Notes for parent/carers:

‘SAINT GEORGE AND THE DRAGON’ BY PAOLO UCCELLO (1397-1475)

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.