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

Long before Calvin Klein and Abercrombie & Fitch, J.C. Leyendecker brought homoeroticism to Madison Avenue.

"Men with Golf Clubs," a painting for an Arrow Collar advertisement around 1909.
J.C. Leyendecker / National Museum of American Illustration

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By Dan Avery

“Sex sells” is one of the oldest aphorisms in advertising. But it wasn’t until the turn of the 20th century that the marketing world truly took notice of the male form. In large part, that was thanks to the work of commercial illustrator J.C. Leyendecker, whose ads were suffused with homoeroticism.

Leyendecker painted broad-chested Adonises that were used to sell everything from socks and underwear to razors and cigarettes. His most notable contribution, though, 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 the 1900s to the 1930s, he was a household name: Both Leyendecker and the Arrow Collar Man were name-checked by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

But with the advent of the Great Depression and World War II, his urbane, effete mannequins fell out of favor.

Commissions dried up and Leyendecker painted his last Post cover in 1943, dying in relative obscurity in 1951.


The exhibition features some of Leyendecker’s best known commercial work, as well as magazine covers, preparatory drawings and 19 original oil paintings, much of it on loan from the National Museum of American Illustration in Newport, Rhode Island.

“Up until Leyendecker’s era, men had their clothes made by a tailor,” advertising executive John Nash explained. “Now clothes were being mass-produced and advertised nationwide. Any man could look at Leyendecker’s work in a magazine or newspaper, or on a billboard, and want to be him. It opened up the idea of men as fashion consumers — and sex objects.”
Leyendecker’s Arrow Collar Man “was tall, muscular and white,” Nash said. “Practically Germanic. He was Ivy League-educated and athletic – the progenitor of today’s metrosexual.”

The model for the Arrow Collar Man, and many of Leyendecker’s figures, was Charles A. Beach, his business manager and, by most accounts, his longtime lover. The two shared a home in New Rochelle, New York, for nearly 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.

“Leyendecker’s eye for capturing the male form was absolutely informed by his sexuality,” said Nash, who was the creative director who got Subaru to advertise to lesbians. “Was he going to that well purposefully or just instinctively? We just don’t know. But it’s definitely the visual world he wanted to create.”

“Record Time, Cool Summer Comfort,” a painting for a Kuppenheimer advertisement, around 1920.

J.C. Leyendecker / National Museum of American Illustration

“Under Cover” is broken into two main segments: One explores Leyendecker’s provocative depictions of the male body, including a Post cover featuring the god Apollo in a loincloth and an Ivory soap ad with a robed man who, according to the exhibit text, “appears to be sexually aroused.”

The other section explores his depictions of male intimacy, often through images of men sharing sexually charged looks.

In a Saturday Evening Post cover from Thanksgiving 1928, Leyendecker delivers a musket-wielding pilgrim locking eyes with a hunky football player whose right nipple is exposed through his torn jersey.
Some of his work did feature women, “but they’re almost completely ignored by the men next to them,” curator Donald Albrecht said.

In one well-known Arrow ad from 1910, a woman is sitting next to a golfer who is gently cradling his clubs and staring across the page at another man. Leyendecker’s work was frequently cropped based on the needs of the outlet and, in some iterations of this ad, the female companion is cut out entirely, leaving only the two men.

The executives at Arrow were probably focusing on how good the clothing looked, Nash said.

“The notion that there’s this cult of masculinity sailed right over their heads,” he said. “I don’t think they thought he was tapping into something primal about male identity.”
Through a modern eye, it’s easy to see queer undertones in Leyendecker’s work. To provide some historical context, though, Albrecht also included images of gay life in New York between the wars, including a photo of butch blues singer Gladys Bentley in a white tux and top hat and a painting of a gay bathhouse by artist Charles Demuth.

“We don’t know if Leyendecker explored that world, but it was going on parallel to what he was doing,” Albrecht said. “Because he was so elite, so Ivy League, we decided we had to present a kind of counternarrative.”

The exhibit also presents an alternative to the homogeneity of Leyendecker’s work. If Black Americans appear at all, they’re young boys or porters. (“He was a creature of his time,” Nash said.)

“Under Cover” includes dapper portraits of Langston Hughes, Richard Bruce Nugent and other Black men who emerged from the Harlem Renaissance.

“Leyendecker was pushing boundaries, but he definitely followed gender and racial norms,” Albrecht said. “We’re saying, ‘This is how he depicted African Americans, but others depicted them other ways.’”

While Leyendecker’s virile figures were his calling card, his work with the Post also solidified holiday imagery we still use today – flowers on Mother’s Day, fireworks on the Fourth of July, turkey and pie on Thanksgiving.

He popularized the image of Santa Claus as a rotund, rosy-cheeked old man with a long white beard years before Haddon Sundblom’s Coca-Cola ad debuted in 1931.

Given his impact on the culture, there’s no easy explanation for why Leyendecker’s popularity dropped off so suddenly.

As World War II was gearing up, the Saturday Evening Post wanted imagery that told a story, according to Albrecht, that depicted everyday life and reinforced small-town values.
Rockwell was able to tap into that iconography, but Leyendecker never really changed his style.

And while he wasn’t outed, the Depression and the war saw a clamping down on anything non-normative.

“Some of it may have been homophobia,” Nash said. “But some of it was his own doing.”

In the 1930s, Leyendecker became increasingly insular, rarely leaving his New Rochelle home. He instructed Beach to destroy all his work after his death. And while some pieces clearly survived, his personal letters and much of his art was lost.

“There was no one to preserve his legacy, the way the [Norman Rockwell Museum] kept Norman Rockwell’s legacy alive,” Nash said. “Once Beach died, Leyendecker began to be forgotten.”

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