THE ANNOUNCEMENT MAN >

Wasn't he man enough? This is how the first 'sex symbol' of advertising triumphed (and disappeared)

The man known as the 'Arrow Collar Man' became an icon of masculinity in the twenties in the United States, but the crash of '29 and the conservative hangover ruined his figure

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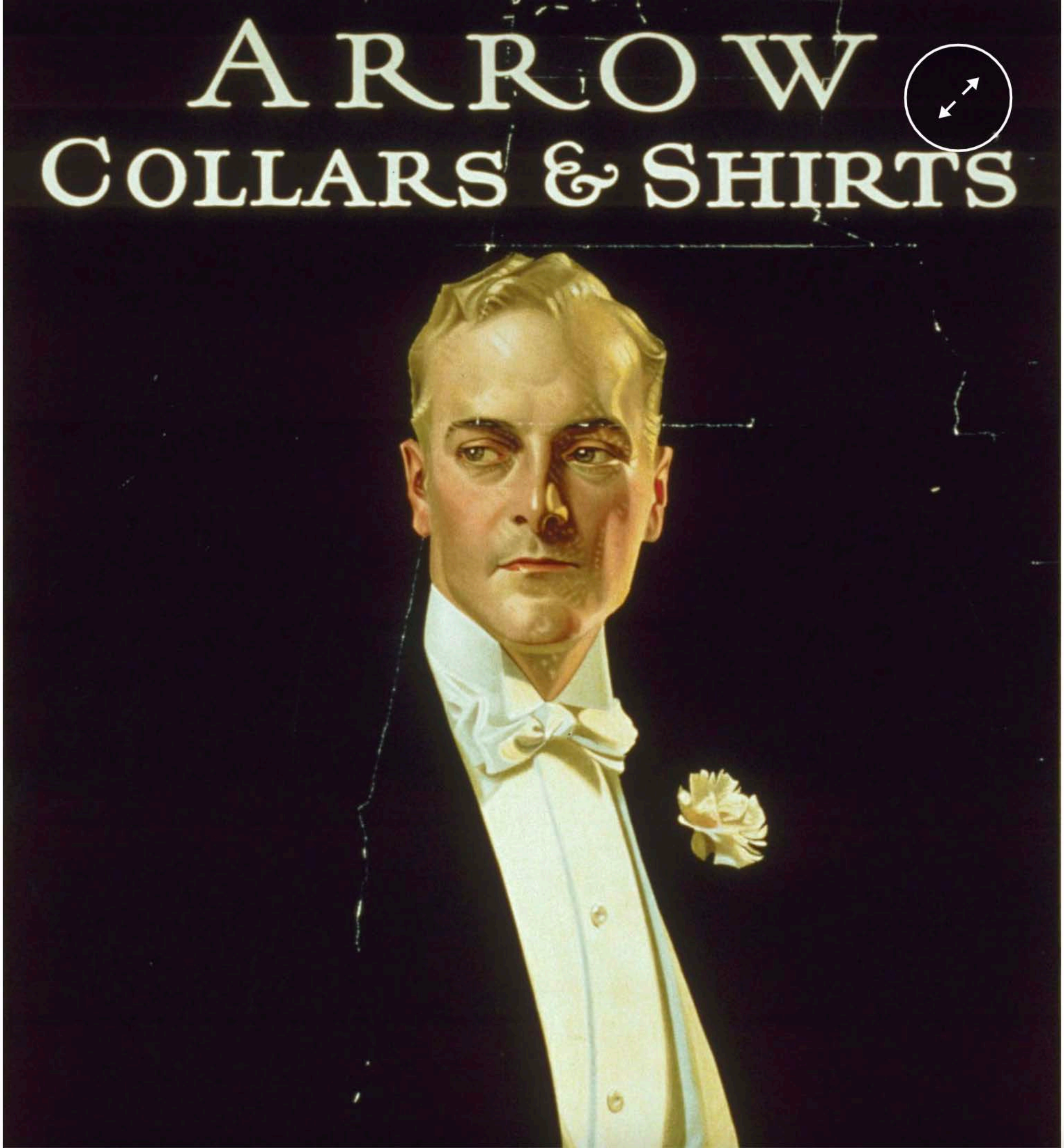
It is said that hundreds of letters and telegrams arrived every week at Cluett Peabody & Company headquarters addressed to the mysterious hunk who promoted their shirts and false collars, known as the Arrow Collar Man . A strong and manly man, graceful and carefree. Tall, broad-shouldered, and narrow-waisted, he walked as confidently in the locker room after training as he did at a formal dinner. His face and his style obsessed the United States during the twenties and the disappointments could not have been few when it was discovered that this man was nothing more than a fiction invented for an advertising campaign and illustrated by the American artist of German origin Joseph Christian Leyendecker (1874-1951).

