Title: High art joins popular culture; the life and cover art of J.C. Leyendecker

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High art joins popular culture: 
the life and cover art of J.C. Leyendecker

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors in Art History from The College of William and Mary in Virginia,

by

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[Signature]

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Introduction

In the early twentieth century Joseph Christian Leyendecker (1874-1951) was a leader in illustration technique, style and design. Leyendecker’s work for the popular magazine *The Saturday Evening Post* established him as one of the top illustrators of his era. Today, as the specialty field of illustration begins to receive greater recognition as a respectable branch of art, a closer look at Leyendecker’s life and his artistic contribution to illustration is justified. Leyendecker has been called “the first great pop artist of his time,”¹ “the most popular illustrator of his time,”² “the most successful and sought after artist of his time,”³ “the backbone of American illustration,”⁴ “the most famous illustrator in America,”⁵ and the “primary American imagist.”⁶ Such an influence on culture and art deserves recognition and analysis.

Leyendecker created over 300 covers for the *Post* while at the same time maintaining a career as a popular advertisement artist for many companies including The House of Kuppenheimer, Kellogg’s cereal, and the U.S. government. His handsome and elegant men drawn for Arrow Collar ads were so widely known and admired that in one month in the early 1920s one of his unnamed illustrated men received 17,000 fan letters, marriage proposals, and notes threatening suicide — “a deluge surpassing even Rudolph Valentino’s mail at the star’s apex. ... The Arrow man was the subject of admire

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⁶ *J.C. Leyendecker.*
poems, songs, and even a Broadway play.” Leyendecker’s stylish leading men and women inspired other illustrators and fashion leaders of the time, and his pudgy cherubs, children, and scenes of American life left a legacy rivaled only by Norman Rockwell almost twenty years later.

In an era of limited visual media, The Saturday Evening Post was unique in the number of people it reached. At the height of Leyendecker’s popularity over two million subscribers, not counting their families, absorbed the Post’s stories, art, and ideas. Leyendecker was making between eight and thirteen of fifty-two covers a year.

On just one page of the Post Leyendecker entered millions of homes and early in his career became one of the biggest celebrities in illustration art. His early-established sculptural style made his covers immediately recognizable to the public who then demanded to keep seeing his art. This popularity thus helped propel Leyendecker to a prestigious place that allowed him greater freedoms in his artistic choices. His style stayed fundamentally consistent throughout his career, yet aspects shifted over time with the addition of color and new themes. The exceptional part of Leyendecker’s Post covers was how each became a small genre-like representation of America’s hopes.

Leyendecker’s undeniable talent does not mean that it is possible to place his art into an early twentieth-century art historical context. He followed his own path, but by looking at decisions he and his parents made early in his life, it becomes clear that it was a natural step for this academically trained artist to work in the commercial art field. Moreover, by examining his Post covers we shall explore the art and character of the Post and of early twentieth-century America.

The art made for magazines of this period was created to be copied for reproduction. Paintings did not have to last and were not usually meant to be displayed or "museumified." This art was created with a different purpose in mind. It is noticeable just by looking at the canvases of many illustrators of this period that they were not meant to last – many, before restoration, were ripped, others just thrown away and later rescued, and most have been badly preserved until recently. The reproduction was what mattered to these mass-media artists. These works were meant to reach a huge audience and that public dictated what was popular and which artist's covers they wanted to see.

This is part of what differentiates Leyendecker from the movements of modern art at this time. He was painting what he loved, just as his non-commercial contemporaries were, but he had to be constantly aware of his public. Some modern artists aimed their works to suit a patron, but for most this did not have the same affect as painting for millions. As the face of the Post, Leyendecker had to always keep the American subscribers in mind.

Leyendecker's works displayed America at its best to the readers of the early twentieth century. His covers are the epitome of their age and a visual summary of the nation's character as he saw it. He captured the ideals and motivations behind the country's actions through difficult periods of history: World War I, the Great Depression, and the Second World War. Leyendecker's Post covers were carefully rendered in his extremely meticulous and very successful personal style. Each Post cover is an example of the skills Leyendecker learned in the three art schools he attended: the Art Institute of Chicago, the Académie Julian, and the Colorossi. His success lasted for forty decades.
and countless magazines and merchandise were sold thanks to his culturally affecting and popular artistic style.

Life

In spite of Leyendecker’s enormous contemporary popularity, after his death his name and art disappeared from the mainstream culture he had once dominated. Before exploring his life and work it is crucial to understand the sources available. Today there are three important published accounts of Leyendecker’s life. The first is a biography by Michael Schau published in 1974.\(^8\) Schau’s work, by far the most complete account, presents two problems as an authoritative text. The first, and lesser of the difficulties, is that Schau himself owns several pieces of Leyendecker’s works and therefore seems to benefit from a positive telling of Leyendecker’s life. The second problem stems from the fact that Schau gives no specific sources for his information but writes in his introduction that he spoke with living relatives and friends of the Leyendecker family.\(^9\) Schau’s book, and therefore the details of Leyendecker’s life, relies heavily on the potentially faulty memories of those who knew Leyendecker. With the deaths of many of these unnamed

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\(^8\) Schau. Introduction.

\(^9\) Nothing in Schau’s book is attributed, there is no bibliography, nor are there footnotes. This makes the text difficult to take seriously as an academic work. However, it does not wholly discredit Schau. He clearly did a huge amount of research, even claims to have gone to the church where the Leyendecker family’s births and marriages are recorded. Therefore, as it is the only biographical text available and as it seems to be mostly accurate, I must trust the factual information that is repeated in other texts, but take his anecdotes with a grain of salt.
distant relatives Leyendecker’s life story died as well. Therefore every piece of
information cannot be investigated and verified.

Leyendecker’s friend and co-worker, illustrator Norman Rockwell, wrote the
second source for Leyendecker’s life. Rockwell’s autobiography has an entire chapter,
called “The House on Mt. Tom Road,” dedicated to the Leyendeckers. A young and
impressionable Rockwell idolized Leyendecker, but later in life, when questioned about
Leyendecker by Schau, Rockwell was “not terribly happy that [Schau] was resurrecting
this artist again.”10 However, according to Rockwell, he was one of Leyendecker’s few
close friends and he fills in many details about Leyendecker’s later life, even if it does
need to be taken critically. Just as Schau benefits from a positive slant, Rockwell’s
reputation as the premiere Post artist benefits from a negative account of Leyendecker’s
art. Whether as friend or foe, Rockwell is far from unbiased.

The third piece of biographical information comes from Leyendecker.
Leyendecker kept himself far removed from most everyone. Only once in his long career
was he persuaded to share his personal life with his fans. He wrote a short piece of
autobiographical text for a 1938 Post.11 Leyendecker does not elaborate on his simple
beginnings and writes of his art in a self-deprecating manner. He tells of no complexities
or struggles of his immigrant childhood and seems to paint the story of his life as he did
his masterpieces – a little cleaner and more beautiful than reality. This could easily be
considered the most reliable source as it is from the artist’s own pen, but it should be
remembered that it was written for the public. If Leyendecker wrote anything privately it
is lost today.

10 J.C. Leyendecker.
From the texts available the following is what is known of the life of J.C. Leyendecker.

Leyendecker was born on March 23, 1874 in Montabour, Germany to Peter and Elizabeth Leyendecker. Little is known of Joe’s life until his parents brought their two sons – Joe and younger brother Frank Xavier – to Chicago, Illinois in 1882. Peter Leyendecker began work at Elizabeth’s uncle’s brewery. A third child, Augusta, was born soon after. The three siblings were close for most of their lives. Frank was three years younger than Joe and followed in his older brother’s artistic footsteps, although failing to gain the fame and adoration Joe did.

