Leyendecker and his male gaze on display at the New York Historical Society

The exhibition, open until August 13, focuses on the nuances of masculinity

Profiles and characters
Luciana Capretti

Born in Germany and moved to Chicago while still young, Joseph Christian Leyendecker immediately began producing images of perfect, muscular, athletic, elegant men, looking at other men rather than women, who are rarely present in his works. The subjects were male, because the subjects of Leyendecker's gaze and eros were male. Leyendecker lived nearly 50 years with her business partner, muse and lover Charles A. Beach in a residence near New York. To date it is not known whether their relationship was known, at least to their intimates, their relationship has remained substantially secret up to the present day.

“That era was rather fluid from the point of view of sexual freedom – explains Donald Albrecht, curator of the exhibition – this will not be the case starting from the 1940s and in the era of McCarthyism. It should be remembered that President Eisenhower signed an executive order in 1953 authorizing investigations of all military and government employees to exclude those with sexually perverse behavior. Before then things were different, so probably his friends knew his sexual preferences, we don't know, but it certainly didn't hinder his career.”
Leyendecker went to study art in Paris, frequented Toulouse-Lautrec and others before moving to New York and devoting himself entirely to magazine and advertising illustrations. His models often became famous actors, from John Barrymore onwards, but his favorite remained his partner, represented in the famous advertisement for Arrow collars.
The exhibition, 19 works by the artist from 1898 to 1943, contains oil paintings, newspaper pages with his advertisements and covers of Collier's Magazine and Saturday Evening Post. His legacy will be taken up by his friend and neighbor Norman Rockwell who will continue to design the covers of the Post, however focusing on the themes of family, suburban and country life.

“There is a common thread in his vast production – continues Albrecht – and it is masculinity in its various declinations: effeminate, athletic, sophisticated.

Before him, were there examples of "male gaze" in American art?

John Singer Sargent painted naked men and it has always been debated whether he was homosexual: it is not known, and it is just one example.

Why this exhibition today?

Because today we ask ourselves what it is to be male, what gender, race, white supremacy is. This can be a contribution to the debate.

For those who want to know more about the artist, “Coded: The Hidden Love of JC Leyendecker” a documentary film by Ryan White presented at the Tribeca Festival and made it to the final selection of the Oscars is now visible on Paramount+.