The all-American man? A queer advertising genius invented him

J.C. Leyendecker created the image of the idealized bro we still see today, from the Ken doll to the Abercrombie & Fitch catalog.

The once-idealized image of the all-American man, that preppy, sporty Ivy Leaguer who played football, golfs, and rowed crew in college? Turns out he was invented by a gay advertising genius. The illustrator, J.C. Leyendecker, found fortune and success in the first half of the 20th century—all the while coding queer messages in his advertising and editorial work.
Even back then, consumers clearly recognized those messages, argues an exhibition at the New-York Historical Society. It explores the era-defining work of Leyendecker, a German-born artist who grew up in Chicago and became America’s top illustrator at a time when illustration was one of the most important disciplines within visual culture. No shortage of major brands lined up to get Leyendecker to position and market their wares. And he seems to have achieved remarkable professional success on his own terms. Though it is impossible to know how out he was by today’s standards, he shared a home with his boyfriend and frequent muse, a beefy model named Charles Beach, among a community of artists in New Rochelle, New York.

What makes Leyendecker’s work so fascinating today is not that the queer references are there if only you know where to look, but that they’re plain to see. “I think people feel that until Stonewall, everything in popular culture was homophobic and closed, and then after Stonewall, it’s open,” says Donald Albrecht, curator of the exhibition. “But as Leyendecker’s work suggests, actually it was kind of open during the teens, twenties, and early thirties—and that’s a surprise to people.”
Collier's, 1917 [Photo: courtesy National Museum of American Illustration]

MASCULINITY FOR THE MASSES
Leyendecker’s name is not well known circa 2023, but a century ago he was famous (Irving Berlin and Cole Porter referenced his work in song lyrics), and many of his illustrations are instantly identifiable to this day. He dreamed up the familiar image of Baby New Year in his cute little top hat and sash as well as the jollier, chubbier version of Santa Claus (first modernized by Thomas Nast), which has since become the default. He also popularized the notion of sons giving their mothers big bouquets of flowers for Mother’s Day. We take these ideas for granted now, but they were not widely understood visual tropes before Leyendecker put them down in his sketch pad. And his legacy shaped Americana for decades to come; Norman Rockwell was a protegé and an admirer.

Leyendecker’s image of what a contemporary viewer might call the “modern man” is his most iconic work—subversive in a good way though also deeply classist and narrow-minded. In ads for the Arrow Collar, Chesterfield cigarettes, and Ivory soap, as well as in World War I recruitment posters, and in illustrations for the cover of the Saturday Evening Post, Leyendecker honed the first dominant mass-media prototype of American masculinity. His vision is one that we now view as laughably retrograde, but it is undeniably entrenched in the culture—it can be found in the DNA of Ralph Lauren’s Polo brand, J. Crew, and the Abercrombie & Fitch catalog, even the Ken doll. And, of course, the sly joke of it all is the macho guys in Leyendecker’s illustrations seem much more interested in their buddies’ biceps than they are in the occasional woman who enters the frame.

Albrecht argues that Leyendecker’s knack for crafting effective advertising tells us something about the society in which he lived and worked. “Leyendecker creates these homoerotic images in advertising not because he’s gay but because he’s manifesting the freeness of the era,” he says. “There seems to be a wider definition of masculinity, a more acceptable sense of men interacting with one another that was more permissible.”
QBS AND ‘MANNING UP’

Of course, the culture of Leyendecker’s era—not unlike our own—was rife with racist, classist, and militaristic sentiments, and these are evident on his canvases, as well. “Darker shadows occur, for example in Leyendecker’s images of college men playing football,” a sport that was, at the time, not nearly as popular as baseball, Albrecht says. “His work portrays football as a way for the upperclass man—the college student—to ‘man up.’ Well, the upperclass white man in that era only felt he had to ‘man up’ because of the incursion of immigrants moving into American cities, of African-Americans moving from the South to the North, and of the role of women in public life beginning to expand with suffrage.”
As with so many representations of masculinity, the fragility of the male ego is palpable in Leyendecker’s work. Still, it’s possible to fault Leyendecker for conjuring up a standard for American masculinity that is unhealthy and exclusionary, while also celebrating the fact that his work encourages the viewer to believe that there’s more than one way of looking at the world.

If you’re a person interested in how advertising works, Leyendecker’s story raises intriguing questions about how brands market themselves, undermining the notion that all advertising has to play it safe. At a time when the likes of Bud Light and Target backpedal at even the hint of cosmopolitanism in their marketing efforts, it’s revelatory to know that the mainstream brands your great-grandparents shopped embraced an anything-goes spirit when making their pitch.

You can’t help but walk away from this exhibition without wondering what society would be like if a different image of masculinity had been passed down through the years. When was the moment Leyendecker’s sly sensitivity fell away, leaving behind only the preppy machismo? And if you could go back and time and stop that from happening, would life be any different?

_Under Cover: J.C. Leyendecker and American Masculinity_ runs through August 13 at the New-York Historical Society; and there’s a documentary, _Coded: The Hidden Love of J.C. Leyendecker_, about the artist’s life and work, available to stream on Paramount+.

Now accepting applications for Most Innovative Companies. **Apply by October 6** for your chance to be featured!