
Fildes, (Samuel) Luke

(b Liverpool, Oct 18, 1844; d London, Feb 27, 1927).

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English painter and illustrator. He first studied art at the Mechanics Institute in Liverpool and at the nearby Warrington School of Art. In 1863 he won a scholarship that enabled him to study at the South Kensington Art School in London and subsequently at the Royal Academy Schools. By the late 1860s he was earning money as an illustrator for such popular periodicals as the *Cornhill Magazine* and *Once a Week*.

Fildes's illustration *Houseless and Hungry*, which appeared as a wood-engraving in the first issue of the *Graphic* (4 Dec 1869), a socially conscious weekly, was the turning-point of his career. The engraving depicts homeless paupers queuing outside the casual ward of a workhouse. When it was shown to Charles Dickens by John Everett Millais, the author commissioned Fildes to illustrate his novel *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. The unfinished book was published posthumously in 1870 with a set of 12 illustrations by Fildes.

In 1874 at the Royal Academy, Fildes exhibited *Applicants for Admission to a Casual Ward* (1874; Egham, U. London, Royal Holloway & Bedford New Coll.), a painting based on the *Houseless and Hungry* illustration. The success of this work, with its forceful social message and dark-toned realism, established Fildes, along with Frank Holl (ii) and Hubert von Herkomer, as a leader of the social realist school in England that flourished during the 1870s. Fildes's sympathy for the poor reflects his origins; he was brought up by his grandmother Mary Fildes, an active political reformer who was seriously wounded in 1819 at the Peterloo Massacre near Manchester. Other social subjects by Fildes include *The Widower* (exh. RA 1876; Sydney, A.G. NSW), the *Return of the Penitent* (exh. RA 1879; Cardiff, City Hall) and *The Doctor* (exh. RA 1891; London, Tate). The last painting, set in a humble dwelling, shows a mortally ill child attended by a concerned physician with the distraught parents in the background. The sombre pathos of this work sparked an enormous popular response, and the engraving after it published by Agnew in 1892 was extremely successful.

After a trip to Venice in 1874 with his bride Fanny (fl 1873–83; d 1927), an artist and the sister of the painter Henry Woods (1846–1921), Fildes began to paint a series of Venetian subjects, which he exhibited at the Royal Academy during the 1880s; his most successful work of this type was an *Alfresco Toilette* (exh. RA 1889; Port Sunlight, Lady Lever A.G.). Popular for their vibrant colour and pretty women, these sentimental Venetian genre scenes offer a startling contrast to his paintings of social distress and poverty.

By 1890 the bulk of Fildes's work was almost exclusively portraiture, and his large and fashionable clientele included royalty. Among his royal commissions were portraits of the *Princess of Wales* (exh. RA 1894), *Edward VII* (exh. RA 1902) and *George V* (1912) (all British Royal Col.). The financial rewards of portrait painting enabled the artist to commission a Queen Anne style house (1875–7) from Richard Norman Shaw, which was built at 11 Melbury Road, Kensington, London. Elected ARA in 1879, Fildes gained full membership in 1887 and was active in Academy affairs. He was knighted in 1906 and made KCVO in 1918. The contents of his studio were auctioned at Christie's, London, on 24 June 1927.

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Fildes, Luke (Sir) <<http://oxfordartonline.com/benezit/view/10.1093/benz/9780199773787.001.0001/acref-9780199773787-e-00064129>> in Oxford Art Online <<http://oxfordartonline.com>>

Fildes, Sir (Samuel) Luke (1843–1927), illustrator and genre and portrait painter <<http://oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-33127>> in Oxford Dictionary of National Biography <<http://oxforddnb.com>>

External resources

Fildes, Luke: *The Doctor*, c. 1891, Tate (London) <<https://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?workid=4277&searchid=10765>>

Fildes, Luke: *Applicants for Admission for the Casual Ward*, after 1908, Tate (London) <<https://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?workid=4278&searchid=10792>>