



Leyendecker, Joseph C. (1874-1951)

by Patricia Juliana Smith

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During the decades between the two World Wars, the "Arrow Man," the advertising figure of the Arrow Collars and Shirts company, became the icon of urbane American masculinity. The unnamed artist-rendered figure, created by J. C. Leyendecker, received more fan mail from adoring women and girls than most leading men of the stage and screen and inspired numerous songs.

Unknown to the public, this epitome of male beauty and heterosexual female admiration was, ironically, the product of a homosexual collaboration that lasted half a century between the artist and his model, Charles Beach. Although Norman Rockwell is today the best remembered illustrator of early twentieth-century Americana, Leyendecker's ubiquitous images helped to define mainstream American standards of beauty and sophistication from the 1890s to the 1940s.

Joseph Christian Leyendecker was born in Montabaur, Germany, to a family of Netherlandic extraction, on March 23, 1874. The family immigrated to the United States in 1882, and settled in Chicago. From early childhood, Leyendecker drew images on any available surface, a tendency that his parents encouraged. As they were unable to afford private art lessons for their son, he was apprenticed at fifteen to a Chicago engraver, with whom he began his career by designing advertisements and book illustrations.

During these years, Leyendecker also took night classes at the Art Institute of Chicago. By the time he was nineteen, he showed a mature technical mastery of the illustrator's art and, with his younger brother Francis X. Leyendecker (1877-1924), he traveled to Paris to study at the Académie Julien.

The brothers returned to Chicago in 1898 and established a studio there. Both soon gained numerous commissions for magazine and advertisement illustrations, and in 1899, J. C. Leyendecker produced his first cover for the *Saturday Evening Post*, one of the leading mainstream American publications.

Leyendecker's association with the magazine continued for the next four decades. With his holiday covers for the magazine, he virtually created the popular image of Santa Claus and the New Year's baby that Americans know today.

Suddenly in great demand, the Leyendecker brothers moved to New York in 1900. Their work, characterized by what might best be called a discreet male homoeroticism, typically portrayed handsome young men, particularly athletes, soldiers, sailors, and muscular working men, as heroic figures, recalling the classical ideals of the French Academy and the sinuous lines of Art Nouveau.

By 1914, J. C. Leyendecker had accrued enough wealth to build an estate in New Rochelle, New York, where he lived with his brother, his sister Augusta, and his lover Charles Beach (1886-1952).

Leyendecker met Beach in 1903, when the young model from Cleveland first posed for him. The artist was impressed not only with Beach's handsome face and physique, but also with his ability to hold poses for



A poster advertising Arrow Shirts (circa 1920?) designed by J. C. Leyendecker. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

extended lengths of time.

Their relationship lasted until Leyendecker's death. Over the next thirty years, Beach's image as the "Arrow Man," as well as Leyendecker's other representations of him, became one of the most widely circulated visual icons in mainstream American culture. In this capacity, Beach became the symbol of American prosperity, sophistication, manliness, and style.

For forty-nine years, Beach functioned as Leyendecker's model, lover, cook, and business manager. The household was extremely careful in maintaining a strict, even secretive, privacy.

Although Beach's features were much in the public's gaze, few actual photographs of him or the Leyendeckers are to be found. Beach, presumably at Leyendecker's instruction, burned virtually all correspondence and many art works after the artist's death.

Accordingly, few facts are known about their relationship and the couple's interactions with Leyendecker's siblings.

Frank Leyendecker was, however, also known to be gay, and a rift between the brothers apparently occurred months before the younger man's death, reportedly from a drug overdose, in 1924.

The last years of J. C. Leyendecker's life were overshadowed by financial concerns, as he had spent as lavishly as he earned at the height of his career. By the 1940s, the major magazines increasingly supplanted artist's cover illustrations with photographs. As a result, Beach and Augusta sold many of Leyendecker's art works, which now bring hundreds of thousands of dollars at auction, for a pittance.

Leyendecker died at his home in New Rochelle on July 25, 1951. Beach followed him in death within months.

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