



Making money an art for HK's banknote designer  
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# B10 The Back Page

## Henry Steiner delves into history for StanChart's HK\$150 issue **Making money an art for city's banknote designer**

**Enoch Yiu**

Some would say Henry Steiner has a licence to print money. That might not be strictly true but as a banknote designer – most recently Standard Chartered's HK\$150 commemorative note – he gets close.

Steiner is known as the father of Hong Kong design. His left hand is not only seen in people's wallets. He is also behind some of the city's most famous logos including HSBC, the Hong Kong Jockey Club, Wellcome, Hongkong Land and Lane Crawford. In a sense, his works surround us.

In 1973, Steiner put the famous lion on the HSBC banknote.

Hong Kong allows the three note-issuing banks – HSBC, Standard Chartered Bank and Bank of China (Hong Kong) – to design their own notes.

The designer did not have an easy start in life. Steiner was born in Vienna in 1934. His father was a dentist and his mother a seamstress.

They fled to New York to escape Nazi persecution and he was educated at Yale University and the Sorbonne in Paris in fine arts and graphic design.

Now 75, Steiner came to Hong Kong in 1961 as design director of the *Asia Magazine*. Like many expatriates, he loved the city so much that his initial nine-month contract for the magazine expanded into a 48-year career in the city.

Eventually, he set up his own business, Steiner & Co, married and had two sons.

With the HK\$150 banknote to celebrate the 150-year anniversary of Standard Chartered, he went back into the city's history.

He chose eight characters that he believed captured the city – a turn-of-the-19th-century policeman, a mother carrying a baby, a man carrying a birdcage, a lady dressed in 1930s-style costume, a modern businessman, a schoolboy and a coolie.

"All of us who have lived here for a long time would know the number eight means rich and lucky in the Chinese culture," he said while showing etchings of the banknote.

In his earlier design, he had drawn a Chinese maid but Standard Chartered wanted to have a coolie to show they helped build the city over the past century and a half.

The eight are seen viewing Victoria Harbour from The Peak. The special commemorative banknote, put on sale for charity on October 1, drew a long queue at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre with people wanting the note for themselves or to resell to collectors.

Besides the HK\$150 banknote, Steiner also designed Standard Chartered's banknote series featuring five Chinese mythological animals.

Steiner says the series has "a clear hierarchy in that the more important the note, the more important the animal".

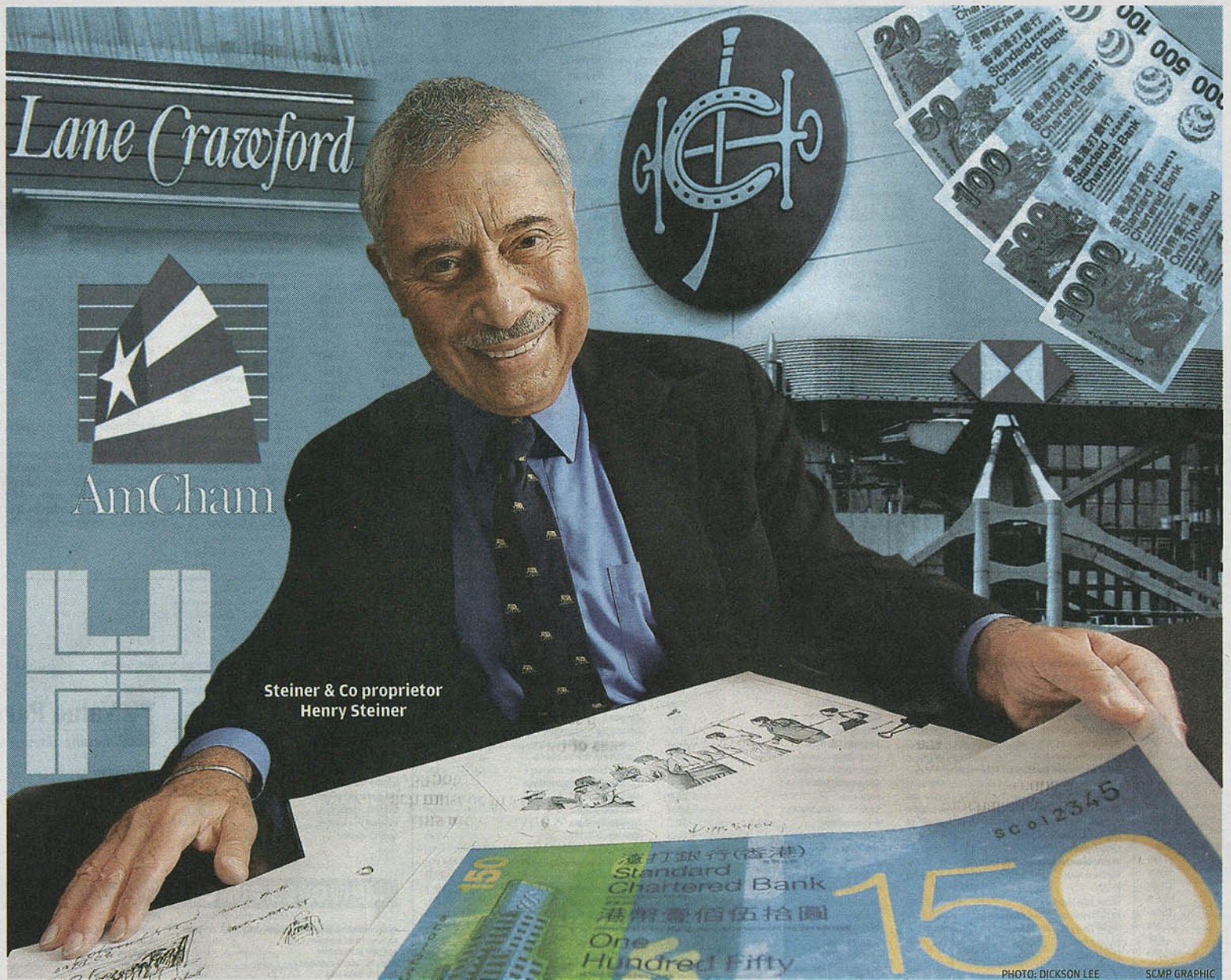
So a fish is on the HK\$20, a turtle on the HK\$50, a *chi lin* (unicorn) on the HK\$100, a phoenix on the HK\$500 and a dragon on the HK\$1,000 notes.