“Leyendecker was one of the best and most prolific commercial illustrators in the first three decades of the 20th century,” architect and interior designer Donald Albrecht tells ICON. “He was a specialist sketching menswear with men doing all kinds of activities. He was gay and his partner of 50 years, Charlie Beach, was the model for much of his work. In fact, many of the Arrow Collar Man illustrations were based on Beach."

Albrecht has been a guest curator for the exhibition *Under Cover: JC* Leyendecker and The American Masculinity, which explores both the artist's legacy and influence on the masculine ideal of the time, and the homosexual subtext. Of his work. The show, which includes 19 original Leyendecker oil paintings, has been on display at the New York Historical Society from May through this weekend. "The Arrow Collar Man is what he would call brand embodiment," says Albrecht. A more recent example of this concept would be the Marlboro man, for example. "There were about six models in total, but Beach was the most common. He was this aspirational figure, the ideal Christian white man. A figure very in the style of *The Great Gatsby* ".

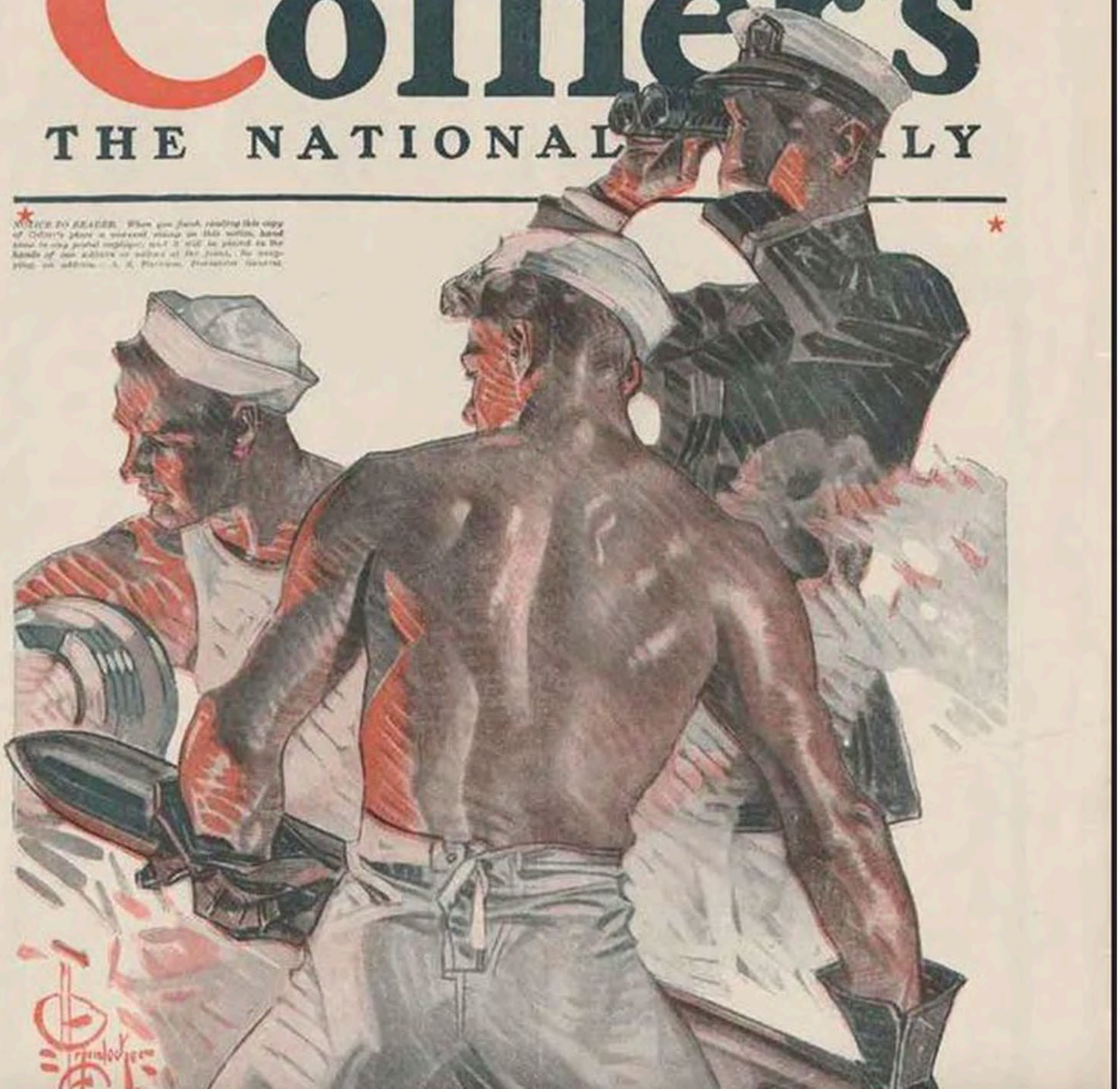

ARROW
COLLARS & SHIRTS

Collier's

THE NATIONAL WEEKLY

5 cents a copy
November 10, 1917

NOTICE TO READER. When you finish reading this copy of Collier's place a two-cent stamp on this notice, hand same to any postal employee, and it will be placed in the hands of our soldiers or sailors at the front. No wrapping or address.—A. S. Burleson, Postmaster General.



The homoeroticism of Leyendecker's work is obvious to the modern viewer. Half-naked athletes in locker rooms, shirtless sailors loading torpedoes, suggestive glances as one smokes a pipe or another clutches a golf club. Albrecht believes that rather than being a pioneer, the artist's illustrations reflected a different understanding of masculinity in the early 20th century. “It is true that there is a homoerotic element in Leyendecker's work, but it is not necessarily because he was gay,” argues Albrecht, who in the past has worked on exhibitions on LGBTIQ+ history in the United States. “It was not uncommon in the first decades of the 20th century to present this kind of fluid masculinity that from our point of view can seem like homosexual behavior,