Leyendecker writes the following of his childhood and explains how art was a natural part of his life from an early age:

The Leyendeckers are of Dutch ancestry, though we came to America in 1882 from Montabour. I was 8 at the time and was already covering school books rudely with colored examples of my work. … When I was 16, I felt I’d reached the saturation of the oilcloth field. So I decided to find a job and gain some experience in the profession of being an artist. I still remember boarding an open cable car one windy day with three large canvases wrapped in newspaper and fighting my way through the crowded streets to an engraving house where I showed my samples.¹³

Leyendecker’s early training at the engraving house was the official beginning to a life dedicated to art.

¹² It is possible that there was a third son, Adolphe, born in 1870. The only place this is documented, however is on AskArt.com, in Frank Leyendecker’s bio.
Leyendecker quickly excelled at the work and he was trained as an apprentice at J. Manz and Company. After only one year he became a salaried worker. The pay allowed him to take classes beginning in 1889 at the Art Institute of Chicago three nights a week under the direction of muralist and illustrator John H. Vanderpoel (1857-1911).\textsuperscript{14} Vanderpoel was himself a student of the French academic painters Gustave Boulanger (1824-1888) and Jules Joseph Lefebvre (1836-1911) at the Académie Julian in Paris and it may have been he who encouraged Leyendecker to study abroad. Before Leyendecker left, however, he was promoted to full illustrator at Manz and studied with Vanderpoel for five years. Both the skills he learned at the engraving house and in his classes with Vanderpoel, allowed Leyendecker to become a master draftsman rather quickly. In these early years, the classes at the Art Institute opened doors to many commissions, including sixty illustrations for an edition of the Bible that he did at age seventeen.\textsuperscript{15} It was here that he also learned the first skills required for commercial art. There was already an established and proud tradition of American illustration in these years of what is today called "The Golden Age of American Illustration." Started by Howard Pyle (1853-1911) and continued by his students N.C. Wyeth (1882-1945), Edwin Austin Abbey (1852-1911), and Maxfield Parrish (1870-1966), Leyendecker was first exposed to their art and the techniques of illustration during his years at the Art Institute.

Rockwell wrote what he knew of Leyendecker's artistically formative years:

When the boys were very young the family had decided that Joe was a genius and, like many immigrant families, had henceforth concentrated all

\textsuperscript{14} Schau. p. 15. Leyendecker wrote, according to Schau, "In the meantime I'd become a salaried man, starting at two dollars a week. I could now attend Vanderpoel's class at the Art Institute three nights a week." Vanderpoel was a teacher to other artists such as Georgia O'Keefe (1887-1986) and taught at the Art Institute from 1880 to 1906.

\textsuperscript{15} Rockwell. p. 188.
their efforts on helping him to fulfill himself. I guess the family felt that only one of their children had a chance to distinguish himself and so they fixed on the one who had a talent and sort of sacrificed their lives to him. Many immigrant families seem to have regarded a talent as a gift from God and therefore something which was to be respected and aided, which it would be somehow sacrilegious to waste. The Leyendeckers scrimped and saved and went without until they had gathered together enough money to send Joe to Paris to study art. Frank, his younger brother and inseparable companion, went along.\(^{16}\)

Rockwell’s claim that the family barely ate so that Leyendecker could study in Paris seems overly dramatic, but is impossible to verify. It is of note, however, that Joe and Frank left for Paris in 1896 and by this point in Joe’s life, he had been making money of his own for seven or eight years. Rockwell’s description of the family’s poverty also does not match the photograph taken of the boys at this time. The two are in dress suits and sit in their spacious Paris apartment, surrounded by purchased art replicas and texts.\(^{17}\)

The stories Rockwell tells of Frank always paint him as a depressing character, if not in personality then in luck and lifestyle. According to Rockwell, Frank lived his whole life in Joe’s shadow. Schau, however, writes that the two brothers were inseparable at this age and clearly both had a strong desire to study art. It is not known how the family found money for Frank’s studies.\(^{18}\) However the brothers got to Paris in

\(^{16}\) Rockwell. p. 188.
\(^{17}\) This photo can be found in one of the introductory pages in Schau.
\(^{18}\) No book or article tells the story of Frank Leyendecker’s life so the details are unknown. It is clear, however, that no matter how Frank’s career began, he too had many successful years as an illustrator. He did several Post covers but was better known for his Life covers. Frank never worked as quickly as his older brother and was usually in debt.
1896, the important fact remains that they did. Joe later wrote of the importance of these early teachers and these early years.\textsuperscript{19} He studied at the conservative art school, the Académie Julian for two years under Jean-Paul Laurens (1838-1291) and Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant (1845–1902). Benjamin-Constant had received the highest honor in France, the Legion of Honor, in 1878 for his contribution to French Art.\textsuperscript{20} Laurens was mainly a history painter and Benjamin-Constant painted with an oriental and exotic spin to his academic works. Both artists were known for their conservative, academic art. Leyendecker also took classes at the Académie Colarossi, though little is known of his time there.

While in Paris Leyendecker made a name for himself as one of the Académie Julian's most accomplished students. Schau wrote:

Monthly prize given by [Adolphe William] Bouguereau for the best work by a student invariably went to Joe. The few times it did not it was won by Frank. Joe’s achievements at the Académie were so highly regarded that several of his classroom drawings, including a memorable life-size nude, were displayed in the school’s permanent exhibition, where they remained until a World War II bombing raid destroyed them.\textsuperscript{21}

Leyendecker’s success was so great that he earned the honor of having a one-man exhibition at the Salon Champs du Mars in April 1897 and he was still considered one of the Académie’s best students years later when Rockwell was there.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{19} Schau. p. 17  
\textsuperscript{20} Schau. p. 20.  
\textsuperscript{21} Schau. p. 20.  
\textsuperscript{22} Rockwell. p. 188.
Twenty years later, when I visited Paris, they still talked about Joe Leyendecker at Calorossi’s [sic]. Some of his figure drawings were still hanging on the walls; the teachers used to cite them as outstanding examples of the art of drawing the human body. ... In art school we said, ‘One day we’ll be as good as Pyle or Abbey or J.C. Leyendecker.’

Besides his academic training while in Paris, Leyendecker was most likely exposed to the rise of commercial art in Paris. Leyendecker may not have studied with artists like Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Jules Chéret, but it would have been impossible for him to miss their influence. Chéret won the Legion of Honor for the development of commercial art in France in 1889. Leyendecker’s biographer, Schau, speculates on how this period in Parisian art could have affected the young artist, “There were money and fame to be won, Leyendecker could see, by painting for the masses in streets as well as the few in the museums.” Schau makes it sound as if Leyendecker’s decision to be an illustrator was made with confidence and pride. At this time, illustration may not have been encouraged by French academics, but especially in the rich tradition of American illustration, it was a reasonable choice for a penniless artist.

Even before he left Paris, Leyendecker fulfilled commissions and sent them back home to the United States. He won The Century cover contest in 1896, beating out the famous illustrator Maxfield Parrish. This commission marks the beginning of Leyendecker’s professional career in cover illustration. Soon after he submitted a cover to The Inland Printer and it became the magazine’s first cover, printed in January 1897. The editor was so pleased that he commissioned Leyendecker to create all remaining 11

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23 Rockwell. p. 188.
24 Schau. p. 21.
covers for that year. These covers are in an art nouveau style that Leyendecker would soon leave behind. They are glimpses into a world of fantasy and revelry and they depict the foundations of a thoughtful maturity that would take Leyendecker far in his artistic career.

Upon his return to the United States, in 1899, Leyendecker was a part of a watercolor exhibition of contemporary art at the Art Institute of Chicago. At this time, the Art Institute was the only place for artists to exhibit in the mid-western states. They only accepted certain types of work and Leyendecker knew he had to appeal to the tastes of the three jurors if he wanted his works to be chosen for the exhibition. Four of his works were approved -- "Bal Bullier," "Notre Dame," and "The Louvre," painted with watercolor, and "Third Class Travellers" in pastel.

