

# PRIMARY TEACHERS' NOTES

SAINT GEORGE AND  
THE DRAGON  
PAOLO UCCELLO



## 'SAINT GEORGE AND THE DRAGON' BY PAOLO UCCELLO (1397-1475)



The actual size of the picture is 56.5 x 74 cm. It was painted in oil on canvas in about 1460.

These notes and a large print of Uccello's 'Saint George and the Dragon' are for primary teachers attending the one-day course 'Telling Pictures' at the National Gallery during 2001/2002. Cross-curricular work produced in schools as a result of these courses will be shown in an exhibition at the National Gallery in 2003 as part of the Gallery's **Take One Picture** project. The notes contain basic information about the painting and the artist, as well as suggestions for classroom activities and curriculum links.

The **Take One Picture** project is generously supported by Mr and Mrs Christoph Henkel.

## What is the subject of the painting?

This picture shows two episodes from the story of Saint George. First, the saint with his lance defeats a plague-bearing dragon that had been terrorising a city. Behind the unusual, two-limbed dragon is a large cave with water on the ground. In the second episode, the rescued princess brings the dragon to heel, using her blue belt as a leash.

It is perhaps evening, or early morning, as there is a tiny crescent moon at the top right-hand side of the picture. In the sky, a storm is gathering. The eye of the storm lines up with Saint George's lance, suggesting that divine intervention has helped him to victory.

The strange patches of grass work a bit like a black-and-white tiled floor. They demonstrate Uccello's obsessive concern with linear perspective, and his tendency to create decorative pattern. This can also be seen in the coloured discs on the dragon's wings.

## The legend

The story is taken from a popular collection of saints' lives, 'The Golden Legend', written by Jacobus de Voragine in the 13th century. According to the legend, the citizens of Silene in Libya had managed to appease the dragon by feeding him two sheep every day. However, their supply of sheep began to run out and they decided to offer one sheep and one person, to be selected by drawing lots. One day the lot fell on the king's daughter, and although he pleaded with the citizens to spare her life, they refused; they had lost all their children and there was no reason why the king should not lose his. George, who was a military tribune, happened to be passing the lake where the dragon lived, near which the princess was awaiting her fate. When the dragon appeared George wounded it and called to the princess to tie her belt around its neck. Here the legend says: 'It followed her like a little dog on a leash'. They took the dragon back to the city where Saint George eventually satisfied the citizens by putting it to death. This legend is one example among many in different cultures in which good is seen to triumph over evil.

## Storytelling in paint?

If you did not already know this story, reading from left to right you might think it showed a pet dragon being taken for a walk by an elegant princess, and suffering a surprise attack from an armed knight on a white horse. Paintings do not take place in time, but of course stories do, and storyteller-artists resort to different tactics to overcome the problem. Here Uccello has shown two separate events as if they were happening simultaneously. He relies on the fact that viewers of the picture would have been extremely familiar with the story and would have been able to sequence the events themselves. Saint George was a highly popular saint by the mid-15th century when the picture was made, and he was patron saint of many places in Europe including Venice and, of course, England.

## Who was the artist?

Paolo di Dono, known by his nickname Uccello ('bird' in Italian), was born in 1397. He was apprenticed to the sculptor Ghiberti and then entered an artists' guild as a painter in 1415. He painted frescoes, panels and canvases in Florence but also designed stained glass and produced a mosaic in Venice. He was famously interested in perspective.

## Using the picture in the classroom

There are many ways to introduce the picture. Here are some suggestions:

- Put it up in the classroom without drawing attention to it. Ask children to write about it in a comments book, or record children's discussion about it.

- Introduce it, for example at story time. Allow children a minute to look at it, then cover it up. Ask them what they remember.
- Cover it with a piece of card in which you have cut windows, as in an advent calendar. Open a window each day to reveal an interesting detail.
- Allow one or two children to look at the picture and get them to describe it to the rest of the class. Each child could do their own picture based on this description. Or blindfold one willing child and get the rest of the class to describe the picture to her or him.

These introductions can all provide a good basis for the more formal discussion you might lead. Using the clues provided by the artist, productive questions can lead children to work out the story for themselves. Allow plenty of space for speculation and alternative versions. For example, some children might feel sorry for the dragon! The discussion is also a time for children to think about the difference between the print and the original painting.

## Art across the curriculum

Using the work of artists to enrich and stimulate children's own artwork is a requirement of the National Curriculum for Art. But pictures can also be linked fruitfully with both core and foundation subjects as part of the delivery of a broad and balanced curriculum. The links need not be laboured. It can be a question of using a picture imaginatively, where possible fitting it in to existing schemes of work. Some of the links may simply arise in passing as part of a general discussion about the picture; others may lead to extended pieces of work.

The desired outcomes here are for children to:

- become familiar with the image.
- discover the wealth of ideas and feelings it represents.
- learn about the skills and techniques that went into the making of it.

and then perhaps also:

- to like it or dislike it, developing critical thinking around their basic responses.

## Some suggestions

### Literacy

Many schools now use pictures to enrich existing texts, to stimulate writing in different styles and as a source for word-level work particularly at Foundation level and at KS1.

Here is an example of using the picture with a Year 2 class in term2, based on the framework of the National Literacy Strategy.

#### Text level:

The range of texts includes traditional tales, many with predictable and patterned language. A legend such as this, where there is no strong characterisation, is ideally suited for this type of writing. In this case the teacher could produce a model text or, after a reading of a similar tale, the class could produce the text as a piece of shared writing.

#### Word level:

- Compound words e.g. horseback, fearless, whirlwind.
- Syllables in multi-syllabic words.
- Vocabulary extension – new words from the picture.

**Sentence level:**

- Using verb tenses in speaking and writing (e.g. in a retelling of the story).
- Investigating different ways of presenting texts, for example speech bubbles, captions, headings.

**Science**

Living things. How might mythical beasts such as dragons relate to creatures of similar appearance such as dinosaurs and modern reptiles? Might Uccello have constructed his dragon by putting together elements of animals he knew about?

**History**

Saint George is shown wearing medieval armour. Introduce children to the idea of using paintings as historical sources. How reliable a source might this armour be? Might the artist have had his own agenda for the painting which for example meant that he put in less detail, or simply imagined it? How might we check this? As part of a local history study, this picture might link with a work on a local medieval castle.

**Geography**

Uccello has painted a dramatic whirlwind or tornado in the top right-hand part of the picture. Children could look at this artistic representation of a cloud formation and compare with photographs or videos.

**RE**

Look at different dragon symbolism. In the Western tradition the dragon is a symbol of evil, in China the dragon is a noble animal that represents the emperors. In Chinese astrology, the year of the dragon is said to be the most auspicious.

**Music**

Children could compose music based on the picture, retelling the story using a variety of tuned and untuned instruments to represent the different characters.

**Dance/Drama**

The story could also be told through other temporal art forms such as dance and drama.

**Design and Technology**

Perhaps as part of Chinese New Year celebrations, children could design their own 3D dragons using materials such as wire and modroc.

**Art and Design**

'Saint George and the Dragon' can be used directly in connection with schemes of work such as the QCA scheme, for example Unit 6A People in Action or Unit 6C A Sense of Place.

**Other suggestions**

- Make a large frieze which tells the story in sequence rather than as one moment.

- Design a dragon as a composite of different animals.
- Recreate the whole picture in a different format or medium, for example in model form or in collage.
- Update the story!

For more information about the **Take One Picture** project please telephone National Gallery Education on 020 7747 2424.

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[www.nationalgallery.org.uk](http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk)