How one of America's most famous illustrators brought homoerotic ads to the masses

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"Sex sells" is one of the oldest aphorisms in advertising. But it wasn't until the late 20th century that the marketing world truly took notice of the male form. In large part, this was thanks to the work of commercial illustrator JC Leyendecker, whose advertisements were infused with homoeroticism. Leyendecker painted broad-chested Adonides who were used to sell everything from socks and underwear to razors and cigarettes. His most notable contribution, however, was the "Arrow Collar Man," a dashing figure who promoted Cluett Peabody & Company's removable shirt collars. Leyendecker also painted 322 covers for the Saturday Evening Post, reportedly one more than his famous protégé, Norman Rockwell. From 1900 to the 1930s, he was a household name: both Leyendecker and Arrow Collar Man were controlled by F. Scott Fitzgerald. But with the advent of the Great Depression and World War II, his urban, effeminate mannequins fell out of favor. The commissions dried up, and Leyendecker painted his last Post cover in 1943, dying in relative obscurity in 1951. Now, his work — and his legacy — is repurposed in "Under Cover: J.C. Leyendecker and American Masculinity," ongoing at the New-York Historical Society through August 13. The exhibition features some of Leyendecker's best-known commercial work, as well as magazine covers, preparatory drawings, and 19 original oil paintings, many on loan from the National Museum of American Illustration in Newport, Rhode Island. "Until the Leyendecker era, men had their clothes made by a tailor — explained advertising executive John Nash — Now clothes were mass-produced and advertised nationally. Any man could look at Leyendecker's work in a magazine or newspaper, or on a billboard, and wish they were him. He opened up the idea of men as consumers of fashion and sexual objects." "Leyendecker's Arrow Collar Man was tall, muscular and white," Nash said. "Practically Germanic. He was athletic and Ivy League educated, the progenitor of today's metrosexual." The model for Arrow Collar Man and many of Leyendecker's figures was Charles A. Beach, the company manager and, by most accounts, his longtime lover. The two shared a home in New Rochelle, New York, for almost 40 years. There are few primary sources to corroborate Leyendecker's sexual orientation, but many modern historians — and the Historical Society exhibit — present him as a gay man.