This single exhibition stands as Leyendecker's last public showing of non-illustrative paintings, however, it is thought that he may have done a few portraits throughout his life. From his first successful commissions, Leyendecker rarely painted anything non-commercial again. Most likely, Leyendecker's choice to remain in the commercial field was mainly for financial reasons. Soon after returning from France, Leyendecker took on the fiscal responsibility for his parents and siblings for the rest of his life. Rockwell commented on this and on Leyendecker's spending habits:

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26 1889 was the second year that the Art Institute held this exhibition and it continued until 1950. In these first years, the exhibition was only open to American artists and in 1889 the catalogue for the show was called "Catalogue of the Water Color Exhibition." Falk, Peter Hastings, ed. The Annual Exhibition Record of the Art Institute of Chicago 1888-1950. Madison, Ct. Sound View Press: 1990. p. 18.


28 Falk. p. 552. It is not known how many works Leyendecker submitted for this exhibition or where any of these paintings are today.

29 There is one example of a portrait of novelist and playwright Rex E. Beach that is not dated. His relationship to Leyendecker is unknown, and he is of no relation to Charles Beach. Schau. p. 29.
He was supporting his parents and his sister Augusta [and later Frank as well] by this time and living splendidly — the mansion, servants, an automobile. Joe believed that an artist should live just a little bit beyond his means so that there would always be a challenge. ‘Buy more than you can afford,’ he used to say, ‘and you’ll never stop working or fret so over a picture that it never gets done. If every day you have to save yourself from ruin, every day you’ll work. And work hard.’

Leyendecker enjoyed living well, and constant and consistent work allowed him to escape from his humble beginnings. His enormous talent got him major jobs at a young age and from there he quickly became a leading part of the changes happening in the world of printing.

Leyendecker and his brother Frank opened a studio in Chicago’s Stock Exchange Building. Now, at age 23, he was doing freelance work for J. Manz and Co. and making advertisements for Carson Pirie and Scott Department Store, A.B. Kirschbaum Clothiers, and his great-uncle’s McAvoy Brewery. In 1907, not long after settling in Chicago, the brothers relocated to Greenwich Village in New York City. This was a wise move for these up and coming artists. Leyendecker chose a studio in the Beaux Art Building on 6th Avenue.

The move to New York put the young artists in the center of artistic modernism, according to art historian Robert Hughes:

The twenty years from 1910 to 1930 turned America in the world’s most powerful nation, the only combatant state that had not been crippled by

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30 Rockwell. p. 189.  
31 Schau. p. 23.  
32 Schau. p. 34.
World War I, and New York became its more powerful city: a condenser of change, renewal, experiment, and hope. ... New York made modernism; modernism made New York. And the city, in modernist eyes, was its own total and challenging work of art.\textsuperscript{33}

New York was an ideal place to learn of contemporary art and to feel the energy of city life. Both are evident in Leyendecker's art. However, Leyendecker's success soon allowed the family to leave the city. In 1914, Frank and Joe, with sister Augusta, moved to a French chateau-style mansion on Mt. Tom Road in New Rochelle.\textsuperscript{34} Still, Joe continued to commute to his studio in the Beaux Arts building until 1920.

At this point another character enters the story of Leyendecker's personal and artistic life: Charles Beach. Like most of the details surrounding Leyendecker little is known of Beach, or of his relationship to Joe. The best source of information about Beach is Rockwell's writings and yet Rockwell never knew Beach's first name. Rockwell's bitterness towards the man must be taken seriously, as he backs it with pages of stories to prove his point. However his bias is clear and he fails to recognize that Beach must have meant a lot to Leyendecker.

According to Rockwell, Beach appeared in Joe's life in 1901 after having fallen in love with one of the models in a Leyendecker advertisement. He traveled from Canada to find this woman and ended up living with the Leyendeckers until Joe's death in 1951. Even Rockwell, with his strong dislike of


\textsuperscript{34} Schau. p. 36. The mansion, according to Schau, is today a day school.
Beach, was not blind to the fact that Beach was a beautiful man. His overt masculinity combined with grace must have attracted Joe to him and he used Beach as the main model for his Arrow Collar and House of Kuppenheimer advertisements, and for many *Post* covers.  

Rockwell describes how Beach began to entrench himself in Leyendecker’s life by doing little tasks at first and gradually taking on more responsibilities for the artist. When the family went to New Rochelle, Beach moved into the mansion with the three siblings. After this, according to Rockwell, Beach slowly squeezed the vitality out of Leyendecker and did all but paint for him:

[Beach] built a wall around Joe. I knew Joe for almost twenty-five years and in all that time the only persons he ever saw besides his models were myself, his sister Augusta and brother Frank, a family of cousins named Sullivan, and a colonel from West Point. He rarely even *spoke* to anyone else. ... I can see him in my mind’s eye now: a small compact figure dressed in gray flannels and a tweed sports coat, with a white silk scarf around his neck; pacing beside a pool or down a pathway ... And always just behind him comes Beach, his eyes riveted on Joe’s back as if they were tied to it with a cord. ... he’d say to Joe, ‘*We* had better get back to work now.’ And he’d pressure Joe to finish the picture so that he could

35 A beautiful example of a Beach *Post* cover is one called “Thanksgiving” from Nov. 24, 1928.
get his percentage. ... He was a real parasite – like some huge, white, cold insect clinging to Joe’s back. And stupid.36

Although it cannot be proven, it is thought that Beach caused a rift between the siblings forcing Frank and Augusta to leave the Leyendecker mansion. Less than a year, in 1924, later Frank died, probably from a drug overdose.37

Rockwell writes of Joe’s descent from a social, amiable man to a meek shell. And so also over time Leyendecker’s art suffered from Beach’s suffocation. The two lived hermit-like until Leyendecker’s death in 1951. Beach sold off Leyendecker’s art to pay for his drinking and, according to Rockwell, died shortly after.38

Illustration and The Saturday Evening Post

By 1912 Joseph Christian Leyendecker had become a well-known name. His fame was mostly thanks to his consistent appearance on the cover of The Saturday Evening Post. Leyendecker was best recognized in life for his magazine covers and for the elegant and lively people who graced those Post covers. This period in American history was an ideal time for Leyendecker to make a career as an illustrator. His early career coincided with a period today called “The Golden Age of American Illustration.” Leyendecker’s later career continued in part due to the on-going high demand for mass-produced magazines.

37 Rockwell. p. 196.
38 Rockwell. p. 199.
The “Golden Age of American Illustration” lasted from the late 1880s until the late 1920s and is marked by an enormous jump in mass publication on account of social changes and the technological developments in the printing field.

The images that accompanied news of the Civil War created a hunger in the American public for more visuals. The best known of the war imagists was Winslow Homer, who contributed to Harper’s Weekly from 1858 to 1865. According to magazine historian Frank L. Mott, there were some 7,500 new periodicals founded between 1885 and 1905. This was a dramatic rise from the sixteen published before the Revolutionary War and the approximately 600 of the mid-nineteenth century.

These new periodicals that appeared in this period had varying themes to appeal to different markets. Ladies’ Home Journal (1883) was for the lady of the house, St. Nicholas (1873-1940) for the children, Harper’s Weekly (1857-today, non-continuously) for the father, and The Saturday Evening Post (1821-1969, 1971-today, non-continuously) to pass around the entire family. These magazines sold easily because of the rise in middle-class disposable income and the spread of education that meant nearly all of the middle class could read by the end of the nineteenth century.

The lower cost of printing meant these magazines were inexpensive and thus available to a huge audience. Not only cheaper to print, these periodicals were now easier to print as well. New techniques, such as a halftone process, made the transfer of color printing and photography possible by the 1890s. Having replaced the art of etching

41 Alt. “Periodicals.”
a work into wood or copper, the halftone process was soon updated to a four-color process for partial or full-color images.

