





Rogier van der Weyden,  
*Saint George and the Dragon*,  
c. 1432/1435, oil on panel,  
National Gallery of Art, Ailsa  
Mellon Bruce Fund

This painting is only 5 7/8 by 4 1/8  
inches in size!



# 1

## George's Story

The knight in each of these paintings is Saint George, a Roman soldier who lived during the third century in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). According to a popular legend from the Middle Ages, Saint George rescued a princess and her town from a terrible dragon. The best-known account of this heroic tale was written in *The Golden Legend*, a medieval best seller from the year 1260. Its stories from the Bible and tales of the lives of saints inspired many artists. For early Christians, Saint George became a symbol of courage, valor, and selflessness.

According to *The Golden Legend*, the citizens of Silene, a city in Libya, were threatened by a fierce and terrible dragon. People saved themselves by feeding their sheep to the hungry monster. When their supply of animals started to run low, the frightened townspeople realized they would have to choose a person to sacrifice. Princess Cleodolinda was the unlucky one selected. Outside the city walls, she knelt and wept while she waited for the dragon. Just then, a brave and noble knight passed by and vowed to save her. George slew the dragon with a single thrust. The citizens of Silene were so inspired by this fearless act that they converted to Christianity.

This popular tale of good triumphing over evil was told to children to inspire them to lead virtuous lives.

# 2

## Masterful Miniatures

Saint George was a favorite subject of artists during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. These small paintings of Saint George, created in different parts of Europe, were made by two of the leading artists of their times: Rogier van der Weyden (c. 1399/1400–1464) in northern Europe, and Raffaello Sanzio, known as Raphael (1483–1520), in Italy. Despite their diminutive size, each painting is full of incredible details that were meant to be viewed closely.

### Look carefully and compare:

**Saint George:** Both paintings show the most dramatic part of the story: when Saint George thrusts his lance at the ferocious dragon. Notice how each artist painted the light bouncing off George's brilliant suit of armor. Examine the expression on his face.

**Horse:** George rides a white horse in both paintings. Its movement, with its mouth open and tongue out, adds to the energy of the scene.



Raphael, *Saint George and the Dragon*, c. 1506, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Andrew W. Mellon Collection

This painting is about the size of a piece of notebook paper.



### 3 An Oil-based Revolution

**Dragon:** Both artists created a frightening version of this mythological creature near its rocky cave.

**Princess Cleodolinda:** Each artist shows the princess kneeling in prayer and dressed in the current fashion of his own era. Rogier's Cleodolinda wears a rich gold and blue brocade dress and an elaborate headdress. Raphael's princess is dressed in red with a thin golden halo.

**Landscape:** Each artist set the story in a landscape that resembled his own country. Rogier's painting shows a view over rolling hills toward a walled city surrounded by water and dominated by a castle perched atop a fantastic mountain. Raphael's tall trees and rocky hills direct attention to the towers of a city in the distance.

**What other similarities can you find between the two paintings? What are their differences?**

How did these artists create such tiny and highly detailed paintings on wood panels? Both Rogier and Raphael skillfully used oil paints, an invention that changed the history of art.

Early artists had used egg tempera paint. Its powdered pigments—made by grinding colored earth, minerals, and even the shell of certain insects—were blended with egg yolks. Tempera was durable and dried quickly, but it was also thick and could be difficult to mix with other colors. In the early 1400s artists in northern Europe developed a revolutionary way to handle oil paint, which was made by blending pigments with slow-drying linseed or walnut oil. Intricate effects, such as the shine of Saint George's armor, could be achieved using the medium. Artists could build up thin layers of opaque and transparent paint that reflected light, and they could subtly blend wet paint to produce a wide range of new color possibilities.



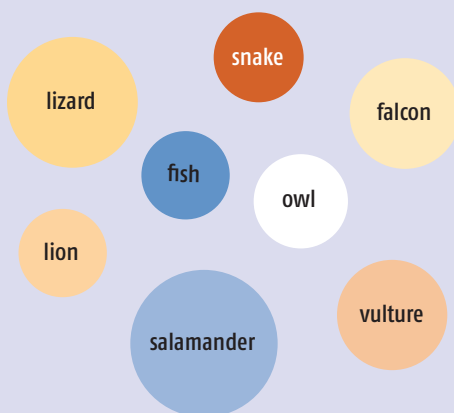
## try this

### Dragon Design

Dragons appear in stories from ancient times through to the present day. Sometimes they symbolize evil, as in the story of Saint George, but in China and other countries, dragons are emblems of good luck.

Bestiaries—illustrated books that describe real and legendary animals—were popular references in the Middle Ages.

Artists created these mythological creatures from their imaginations. Sometimes they combined features of several animals. What kinds of animals might have inspired Rogier and Raphael in painting their dragons?



**“George, a native of Cappadocia . . . once traveled to the city of Silena. . . . Near this town there was a pond as large as a lake where a plague-bearing dragon lurked; and many times the dragon had put the populace to flight when they came out armed against him, for he used to come up to the city walls and poison everyone who came within reach of his breath.”**

*Jacobus de Voragine, **The Golden Legend**, 1260*

#### Invent a dragon or imaginary creature

**Decide:** Will the beast be friendly or dangerous, lucky or evil? Does your creature have any special powers?

**Think about:** What animals will you combine? Imagine a head of a \_\_\_\_\_, body of a \_\_\_\_\_, the claws of a \_\_\_\_\_, wings of a \_\_\_\_\_, and tail of a \_\_\_\_\_.

**Sketch** out possible ideas and combinations.

**Transform** your idea into a three-dimensional action figure or puppet by using a combination of art materials (clay, papier-mâché, paint) and found objects (pipe cleaners, egg cartons, cardboard rolls and boxes, paper).

**Create** a story about your creature. Where did it come from? Where does it live and what does it eat? Who does it meet? Is it the hero or the villain of your story?



*Suffrage to Saint George.* Playfair Book of Hours. Ms.L.475 – 1918, fol. 174v. French (Rouen), late 15th c. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Great Britain. Photo credit: V&A Images, London / Art Resource, NY