

ARTS

# Going Undercover with Leyendecker at the New York Historical Society

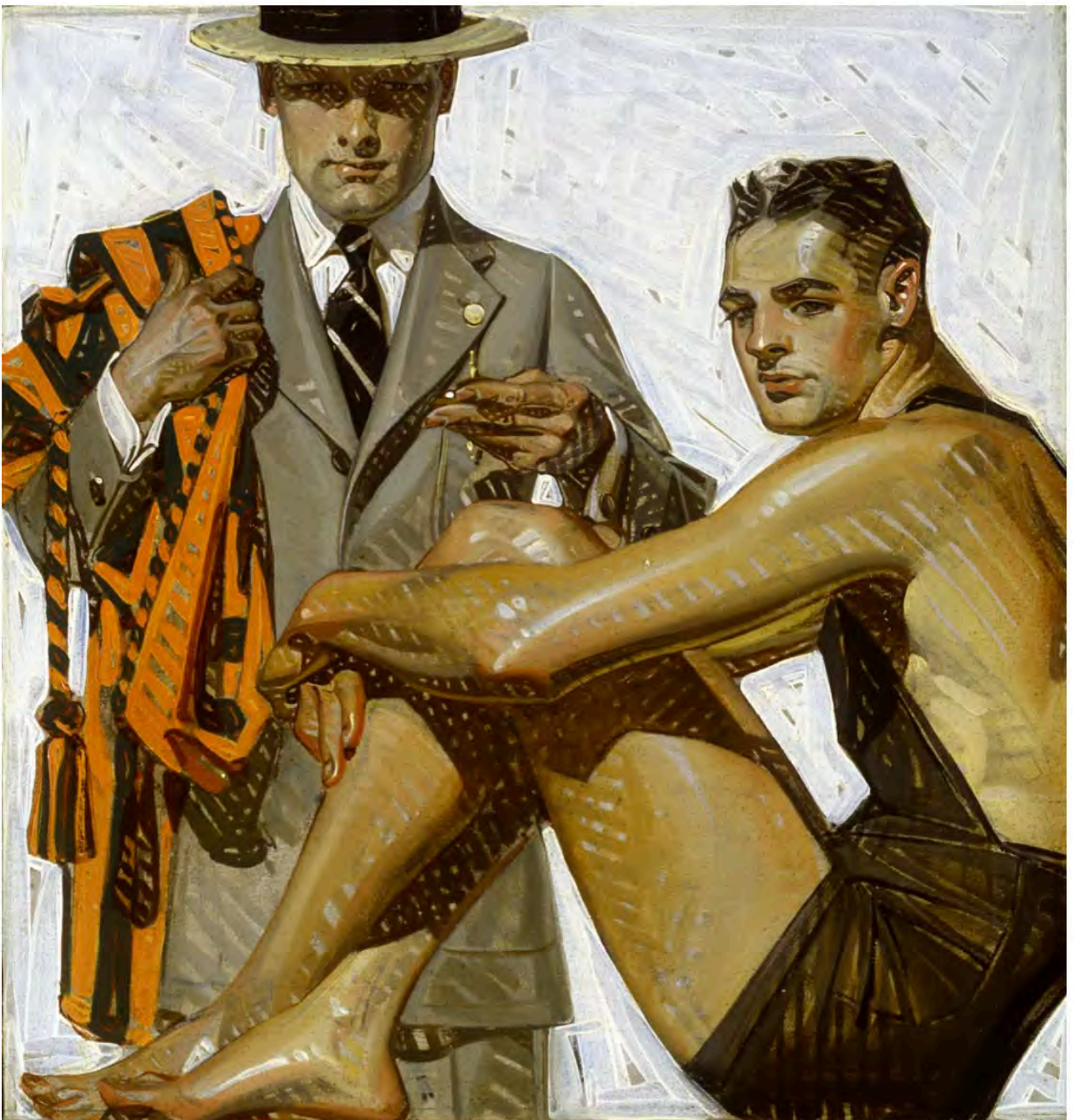
The show is forthright about the fact that the artist's work, which helped set a standard for idealized masculinity, was the product of a queer gaze.

By [Sonya Abrego](#) • 06/14/23 12:06pm



Elegant men of leisure, ivy league athletes and soldiers—all muscular, square-jawed, blonde and blue-eyed—populated print media over a hundred years ago. They are the creation of J.C. Leyendecker, illustrator, commercial artist and the subject of New York Historical Society's exhibition *Undercover: J.C. Leyendecker and American Masculinity*. The show highlights Leyendecker's virtuosic skill and is forthright about both the fact that he was gay and that his work, which helped set a standard for idealized masculinity, was the product of a queer gaze.