In the mid-1890s *The Inland Printer* became the first American magazine to run a different cover illustration every issue and thus the face of the modern magazine was born. These changes amazed those living in this period. Mural painter Edwin Blashfield, felt this era was so rich with talent, innovation, and imagination that he said of his time:

If an enlightened foreigner came to America to weigh our art I would take him to the illustrators, with pride in the fact that in them he would find full measure of all-round varied technique, a mastery of means which had not been paid for by any lack of significance. Blashfield was not alone in his feelings and, at this time, these works were valued for their artistic skill, beauty, high ideals of American life and individual style.

Illustrations were key to the popularity of the thousands of circulating magazines. Artist-created images enhanced everything from car and clothing advertisements to almost every piece of literature included in the Post. As artists like Leyendecker appeared throughout the magazine and on the covers, they, like the products they sold, became "household names." These cover artists were the American celebrities that Hollywood had yet to produce. Just as Kellogg's became part of the American household vocabulary, Leyendecker's use of paint became part of the American visual vocabulary.

Terrance Brown, Director of the Society of Illustrators, notes that it was in part this visual recognition that kept Leyendecker so successful for four decades: "His technique, it was very efficient, very effective, and he made it also very consistent, which

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42 Kelly. p. 4.
43 As cited in Kelly. p. 4.
in his heyday was key for a good illustrator – to have a good, consistent style the public would recognize without even a signature on it.\textsuperscript{44}

Leyendecker rode the wave of mass illustration and was a major contributor to the rise in popularity of illustration in its mass-media form. From advertisements to magazine covers, Leyendecker held enormous power in the setting of American culture and style and in the way American saw themselves as modern people.

Leyendecker’s first cover for \textit{The Saturday Evening Post} was printed on May 20, 1899. This cover was a black and white illustration of a nun healing a soldier. Leyendecker wrote of his first cover, “There was nothing distinctive in the appearance of the first few numbers; it was not until George Horace Lorimer became editor that color was introduced and the cover became a design complete in itself.”\textsuperscript{45}

It was indeed under the editorship of Lorimer that the \textit{Post} became a magazine of consequence. In an analysis of contemporary magazines done in 1929, author Gladys Campbell suggests the \textit{Post} as a magazine for study of dramatic changes in appearance, size, and general character of contents over an extended period of time.\textsuperscript{46}

Indeed, the magazine went through significant changes once Lorimer took charge. One early and significant change occurred when a piece in the \textit{Post} declared the importance of the periodical on October 5, 1901. Page 12 reads as follows:

\textit{The Saturday Evening Post} is the oldest journal in America, having appeared regularly every week for the past 173 years, except for the short period when Philadelphia was in the hands of the British Army. The

\textsuperscript{44} J.C. Leyendecker.
\textsuperscript{45} Schau. p. 25.
magazine was founded in 1728 and was edited and published by Benjamin Franklin, in whose days it was known as The Pennsylvania Gazette. In 1765 the publication passed into other hands, but its name continued until 1821 when it was changed to The Saturday Evening Post. The magazine was purchased in 1897 by The Curtis Publishing Company.⁴⁷

This declaration stated the history of the Post and explained to its readers the stable base from where the magazine would grow. In these early years, Lorimer made clear that the Post had a legitimate claim to a piece of the popular culture pie.

Cyrus H. K. Curtis, founder of The Curtis Publishing Company, purchased a bankrupt Post for a mere one thousand dollars. The magazine had only two thousand subscribers, most of whom quickly abandoned the sinking periodical. To save rights to the name, Curtis’ company, established in 1890 and owner of The Country Gentleman and The Ladies’ Home Journal, kept the magazine together for a while. Curtis worked to build up the Post from almost nothing and many in the magazine world thought him crazy.⁴⁸ For about a year, few changes were made and then Curtis sought out the editor of Cosmopolitan, Arthur Sherburne Hardy hoping Hardy could jump-start the magazine to success. Before he could secure Hardy, Curtis hired in the meantime, as a “stop-gap incumbent,”⁴⁹ a young man named George Horace Lorimer. Lorimer had no experience in magazine publishing or editing and had worked only as reporter for The Boston Post. But, before Curtis had heard back from Hardy, who was abroad at the time, Curtis

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⁴⁹ Wood. p. 151.
realized that Lorimer was precisely the type of editor he wanted.\textsuperscript{50} Lorimer officially became editor of the \textit{Post} in 1899. Things then began to change.

In a study of Lorimer's life, Jan Cohn writes of Lorimer's early work with the \textit{Post} and his analysis of the \textit{Post} at this time is key to understanding the rise in influence that the magazine had in the United States. Lorimer served as editor to the \textit{Post} until 1936 and Wood calls the \textit{Post} in the Lorimer years "perhaps America's greatest mass magazine."\textsuperscript{51} Every single item from cover to cover, every illustration, advertisement, and article required Lorimer's approval. His diligence completely turned the \textit{Post} from a failing magazine to the most popular piece of American print for over thirty years. Cohn describes a few of Lorimer's changes:

By 1903 Lorimer had succeeded in creating a handsome magazine with a real identity. It could boast first class writing, a circulation of over half a million, and advertising that filled up to 45 percent of some issues. The \textit{Post} now had a cover, in two colors, with beautifully drawn illustrations by leading artist-illustrators of the day, including the great J.C. Leyendecker … \textsuperscript{52}

Lorimer himself boasted that the \textit{Post} was "The largest weekly magazine in the world."\textsuperscript{53} The magazine was indeed popular in Lorimer's years. Profits soured under his guidance and in these years, and United States laws also aided the high sales of the \textit{Post}. In the Postal Act of 1879, full second-class mailing privileges were granted to magazines. Again costs decreased for the publishing companies in 1885 when these second-class

\textsuperscript{50} Wood. p. 151.
\textsuperscript{52} Cohn. p. 46.
\textsuperscript{53} Cited in Wood. p. 154.
rates were reduced to a shipping cost of one cent per pound. Magazines again profited thanks to the Congressional passage of a law allowing free delivery to rural areas in 1897. The circulation of all magazines leaped in this period, but none so dramatically as the *Post* — from one-quarter million in 1900 to one million in 1908 to almost two million by 1913 and three million before Lorimer retired. Profits made almost entirely from advertisements were high.

The laws helped the profits, but it was mainly Lorimer’s guidance and leadership that caused the huge jump in sales for the *Post*. In his book *Magazines in the United States*, specialist James Playsted Wood describes the rise and power of the *Post* in Lorimer’s time. According to Wood, the *Post* was such a part of American life that “people came to know it as they knew their own names. Its influence was pervasive and immeasurable, spreading simultaneously in many directions.”

Under Lorimer, the magazine became a shrine to middle-class values such as a strong work ethic, patriotism and, by the 1930s, moderation. The *Post*’s cover became a visual representation of all that was expressed inside. Artists, under the supervision of Lorimer, had the power to construct a vision of American as the editors of the *Post* wanted to sell it. The cover, in conjunction with the many advertisements inside, often depicted a nation of ideals to sell their products. These illustrations, always portraying a more perfect reality, left their mark on American culture. Leon Whipple’s 1928 analysis of the *Post* is worthy of note:

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55 Numbers are from the Ayer’s American Newspaper Annual and Directory. As cited in Greene. p. 174.
56 Lorimer was editor officially from 1899 to 1936. Leyendecker was a cover artist from 1899 to 1943 and so by looking at Lorimer’s years, we can better understand the magazine for which Leyendecker was so proud to work.
57 Wood. p. 163.
This is a magic mirror; it not only reflects, it creates us. What the
SatEvePost is we are. . . . Who reads the Post? Who looks in the mirror?
Everybody — high-brow, low-brow, and mezzanine; the hard-boiled
business man and the soft-boiled leisure woman; the intelligenzia, often as
a secret vice. 58

In 1926, Whipple estimated that an unbelievable number of more than one in ten of
literate American families read the Post. 59 Thus, its influence upon the nation was
enormous.

