

PRO LOGO

World renowned graphic artist Henry Steiner explains why he is annoyed by pandas, and why Hong Kong's branding has fallen behind, writes *Tiffany Ap*

Local graphic designer Henry Steiner is concerned Hong Kong's uniqueness is under threat.

Regarded as an early pioneer in Asia of the expression of identity through branding, Steiner laments what he sees as the erosion of the city's character.

"It's hard to find anything Hong Kong about Hong Kong," Steiner says at his Mid-Levels office, a two-level studio on Conduit Road. "I'm not too sure why people would want to come here because it is very much like Fifth Avenue except with slightly different architecture and landscape," he says, referring to New York's ritzy shopping district. The Austrian-born designer, schooled at Connecticut's Yale and France's Sorbonne, is hailed as the father of Hong Kong design. An honorary professor at both Hong Kong University's Department of Architecture and the design school at Polytechnic University, his iconic work includes the red and white hexagonal HSBC logo, Standard Chartered bank notes, and the elegant, serif typeface of the Lane Crawford logo.

Hong Kong has been his home for over five decades but Steiner retains a US east-coast accent. His family fled to the US to escape Nazi

persecution, eventually settling in New York. Years ago, he declared Hong Kong was in the midst of a branding crisis. He maintains that view.

"They've still got that slogan 'Asia's World City' and that peculiar dragon except they've made it smaller. Maybe they're a bit embarrassed about it. I don't see that there's any attempt to get at what makes Hong Kong distinctive." One thing that Hong Kong still has, in his opinion, is a great name. "It's a magic name. You say it and immediately people know what it is and it's almost like a gong striking and that's wonderful. It's not anything you get with saying 'Singapore'. What we have was built up post-war but it's not being maintained." He's also annoyed by pandas: "They're sort of fat, slow, not terribly clever animals," Steiner says. "Is that a good symbol for a nation? Something that sits on its back and eats bamboo?"

Steiner's own ability to encapsulate Hong Kong was put to the test in 1979 when he was invited to design banknotes. He's best known for the Standard Chartered series but he also did two HSBC notes in 1973.

As Steiner recalls, the

government briefed the three banks - Bank of China, HSBC, and Standard Chartered (which was then known as Chartered Bank) - on what it wanted in terms of general features. Each bank was then left to come up with their own design. "We did not know what each other were doing. Our theme was heritage and technology. We took old technology and compared it with new technology, such as an abacus with the binary system."

Steiner created five series of notes for Standard Chartered. Over time, the Hong Kong Monetary Authority tightened up the parameters, which he sees as an improvement. Notes issued from all three banks now have the same colours, the denomination is in the same place, and security features - he points to the ribbon and a watermark - are in the same position.

"If you put the three banks notes for one denomination together and look at it out of focus, they match pretty well," he says. "That's a bit of progress. It's a kind of convergence." Steiner hates the purple 10-dollar note issued directly by the Monetary Authority, which he calls "the perfect example of what not to do".

His main gripe? It looks too



Above from left: Henry Steiner, Hong Kong-based graphic designer. Montage of logos created by Steiner for (first row) ShanghaiMart, WingTai Asia, Hong Kong Jockey Club; (second row) American Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong, Kuok Group, Gold Peak Industries; (third row) DahSingBank, Radio 3 RTHK, Lane Crawford; (fourth row) Hongkong Land, Jardine Fleming, SsangYong. Photo: Paul Yeung

much like a coupon. "It doesn't have the visual vocabulary of a banknote. There's not much wording. It usually says something like 'the bank promises to pay,'" he says.

Steiner doesn't believe every organisation needs to hire a designer. Some don't need a logo because they don't have that much contact with the public.

"Sometimes I'm approached by people with that dreaded question 'How much is a logo?'" he says. "If they say that's too much, then they probably don't really need it. If they have a small operation or something like an accounting firm then maybe they just need their name written well."

With such a high profile, there are not many questions Steiner hasn't fielded from the media, but he indicates there is something on his mind. "The question that I would like to be asked is, what is the difference between painting and design?"

The question makes more sense when Steiner reveals that he studied painting. He majored in fine art at New York's Hunter College, and counted among his influences the abstract expressionism movement of the 1950s and 1960s. However, he never felt completely connected to his work until a fellow Yale teacher suggested he study graphic design.

It changed his life. "It gave me a

sense of professionalism. I'm not a painter because I like to get assignments," Steiner says. "Put me in front of a canvas and I don't know what to do. There was no burning direction. But when I have an assignment and a deadline then things start happening."

Which leads to his answer. Design, he says, is about function, which separates it from painting.

"Fashion design' is a misnomer because it is decoration. To change the pattern on a dress doesn't change its function. It doesn't matter what colour something is unless it communicates something," says Steiner. "Design is inseparable from function."