American Masculinity

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J.C. Leyendecker (1874–1951), "Men with Golf Clubs (Arrow Collar advertisement)," c. 1909, oil on canvas, 20 1/2 x 42 1/2 in., National Museum of American Illustration (Newport, Rhode Island)

Under Cover: J.C. Leyendecker and American Masculinity

New-York Historical Society
New York City
nyhistory.org
Through August 13, 2023
The New-York Historical Society has organized the exhibition “Under Cover: J.C. Leyendecker and American Masculinity,” which considers the illustrator and commercial artist who helped shape American visual culture in the first three decades of the 20th century. Leyendecker (1874–1951) became famous for memorable advertisements promoting Arrow shirt collars, Gillette razors, Ivory soap, Kuppenheimer menswear, and Interwoven socks, not to mention his countless covers for the bestselling Saturday Evening Post. His aesthetic influence extended to Norman Rockwell, his colleague and eventual successor as the Post’s premier illustrator.

The model for many of Leyendecker’s illustrations was Charles Beach, his lover and eventual business manager, and his imagery — ostensibly intended for a mainstream audience — often had unspoken queer undertones. Guest curator Donald Albrecht says Leyendecker’s work demonstrates “how fluidity in gender expression and queer representation were actually quite common at the time, contrary to current assertions that they are unique to our own moment.”

Albrecht has collaborated on the project with the Society’s curator of material culture, Rebecca Klassen, and all of the artworks have been borrowed from the National Museum of American Illustration in Newport, Rhode Island. The project is a partnership with the American LGBTQ+ Museum, which will open within the Society’s yet-to-be-constructed new wing.

On view are 19 original oil paintings as well as magazine covers and commercial illustrations that appeared in print, roadside billboards, store windows, and mass transit. Illustrated here is a quintessential example showing two handsome white athletes posed in an elite setting; in the windows behind them appear the crests of both Harvard and Yale.

On July 7, the Society will host a screening of the documentary film “Coded: The Hidden Love of J.C. Leyendecker (2021).” The 28-minute film was directed by Ryan White and narrated by Neil Patrick Harris.