Lorimer’s ideas changed the Post from a failing magazine to an influential
periodical, read and sought after by millions across the country. His audience was the
average American businessman and his family. Lorimer filled the magazine with stories
ranging from romance to politics. By September 1899, every piece of literature in the
Post was accompanied by illustrations and by 1900 the cover was an independent entity.
Although still supervised by Lorimer, the cover became the artist’s opportunity to show
his creativity, skill, and design ideas.

Still, only Leyendecker and Rockwell were ever given real freedom in their
covers. Lorimer would usually look at a room full of finished paintings and pick a cover.
But for Rockwell and Leyendecker, sketches were enough to receive Lorimer’s go-
ahead. 60 This minor check on Leyendecker by Lorimer meant that the magazine
maintained an identifiable face for its readers for decades no matter the cover artist, but

58 Whipple, Leon. “SatEvePost, Mirror of These States,” Survey. March 1, 1928 as cited in Wood. p. 154-
155
59 Whipple. As cited in Wood. p. 156.
60 Tebbel, John William. George Horace Lorimer and the Saturday Evening Post. New York: Doubleday
by approving Leyendecker’s first sketches Lorimer granted him a greater freedom in subject matter, style, and depiction. 61

In an early editorial Lorimer wrote of his plans and ideas for his Post. Perhaps this description of the Post is also the best description of the covers that bore its name.

There is nothing worthy or permanent in life that is not clear, and in its plans and purposes the new Saturday Evening Post preaches and practices the gospel of cleanliness. It appeals to the great mass of intelligent people who make homes and love them, who choose good lives and live them, who seek friends and cherish them, who select the best recreations and enjoy them. 62

Leyendecker’s covers, like the stories inside, helped sell the Post to that mass of “intelligent people” of whom Lorimer wrote.

Leyendecker, being so adaptable in everything from his artistic themes to his characters, was, for almost forty years, able to change with the times and use his skills to his greatest financial gain. Although Leyendecker never signed a formal contract with the Post, it is thought that he made between $1500 and $2000 per cover – an amount that put him at the top of paid illustrators at this time. 63

It would be unfair to say that Leyendecker created his art purely for money, but he did force himself to work consistently by having the idea that if he kept spending he would continue to be productive and innovative. 64 This philosophy meant he spent almost all of his income on his mansion and its grounds. According to Rockwell, this

61 Rockwell stated that the Post was “Almost the only job which allowed me full freedom to do the pictures I wanted.” Rockwell. p. 167.
63 Schau. p. 25.
64 Rockwell. p. 189.
constant need for money meant that Leyendecker was under pressure to keep producing successful covers and was thus never free of his routine.

This need to keep earning money may be why Leyendecker never strayed from commercial work. Leyendecker was offered great artistic commissions, such as murals for the Boston Public Library and the New York City Public Library but he turned them down, probably because they did not allow him to earn enough money quickly. Instead, Leyendecker produced cover after cover and advertisement after advertisement to maintain the mansion for himself, Frank, Augusta, and Beach.

It will take a detailed analysis of his covers to understand the effect Leyendecker had on the American public. The Post offered Leyendecker an amazing platform from which he could share his talent, his ideas, and his ideals. Leyendecker followed in the footsteps of his teachers and of other greats of the “Golden Age of American Illustration” by reaching millions with every work. Art was no longer just for the elite.

Cohn’s analysis of the Post explains:

Readers became a national community as they came to know, to share in, and to talk to one another about familiar stories by familiar writers about familiar characters. ... The very appearance of another Rockwell or Leyendecker cover enriched and confirmed the culture of Post readership. To read the Post was to become American, to participate in the American experience.\(^6\)

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\(^6\) Schau. p. 27
\(^6\) Cohn. p. 9-10.
Analysis of works

In the beginning of the twentieth century, when other Post cover artists were focused on one topic, specialty covers, Leyendecker was, by far, the most versatile and original of artists. Of the fifty-nine possible cover-theme categories defined today by the Post, Leyendecker’s touched upon forty-eight. From babies to baseball, weddings to wars, Leyendecker captured the essence of what it meant to be American – only Rockwell was as versatile.

Leyendecker’s first cover in May of 1899 was the small black and white illustration already mentioned. His next was not for another four years; titled A Woman Mourning, it ran February 7, 1903. The cover illustrates “A Life Struggle; Recollections of M. de Blowitz” by Henri de Blowitz. Leyendecker also executed an inside illustration for this story.

The cover is designed inside a black box that does not wholly disappear until the 1930s, although the outlining box runs less as the cover opens up and becomes lighter in content. Leyendecker’s cover for the story is not wholly in the clearly defined style for which he would later became known.

The cover depicts two characters, a woman in black with hands clasped and head down in sadness, and a servant holding a curtain so she may pass. The man is stiff and almost awkward looking, which is rare to see in a Leyendecker cover. His hands seem to be too big for his body. Perfect perspective is a guarantee in his future Post covers, but this one does not quite reach his future standards. As a draftsman, he was superb and

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67 See page 17.
68 Leyendecker did not name his own covers as far as we know. They were probably given their titles by Lorimer or even modern Post archivists and often reflect the lead story title.
this, too, is less evident here — it feels as if Leyendecker was nervous for the first few
Post assignments. Compared to most Post cover characters by other illustrators, the
servant does not seem obviously out of proportion, but in contrast to Leyendecker’s
future men, he is absolutely inelegant. This character has a natural facial expression, but
he stands as the first and last of Leyendecker’s imperfect people. In just a few covers his
men become confident and well balanced on their feet.\footnote{Cover June 11, 1904 of Kaiser Wilhelm II, July 9, 1904 of South Africa After the War, October 22, 1904
lole are early examples of the poised men for which Leyendecker would become known.}

Also unlike future works, the man and woman are heavily outlined. Many
illustrations at this time were outlined to give them emphasis without the use of color.
This flat, geometric look rose from the popularity of Japanese prints in the United States.
Other illustrators of this period, like Elizabeth Shippen Green, perfected this style for the
Post.

The cover figures’ skin is more blended and modeled than future Leyendecker
people will be. This work is more in line with his academic training. Yet there are hints
of the style for which Leyendecker would be renowned in his own lifetime, as was
mentioned. We can see the structure-lines — that will later be more heavily defined and
help to make his works easily recognizable — in the heavy dress of the mourning woman,
in the curtain gently pulled aside, and in the wrinkles of the pant leg of the man’s suit.
These lines have a tactile quality of paint, which is very noticeable in most Leyendecker
covers.

The thick strokes of paint and the angular style the paint gives the fabric are key
aspects of Leyendecker’s covers. Some have taken these structure-lines too seriously,
going so far as to define Leyendecker’s style by them alone: “In spite of modeling used
to describe his forms, his painting is actually two-dimensional, flat shapes placed
intelligently, one over the other, to form never-ending design variations.\textsuperscript{70}

Although this may sound interesting, it is far from the truth. According to
Rockwell, it is true that the Leyendecker brothers did work to get visible paint strokes in
their work:

And they shared a secret medium (that's what you mix your oil paint
with). Only Joe and Frank knew the formula. For years they had kept it a
secret, refusing even to exhibit their pictures for fear that some artist
would discover it. The use of this medium gave their paintings a special
quality. You could see each brush stroke in the finished painting. Very
distinctive. ... Incidentally, I was never able to use the medium; it was too
slippery.\textsuperscript{71}

The intricacies and subtleness of a Leyendecker Post cover may not be appreciated by
every casual viewer but Leyendecker's academically-trained technique and his drafting
skills are the foundation of every work. Leyendecker's understanding of the three-
dimensions of the human form made him the top student at two French academies. The
discernable brush strokes of the unique medium were not placed in a blocky, two-
dimensional way, but rather they were used to add character to the figures and objects.
Many of Leyendecker's later paintings have a stylized quality to them, but too few of his
covers are purely "design-oriented," as Meyer called them to define Leyendecker's style
by this. This analysis is oversimplified.