'Record Time, Cool Summer Comfort' (1920). Courtesy National Museum of American Illustration

His career spanned the late nineteenth century through the early 1940s and coincided with advertising's shifted toward what we would recognize today as lifestyle branding. Instead of depicting a product alongside a list of its features, visions of the item in imagined but still believable worlds sparked aspirational feelings, connected a brand to a look and in this case, to specific ways of being a man. "He brought an addition to the advertising landscape that goes into the narrative and the emotional," said guest curator Donald Albrecht. Leyendecker helped sell soap, razors, socks, Kuppenheimer brand menswear and perhaps most famously, Arrow brand shirts and collars.



The Arrow collar man—handsome, well-groomed, and always dapper in crisp shirts with starched white collars—was a pop culture icon. He was so dashing that women who weren't quite familiar with the idea of a brand personification yet, wrote to Arrow's parent company hoping they could meet him. He shares a lot in common with the Gibson Girl of the same era: an elegant, youthful ideal of American beauty. But unlike Charles Dana Gibson's illustrated feminine creation, which he insisted was an amalgam of modern American women of his time, The Arrow Collar Man was originally modeled after a specific person, Charles Beach, who happened to also be Leyendecker's partner. The two lived together for close to fifty years, and he helped manage the illustrator's career, a relationship that would have likely disappointed the Arrow man's female fans.



**'Men with Golf Clubs' (1909).** Courtesy National Museum of American Illustration

The exhibition offers a chance to see Leyendecker's original large scale oil paintings and their iterations in print. The artist's imagery is a lot like looking at a film still. He created vignettes where men are often glancing at each other, where the ambiguity and unspoken connections make the images compelling. "[It's] telling stories, something is happening," Albrecht said. "Oftentimes it's nuanced and not fully obvious, and that was the intention, that you would look at it longer trying to figure out the relationship between the people in the image."

From a 21st-century perspective, it's hard *not* to read Leyendecker's vignettes as queer. How that imagery would have been understood at the time, however, is hard to know. According to Albrecht, "we don't know what people's perceptions or receptions were. The one clue we have is that Leyendecker's work was featured in extremely popular magazines: *National Geographic*, *Collier's*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Vanity Fair*, and appeared for decades... It's hard to know what they felt." How representations were understood also depended on the eye of the beholder.

Leyendecker's subjects exemplify an elite white masculinity that was hardly representative of the diversity of the United States in his time, or since. It was working in line with nationalist standards of rugged masculinity espoused from the top by figures like Teddy Roosevelt that permeated the culture at large. In at least one instance, with Kuppenheimer menswear, the Jewish business owners hoped that connecting to imagery of idealized white American men would help shield their reputation from anti-Semitic sentiments. There is an exclusivity to the lifestyles Leyendecker showcased, but the exhibition works to consider it in light of the broader society. According to Albrecht, "we can talk about him in gender terms, racial terms, sexual terms, you can treat him in an intersectional way."





An example of Leyendecker's cover art for Collier's. Courtesy National Museum of American Illustration

Casting a wide interpretive net makes room for contradictions too. While queer life found space to flourish in more bohemian communities like the West Village and Harlem, publications like *The Saturday Evening Post* were about as mainstream as it got. That popularity came from appealing to what was normative which, according to New York Historical Society curator of material culture, Rebecca Klassen, meant upholding racial, social and nationalist hierarchies. To complicate things further, Leyendecker wasn't alone in creating this kind of homoerotic work, which was a discovery for Albrecht: "He was part of the zeitgeist. These kinds of images were common, I found that surprising. People would assume that as a gay man he's inserting the homoerotic images into his work, but other people were doing it. Leyendecker was particularly good at it... but he was not alone."





'In the Yale Boathouse' (1905). Courtesy National Museum of American Illustration

It's tempting to think of history moving along a straight line from a more repressive past to a more open and enlightened future, but this exhibition shows that the beginning of the last century was significantly more permissive than the later 1930s through the 1950s, when censorious restrictions were put in place. Klassen hopes that these images will invite viewers to consider that there was a range of acceptable desire in the early 20th century, something particularly poignant in our present moment when this understanding still, regrettably, continues to be challenged.

***Undercover: J.C. Leyendecker and American Masculinity* is on view at the New York Historical Society through August 13.**