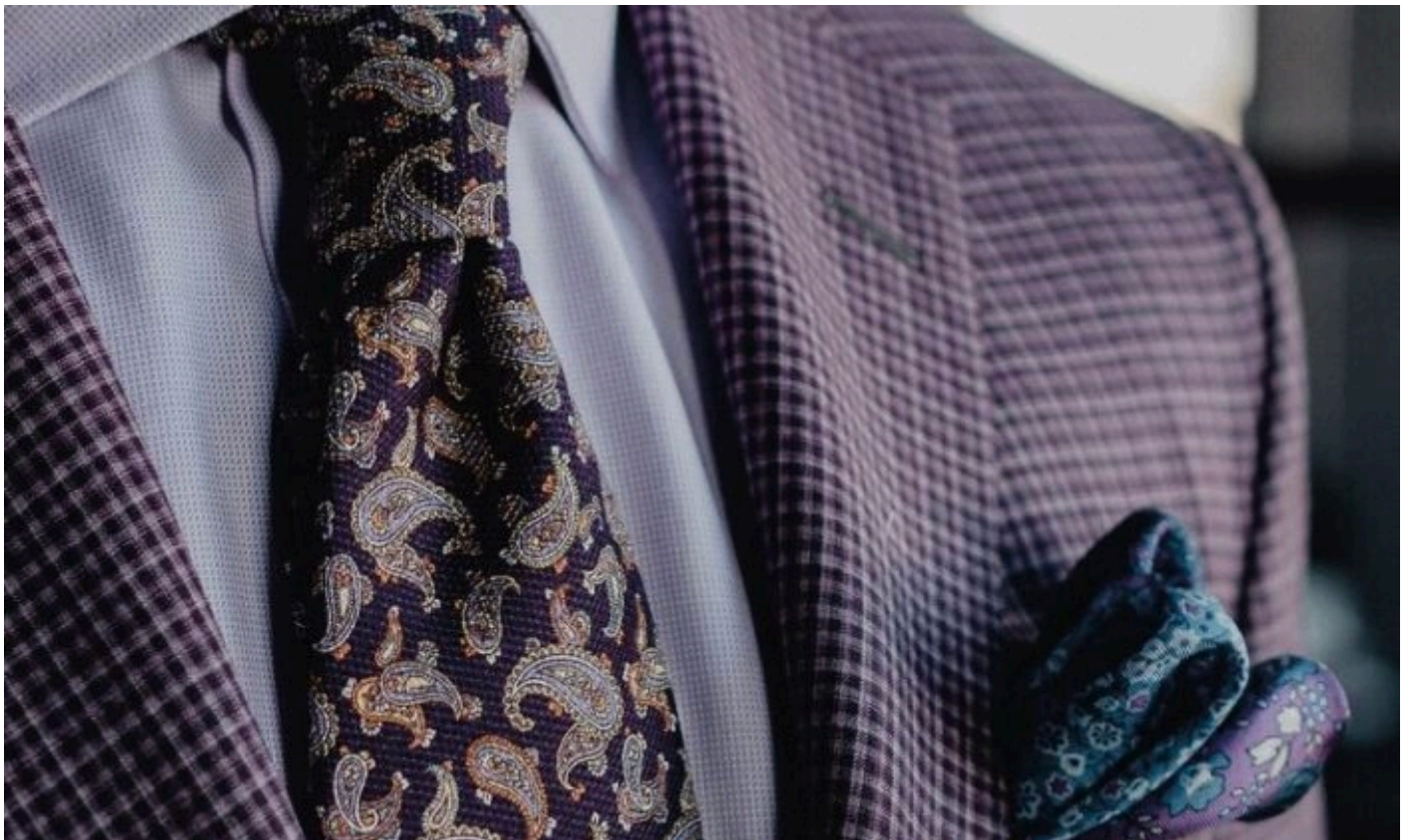


Ties Are Back, Thank Goodness

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Commentary

Times of great social and political upheaval, epochs in which a paradigm shifts from one cultural moment to another, invariably involve changed fashions. It has become apparent in the world of menswear.

We are going back to jackets and neckties. Thank goodness and it is about time. A man is never fully dressed without a tie. From a purely aesthetic point of view, the tie completes the outfit. No open-collared shirt can achieve the same look.



This has been true for centuries, even back to the time of the cravat and all the crazy bows of the 18th and 19th centuries. The 20th



century gave us the standard necktie and made it available to everyone, not just the elites. They have been standard for a reason:



they look right. They suggest that the wearer should be taken seriously. It's as simple as that.



It was only a couple of years ago that I was tottering around in a menswear shop and asked about ties and how they are selling. I was in the business in the old days so I'm always curious what people are buying. The man informed me that the tie is completely dead. No one buys them at all. He acted like this was a permanent shift.

I knew for sure that he was wrong. Ties come and go, and usually their disappearance is a sign that something major has gone wrong. They were fashionable in the early 1960s and vanished in the late 1960s with shock over assassinations and conscription. They returned in the 1980s and then vanished in the 21st century with the popularity of hoodies and tennis shoes among the tech bros.

Probably this had something to do with zero interest rates. This always flatters the people on the right side of the ledger. Why try when the money flows like magic?

Let me say this again: What you wear is not really about what you are saying about yourself; it is what you are saying about others, the occasion, and the venue. People dress up for court or for Congressional testimony and that has never gone away. It's because they are showing respect for the institution.