\textsuperscript{71} Rockwell. p. 193, 196.
Other than the unique brush strokes, the secret paint medium also enhanced the shine of the Leyendecker paintings and although it may have added to the appeal of Leyendecker’s covers, it was far from the only popular aspect of them. If such were the case than his brother Frank, who also knew and used this medium, could have reached the same level of fame.

The features that are first seen in these early covers – the beginnings of structure-lines, the distinctive brush strokes, and the glossy, painterly style – made Leyendecker’s paintings not only unique but also memorable. Plus the works reproduced excellently as magazine covers.

More than technique or paint, however Leyendecker’s success also came from this naturalness in rendering the human form. In a film dedicated to Leyendecker’s art, one speaker hints at the level of mastery reached by the famed illustrator: “Two artists in the world … could paint hands – Michelangelo and Leyendecker.”

Leyendecker’s second New Year’s cover also has one of his endearing cherubs gracing it. The work is called Stork and New Year’s Baby and was printed December 28, 1907. A realistic cherub and bird are just slightly more beautiful than reality. The small, wide-eyed angel holds all the potential for a wonderful new year. As an advocate of the ancient technique of drawing from live models, this beautiful baby is only more proof as to why Leyendecker was so sure this method worked. There is nothing stiff or frozen in the baby’s position. His recreation of the human form is beautiful.

His understanding of the human body and his academic training allowed him to vary the characters gestures and expressions without ever making them appear forced or overdone – unique and interesting figure positions and situations kept Leyendecker’s

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72 J.C. Leyendecker.
covers looking fresh every time. Rockwell, although he clearly cared deeply for the Leyendeckers, was unfair in his descriptions of Leyendecker’s art. But he did understand the skill that lay behind each cover:

You could see his emphasis on technique in the way he painted a picture. He would make endless little sketches from the model – two or three of the hands, a couple of the head, the torso, the eyes, the folds of the dress, the shoes – until he had drawn everything exactly as he wanted it. Usually he filled three or four canvases in this way. Then he would combine the sketches on another canvas and that was his finished painting. By working this way, he explained, he could forget draftsmanship when painting and concentrate on his brush strokes, his technique. 73

Rockwell believed that by breaking the painting into parts, the final work did not have the feelings and spontaneity of a work done directly from models or photographs.

Having seen one of these progressions from sketch to final cover for myself, I would completely disagree. In the Kelly Collection of American Illustration I was privileged to see the oil sketches for Leyendeckers’ Silent Night cover from December 28, 1935. Two parents are shown trying to cheer up their grouchy infant. Although never a father himself, Leyendecker captures in this work the very essence of love for a child – these parents are going to great lengths to try to make their weeping baby smile. The oil sketch contains details of hands,

73 Rockwell. p. 197.
the woman's curls, and the angles of the instruments they play. Neither feeling
nor naturalness is lost in any of the details or in the final piece.

None of Leyendecker's covers are without identifiable human emotions
and they are the definition of spontaneity. They do lack the sometimes-forced
emotions of a Rockwell Post cover, however, for which Leyendecker would have
blamed Rockwell's use of photographs, according to Rockwell:

Joe damned photographs. 'Are you going to be an artist or a
photographer?' he'd ask. (I always agreed with him. But I began
to use photographs. One day I had hundreds of photographs
scattered all over the floor of my studio. I was picking parts out of
all of them - the best leg, the best expression, et cetera. Joe came
in. We talked for an hour, neither one of us looking at the floor,
keeping out eyes fixed on each other's face. Then he left. He
never said anything about this to me.)\(^{74}\)

Leyendecker always worked from models and his unique characters and
positioning of figures prove the value in such an artistic decision.

Like Leyendecker's second cover, his third retained the heavy outlining of key
figures. The Princess Romanova was printed May 16, 1903. This cover, done in black
and orange, illustrates George Horton's story of the princess. It is a prime example of
Leyendecker's early cover style. It depicts an elegant woman holding a parasol with a
steamboat in the background. She is more voluptuous than his later leading women but
she glows as a tribute to the apparent beauty of the upper classes of the early twentieth
century.

\(^{74}\) Rockwell. p. 198.
White is the overwhelming color, making the painting feel more like a pen and ink wash than an oil painting. It may not follow Leyendecker’s later painting technique, but it does still have aspects of his signature style. The use of line creates the Leyendecker structural style in her dress and the ferryboat.

This cover marks a period of greater freedoms for Leyendecker – as he gains the trust of Lorimer he begins to try things like breaking the image outside the box that outlines the cover. Instead the illustration sweeps up over the thick black lines characteristic of the Post. By bringing the illustration upwards in one large curved motion, the cover has a more airy feel that suits the mood of the painting. Leyendecker did this more as his career continued.

In Leyendecker’s early years with the Post, he quickly became known for his holiday covers. On December 2, 1905, his second Christmas cover made it to print and is today called Christmas Dinner. Like many of Leyendecker’s future holiday covers, block letters declare the theme of Christmas just below the image of Christmas. The word gives the illustration a base and reminds the reader that this cover is a symbol of what the holiday could mean to Americans.

The defining feature of this particular Christmas cover is the symmetry of the work. Whether in art school or from his early years at the engraving house, Leyendecker clearly learned the importance of a symmetrical and balanced design. His skill and eye for the structure of his compositions are a subtle part of what makes his covers so successful.

But it took more than style and painting technique to be a Post cover artist for so long. According to Rockwell, Lorimer would pick his covers at a glance, knowing that it
was the impression it made from the newsstand that convinced readers buy the Post: "The first glance, its first impact, was his criterion. 'If it doesn't strike me immediately,' he used to say, 'I don't want it. And neither does the public. They won't spend an hour figuring it out. It's got to hit them.'"\(^75\) Lorimer wanted even an untrained eye to be attracted to the Post. With Leyendecker, such was always the case as his thoughtful design and creative anecdotes contributed to that.

There is another important aspect to Leyendecker's covers that helped to augment his success. This Christmas cover has the beginnings of what would become Leyendecker's long-lasting legacy: his depiction of children.

At first glance, the small child in this cover is not even noticeable. Yet this subtle detail is the best part of this work. Front and center, all that is seen of the boy are his eyes and the tips of his toes. He is hidden by the food and suggests many things to readers. The child's wide eyes show a gleam of excitement as his solemn parents bend in prayer. Reminders of past family feasts, the joy of being together, the possibilities for the future that a child suggests – all come across with just a glance. Leyendecker was able to capture young holiday jubilee in a delightfully subtle way.

The situations in which Leyendecker placed his beautiful children were sometimes humorous, sometimes grave yet the children were always placed in scenes that impacted viewers. These lovable characters, and even more so his roly-polly babies, naturally became anticipated characters for readers of the Post. The babies and cherubs became repeated characters that were very popular and helped Lorimer define his magazine's image. In an analysis of Lorimer, Jan Cohn explains:

\(^75\) Rockwell. p. 168.
One way the cover artists of the *Post* appealed to that audience and, more significantly, contributed to the magazine's increasingly established identity, was through the use of recurring characters. The most familiar of these was J.C. Leyendecker's New Year's baby, appearing first on December 29, 1906, with a list of New Year's resolutions and reappearing every New Year through and beyond the period of Lorimer's editorship. For the first few years, Leyendecker's baby was not confined to the New Year's cover but would appear at various holidays. He, or she, might become a delivery boy bringing Easter flowers or a chef preparing to carve the Thanksgiving turkey; she could be trying on her Easter bonnet and he might leap away from an exploding Fourth of July firecracker. The Leyendecker baby in whatever guise was a figure entirely identified with American celebrations, American traditions, and the quintessentially American magazine—*The Saturday Evening Post*.76

These early covers may be attractive, but it takes another year or so for Leyendecker's style to become more easily recognizable. Most covers between 1899 and 1909 have the previously explained touches of Leyendecker's signature style but his works do not emerge as an instantly recognizable and sought after cover art until around 1910.

