CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

J.C. Leyendecker: The ‘Arrow Collar Man’ Who Hid a Radical Idea

The celebrated illustrator shaped American visual culture in the 1900s, but his traditional imagery carried a defiant queer message.


By Blake Gopnik

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As the 20th century got well underway, who was more radical, Pablo Picasso in Paris, or Joseph Christian Leyendecker in New York?

I asked myself that as I toured “Under Cover: J.C. Leyendecker and American Masculinity,” a fascinating show at the New-York Historical Society. In a score of paintings and countless magazine pages, it gives a compact survey of Leyendecker’s work across the first three decades of the last century, as one of this country’s celebrity illustrators.

His calling card was male beauty: Jazz Age youths in their finest finery populate his ads for shirts and starched collars; athletic collegians grace his covers for the weeklies.

Picasso did amazing things to the surface of his pictures that Leyendecker’s crisp realism couldn’t match. But just because Picasso’s radicalism was visible right there on that surface, it was easy to take steps to avoid it.
Whereas Leyendecker’s wildly successful illustrations were simply unavoidable. In 1908, a popular magazine felt it worth reporting that, at 34, Leyendecker was booked 12 months in advance and charged the vast sum of $350 for one commercial illustration — what an ordinary worker might have earned in a year.

That meant a large part of the public had no choice but to encounter the radical idea that hid under the traditional surfaces of his imagery: that two elite men could be in love, or in lust, and might even be the happiest of long-term couples.

Those with the will to see could not have missed the possibility that romance is budding, or maybe already blooming, between the two square-jawed hunks in Leyendecker’s 1920s ad for Kuppenheimer menswear. One man is immaculately dressed in gray suit and boater, the other at ease beside him in a one-piece swimming costume.

Contemplating the two men in an ad for Arrow collars, lounging of a morning in an Ivy League club, it takes just the smallest skip of the imagination to think that Leyendecker introduces them to us as mere bosom buddies only because it would be rude to tell some more explicitly amorous story.

Even in the Jazz Age, when homophobia was less aggressive than it later became, to offer up such scenarios to the mainstream was more outrageous — more silently, secretly outrageous — than anything Cubism’s show-offs could propose. I think of Leyendecker’s art as a Trojan horse that released a gay fifth column into American culture, undermining the majority’s straight erotics in preparation for the uprising that came in 1969 outside the Stonewall Inn.
Dan Guadagnolo, one of several scholars studying Leyendecker's queer culture, has written about how the illustrator “generated commercial appeal among normative men while simultaneously offering a novel vision of middle-class white queer masculinity for those who might experience same-sex desire.” Queer identities had barely begun to jell in Leyendecker’s era; his images helped a nascent gay culture imagine itself folded into the American power structure, however remote that reality might still have been. After Leyendecker took up with his life-partner, Charles Beach — who modeled in that bathing suit and for many other ads — he felt the need to withdraw from public life into the privacy of the mansion his works had bought them.

Norman Rockwell, 20 years younger than Leyendecker and eventually his neighbor, writes quite brutally in his memoir about how Beach had “insinuated” himself into Leyendecker’s life and especially about the duo’s social withdrawal once he had. Leyendecker told Beach to burn his papers and art upon his death, in 1951, but luckily a few of the pictures were spared.

Leyendecker painted those pictures with all the bravura of a great society portraitist — of a Gilbert Stuart or a John Singer Sargent — but with every gorgeous lick of paint magnified and exaggerated so it would come through even in reproduction on the printed page. That showy technique was faux-conservative camouflage, I think, for the defiant message hidden beneath.
Most members of the American mainstream might have been too blinkered to recognize that defiance. But I can't shake a mental image of the artist and Beach at ease in their mansion, reveling in their ads' secret subversion. As a gay couple, how could they not have recognized it in the male duos so lovingly portrayed? There's one case where the subversion was barely hidden at all: In an ad for Ivory Soap, the shadow Leyendecker placed on his model's crotch seems clearly to hint at an erection, according to an exhibition wall text. You can't unsee it once it gets pointed out.

Leyendecker's queer daring could have played a role in his market success. The gorgeous young Ivy Leaguers in his ads seem the epitome of privilege — more privileged, certainly, than the working stiffs actually meant to buy the clothing being pitched. And what could have been a greater sign of privilege than the freedom to love anyone you fancied, of any gender? Choose an Arrow collar; those ads imply, and you'll soon have the same power to make choices as the elites.

Just what's being chosen is beside the point: Many American men might have been horrified at the idea of sleeping with another man. But Leyendecker's imagery gets at the very idea of untrammeled choice. You might say that imagery stands, subliminally, for the unending options that American capitalism had started to offer consumers.

Compared to the freedom that Leyendecker puts on the table, Picasso's preference for facets and angles hardly counts as all that unfettered.

Under Cover: J.C. Leyendecker and American Masculinity

Through Aug. 13 at the New-York Historical Society, 170 Central Park West, Manhattan; (212) 873-3400; nyhistory.org.

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