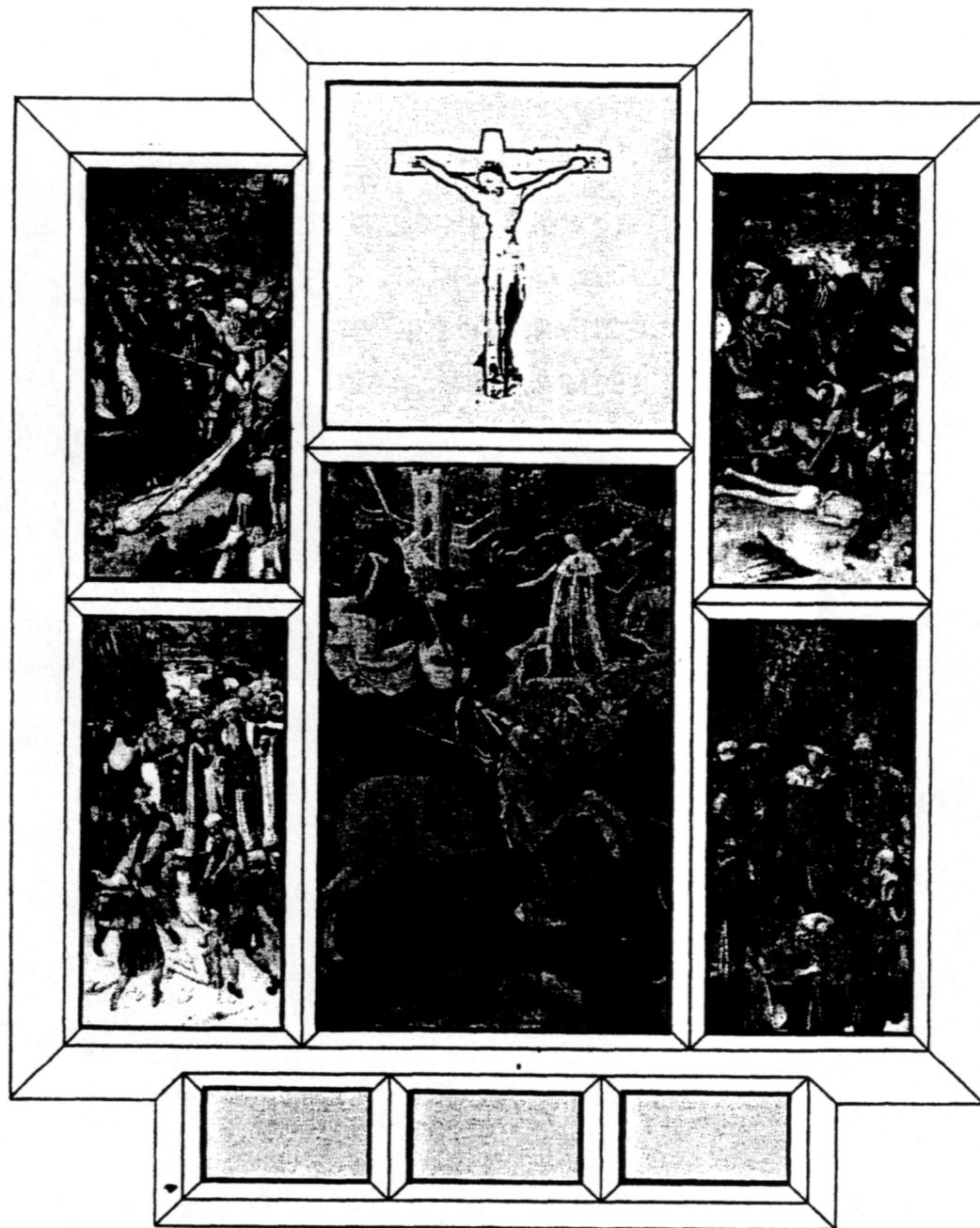
The King and Queen wait on the balcony of a castle decorated with banners. Typical of a medieval manor, it is circled by a moat that is sprinkled with swans and surrounded by walled orchards and gardens. The lush foliage suggests that it is summer. While some spectators are wearing turbans, suggesting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



Detail
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 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)

Bernardo 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.

Horses

Raphael, *St. George and the Dragon*



Raphael (rah-fa-yell), Italian (Umbrian), 1483-1520. *St. George and the Dragon*, c. 1506, oil on wood. $11\frac{1}{8} \times 8\frac{3}{8}$ -in. National Gallery of Art, Washington; Andrew W. Mellon Collection.

The Artist

Raffaello Sanzio, or Raphael, is remembered for his charming, serene, and graceful madonnas and saints posed in spacious and quiet landscapes. His art was consistently beautiful, enlarging on the sweetness of Perugino, his early teacher, and the stable, pyramidal composition that he learned from Leonardo.

