

New-York Historical Society explores work of J.C. Leyendecker, pivotal gay artist and illustrator



J.C. Leyendecker (1874-1951), Couple in Boat, Painting for Arrow Collar advertisement, 1912. Oil on canvas. National Museum of American Illustration, Newport, RI.

NEW YORK, NY.- This spring, a new exhibition at the [New-York Historical Society](#) examines the work and influence of J.C. Leyendecker (1874–1951), a preeminent illustrator and commercial artist who helped shape American visual culture in the first three decades of the 20th century through captivating advertising campaigns including the legendary “Arrow Collar Man” and countless covers for the Saturday Evening Post. As a gay artist whose illustrations for a mainstream audience often had unspoken homoerotic undertones, his work is especially revealing for what it says about the cultural attitudes towards homosexuality of the period. *Under Cover: J. C. Leyendecker and American Masculinity*, which opened May 5, and will continue until August 13, 2023, is organized by New-York Historical from the collection of the National Museum of American Illustration, Newport, RI.

“*Under Cover: J.C. Leyendecker and American Masculinity* deepens our understanding of the struggle for full civil rights as Americans of the LGBTQ+ community,” said Dr. Louise Mirrer, president and CEO of New-York Historical. “The exhibition is part of New-York Historical’s ongoing commitment to tell stories of Americans whose lived experience, though important and consequential to our history, is so often absent from textbooks in schools and colleges. New-York Historical’s collaboration with the American LGBTQ+ Museum, which will be housed in our institution’s new wing, will further enable meaningful conversations about LGBTQ+ history and its rightful place within the American narrative.”

“J.C. Leyendecker was an amazingly talented artist whose illustrations have come to embody the look and feel of the first half of the century while simultaneously demonstrating how fluidity in gender expression and gay representation were actually quite common at the time, contrary to current assertions that they are unique to our own moment,” said Donald Albrecht, guest curator. “Not only did his work exemplify the zeitgeist, but it depicts a deeply nuanced view of sexuality and advertising that broadens our understanding of American culture.”

Under Cover: J.C. Leyendecker and American Masculinity showcases 19 of the artist’s original oil paintings and a wealth of related ephemera, and features both Leyendecker’s editorial work, such as magazine covers, as well as commercial illustrations that appeared in the pages of popular publications, on roadside billboards, in store windows, and on mass transit. His aesthetic influence extended to Norman Rockwell, his colleague and eventual successor as the Post’s premier illustrator. The exhibition is organized into two primary sections: one exploring Leyendecker’s depictions of the male body, either semi-nude or clad in body-revealing garments, and a second focusing on his images of male intimacies, often of men sharing sexually charged looks. The model for many of his illustrations was Charles Beach, his lover and eventual business manager.

Under Cover delves into the early politics of sexual identity and gender while simultaneously examining how Leyendecker helped establish a nationalistic ideal of elite and athletic white male beauty. To address this aspect of his work, the exhibition juxtaposes some of Leyendecker’s paintings with artifacts that offer counter-narratives to his works’ exclusionary nature, including depictions of fashionable African American men during the Harlem Renaissance. Also providing crucial context: a selection of contemporaneous advertisements with homoerotic connotations and a digital show of images depicting gay culture in New York during Leyendecker’s time, including plays about lesbians and men in drag that appeared on Broadway, effeminate male nightclub performers, and gay artists who wrote poems and created drawings about same-sex desire.

The exhibition locates Leyendecker's work within the evolution of commercial illustration, when advertisers sought to sell products by emotion and feeling and not only by factual representation of a product's utilitarian characteristics. These commercial trends can be seen in Leyendecker's work creating advertising illustrations for companies such as Gillette razors, Ivory soap, House of Kuppenheimer menswear, and Interwoven socks. He also developed campaigns for Arrow collars depicting handsome, idealized men wearing shirts and detachable collars manufactured by Cluett, Peabody & Co. Laying the groundwork of Leyendecker's implied gay narratives, these ads starred fashionable men in stylish settings engaged in activities such as boating, golfing, or reading in men's clubs. In his work, Leyendecker created drawings depicting multiple kinds of masculinity for the mass market, from feminized men like the languidly posed males in Interwoven ads who look at and caress their sheer stockings to elegant men of leisure like the Arrow Collar Man to manly men like muscular sailors, lifeguards, and athletes.

Leyendecker's suggestive images aligned with his era's sexual mores. Starting in the latter decades of the 19th century, small but dense subcultures that defied sexual and gender conventions became increasingly visible in cities like New York. Members of these subcultures often identified themselves with specific styles of dress, mannerisms, and language. As a gay Manhattanite immersed in the city's sophisticated visual culture industries, Leyendecker was most likely cognizant of these gay identity markers, sometimes depicting them in his illustrations.

Under Cover is organized by New-York Historical from the collection of the National Museum of American Illustration, Newport, RI. The show is guest-curated by Donald Albrecht, and coordinated at New-York Historical by Rebecca Klassen, curator of material culture. Drawing on three decades of scholarship, the exhibition is aided by a committee of advisors: Dr. Elspeth Brown, Professor of History at the University of Toronto; Dr. Monica L. Miller, Professor of English and Africana Studies, Barnard College; and Dr. Michael Murphy, Associate Professor of Gender and Sexuality Studies at the University of Illinois Springfield.

Programming

On Friday, July 7, New-York Historical, in partnership with the American LGBTQ+ Museum and NewFest, New York's leading LGBTQ+ film and media organization, hosts a screening of the documentary *Coded: The Hidden Love of J.C. Leyendecker* (2021). Directed by Ryan White, the film focuses on J.C. Leyendecker as one of the most prominent artists of his time, whose story is now largely forgotten. Forced to keep his sexuality a secret, his coded imagery spoke directly to the gay community and laid the foundation for LGBTQ representation in advertising today. Additional details to follow.

Private group tours can be arranged throughout the run of the exhibition. Family friendly story times featuring books about Pride will take place during the exhibition's run. Learn more at the DiMenna Children's History Museum's family calendar.