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HALLOWEEN ALREADY?

Darker and sexier

Merchants gather early each year to see trends in costumes for October

By L.M. SIXEL Copyright 2011 Houston Chronicle
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Eric Kayne : For the Chronicle

Models warm up for a presentation at the Leg Avenue exhibition at the Halloween & Party Expo this week at the George R. Brown Convention Center. Merchants got together to pick the must-have outfits that people will want on Oct. 31.

Don't be surprised if the fairy princess knocking at your door this year has a little "blood" dripping down her **Halloween costume**. Or maybe instead of pink lipstick, her lips are outlined in black.

This year's costumes will be darker, edgier and sexier, says Daniel Song, marketing manager for Leg Avenue in City of Industry, Calif., which designs and manufactures Halloween costumes. The trend plays off the popularity of filmmaker **Tim Burton's** darker interpretation of *Alice in Wonderland*.

Halloween is the second-biggest sales-generating holiday after Christmas. Manufacturers, wholesalers and retailers convene early each year to study cultural trends, gauge which movie characters will be hot, and pick the must-have outfits, decorations and party supplies that will fill their shelves for the big fall event.

This year's Halloween & Party Expo was at Houston's **George R. Brown Convention Center**, where more than 6,000 retailers and 400 exhibitors showcased their wares Saturday through Tuesday.

They heard about the popularity of the *Mad Men* television show, which is spurring demand for costumes that evoke the early 1960s, the popularity of children's hats that resemble pandas and bears, and demand among women for well-fitting costumes that complement their figures.

The retailers gave the manufacturers an earful about zippers that break and seams that rip the first time a costume is tried on, their difficulty finding costumes in plus sizes and the shortage of "conservative sexy" outfits that won't be embarrassing to wear at work or around the neighborhood.

Plunging necklines, bare midriffs and costumes that show too much leg fail what the industry calls the "daddy test." And when dad says no, that means no sale.

But the manufacturers were skeptical, believing many women still want a look one day a year that will turn even the most mild-mannered into a **French maid** or a busty barmaid. One manufacturer suggested that the retailers stock shorts and sports bras if their customers want more coverage.

Modesty theme

That theme of modesty played out on the selling floor — which took up the full length of the convention center. One of the biggest growth areas is among 10- to 12-year-old girls. They're developing fashion sense, but their mothers still want to make sure the girls aren't decked out like the cast of *Desperate Housewives*.

At Princess Paradise, a monkey costume aimed at the age group comes with leggings, a flirty tulle skirt and a high neckline.

Another popular costume features a monster who wears a colorful short sweater and fake fur leggings, said Rachael Weichel, who heads the design department of Princess Paradise, based in Fort Collins, Colo.

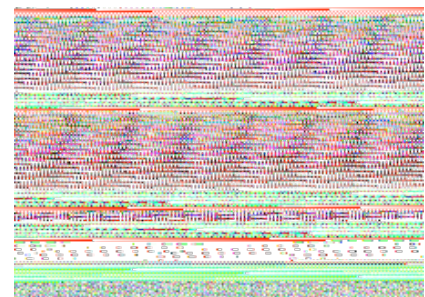
The costumes have become so popular that moms want them too, said Weichel, who was modeling one of the outfits.

Monsters and other ghoulish items never go out of style on Halloween, and a convention is a great time to introduce a product. Seasons USA, a Sauquoit, N.Y.-based wholesaler, was debuting Rocky the Rat.

The animated table-top decoration shows a rat confined in a large spring trap. Eerie organ chords play until the rat begins lifting the trap and escapes to the tune of *Eye of the Tiger*, the song made famous in the 1982 movie *Rocky III*.

Fred Austin was cradling the prototype at the Seasons booth, which focuses on the macabre - hacked-off body parts, fountains flowing with fake blood instead of water, and multiple renderings of the Grim Reaper.

Fred Austin was cradling the prototype at the Seasons booth, which focuses on the macabre - hacked-off body



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parts, fountains flowing with fake blood instead of water, and multiple renderings of the Grim Reaper. The suggested retail price for Rocky the Rat? Too early to tell, but Austin's thinking \$14.99 or \$19.99.

Police tape

What's Halloween without a crime scene?

"We have a little morbid niche that we stick with," said Dave Sherman, whose company, Creative Innovations USA, of Discovery Bay, Calif., displayed coroner supplies including body bags and this year's new item: T-shirts that say "Coroner: Our day begins when your day ends."

Sherman, a biomedical engineer, started his Halloween-oriented side business after he draped his yard with yellow police tape. So many parents escorting trick-or-treating children asked where he got the "Crime Scene: Do Not Enter" tape that Sherman launched his own line and added other ghoulish phrases such as "Fresh Graves - Keep Out."

Staying warm

Not all the retailers found what they came to buy.

It's a challenge to find warm costumes, said Nicole Hale, a buyer with Costumes With Character in Sun Prairie, Wis. The town near the state capital of Madison hosts a popular outdoor Halloween party each year - and Wisconsin in late October can be bone-chillingly cold.

She was also on the hunt for badger costumes, badger hats - anything that resembled the furry little critter because of the hometown popularity of **Bucky Badger**, the University of Wisconsin mascot.

But nothing. That surprises Hale, who said she would have thought some clever entrepreneur would have designed a line of wolverine, gopher and badger get-ups to satisfy the fans of the **Big 10**.

Not everyone at the show cares if *CSI: Miami* is hot or whether young princesses would prefer a white or pink tutu. Some buyers were shopping more for deals than characters.

Like Cary Grant

In previous years, shoppers have gravitated to Uptown Thrift, **Tim Robbins'** secondhand shop in Oklahoma City, to put together their own costumes, whether a double-breasted sport coats for a Cary Grant look or a polyester leisure suit for a 1970s disco outfit. Last year Robbins added a pre-made costume line, and it was a big hit.

So Robbins is back at the show to buy last year's close-outs. At one booth he found some costumes for \$4.50 each and figures he can resell the witch, pirate and princess get-ups next fall for \$8 to \$12 each.

But the wigs and fishnet stockings he found on sale? They'll go out on the floor right away, Robbins said. People are always shopping for accessories.

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