

Finer Things: Subtle ties covered in whimsy

Look closer: Elegant pattern might be bulls and bears on seesaws

Bird Dog Bay's brightly colored ties feature bulls and bears on seesaws.

All truth lies in the small print, and so it is with whimsical neckties.

From a distance, they look average — nicely colored, covered with small things. Up close, those small things reveal themselves to be sheep jumping over fences. Or partridges perched in pear trees.

“Conversational” ties, as one local neckwear designer calls them, aren't for all men. In fact, they're not for most men.

“Most men who buy whimsical ties are those who do not wear ties,” says Gus Isacson, owner of Shirts on Sheffield, a menswear store in Lakeview. Mr. Isacson carries whimsical ties designed by two Chicago-based firms, Lee Allison Co. and Bird Dog Bay, and says “trend-oriented” Chicago men and older North Shore residents tend to buy them.

When Pat Palella, vice-president at First Choice Bank in Geneva, attends a negotiation, he wears a Lee Allison tie printed with small sharks.

“Every fifth one has a little brown briefcase,” says Mr. Palella, 49, who owns about 250 ties. He wears a print called “Binary Code,” festooned with ones and zeros, when calling on an IT company. The selection “shows your client that your prep is more than grabbing a Web site and reading it in the car.”

David Sims, 44, principal at Lodging Capital Partners LLC, a Chicago-based hospitality investment firm, wore a red partridge-printed Bird Dog Bay tie to his company's holiday party. “I got a dozen or so positive comments,” he says. The ties “can be conversation starters.”

Whimsical ties suitable for corporate wear are understated, with the sense of an inside joke, and expensive. For instance, both companies offer bull-and-bear theme ties; Bird Dog Bay's has the two animals on a seesaw, and Lee Allison's features the bear pulling the bull by its horns and the bull butting the bear with its horns.

“Animals in general are the strongest (sellers) of these things,” says Lee Allison, 46, founder and president of his eponymous firm. Whimsical ties, he adds, tend to sell better during economic upswings.

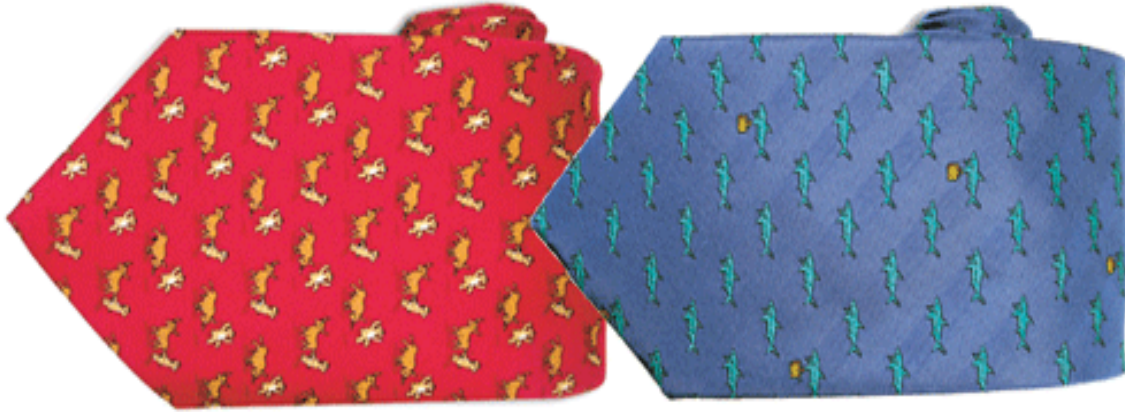
Sharks carry briefcases while bulls and bears battle on ties from Lee Allison Co.

Both Bird Dog Bay and Lee Allison make their ties from high-quality imported silk.

Some Lee Allison ties weave the pattern with different-colored silk threads. On others, the pattern is screened onto silk fabric. Woven ties look richer, but printed ties are lighter weight and allow use of more colors. Lee Allison sells both printed and woven ties; all Bird Dog Bay ties are printed.



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Ties from Lee Allison cost around \$90; Bird Dog Bay's are \$75. Hermès, the French luxury goods maker, also offers a selection of whimsical ties at about \$145 each.

Despite the price and quality, wearers won't find much support from wardrobe experts. "A whimsical tie says 'notice me,'" says Ann Marie Sabath, president of At Ease Inc., a business etiquette consultant with offices in Chicago and Cleveland. Even an Hermès model, with its high sticker price, "could easily intimidate a client," she says.

"It's so rare that they're appropriate," concurs Jennifer Sara Levin, founder of Nate & Dot Consulting, a Chicago-based image consulting firm. Ms. Levin says a tee-festooned tie would be fine for a man seeking capital for a golf-related startup, and an animal-print tie would be suitable for a child's birthday party.

"But in the vast majority of situations," she says, "you don't want the tie to be the attraction."

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