



Art in Science

Art in Science: *The Doctor* by Luke Fildes: Putting the Patient First

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The thoughtful and concerned gaze of the well-dressed physician upon the face of his ill, young patient dominates the center of *The Doctor* (Fig. 1), an iconic oil painting completed by the British artist Sir Samuel Luke Fildes (1843–1927) in 1891. The scene unfolds in the humble home of this distraught family, with one small area rug and the hang-

ing laundry in a single modest-sized room used for all manner of everyday life.

While there is some debate about Fildes' motives in choosing the doctor as his subject, L. V. Fildes, son and biographer of the artist, confirmed that his father selected the subject for personally compelling reasons. According to his son, Fildes was indelibly impressed with the compassion shown by the physician who cared for his infant son, Phillip, who died of typhoid fever at the age of 1 in 1877. His surviving son later wrote in his father's biography that "[he] must have thought a great deal on the subject for when after thirteen years he came to paint *The Doctor*, it was the easiest and quickest painted of his 'big' pictures" [3].

The parents are nearly lost in the background of this scene, but when

found, add a deep layer of despair in the collapsed pose of the wife with her hands in prayer. Her husband empathetically places a hand of comfort on her shoulder, while gazing in the direction of his ill daughter and the respected doctor. There is little evidence to demonstrate that the outcome will be determined by science—as opposed to fate or faith—except for a small bottle near the doctor, suggestive of medication and a cup with utensil that might represent a mortar and pestle. In the past, trust would have been placed in God's hands, but now the priest and prayer are replaced by the doctor.

Light from a rising sun comes through the only window. In his own correspondence, Fildes indicated that the rising sun represented the beginning of the child's recovery [9]. This light is in contrast to the illumination from the lamp on the table next to the doctor. Fildes was interested in mingling the natural light of dawn with the artificial lamplight to mark the passage of time [3]. The artistic constructs of dawn and dusk had long been used in Victorian painting to express change, add drama, and introduce ambiguity to the conflict in the painting. This contrast of light was also a way of showing the doctor had been up all

Note from the Editor-in-Chief:

I am pleased to introduce the next installment of "Art in Science," team-written by Gary and Linda Friedlaender. Gary is the Chair of the Department of Orthopaedics and Rehabilitation at Yale School of Medicine; Linda Friedlaender is the Curator of Education at the Yale Center for British Art. Together, they will share observations from a fascinating vantage point: *The interface of art and medicine.*

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night attending to his patient and looking for any change in her condition.

In his studio, Fildes built a full-sized reproduction of a fisherman's cottage from sketches he made in Devon, England complete with rafters, walls, and a window, and this became the setting for his painting. Fildes probably used his daughter as the model for the stricken boy, and his son was the study for the limp outstretched arm and helpless hand [8]. He may have initially considered using himself to represent the image of the doctor in his painting and was photographed

several times in the striking and now immortalized pose. Doctor friends would visit his studio hoping to pose for the part of the doctor [6, 8]. In the end, the figure in the painting was not a portrait of any one individual, but rather a composite of the artist's imagination [3]. As it turns out, the finished product bears an unmistakable likeness to Fildes (Fig. 2).

At first glance, we are witness to the esteemed physician, involved in a patient-centric relationship, who is strongly committed to the care of this poor, ill child, armed only with his professionalism and perhaps a limited

armamentarium of symptomatic reliefs. His intelligence and commitment are unquestioned, but by today's standards, his contributions to changing the course of events are as sparse as the family's physical possessions. In Victorian England, healthcare was a commodity, limited by financial resources of the patient, in much the same manner as access to healthcare remains tiered today. The Medical Act of 1858, preceding the National Health Service in the United Kingdom by 90 years, transformed the role and stature of the British physician by setting compulsory standards for training. The

Fig. 1 Sir Luke Fildes, R.A. (1843–1927), *The Doctor*, 1891, Oil on canvas. The Tate Britain, London. (Republished with permission Tate Britain Gallery).



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general practitioner emerged as both the “family doctor” and the specialist in primary care. Fildes was very purposeful “[in putting] on record the status of the doctor in our own time [9].” By carefully depicting the lifestyle of poverty, and emphasizing the clear limitations of then-modern medicine, Fildes pursued both his desire to portray commonplace subjects with realism, and to reflect a near spiritual reverence of physicians.

