

NEW YORK



J. C. Leyendecker, *Thanksgiving: 1628-1928 (Pilgrim and Football Player)*, 1928, oil on canvas, 28 × 22".

J. C. Leyendecker

NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

J. C. Leyendecker died in the summer of 1951, in Norma Desmond—like obscurity, on the grounds of his once-magnificent mansion in New Rochelle, New York. His Ivy League Adonises and Madison Avenue boulevardiers—definitive images of aspirational American manhood in the first three decades of the twentieth century—were long ago processed and extruded by the sausage factory of modern visual culture, their maker eclipsed by his onetime protégé (and soon-to-be pallbearer), Norman Rockwell. Leyendecker’s lover, Charles Beach—whose square-jawed good looks and Winckelmannian physique had inspired his most iconic and ubiquitous creation, the Arrow Collar Man—sold the artist’s work at a yard sale and burned his memoirs at Leyendecker’s request, opening his legacy to innuendo and fictionalization.

Fortunately, the illustrator received a thoughtful treatment this summer at the New-York Historical Society’s “Under Cover: J. C. Leyendecker and American Masculinity,” a small but scholarly exhibition that punched above its weight, attending to the homoerotic overtones of the artist’s output alongside the stereotypes and exclusions that defined his Yankee beau ideal.

Opening the show was Leyendecker's Easter 1936 cover for the *Saturday Evening Post*, one of the 322 illustrations he produced for the magazine. A foppish youth is seen adjusting his tie in a gilded mirror. Assembled in the foreground alongside a potted narcissus are the accoutrements of dandyism (a cane, a top hat, and kid gloves), which here become a latter-day *vanitas*, gently warning against the perils of male self-admiration and the feminizing excesses of fashion (as the wall text explains, daffodil, the common name for the narcissus flower, was an epithet for a gay man). If the moralizing message here becomes an alibi for a coded representation of queerness, other Leyendecker covers cathect on the athletic male body, exuberantly commingling beefcake homoeroticism and a triumphant American nationalism, which can, as the curators acknowledge, resonate uncomfortably with fascist kitsch. See the bellicose racecraft of Leyendecker's 1928 Thanksgiving cover for the *Post*, featuring a swole, blunderbuss-packing pilgrim beside a strapping football player, glistening pectorals and biceps bulging from his ripped uniform. As media historian Dan Guadagnolo has written, Leyendecker's Chads and swells can't be credited with "normaliz[ing] same-sex desire," but they did innovate "a visual discourse for the creation of a new mode of gay identity in the late 1920s and 1930s," one no longer premised on "gender inversion but instead rooted in a virile sexuality and the built muscular form."

Hailed by the rough-riding Teddy Roosevelt as a “superb example of the common man”—and name-checked by queer wit Cole Porter in his effervescent “You’re the Top”—Leyendecker’s Arrow Collar Man personified the consumptive dreams of an emerging managerial class (literally “white collar,” white and male) while securing, and in fact surpassing, such dreams for the artist himself. (By 1908, an illustration by Leyendecker earned the artist \$350, about the yearly income for the average American worker.) The most provocative of these advertisements cloister male pairs in exclusive homosocial environs such as golf clubs or, in *Men Reading*, 1914, a tenebrous mahogany-appointed library. The dapper gent depicted on the left looks away from his book, saving his place with his finger. The vector of his gaze is ambiguous. Is he lost in contemplation, peering into the artificial enveloping darkness that heightens the intimacy between the picture’s two subjects, or is he eyeing his lithe flaxen-haired companion, who, absorbed in his newspaper, unwittingly flashes a well-turned ankle beneath houndstooth trousers?

This coy dance of normativity and deviance today lends Leyendecker’s work a camp frisson and a contemporary resonance rarely recognized in the products of the so-called golden age of American illustration. We dismiss this work to our detriment, for if, as Clement Greenberg famously lamented, “the same civilization produces simultaneously . . . a painting by Braque and a *Saturday Evening Post* cover,” the latter surely tells us more about our lust and longing in the afterglow of modernity, about racial capitalism and gender panic, about cruel optimism and the meretricious promise of the American Dream. “You resemble the advertisement of the man,” Daisy told Gatsby, almost certainly with Leyendecker’s dashing pictures in mind. “She went on innocently. ‘You know the advertisement of the man.’”

— Chloe Wyma