One of the most familiar and beloved images of the practice of medicine is *The Doctor*, an 1891 oil painting by Luke Fildes in the tradition of Victorian-era social realism. First exhibited at the Royal Academy in London and now displayed in the Tate Gallery, this iconic artwork depicts a physician at the bedside of a sick child in a humble cottage, watched over by the child’s worried parents. The painting was commissioned in 1890 by Sir Henry Tate (1819-1898), noted philanthropist and sugar merchant. Tate did not specify a subject for the painting.

One commenter noted in *The British Medical Journal* in 2002, that it is the doctor’s empathy and compassion that defines this painting: “His manner is all, and Fildes captures it forever—the furrowed brow; the hand propping the firm bearded chin; the calm, concerned authority.” Although stethoscopes, microscopes, and thermometers were essential clinical tools in the 1890s, no diagnostic instruments are seen in the image, and the only visible tools of healing are a basin and pitcher of water to cool the child’s fever. Medicine is thus reduced to ancient fundamentals: Observation and presence.

Fildes himself described the moment depicted in the painting, “At the cottage window the dawn begins to steal in — the dawn that is the critical time of all deadly illnesses — and with it the parents again take hope into their hearts, the mother hiding her face to escape giving vent to her emotion, the father laying his hand on the shoulder of his wife in encouragement of the first glimmerings of the joy which is to follow.”

Fildes had once been at an ill child’s bedside himself, but without a joyful ending. He and his wife lost their 1-year-old first-born son, Philip, to typhoid on Christmas morning in 1877, and Fildes long recalled the devotion of the attending doctor, Dr Gustavus Murray (1831-1887). The doctor in the 1891 painting resembles Fildes himself, however, not Murray. Two of Fildes’ surviving children modeled the head and arm of the child in the painting, and the cottage interior is based on dwellings that Fildes had observed in the northeast of Scotland and Devon.

Sir Samuel Luke Fildes was born in Liverpool on October 3, 1843, the fourth of 10 children of James and Susanna (Fogg) Fildes. His father was a shipping agent and mariner. At age 11, Luke Fildes went to live with his paternal grandmother, social activist Mary Fildes, who was an icon of the working-class Chartist movement and had been a speaker at the infamous 1819 Manchester rally about extending the right to vote that was suppressed by a cavalry unit and became known as the “Peterloo Massacre.”

Fildes trained at the Warrington Art School in Cheshire and then at South Kensington Art School in London. He sympathized with his grandmother’s social concerns and joined the staff of the reformist newspaper, *The Graphic*, in 1869, drawing many sketches of homeless people and residents of poorhouses. Charles Dickens selected Fildes to illustrate one of his novels, and a widely reprinted sketch of Dickens’ empty chair by Fildes following Dickens’ death in 1870 inspired Vincent van Gogh’s 1888 painting *The Yellow Chair*.

Fildes made his living primarily through painting portraits. Mining entrepreneur and statesman Cecil Rhodes (1853-1902) threatened to burn a portrait Fildes executed of him, so Fildes kept the painting himself and did not cash Rhodes’ cheque. Despite the occasional unsatisfied customer such as Rhodes, Fildes was a popular...
portraitist and was selected to paint State portraits of King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra. Fildes was elected an Associate of the Royal Academy in 1879 and a Royal Academician in 1887, was knighted by King Edward VII in 1906, and was appointed Knight Commander of the Royal Victorian Order (KCVO) by King George V in 1918.

In 1874, Fildes married Fanny Woods (1853-1927), a fellow artist and sister of Henry Woods (1846-1921). They had 4 children, including Sir Paul Fildes (1882-1971), a pathologist and Naval officer who worked on defense against biological warfare at Porton Down during the Second World War. Fildes lived in the borough of Kensington in London, where he died in 1927. He was buried in Brookwood Cemetery (The London Necropolis).

In 1947, the US Postal Service issued a stamp depicting The Doctor (Scott #949) to commemorate the centennial of the founding of the American Medical Association (AMA). The First Day of Issue Ceremony took place at the American Medical Association’s June annual meeting in Atlantic City, New Jersey. As was the custom at the time, the stamp was printed in monochrome on a rotary press, so it appears cluttered and has less impact than the original oil painting. In 1949, the American Medical Association used the image as part of a broad and ultimately successful campaign against a proposal to nationalize medical care in the United States, as had occurred in the United Kingdom in 1948.

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