Knights

Knights were the mounted soldiers of the medieval world. In general, knights had to have a good deal of wealth, since a full suit of armor and a horse cost a small fortune. Knights were vassals of more powerful lords.

Becoming a Knight. The path to becoming a knight involved many years of training. A boy started as a page, or servant. At the age of seven, he left home and went to live at the castle of a lord, who was often a relative. Nearly all wealthy lords had several pages living in their castles and manors. A page learned how to ride a horse and received religious instruction from the local priest or friar.

During this first stage of training, pages spent much of their time with the ladies of the castle. They were expected to help the ladies in every way possible. During this period, the ladies taught pages how to sing, dance, compose music, and play the harp. These skills were valued in knights.

After about seven years as a page, a young boy became a squire. During this part of his training, he spent most of his time with the knight who was his lord. He polished the knight’s armor, sword, shield, and lance. He helped care for his horse. He even waited on him at mealtime, carrying water for hand washing, carving meat, and filling his cup when it was empty.

Most importantly, squires trained to become warriors. They learned how to fight with a sword and a lance, a kind of spear that measured up to 15 feet long. They also learned how to use a battle-axe and a mace (a club with a heavy metal head). They practiced by fighting in make-believe battles. But squires also went into real battles. A squire was expected to help dress his lord in armor, care for his weapons and horses, follow him into battle, and look after him if he was wounded.

In his early 20s, if deserving of the honor, a squire became a knight. Becoming a knight could be a complex religious event. A squire often spent the night before his knighting ceremony in prayer. The next morning, he bathed and put on a white tunic, or long shirt, to show his purity. During the ceremony, he knelt before his lord and said his vows. The lord drew his sword, touched the knight-to-be lightly on each shoulder with the flat side of the blade, and knighted him. Sometimes, if a squire did particularly well in battle, he was knighted on the spot.

The Responsibilities and Daily Life of Knights. Being a knight was more than a profession. It was a way of life. Knights lived by a strong code of behavior called chivalry. (Chivalry comes from the French word cheval, meaning, “horse.”) Knights were expected to be loyal to the Church and to their lord, to be just and fair, and to protect the helpless. They performed acts of gallantry, or respect paid to women. From these acts, we get the modern idea of chivalry as traditional forms of courtesy and kindness toward women.
Jousts and tournaments were a major part of a knight’s life. In a joust, two armed knights on horseback galloped at each other with their lances extended. The idea was to unseat the opponent from his horse. Jousts were held as sporting events, for exercise, or as serious battles between rival knights. A tournament involved a team of knights in one-on-one battle. These events served as entertainment for people in the Middle Ages.

Knights fought wearing heavy suits of armor. In the 11th century, armor was made of linked metal rings, called chain mail. By the 14th century, plate armor was more common and offered better protection.

The medieval style of knighthood lasted until about the 17th century, when warfare changed with the growing use of gunpowder and cannons. Knights, who fought one-to-one on horseback, were no longer effective against such weapons.
Activity 6 Knights

23. Describe the three basic stages for a boy to become a knight.
   1. 
   2. 
   3. 

24. What responsibilities did knights have in the feudal system?

25. What is the code of chivalry?

26. What purposes did jousts and tournaments serve?

Use the provided sources (Knights Code of Chivalry and Art as a Primary Source: St. George and the Dragon) to complete the following questions. Cite specific details from the documents.

27. Was the Knights Code of Chivalry written down? (6A)

28. What is the overall theme of the vows that all knights take? (6A)

29. Suppose that you are a knight. Write a code of chivalry for yourself. “I promise to be... ___.” (6A)

30. Make a list of the important elements of this painting. (people, color, action). (6B)

31. In what way does St. George and the Dragon show the Knights Code of Chivalry? (6B)

32. Read 'The Story Behind the Canvas' and explain how it changes your first impression of the painting. (6B)
ACTIVITY 6A: KNIGHTS

Knights Code of Chivalry
A knight was expected to have not only the strength and skills to face combat in the violent Middle Ages but was also expected to have a chivalrous side to his nature. There was not an authentic Knights Code of Chivalry in written form - it was a moral system which went beyond rules of combat and introduced the concept of Chivalrous conduct - qualities idealized by knighthood, such as bravery, courtesy, honor, and gallantry toward women.

The Knights Code of Chivalry was part of the culture of the Middle Ages and was understood by all. A Code of Chivalry was documented in the epic poem, The Song of Roland - the most famous “song of heroic deeds” and was composed between 1098-1100.

The Song of Roland describes the 8th century Knights of the Dark Ages and the battles fought by the Emperor Charlemagne. The code has since been described as “Charlemagne’s Code of Chivalry”. It describes the betrayal of Count Roland at the hand of Ganelon, and his resulting death in the Pyranee Mountains at the hands of the Saracens. Roland was a loyal defender of Lord Charlemagne and his code of conduct a description of the meaning of chivalry.

The Vows of Knighthood
The Knights Code of Chivalry described in the Song of Roland and an excellent representation of the vow knights take:

- To fear God and maintain His Church
- To serve your lord in valor and faith
- Always put the needs of others above yourself
- To protect the weak and defenseless
- To give aid to widows and orphans
- To live by honor and for glory
- To despise monetary rewards
- To fight for the welfare of all
- To obey those placed in authority
- To guard the honor of fellow knights
- To avoid unfairness, meanness and deceit
- At all times to speak the truth
- To persevere to the end in any enterprise begun
- To respect the honor of women
- Never to refuse a challenge from an equal
- Never to turn the back upon a foe
OBSERVE THE PAINTING FIRST BEFORE READING ABOUT IT!
ACTIVITY 6B : KNIGHTS

The Story Behind the Canvas:
St. George and the Dragon

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.

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 terrorizing 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 colored 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.