One very definitive example of Leyendecker's successful two-tone cover style is called *Hooky Player Tempting Schoolboy*, which ran for the *Post* September 10, 1910. Here, Leyendecker depicts two young boys, one dressed for class, the other in overalls with a fishing pole pointing to the imaginary pond in the distance. The story is clear

76 Cohn. p. 81.
instantly from clothing details, character gestures and expressions and Leyendecker relies a little on reader experience.

This cover helps to identify many key features of Leyendecker’s covers. Cover design, painting technique and style, characters and color are the four aspects that remain consistent throughout Leyendecker’s career.

First is the balance of his figures on the cover. His realistic, yet artistic, placement of characters and his eye for design are rivaled only by the future Rockwell. The boys look inward, but lean in their opposing directions – as if each is being called, one out of duty and the other in the name of fun.

In this cover, second to design, but probably first in the ease of recognizing a Leyendecker cover, is his painting technique. Broad, confident brush strokes add a stylized element to his art, an element that later develops into a decorative aspect to his art. The structure-lines add solidity to his figures. They also keep the eye active and help lead the viewer through the painting. Sometimes these lines even help to tell the story.

The third successful part of this cover is Leyendecker’s treatment of his children. These children, especially the babies, would become his most familiar feature and probably his most lasting legacy. But what makes each one so triumphant is that every character, including his adults, has an individual personality that comes forth with the simple addition of a laugh line or a prop, such as a fishing pole.

Leyendecker never forces his characters’ emotions, as many cover artists did at this time to enhance a story. His naturalism lets each personality shine through so that no action or face seems uncomfortable or fake. A fourth piece of Leyendecker’s skill is his use of color. Even in a two-color cover he uses accents of color to add dimension,
interest, and vivacity. This use of color becomes a key element to future, full-color covers.

Not every Leyendecker cover was lighthearted. Many reached to the spirit of sensitive issues. Leyendecker did not ignore the many social and political problems of the only twentieth century. The aim of a cover was never to offend or shock, but to intrigue and appeal. This does not mean that issues of the times were not addressed. Leyendecker had two ways of dealing with contemporary problems. He either placed a gentler spin on a situation, or he expressed the heroic ideals behind a harsh reality. The first such cover was December 30, 1911 as the New Year’s cover and is called *Votes for Women*.

In that year, of fifty-two *Post* covers, twenty-nine featured a woman or girl, but only Leyendecker’s addressed the pertinent issue of the period – the women’s struggle for the right to vote. He may not have shown the harder aspects of their political struggle, but Lorimer and Leyendecker were not interested in the harsh details of American life. His cover is of one of his famed babies, a girl with curls piled atop her pudgy face, who proudly carries a long pole with a box at the top that states Votes for Women on one side and Equality on another. Behind her float orange numbers with the year 1912. This adorable baby seems to be insisting peacefully that 1912 is her year. But apparently Leyendecker was ahead of his time, as the vote was not given until the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920.

The second way Leyendecker dealt with social issues was to find the core of the problem and express its essence. The first *Post* cover to address a war ran September 3, 1914 and as many *Post* covers do, it gives modern viewers a taste of politics of the
period. The cover is called *War Headlines* and shows Uncle Sam reclining in a wooden chair, intently reading a newspaper with the headline Big Battle Raging. Leyendecker would go on to depict many aspects of wartime in both World War I and II.

With homey details such as handmade rug and a cat curled at his feet, the old man laboriously absorbs all the details of an inside article. This cover beautifully humanizes the American symbol of Uncle Sam. Slippers and pipe complete the grandfatherly image. Although a two-color cover, Leyendecker used dark gray to imply the blue of a red, white and blue color scheme. Perhaps most interesting in this cover is the ominous shadow looming behind Uncle Sam. It hints that the worse is still to come. In August 1914, Woodrow Wilson had declared U.S. neutrality. The United States did not enter the war until 1917, but by September 1914, Europe was very much entangled and America, here shown as Uncle Sam, watched fearfully.

Although a lurking presence, the war made the Post’s cover only four other times until America was involved in the spring of 1917. In the meantime Leyendecker’s covers recall the happy life of the bourgeoisie. *Fat Lady in Rowboat*, printed June 12, 1915, casually brings back the carefree, anecdotal covers so popular to readers. As Leyendecker was given more and more freedom from Lorimer his covers become more and more like genre scenes of American life. Genre painting expresses the emotions, activities, and mannerisms of everyday, contemporary life. Leyendecker hyperbolizes ordinary life to appeal to his audience. In this scene a skinny, middle-aged man works spectacularly hard to row his lady love around a lake. It appears that they are on a leisurely adventure that has turned into a strenuous exercise for the poor man.
Leyendecker shows his ease at painting humor by integrating fabulous details such as the tips of the women’s dress, which drag in the water as she herself comes perilously close to sinking. The woman sits with her parasol, delicately trailing her fingers in the water. Leyendecker’s unfortunate hero is not the dashing ideal of many of his covers. Instead his pants are too short and his hat is off kilter. His face is red with exertion, his sleeves are rolled up, his collar is open and it seems as though no progress is being made whatsoever.

Most covers done around this time were gem-like cutouts of purely American scenes, be it city or country life. Another humorous and joyful scene ran a month later, July 24, 1916, called Fire Hydrant Shower. This cover is meticulously carried out so that the characters and props hint at the world around in a delicate fashion as they overlap the magazine name and distinctive black lines in the Post covers of this period. The children appear on a white background with a few shadows or ground marks to give depth and setting. Two city children, a young girl and infant, and their small dog are enjoying the cool of a nearby, red fire hydrant. The children in this work, with slightly enlarged heads, are more cartoon-like than many of his other figures. With pink cheeks, large smiles, and white underclothes, these children are the purest this country had to offer.

The seated infant has a delightfully lit-up face as he reaches for the puppy and enjoys the cool water. Readers could easily have felt their excitement and their joy; it would be natural to long for the simplicity and sheer happiness that comes with an ideal childhood.

Leyendecker had a gift at creating art that spoke to his audience and these years were his best genre scene covers. He could take a moment and make it embody so much
more to his audience. His covers were immediately easy to comprehend and were always relatable for his "fans." The children are types representative of the idea of what "childhood" means to the early twentieth-century Americans. They are also a beautiful representation of art. Leyendecker had an incredible understanding of anatomy and conveys his figures elegantly but realistically – he never took an easy bodily rendering choice. In this cover, the girl clutches her dress at a complex angle to draft a hand, but the perspective, depth and modeling are technically perfect. In these years, Leyendecker's figures usually have a think gray outline around their bodies. This more structural element falls away as color becomes more central in full-color covers.

Leyendecker's first cover emblazoned with the words More Than Two Million a Week also ran 1916. The illustration is titled First Suit and shows a young man being fitted by an elderly gentleman. This cover, from April 15, is like many of the period – an endearing depiction of American life.

Leyendecker's best-remembered cover is one of his holiday paintings – delightful Christmas one called "Santa's Lap," which ran December 22, 1923. This cover shows Leyendecker's ease with subjects not personal to him. Without having the advantage of having children of his own around captures the youth's simple joy of seeing Santa. The small boy depicted looks up in adoration of Santa, who is just as endearing.

Leyendecker's first full-color cover appeared April 3, 1926. It was an Easter-themed cover called Easter Dutch Girl and depicts, just that – a young girl in Hollandian costume holding flowers. A gold band encircles her in a framing way common to Post covers by this time. The colors are warm and inviting with exquisite pinks and turquoises, yellows and oranges. The large bouquet of tulips, for which the Dutch are
famed, mimics the shape of her shirt and hat and her round, baby face stares out confidently and calmly.