**What did you aim to achieve with the HK\$150 Standard Chartered banknote?**

I wanted to show the bank's long linkage with the development of Hong Kong. I wanted to create a theme of a shared history so I chose eight people representing different periods of time.

**How did you choose the eight characters?**

I wanted a group of people who rep-



Steiner & Co proprietor Henry Steiner

PHOTO: DICKSON LEE SCMP GRAPHIC

resented Hong Kong. So I have a coolie carrying a Good Morning brand towel, a policeman wearing the old uniform of the turn of the 19th century, a mother and daughter, a man with a birdcage and a *tai tai* whom I based on a woman in a film of the 1930s. Then there is a contemporary businessman talking on a mobile telephone and a schoolboy with a big rucksack.

**You use five animals for the Standard Chartered Bank series. Why not choose another animal for the HK\$150 note?**

**I wanted to create a shared history theme so I chose eight people representing different time periods**

The HK\$150 note is a separate note outside the normal series. We could have used a lion but I do not think we need to use an animal for this special note.

**Standard Chartered kept the design confidential. How did you keep everything so secret?**

My company works like a family so we trust each other. Professionally, I work with many confidential projects as I have designed not only banknotes but also annual reports and other publications.

Even on the day of the press conference to unveil the HK\$150 note, the bank's chief executive refused to disclose the design to any staff. While we were working on the project, we used the codename OFN to represent

the project. OFN stands for One Fifty Note.

**What are the key elements to design a banknote and do security features affect your design?**

Again, it is branding. I have designed banknotes for HSBC since the 1970s and the lion I put on their notes is the image they still use until today. Banknote designers need to consider security features. The designer needs to make sure the security features are all included but do not affect the appearance. This includes the watermark, which must be in a white area. In the HK\$150 note, I put it in the zero.

**What do you think of the design of overseas banknotes? Which ones do you like the best?**

One I consider not so good is the US banknote, which is boring. My favourite is the Swiss one as it does not feature politicians but artists. It is really classic art.

**You have also designed HSBC's hexagonal logo. Now the bank is moving its global chief executive office back to Hong Kong, do you think the logo needs to be changed?**

It would be very tempting, but we launched that logo in 1984. Since then, the logo has become more and more valuable as the bank developed. The hexagon is recognised around the world, so keep it.

**You are called the father of design in Hong Kong. How does the design industry compare to almost 50 years ago when you arrived?**

The biggest change is the use of computers that makes life dramatically easier. It has been a god-sent gift. I could not design a banknote in such accurate detail when we used hand sketches to do the design in the 1970s.

The process took about one year, but for the HK\$150 note, it was six months.

**What do you think of the mainland market in terms of the design and brand-building of the companies?**

The mainland has been developing their own companies that have their own personality. Mainland companies are no longer at the stage of manufacturing only cheap goods. They have their home-grown brands. This is what Japan and South Korea have already experienced. They have their own branding and I would like to participate in building their image.

**What designs in Hong Kong and on the mainland do you think are the best, and the worst?**

**Some [firms] have a brand that is better than the reality and some have reality better than the brand**

Some companies are very successful but do not have strong branding, such as Sinopec Corp and BYD. We have two kinds of companies – some have a brand that is better than the reality and some have reality better than the brand.

**Do clients always choose the design you think the best?**

Yes. We do not create something and ask the client if they like it. We work like a partnership. With the customers, we know what they are looking for and how to achieve what they really want.

**What do you think are your best designs?**

The most interesting is the HSBC brand and the Standard Chartered banknotes are very successful. I always try to do the best at the time of the design.

**What is your next design project?**

As mentioned, they are secret and I could not talk about that. You will see it when it is revealed.

**Do you ever think of retirement?**

I am 75. But I love my work and I like the challenges. If I retire, what would I do? I like scuba diving but how often can you do it? No, I will keep working.

**Are your sons following in your footsteps?**

I have two sons who were born here but they do not want to work here and they are not interested in what I am doing. One is doing headhunting in New York and the other is a project manager on communication systems, now working in New Zealand.

**Do you have any hobbies?**  
 I like collecting Japanese prints and Shanghai posters. I also like music.

**What advice can you offer young people who want to be designers?**

Only do it if you really love design. This is not a field that can get you a lot of money or to become a celebrity. The main reward is the satisfaction of the work. If you love it, do it. If not, better do real estate.

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**Watch the Video** Log on to [www.scmp.com/video](http://www.scmp.com/video) to see Henry Steiner talk about the world of design

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