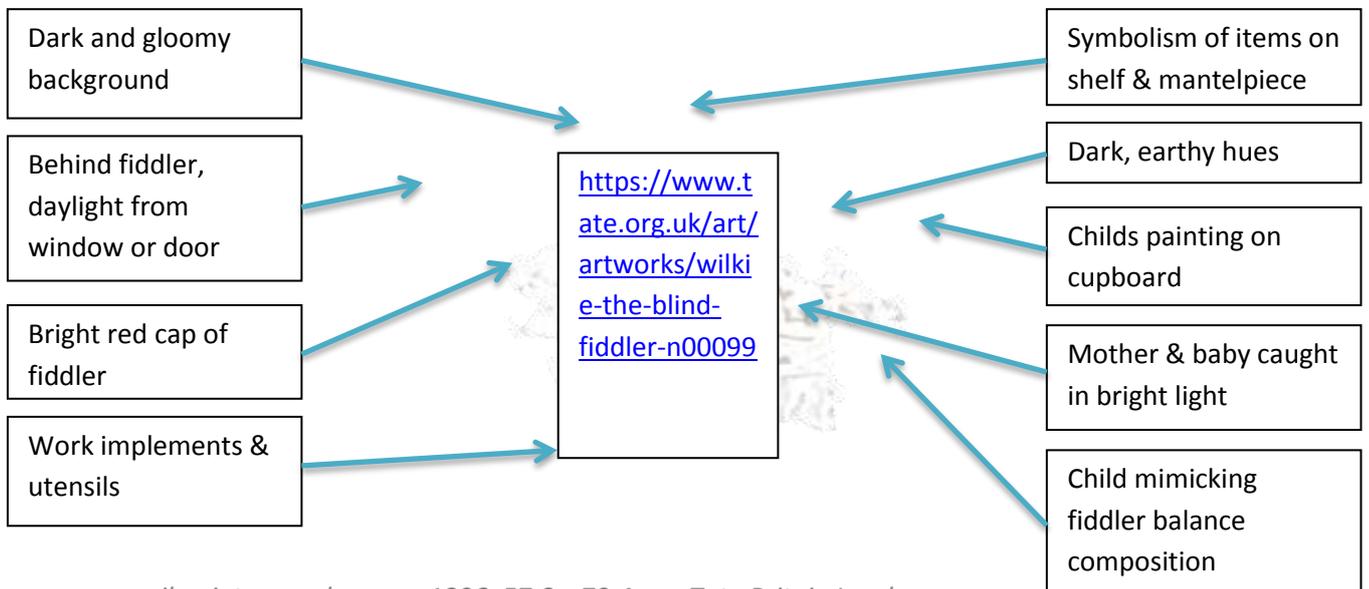


## The Blind Fiddler - David Wilkie



*oil paint on mahogany, 1806, 57.8 x 79.4 cm, Tate Britain London*

- Gloomy general atmosphere broken by light sources shining on mother and child
- Relative poverty of family portrayed by dim internal lighting and muted, earthy hues
- Title: The Blind Fiddler, but attention drawn to mother and child by direct, bright lighting

### Description

This painting portrays a fiddler playing his instrument, his action mimicked on the right by a young boy who pretends to play with a pair of bellows. In between these are ten other people.

What is intriguing about this picture is that few people seem to be taking any notice of the fiddler, the only ones to seemingly show any interest are the two children in the centre of the composition, staring at the fiddler, and the boy who is 'playing' the bellows.

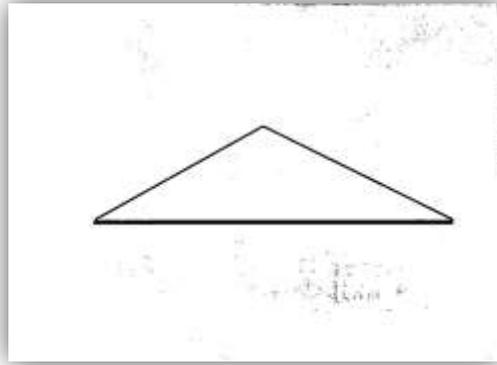
The background to the scene is dull and gloomy and this adds to the dour, frugal atmosphere of the painting. Of interest though is the way in which Wilkie has painted the mother and child on the right of the composition. They have been lit with very direct light which really picks out the white clothes of the baby and the face and white bonnet and apron of the mother.

Various garden or agricultural tools and implements are shown in the painting which indicates the work of the occupants.

### Interpretation

Wilkie is described by Chilvers (2009 p678 as "the most popular genre painter of his time".

The composition is quite pyramidal with the fiddler and the boy at either end and the old man at the apex. There is a strong base line running along the lower horizontal third of the painting formed from the fiddler's thighs, the sleeping baby, the mothers arms and the boy's 'bow'.



There is quite a depth to this painting as there are three planes. The first is the foreground containing a stool, watering can and food. Beyond this in the middle plane are the people, the third plane is the rear wall, shelves and furniture.

Gray writes on The Victorian Web "This scene of everyday life contains an immense variety of expression and subtle activity; the family is united compositionally, but each member experiences the moment privately."

There may be symbolism in some of the articles that are in the painting – the garden implements indicating hard work, an inkpot on the shelf suggesting education. The Tate website states that, when exhibited at the Royal Academy "some critics thought the bust on the shelf represented a dissenting minister, and concluded that the family were nonconformists. The power of music to stir the passions of those supposedly suspicious of pleasure was thought to add to the painting's subtlety".

## Evaluation

This is a typical example of a genre painting, it is very different in both subject and style to what had previously been painted by artists such as Sir Joshua Reynolds. According to The Victorian Web, Reynolds, shortly after the founding of the Royal Academy, was concerned that the annual exhibitions "would tempt artists to abandon classical subjects and idealism in favour of pictures showing common life in particularised detail".

Perhaps this is best summed up on The Victorian Web when it describes The Blind Fiddler as "the antithesis of Reynolds great style".

**529 words**

## References

Chilvers, I. (2009) *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Art and Artists* (4th edition). Oxford: Oxford University

## Web references

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/wilkie-the-blind-fiddler-n00099>

<http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/wilkie/paintings/1.html>