

Such a 'manly man'

What we now think of as the picture of American masculinity is attributable in large part to J.C. Leyendecker. Who? you ask.

CAROLYN KELLOGG

J.C. Leyendecker

American Imagist

Laurence S. Cutler and Judy Goffman Cutler and the National Museum of American Illustration

Abrams: 256 pp., \$50

Picture a rosy-cheeked baby ringing in the New Year on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*. Norman Rockwell, right? Yes, but Rockwell adopted the image from J.C. Leyendecker, who preceded him as the magazine's top cover illustrator.

The lavishly illustrated "J.C. Leyendecker: American Imagist" aims to restore the lesser-known Leyendecker to an appropriate place in the pantheon of American artists. The book outlines his life while showcasing a comprehensive collection of his work.

In addition to magazine covers, Leyendecker was much in demand by advertisers. He helped create modern branding when, in 1905, he lobbied Arrow to think less about collars and create "a unique male symbol for their products." What was called for was "[n]ot simply a man, but a manly man, a handsome man . . . an ideal American man." Model Charles Beach fit the Arrow Collar man role perfectly. He also happened to be Leyendecker's lover; they remained partners for more than 40 years.

Born in Germany in 1874, Joe Leyendecker moved to Illinois with his family at age 8. A determined youth, he illustrated religious pamphlets during the day while taking night classes at the Art Institute of Chicago. At 22, he won a cover design contest at the elite *Century* magazine -- beating Maxfield Parish -- and used the prize money to help finance a year studying illustration in France with his younger brother, Frank.

Upon his return, Leyendecker's reputation grew; he did his first *Saturday Evening Post* cover in 1899. In 1900, with Frank and sister Mary in tow, J.C. Leyendecker moved to New York's Washington Square. He and

Frank shared a studio where they painted live models. When Leyendecker was 29, 17-year-old Beach walked in the door.

Leyendecker's early style -- a crosshatched brush stroke that turned soft surfaces into sharp planes -- reinforced Beach's chiseled good looks. When his dynamic crosshatching faded into softer fills, Leyendecker enhanced the manliness of his subjects in other ways: He lit a single light and oiled the muscles of his models for dramatic contouring. In an early mock-up of an Ivory Soap ad, an erection is prominent in the folds of a bathrobe. Decades before feminist Laura Mulvey wrote about the male gaze objectifying women, Leyendecker turned his gaze toward handsome men and created widely circulated icons of masculinity.

He simultaneously created lasting all-American images for the *Saturday Evening Post*, particularly for the holidays. His 1906 New Year's baby proved so popular that he revisited the theme every year through 1943. The authors also claim, not entirely convincingly, that college football for Thanksgiving, jolly red-clad Santa and flowers on Mother's Day can be traced back to Leyendecker's magazine covers.

The year Leyendecker met Beach, he and his siblings moved to a rental in New Rochelle. While he continued to work in studios in New York City -- one in Texas Guinan's building, where a dumbwaiter connected to her speakeasy -- he built a grand house for his family in New Rochelle he called Mount Tom.

His gifts made him popular as well as wealthy. He and Charles threw opulent parties at Mount Tom; so many stars and socialites attended that gossip king Walter Winchell became a regular. The Cutlers compare him to Gatsby.

Was it his lavish lifestyle that came between Leyendecker and his siblings? In 1923, after an argument with Beach, Mary and Frank moved out. Frank, a longtime drug user, died a year later. His sister remained estranged. That left Beach, who began managing Leyendecker's business affairs and even tried to help paint.

Rockwell later wrote skeptically of Beach's expanded role, but Rockwell had a complicated relationship with Leyendecker. The



CHISELED AND GALLANT: In his illustrations for Arrow shirt ads, Leyendecker put forth "a handsome man . . . an ideal American man."

younger artist was so taken with Leyendecker's talent that he not only apprenticed himself to his mentor, he moved to New Rochelle to be near him.

"Rockwell virtually did everything possible to imitate J.C. Leyendecker," the Cutlers write. "He imitated Joe so completely the public became confused as to the source."

Leyendecker was a top illustrator for more than three decades, but by the late 1930s his assignments began to taper off. He retreated to Mount Tom, its gardens and Beach. While drinking a cocktail one summer afternoon in 1951, he died of a heart attack; Beach died a year later. With no heirs other than a long-estranged sister, Leyendecker's art was in danger of being forgotten.

This volume, in the works for a decade, shows that would be a mistake.

Kellogg is lead blogger for Jacket Copy, The Times' book blog.