“Leyendecker created these handsome, well-dressed men who became the symbol of fashionable American masculinity,” Judy Goffman Cutler tells ICON over the phone. Cutler is co-founder and director of the National Museum of American Illustration in Newport, Rhode Island, and has collected Leyendecker's work for five decades. "Through his advertisements, he made millions for Cluett Peabody & Company with this ideal of the refined, tasteful, and well-mannered American man."

"His ads were always very seductive. He knew how to capture the body under the clothes, the folds, the movement of the fabric with the body. Many artists illustrated them stiffly," Cutler notes. And he adds that another factor that precipitated the fame of the Arrow Collar Man and its creator was the new infrastructure of the moment: the advertisements that Leyendecker carried out with oil paint were reproduced in publications that sold by the thousands throughout the United States. thanks to the distribution through the railway networks, creating a media phenomenon of mass communication.

Illustration for a 1909 Arrow Collar campaign.
JC LEYENDECKER / NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ILLUSTRATION

Leyendecker's illustration for recruiting young men for the Navy.
DAVID POLLACK (CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES)

"Overnight people all over the country try to imitate this style. Many did not have five cents to buy a magazine, but they saw them in the newsstands or borrowed them and tried to buy the advertised products to raise their social position", says the director of the National Museum of American Illustration.

Cole Porter too

The impact of Leyendecker's creation was also felt in the culture of the time. Cole Porter lists it alongside the Louvre Museum and Fred Astaire's feet on the list of things that “are the best” in his song *From Him You're the Top*, from the 1934 musical *Anything Goes*. "You're the best / you're an Arrow Collar , " he sings.