These same people will not dress up for the office or for a cocktail party, so what message is that conveying by comparison? It should be obvious that it betrays a lack of respect and appreciation.

For years I've heard excuses for looking like a slob. I don't have to impress people. My achievements stand on their own without having to put on a fancy get up. I'm more comfortable in sweats and sneakers. And so on.

None of this has anything to do with anything. How you dress is a direct reflection of your attitude toward the event and others there. This is why it is so sad to me to see people at the symphony dressed like they are at a baseball game. For that matter, it is sad to see people at a baseball game dressed like hobos.

What about the problem of overdressing? This is the least problem that exists in the entire world today. In fact, I cannot recall ever seeing an example.

Ok, one correction to that: if you are invited to a holiday party that is specified to be black tie, it is wrong to wear white tie and tails, which is more dressed up than black tie. That is the only case I can imagine in which you can be too dressed up.

(Black tie is what Americans call the "Tuxedo" but it is really the working-class uniform of the footmen in English estates. Americans adopted it as formalwear for everyone as an homage to democracy and a way of honoring workers over the idle rich. White tie is now what it has always been, the most dressed up anyone can be but certainly associated with aristocracy.)

I was recently in Texas and found myself in a normal hotel wearing a double-breasted suit, tie, and my usual winter cape. The driver was amazed and asked me why I was dressed that way. I explained that in advance of my trip, people told me that in Texas, people dress up, so I wanted to look the part. He was suddenly thrilled to hear it. Yes, it was a fib but it worked. The real reason is that I was seeing my mother: I always want to look my best around her.

Boarding a plane in a suit and tie becomes a different experience. The flight crew feels honored, and you will certainly get better service. It's the same in any restaurant, no matter what. It's true when you are out

shopping also. In fact, it's true even on a Sunday picnic at the park: I once wore a blazer and tie to an outdoor concert and could clearly observe that the band was thus made happy that someone went to the trouble.

“Neckties may never regain prepandemic levels of popularity,” writes the Wall Street Journal, “but sales data show signs of resurgence. After tumbling to \$61.4 million in 2020, U.S. tie imports rebounded to \$106 million by 2022, according to the most recent data from trade-tracking website Observatory of Economic Complexity.”

The new interest seems to be driven by Gen Z, which associates back-to-the-office with actual office clothing and adulthood generally. Rightly so! Many years have gone by in which the boss was dressed down so seriously that new employees felt the need to emulate. But that seems to be changing as younger people clearly see the advantages.

Oddly, this is especially true in Zoom meetings. A person is shown only from the chest up so that one's shoes or trousers do not matter. But you can wear a tie and look rather respectable. Plus it is a way of saying: I'm not one of those stay-at-home losers. I actually make some effort to come to the office and dress properly.

Let's explore why the tie seems to be suddenly back. The lockdowns were also associated with constant shabbiness, plus there seemed to be a pandemic chic development that one's clothing should be as close to rags as possible, almost in the garb of penance. This tendency lasted for longer than two years, as if we all had to behave like flagellants.

But those days are gone, and everyone is marching back to the office. In fact, this trend will soon come to Washington, D.C. which has mostly been a ghost town for years, since only about 6 percent of federal workers even show up full time. The Department of Government Efficiency is determined to change that.

No question that the Trump victory is also a victory for dressing up. He is always in a suit and tie unless you find him on the golf course.

That sends a statement. To be sure, he has a habit—a bad one in my view—of leaving open the button on his suit jacket. This is a mistake. Trump will never change, but I hope this habit does not catch on.

Every man needs to develop the habit of unbuttoning one's coat when sitting down and then buttoning it up once standing. It should be so automatic that you never think about it. This is true when you wear a long tie or a bow tie.

This is not the case for double-breasted suits, however. They are not in fashion, they say, but it doesn't really matter to me. I've long worn double-breasted in or out of fashion. I find them beautiful and nicely tailored to fit. Maybe they are not for everyone but I do hope that they make a comeback at some point.

As for the bowtie, I wear them because my mother dressed me in them when I was young, and, later, I was drawn to them because they stay out of the way. In other words, it was purely practical for me and then they stuck. They are associated with eccentricity and pretense, to be sure, and I'm very aware of that. For me, it just is what it is, and I'm certainly not recommending them for everyone.

Where to get your ties? Sure you can pay retail of \$50–350 but you can also find astonishing prices on eBay. A brief look reveals fantastic fabrics and designs for as low as \$1 each. To my mind, I really do not know why anyone would shop in other places.

A few cautionary notes. Avoid wacky ties with cartoon characters and abstract art. Those are and always will be tacky. A tie should be patterns, stripes, dots, or just solid with or without texture. Nor should they be in extreme colors. They should be silk and some wool or cotton depending on the season. Any tie with a synthetic fabric on the outer shell should be thrown away instantly.

As for the knot, there are really only three that are suitable: four-in-hand, half Windsor, or full Windsor. The rest of the alternatives such as the infinity knot are preposterous and should never be worn.

In any case, so much is changing and there are so many wonderful shifts in the air. It's a moment when many things are being fixed and there are signs of restoration everywhere. The rise of the necktie is surely among them, so that men can look like men again.

Maybe, just maybe, someday the menswear industry can completely rethink the attached collar and bring back the detachable ones such as were common before the Second World War. They look vastly better, but the consumer is resistant for now. Let's take it one step at a time and celebrate shifts when they occur.

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