She stands bewitchingly – as otherworldly, as foreign, as exotic as Leyendecker’s cherubs or perfect people – but her charm lies in her innocuous beauty and the clean simplicity of the work.

Now that his covers printed in full-color, Leyendecker made different artistic choices with his covers. His next cover shows a dramatic shift in design. Printed July 16, 1926, this stunning display is called *Knight in Shining Armor*. Beginning with this cover, Leyendecker adds this style design to his already popular oeuvre of cover types – genre scenes and his famed baby covers. The new group has a new two-fold focus: color and decoration. Subject and story become secondary, if they incorporated at all.

*Knight in Shining Armor* is the first triumphant example of Leyendecker’s exploration in full color, decorative illustration for the *Post*. The work demonstrates a more visual than genre-like style. This may reflect what Leyendecker would have done had he had the freedom to create more monumental works of art.\(^77\) It appears that in this cover, Leyendecker is breaking from the *Post*-cover mold.

The work shows a knight embracing his lady as both sit atop a horse. A cherub floats above showering flower petals onto the lovers and flowers grow from the ground below their horse’s feet. The horse wears an elaborate robe adding to the drama of the event. The aspect that makes this cover, and ones like it, stand out are the shapes of color. This is not absent from Leyendecker’s earlier works but becomes more and more evident from here on. The shapes build on themselves to create dimension appealing to the eye. No evidence exists as to whether or not Leyendecker was exposed to the rise of

\(^77\) See p. 11.
art deco at this time, but his bold use of colors, stylized forms and geometric shapes would certainly indicate this. Aspects of that style inched into Leyendecker’s works. His next Easter cover encourages this thought.

Printed April 7, 1928, this holiday cover is simply called Easter, 1928 probably for lack of a better description as to what exactly is going on. This cover is a grand divergence from works such as A Woman Mourning of 1903. The subject is suddenly unclear but may perhaps be a crusader from Medieval Europe rising from a tomb. He floats majestically, like a vertical Teresa in Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s “The Ecstasy St. Teresa” and as he rises a white sheet falls from his body to reveal his armor and the delicate butterfly-like wings that support him. Seated on either side of the suspended knight are deep black Egyptian statues and below him is a scarab beetle.

Leyendecker was no stranger to eastern art. His professor Benjamin-Constant at the Académie Julian was famous for his paintings of near-Eastern subjects and his taste heavily influenced Leyendecker’s brother Frank. Several of Leyendecker’s early Post covers have an Egyptian theme but these ideas seemed to come from the stories inside to which they may be alluding. This 1928 work is one of the few Leyendecker covers that are not apparent at first glance, making it an intriguing study. The mystery only adds to the work’s beauty and allure.

In between his more decorative and elaborate covers, Leyendecker stuck to his tried and true successful designs. Historic themes like George Washington on Horseback, which ran July 2, 1927, and July 7, 1934’s Statue of Liberty and Lincoln of February 12, 1938; and genre scenes like Carousel Ride of September 6, 1930 and Policeman and School Children, which ran October 31, 1931.

78 The Swastika, March 18, 1905 and The False Gods, January 27, 1906, for example.
The late 1920s and first half of the 1930s were the height of Leyendecker's artistic powers. Each cover delights the senses as it glistens with a tactile quality, enchanting scene, and appealing style. In these years, his use of white spaces and marks of light keep the covers looking clean and crisp. *Cow Joins the Picnic* is one such example. This work, which ran August 26, 1933, filled the cover of the *Post* with a flat background of green for the grass. Leyendecker adds dimension and lightness to the painting with shimmering white marks that appear as sunlight on the ground and cloths of the characters as they run from the offending cow. These spots enhance the piece by not only detracting from the heaviness an entirely green cover would create, but also by creating a dynamism and movement to the work.

In these later years, a few of Leyendecker's cover ideas repeated, now more brilliant in full color and with new characters making more complicated gestures, but still thematically the same. *Easter Egg Hunt*, which ran April 15, 1933, is essentially similar to *Easter, 1907*, which ran March 23 of that year. In both covers young children carry baskets as they search for the hidden Easter eggs. Never a unique idea, Leyendecker livenes up the 1933 cover by having a dog help find the colorful eggs. In the 1907 Easter cover there is just one child who comes across the eggs as a rabbit hopes away from them. Leyendecker and Lorimer were certainly aware of the negative image it would send to repeat cover ideas, so Leyendecker puts in differences and spaces the covers out by almost thirty years.

Holiday covers became more and more popular and new reasons to celebrate were created for the purpose of a successful cover. Once such work called *End of Vacation*, September 15, 1934, states Goodbye Summer at the bottom of the work, giving equal
importance to this day as the *Post* allowed holidays like Christmas or Easter. The *Post* gave its readers reasons to be joyous.

A unique trend in Leyendecker’s covers was the idea of the glorification of the American sports hero. Covers like *Thanksgiving 1928/1928*, which was printed November 24, 1928, and *Football Hero*, of November 4, 1933 were both examples of the idealized men who supposedly filled the sports arenas at this time. Rendered almost as heroically as the soldiers of World War I, these specimens of athleticism became the pagan gods of America. Many of Leyendecker’s athletes were modeled from Beach, as Rockwell explained: “He was tall, powerfully built, and extraordinarily handsome – looked like an athlete from one of the Ivy League colleges.”\(^{79}\) He was the ideal for such heroes.

Around the late 1930’s, as sales of the *Post* decreased, Leyendecker began to experiment outside his famed style. Perhaps he wanted to retain his title as America’s beloved cover artist, but it is at this point, when his confidence wains, that his covers decline. One particular cover stands out as being drastically different: *Turkey in Tree*, which ran November 11, 1939. This work is far from his popular holiday covers and represents the beginning of Leyendecker’s end. The divergence from his style is clear in the more matted, dull, and monochromatic colors, the uninspired subject of, as the title tells, a turkey in a tree, and the loss of his structural figures.

That is not to say that late in his career Leyendecker completely abandoned the style that won the hearts of the country. *Rug Beater* from May 11, 1940, shows how he would return again to his glossy colors and relatable scenes. This work has the addition of design-like dust that swirls in the air after having been beaten out of the rug.

\(^{79}\) Rockwell. p. 191.
Leyendecker’s wonderful use of balance and color remain, until the end, two of his most important skills.

Leyendecker’s last three covers, under the Post’s new editor, Wesley Stout, were the ever-popular New Year’s covers: New Year and Warring Fist: January 4, 1941; No Trespassing: January 3, 1942; and Baby New Year at War: January 2, 1943. These covers all relate to the pertinent issue of the early 1940s – World War II. The fact that Stout kept Leyendecker on only for his New Year’s covers proves that, even when Stout was trying desperately to modernize the magazine, the public was not yet ready to let go of this established institution of Leyendecker’s New Year’s babies.

Stout added more and more photography to the cover of the Post and illustration began to become a lost art, undervalued by 1950 and almost ignored for decades and finally being revitalized today.

Conclusion

Joseph Christian Leyendecker capitalized on an era of mass media popularity. He was enormously successfully and by spending as much money as he made consistently motivated himself to continue producing “temporary art.” Each cover is for us today a snapshot of what the American experience meant in the early twentieth century. Leyendecker’s works are a display of what America represented as an ideal – children and holidays, athletes and war heroes, cherubs and lovers. They covers become today the epitome of their time and a visual summary of the nation’s character as he saw it.
Leyendecker’s popular and consistent style, his creative and enjoyable characters, his
unique use of color and decoration, and his eye-pleasing designs contributed to his popularity. His influence on American culture should not be undervalued for his influence entered millions of homes with each of his 322 Post covers.
Works Cited


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Works Consulted