He is quoted by F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby* , when someone describes the man who gives the book its title as "the advertising man, the advertising man." It is no coincidence that the Arrow Collar Man appears in a place of honor in *Times Square* in Baz Luhrmann's 2012 film adaptation of the novel. The shirt and collar company was not the only one to profit. Leyendecker was one of the most in-demand artists of his day. A commercial illustration of his, according to *The New York Times*, required a year in advance and cost in 1908 about 350 dollars, almost 10,000 euros at current exchange rates.

In addition to his work with Cluett Peabody & Company, Leyendecker also did artwork for brands like Gillette, organizations like the *Boy Scouts* of America, and recruiting posters during both world wars. Before color photography dominated magazines and newspapers, Leyendecker dominated the front pages of mainstream outlets such as *Collier's* and *The Saturday Evening Post*.. Cutler indicates that, apart from his quality, the creator of the Arrow Collar Man was recognized for his speed, which was necessary to keep up with the weekly publications: "Leyendecker was quite an artist, but he also knew how to sell a product. He was seen at the time as today we see a pop art creator or a Hollywood filmmaker. A super star".

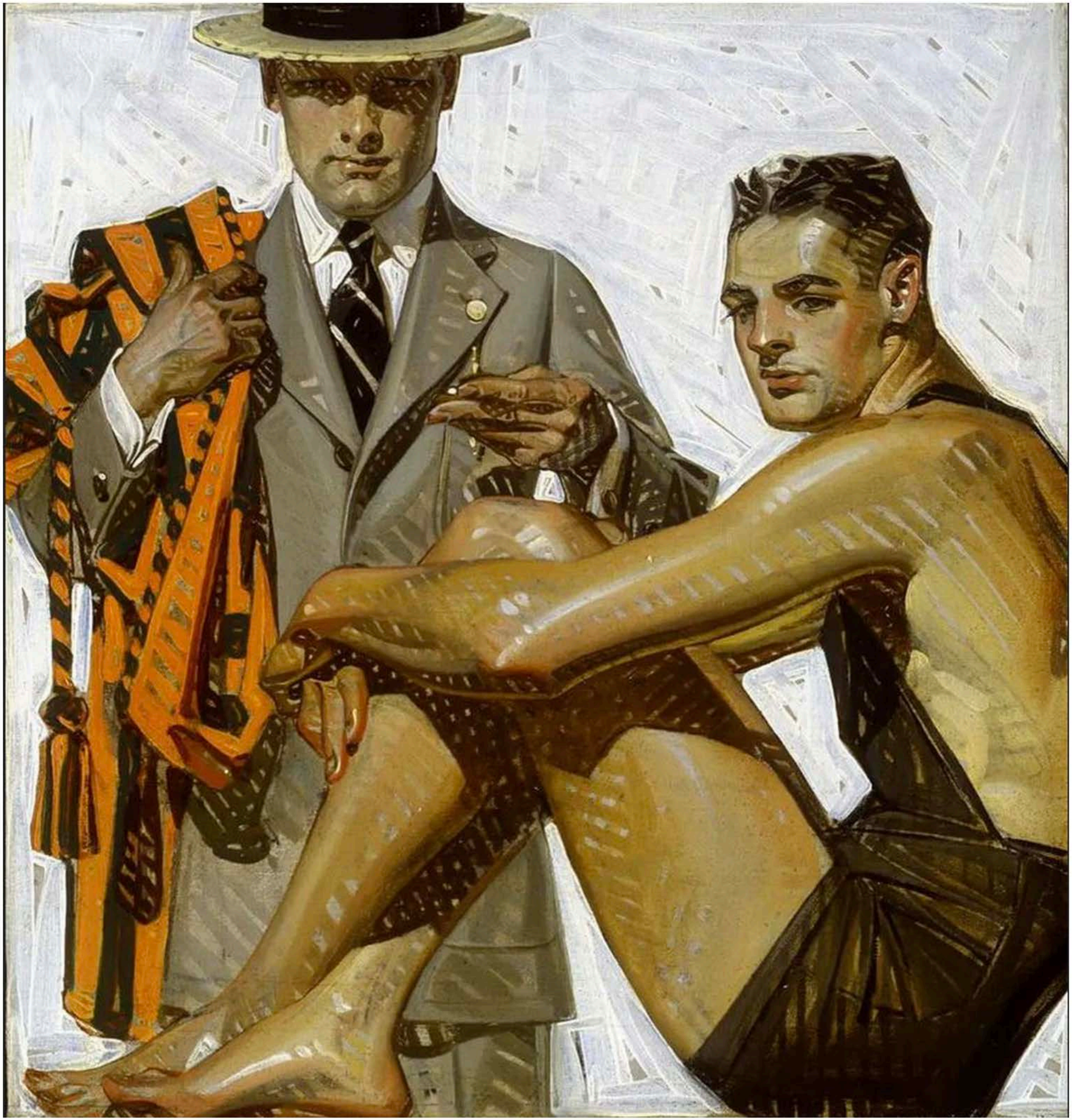
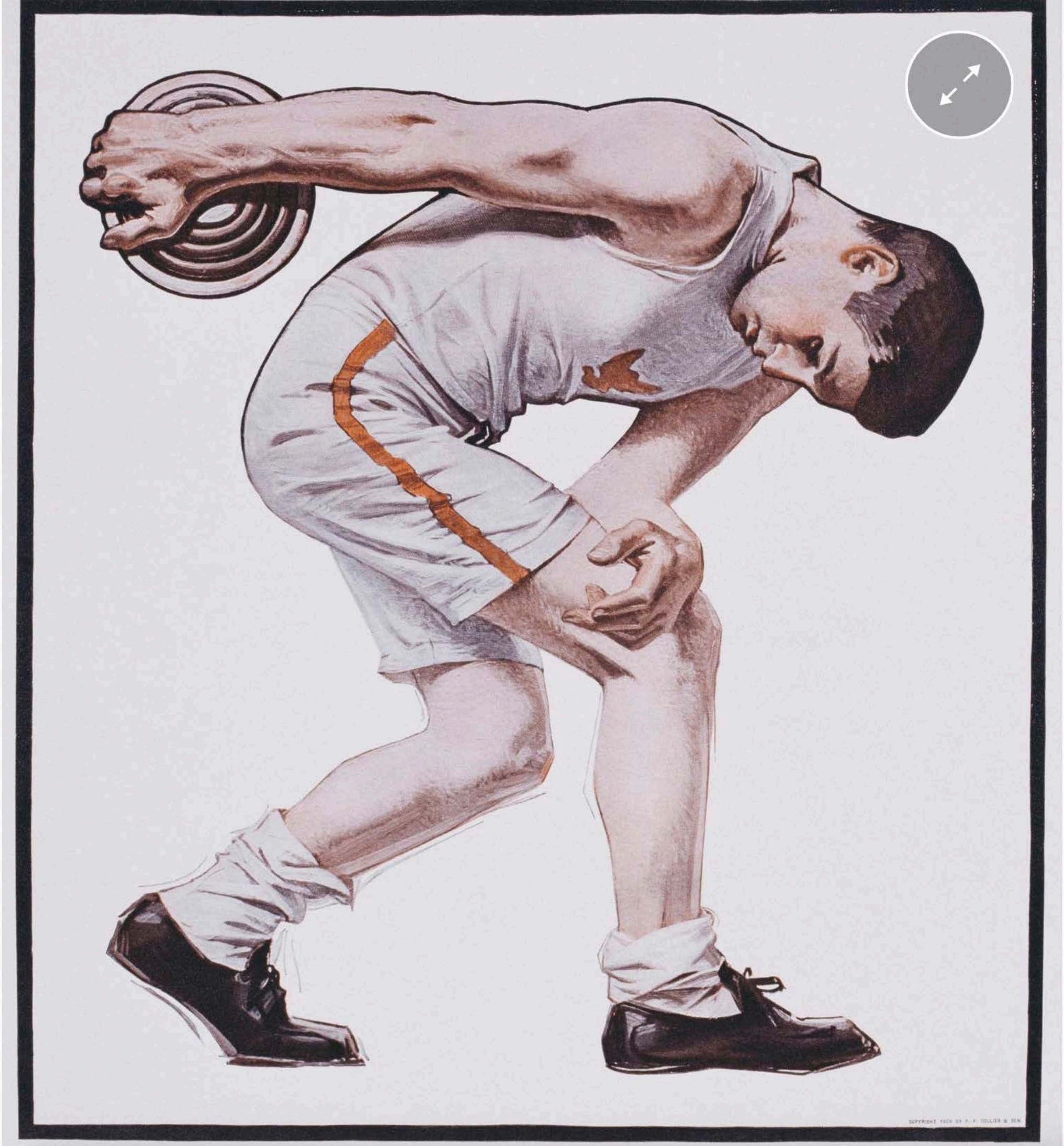


Illustration for a 1920 Kuppenheimer advertisement.