In truth, Fildes manipulated the scene, deviating from an accurate

depiction of healthcare in late 19th century Britain in order to focus on his specific agenda—the doctor’s professional and personal commitment to his patient [5]. The late 19th century was actually a time of significant medical progress that brought with it both public appreciation as well as skepticism, and even the reluctance of some physicians to accept new theories of infection and antiseptis. When examining *The Doctor* in this historical context, another renowned painting comes to mind—*The Gross Clinic* by Thomas Eakins

(Fig. 3). In *The Gross Clinic*, Eakins depicts the skillful surgeon, Dr. Samuel D. Gross, performing a surgical procedure on a patient while also demonstrating the surgeon’s “complete lack of aseptic technique” [4]. Similarly, missing from *The Doctor* are the stethoscope, sphygmomanometer, thermometer, and microscope that were well-established instruments of medical practice in the 1890s.

It was, however, Fildes’ intention to reinforce or reestablish an esteem for physicians, rather than acclaim for advancements in medical science. To this end, he was remarkably successful. “A library of books written in your honour would not do what this picture has done and will do for the medical profession in making the hearts of our fellow men warm to us with confidence and affection,” the Scottish surgeon W. Mitchell Banks FRCS wrote in the *British Medical Journal* in 1892 [1].

While some found *The Doctor* melodramatic, theatrical, and its subject not suitable for high art [3], most of the private, public, and critical responses to the painting were positive. *The Lancet* found it “singularly truthful” [7] and *The British Medical Journal* described Fildes as a “brilliant painter” and *The Doctor* “one of the most attractive pictures of the coming Academy” [2]. Since first exhibited at the Royal Academy in London, this

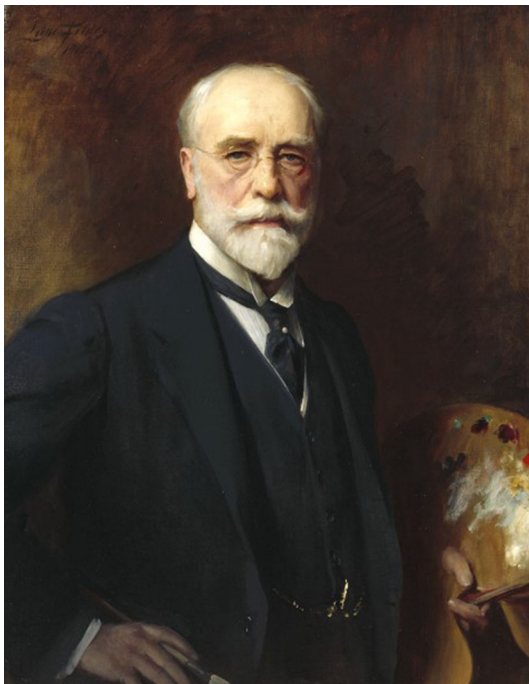


Fig. 2 Sir Luke Fildes. The physician in *The Doctor* bears a striking resemblance to Fildes.

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large canvas image has been repeatedly used to epitomize the highest qualities of the doctor-patient relationship. Indeed, more than 1 million reproductions of *The Doctor* were sold in the United States within a short time of their availability prior to the turn of the 20th century [6].

Fildes had correctly surmised that by painting a narrative content easily understood and accessible by a wide spectrum of viewers, he could achieve popular success and heighten his own public stature. Indeed, Fildes reached the peak of popularity in his own lifetime. He was knighted in 1906 and

installed as a Knight Commander of the Victoria Order in 1918. His works were exhibited at the Royal Academy every year but three from 1868 to 1927. During the last three decades of his life, his subject matter changed, painting mostly society portraits (including the Royal family) and scenes of Venice, Italy. *The Doctor* was put into storage in 1922 as tastes changed, but returned again to exhibition after his death, and remains on public view at the Tate Britain in London [3].

Despite the artist's flattering portrayal of physicians, Fildes has actually provided us with a substantially contrived experience, rather than an accurate depiction of healthcare in 1891 Britain. The late 19th century was a time of considerable progress in science and medicine. The germ theory, sterility, and anesthesia were well-established by this time. The physician's role had evolved from an otherwise provider of compassion (in which the patient was central) to a person of science and skill (with the physician challenging the patient for the "center"). Fildes carefully chose both his subject and his message in *The Doctor*, and provided a timeless, powerful, and iconic tribute to the medical profession, as well as a lasting reminder to keep the patient in the center of the picture. Perhaps if he painted today, the work would be entitled *The Patient*.



Fig. 3 Thomas Eakins (1844–1916), *The Gross Clinic*, 1875, Oil on canvas, 2400 × 2000 mm, Philadelphia Museum of Fine Arts, Philadelphia (Republished with permission from the Philadelphia Museum of Art: Gift of the Alumni Association to Jefferson Medical College in 1878 and purchased by the Philadelphia Academy of the Fine Arts and the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2007 with the generous support of more than 3600 donors).

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