The Man Makes The Clothing

JULY 17, 2023

Editor's Note: We once again are treated to the brilliant writing of Daniel D. Covell, to whom we are always grateful for both his books and his submissions here.
Paul Winston, whose family owned the well-regarded Ivy Style purveyor Chipp, said of John F. Kennedy, Jr., “Kennedy was a handsome and important man. That old saying that clothes make the man? Not really. I think the man makes the clothing.”

It was this line that stuck with me as I thought about the works of Joseph Christian (known professionally as “J.C.”) Leyendecker, a hugely influential commercial illustrator in the early part of the 20th century. As some of you might recall, in a post on this site from a few weeks ago, I hailed the sartorial efforts of legendary football coach Paul Brown (and looked askance at the efforts of current day football coaches, at least one of whom has a space waiting in the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio, attended Andover and Wesleyan), then did a deep dive into the game day dressing habits of mid-century Ivy League football spectators as evidenced in photographs from Yale souvenir game programs. I could have lumped basketball coaches into that negative category as well, while applauding the look of most hockey coaches, but that’s a topic for another day.

I’m still immersed in that program project and trying to discern in what ways the works of the artists and photographers communicated both overtly and subtly the goals and objectives of these Ivy football teams and athletic departments. The evolution of the form and content of these original works, often commissioned to leading illustrators and cartoonists of the period, reflected the shifts in these goals and objectives. As the intercollegiate football enterprise matured in the mid-1900s, “football game programs provided athletic departments with a highly effective and dependable means of positive publicity. Because on every autumn Saturday, millions of Americans read the programs, usually for many hours, the traditional images and articles in these publications formed a massive counterattack against the criticism of college sports ... some saving them for years, extending their influence far beyond game day,” wrote college athletics history Murray Sperber. This impact was especially noteworthy in days when there were virtually no electronic media running either game previews or postgame highlights, or any other real keepsakes other than buttons and pennants. Programs were really the only substantial and tangible takeaway for fans for decades, and the most significant source of information for the game fans attended.
While Yale contracted with multiple important illustrators to execute artwork for its program covers, Leyendecker was not in that company. The souvenir game program evolved into its fully realized form in the early 1920, and by that time Leyendecker, a native of Germany whose family emigrated to Chicago in 1882 then settled in New York around the turn of the century, was likely too busy with more lucrative gigs. Leyendecker’s work graced hundreds of covers for magazine such as Collier’s and The Saturday Evening Post, making him the country’s premier cover artist for three decades. His dozens of football themed-covers (several of them also published separately as posters) and numerous football-themed advertisements made him the premier football artist as well, observed football historian Michael Oriardi. The style Leyendecker used for many of his ads is one of “hard-edged straight lines,” and images “composed of planes like the facets of a crystal,” as described by one critic.

A good selection of Leyendecker’s work – both in print form and original paintings – is now on display the New-York Historical Society Museum on Central Park West in Manhattan through August 13. I went to the show a few weeks back, wanting to take advantage of the opportunity to see Leyendecker’s work in person and to help bring context to the Yale cover artwork I had been examining. Leyendecker’s images in illustrations for stories and for advertisements often included Ivy scenes, in both athletics and casual leisure settings. The ads, Michael Oriard wrote, “are among the earliest instances of the now-ubiquitous branding that links a product not to intrinsic qualities like comfort and durability but to a lifestyle or a fantasy of self-invention. While Leyendecker’s football-themed ads branded Kuppenheimer suits with the prestige of college football, these ads in turn branded college football with the social distinction of the well-dressed gentleman.”
So this was a two-way street Leyendecker was working at his peak in the 1920s, portraying an image that mutually enhanced both parties. Maybe not the image of “cool” ascribed to Davis and JFK, but something just as powerful. One ad exec of the day explained that the use of such art was “soft selling,” surrounding the featured product in a visual atmosphere of style and luxury, and were directed to a target market of college men. Leyendecker rendered images of swimmers, rowers and gridders conveyed elite athleticism, and images of well-dressed collegians cradling golf clubs and smoking pipes in private clubs at Harvard and celebrating rowing victories at Yale for well-known clothing brands such as Arrow collars and Cluett shirts. The main point made in showing Leyendecker’s work now (the show is titled “Under cover: J.C. Leyendecker and American masculinity”) is the relatively recent discovery that the artist was gay, and the curation of the show frames his work in terms that explored the emotions and desires of a closeted gay man of the era. In this context, perhaps Leyendecker was still working that two-way street, using his hypermasculine images of his athletic figures in ways that celebrated his desires, of things he wanted and couldn’t have openly. In any case, the ads connected with both sellers and customers, and benefitted Leyendecker’s professional career greatly.
While the brands and products for which Leyendecker crafted his images are no longer with us, his approach of using collegiate themes to position them to customers was akin to the creation of Ivy Style. The look is a mélange mainly connected to the products of G.H. Bass, Brooks Brothers and J. Press released in the first part of the last century. But it wasn’t just because these landmark purveyors made stuff Ivy types liked. The look became a thing because people – namely college men at the Ivies and their regional brethren – found that THEY liked some of the things these outfits turned out, and THEY gave it the mark of something special. “People made things a classic, not manufacturers,” said Charlie Davidson.

Leyendecker knew this back when the Ivy look was in its infancy, just after Brooks Brothers introduced the No. 1 Sack Suit in 1895. It was true when Harvard, Princeton and Yale football fans opted for the polo coat over the raccoon coat right before the stock market crash in 1929. It was true when the Weejun debuted in Pam Beach in 1936. The customers made Ivy Style, and the most responsive clothing and shoe companies knew it. It is undeniable that the creation of art is an exercise in expressing meaning. Leyendecker’s work, made for the purpose of selling clothes, shows that clothes can express meaning as well. He knew it, and so do we. If you have the chance, check out the show of his work in person, and see for yourself that the man who made the works made the clothes work too.

- D. Covell