Leyendecker, despite his success, was always a very private person. He, his siblings and his partner, Charlie Beach, lived in a 14-bedroom mansion in New Rochelle, a half-hour north of New York City. "He designed 48 covers for *Collier's* and a total of 322 for *The Saturday Evening Post* between 1890 and 1943. Only Norman Rockwell came close, with 321", highlights the director of the National Museum of American Illustration. Rockwell, considered the illustrator of American everyday life in the mid-20th century, was a friend of Leyendecker and is considered by some to be his successor.

Yet while Rockwell's warm pictures—Thanksgiving dinners, rosy-cheeked *boy scouts* , and early-rising fathers—have become synonymous with idealizing America, Leyendecker's suggestive sailors and sophisticated gentlemen have been forgotten for decades.

shirts off

The stock market crash in 1929 and the arrival of the Great Depression meant overnight that Leyendecker's leading men, icons of the aspirational, ceased to be popular. The Cluett Peabody & Company ended the Arrow Collar Man in 1931. "Everybody was out of work and nobody had extra money to buy a false collar," Cutler argues. Albrecht, the guest curator at the New York Historical Society's exhibition on Leyendecker, says that changes in popular taste also affected the artist. “He had been so notorious for so many years that his style ended up being too much seen. I explain? He would also say that in the thirties people wanted a more everyday, more American romanticism. It is then that Rockwell becomes the main artist of *The Saturday Evening Post*”.

However, Albrecht believes that the homoeroticism of Leyendecker's work could also be a source of rejection in times of recovery of traditional values. “There was a kind of openness, of flexibility, during the first decades of the 20th century. After the thirties, a homophobia returned that would increase exaggeratedly during and after the Second World War and throughout the fifties”. The sensuality and subtext of Leyendecker's work "were, as it were, out of sync with its historical moment."

U. S. MARINES

"SOLDIERS OF THE SEA"

A Marine Band.

An Outdoor Gymnasium.

A Five-inch Gun Crew.

Baseball.

A Barracks Amusement Room.

A Range Finding Party.

Off Duty Aboard a Battleship.

Marines Learning Wireless Telegraphy.

Marines With the Fleet.

Marines Searching Mexicans for Arms.

Wall Scaling.

Football.

Battalion of Marines on Duty at a National Exposition.

Bowling.

A Stop for Lunch.


U★S★A
BONDS
Be Prepared
Third
Liberty Loan
Campaign
BOY SCOUTS
OF AMERICA

Albrecht adds that Leyendecker's hectic work pace, in part to support the lavish lifestyle he led with Charlie Beach, may have affected him in his later years as well. “It may be that he just got tired of working so hard,” Albrecht speculates. After all, Leyendecker painted covers and billboards for weekly publications in oil. “He had to produce quite a lot to support the lifestyle that he and Beach led, like the mansion on the outskirts of New York. It is possible that he had simply become fatigued ”.

JC Leyendecker died in 1951 of a heart attack in the garden of his house, in the arms of Charles Beach. Virtually forgotten, he and his family continued to live in the New Rochelle mansion despite financial hardships forcing them to lead a more austere lifestyle and take care of housekeeping and maintenance. Although the artist asked that all works be burned after his death, his partner did not comply with his wish.

A century after its moment of popularity, the Arrow Collar Man and its creator continue to attract attention and attract new fans. The documentary short *Coded* , about Leyendecker's legacy and featuring actor Neil Patrick Harris as the artist's voice, won an award at the Tribeca Film Festival in 2021. Albrecht points to the success of the *Under Cover* exhibition as an example of the attention Leyendecker generates again. “The issue of what masculinity is and whether it is something fluid or immutable is much discussed today and it is something that Leyendecker explores in a direct way.” 100 years later, that oil painting speaks again.

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