Raphael devoted his life to art beginning as a small child in the studio of his father, a recognized painter in the town of Urbino. At the age of ten, he became an apprentice to Perugino, a very popular artist, who soon gave the boy opportunities to work on parts of his large canvases and to become a foreman over other apprentices. At twenty-one years of age, Raphael went to Florence where he saw the work of Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci, then the foremost artists of the world. Because of his talent and pleasing personality, Raphael soon became the third most notable figure in the art world. *St. George and The Dragon* was painted early in this period.

Working in Rome, he painted a series of pictures of Mary and Jesus and portraits of the Pope and other important people. A series of huge murals in four rooms of the Vatican depicted both the figures and the architectural details of the Renaissance period

in Rome. Although Raphael had many apprentices in his studio in Rome, he was overwhelmed with commissions to paint portraits and madonnas and to design tapestries. When he died suddenly of a violent fever on his thirty-seventh birthday, he was at the height of his popularity.

The Art

St. George and The Dragon was commissioned by the powerful Duke of Urbino and presented as a gift to Henry VII of England. Cherished by several British earls, it was given to another King, Charles I. From England, it was traded through a series of French owners who considered it interesting but not fashionable. In the 19th century, *St. George and The Dragon* became the property of Catherine II, Empress of Russia, and was displayed in the Hermitage Gallery before it was bought by an American collector, Andrew W. Mellon, and exhibited in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

St. George and The Dragon is a tiny picture, $11\frac{1}{8} \times 8\frac{3}{8}$ -in., but it gives the impression of being much larger. The drawing is proficient, and his style seems serene and effortless. Brush strokes are not visible, and the colors are soft and expressive.

Judged by the standards of his day and of other periods over the centuries, Raphael's work approached perfection. But because the pendulum of "style" is always moving, such peaks of perfection are today often considered uninteresting. In our time, a very different kind of art is honored. Modern painters do not choose to draw as fluently or paint with such craftsmanship. Their compositions do not reflect such thoughtfulness. Raphael's painting is recognized as a supreme masterwork of its period but not acknowledged as a model for modern artists to emulate.

The tale of the young knight who arrives just in time to rescue the fair lady is an ancient one. St. George, the patron saint of England, is here portrayed as the Christian hero whose strength lies in a pure heart and constant faith, not magic. In shining armor and on a white horse, he pierces the vile dragon with his lance before it can harm the lovely princess. The evil dragon writhes as the princess raises her eyes to heaven. The hero's cloak swirls with motion, and the spotless horse looks out to assure us that everything will turn out all right. But will everything turn out all right for this little masterpiece? Will it one day be traded again to

Raphael, *St. George and the Dragon*

make room for a 20th century masterpiece and continue its travels around the world?

Guided Analysis

Cultural Context:

Raphael's painting of a knight in shining armor saving a beautiful lady from a dreadful dragon is an early example of this Renaissance artist's genius, painted while he was in his very early 20's. Yet it shows all the skills of composition, color, and brushwork of a mature artist.

The theme of the story is an ancient one, going back to early mythology. In the Christian era, St. George, who was the patron saint of soldiers and armorers, became the hero who traditionally protected the countryside as well as beautiful maidens. In English art, he is always shown with a red cross on a white banner, but in this Italian painting, we recognize him from the narrative of the story. What details tell us that this painting was made in the early 1500's, not in the 4th Century when St. George actually lived? *Armor, clothing, Italian town in background. Also, there were no illustrative, narrative paintings made as early as the 4th Century, only icons or devotional pictures.*

Style:

Is it a static or a dynamic composition? Peaceful and still or full of movement? *It is both actually. The air of peace and serenity for which Raphael became famous is obvious. Show some examples of calmness. The landscape under the clear blue sky; the soft, dulled colors; the gentle appearance of the spotless white horse; the confidence of the beautiful lady. Show some examples of action and movement. The prancing horse; the writhing beast; the many diagonal lines and shapes such as the lance, the rider's leg, the placement of the horse and the dragon; the fluttering cloak.*

Elements of Design:

Is the general color scheme of the painting warm or cool? Bright or subdued? Find the diagonal lines and shapes. How did Raphael make the forms of the animals and people appear rounded and three-dimensional? How did he show depth or distance? Was the painting made at the scene of the action or in the artist's studio? What parts might he have sketched from real models and what parts from his imagination.

Media and Techniques:

The painting was made on wood that had been prepared with a very smooth surface. There is no evidence of texture such as a canvas might make. Even the brush strokes have been smoothed. Compare this effect with other examples of paintings in this set. How might a 20th Century artist have made this picture with new and different materials and techniques? How large do you think the original painting is? (*11 1/8 x 8 3/8-in.*) Surprisingly small, only the size of a sheet of notebook paper.

Expressive Properties:

Although this picture portrays violence, how is it different in mood from the way violence is shown today? What changes might Raphael have made to make his painting appear more dramatic and frightening? Why do you suppose he did not choose to do that?

The diagram below illustrates the diagonal lines and triangular composition.



Calmness in the upper half of the painting contrasts with the dynamic action below shown by diagonals and writhing curves creating a triangular pyramidal composition.