

OutPost

A graphic success

GRAPHIC designer Henry Steiner, some might say, wears his art on his sleeve.

And well he might because Mr Steiner is the most visible pioneer of his craft in Hongkong.

Not in a personal sense, but in terms of his finely crafted graphic creations that have helped to give otherwise faceless institutions, and business houses, an instantly identifiable personality.

Yet, 25 years ago, when the Vienna-born New Yorker arrived in Hongkong, no one here had heard of graphic design, let alone a graphic designer.

Clearly this was a gold-plated appellation for what in the ink-stained print media world of the day was the lowest form of animal - the commercial artist.

The turnaround since has been little short of dramatic. That quantum leap has made graphic design today a respected profession and a career area with promise for young people.

This, in turn, is as much a success story for the craft as for Mr Steiner who first unveiled it here.

But it was anything but plain sailing.

In the early 60s, the in-built resistance to anything new, and not merely in graphic design, was endemic to the region. The barriers against change were cultural and psychological.

Looking back over those years, now mercifully in the past, Mr Steiner recalled: "In those days the trade was very much commercial art. There were no design schools as such, only makeshift teaching

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shops that taught you how to do those little paintings that went on menu cards. It was intensely manual and, of course, the state of printing was quite primitive. I used to have a terrible time getting colour separations done."

No less primitive were some of the quacks and charlatans who controlled the trade or pretended to speak for it.

Mr Steiner's first encounter with one of this tribe was quite amusing.

"This person, who introduced himself as an interior designer, gave me his card. It had, listed on it, all sorts of little things like architect, interior designer, furniture designer, landscaping and on and on.

"While I was taking in all this, he asked me what I did. I told him I was a graphic designer. 'What is that?' he asked.

"So I explained that we did letterheads, annual reports, corporate identity etc. He said: 'That is interesting. We do letterheads for clients sometimes.'"

"Then, the next time I met him, we traded cards again. I looked at his purely out of curiosity and there, added to his long list of attributions, was a new one: 'graphic designer'."

That should say something about what Mr Steiner was up against. Before we get to that, a quick recapitulation of what launched Mr Steiner on the career that was to steer him to Hongkong.

There is a touch of Woody Allen in the self-mocking way in which he pieces together his story. Arriving with his immigrant parents in the US in 1939, Mr Steiner went to study fine arts and painting at the New York School of Expressionism.

"I drifted into art because I didn't obviously have a vocation. There again, towards the end of college, one of my teachers was kind enough to give me a little advice. I was told I had talent, but not the drive.

"If you are going to be a painter, I think you have got to have a vision. Apparently, I didn't."

"So my teacher asked me what I would like to do. I told him that I quite enjoyed doing the extra-curricular work I was doing, being the art editor of the school magazine, the year book, the newspaper. I had done set design.

"The teacher said: 'It sounds as though you should get into graphic design.'"

"I asked him what graphic design was. This was back in

1955 when it was called commercial art.

"My teacher said: 'Graphic design is typography, print making, photography, and so on.' Everything that I enjoy."

So that is what launched Mr Steiner on graphic design. To his good fortune, Mr Paul Rand, the teacher who put him on to it, also happened to be teaching that subject at Yale.

Mr Steiner spent two years at Yale for his master's degree and then worked for a year in New York. Then he landed a Fulbright grant which took him to Paris for a couple of years before he returned to New York. That is when Mr Steiner appeared to experience a strange transformation.

"I had felt terribly American while I was in Europe; but then gradually I became more European, or whatever European there was in me started coming out again. When I got back to New York, I was fairly uncomfortable."

About six months after Mr Steiner got back, he was asked if he would do freelance work for *Asia Magazine* which was just then starting up. This was in 1961.

"So I designed ads, covers, literature, the whole works. The person with whom I was working became promotion director. He decided he needed to come out after a visit to Hongkong. And then he asked me to follow."

The Steiner style pays off



and put the H's together. I had this with me when I went to meet the representatives of Hilton.

"They seemed to take a long time. First they were very apologetic, saying I had done a great job, but that there was a problem, namely, they had changed management. They felt the Hilton name should be found a place.

"So I pulled out this composite I had done, and they said: 'Oh! That is it.'"

That gave Mr Steiner a flying start in the freelance market. He did the whole corporate identity for Hilton, the hotel's graphics, the signage, room numbers, the logo, stationery, the works.

"Soon there came a flood of inquiries. And suddenly everything seemed terribly in-

teresting to make the prospect worthwhile and persuade me to stay on."

In 1965 Mr Steiner went back to New York to see his parents. He looked around and talked to one of his old bosses and decided that the work he was doing in Hongkong was fulfilling.

"I had also by then done the Ocean Terminal. I decided there was nothing really holding me back from doing good work, that it was pleasanter to live in Hongkong."

While that indeed may be so, didn't it constrict him professionally and limit the challenges he would have faced in other places?

Mr Steiner does not think so and he has a convincing argument for that.

"I belong to a group which was started in France in 1947 called AGI (Alliance Graphique Internationale), a group of 200 graphic designers elected into membership by their peers. We have conferences once a year.

"They are the best practitioners in graphics. Meeting with colleagues on that basis is extremely stimulating in that you feel you have something to show for what you have been doing.

"From time to time, you are invited to make a presentation. I do have a reputation internationally, and that keeps me honest as well in terms of design. I know there are people watching what I do, the things

Does that mean the situation is hopeless or irreversible?

Apparently not. The good news is that something is being done about it.

"We are working on this. The Polytechnic is going into a degree programme. I have started a school with some colleagues to see if we can move this process along."

What about the clients? "There is a lot of work to be done, but the sad thing is that the clients are not that demanding."

"Somebody comes to Hongkong for the first time and things are totally different here, a sense of tropy-turvydom. They might get conned into doing something which is really rather shabby with the excuse that this is what the local market really likes."

"In fact I think that quality, obviously, is as important here as anywhere. More and more people are coming around to this view. I was very impressed with what Esprit, the clothing people have done with their design, their retailing, and their advertising."

"Because of this there is now a bit more sense of professionalism."

Fortunately, says Mr Steiner, he does not have to struggle with his clients. "I find that, on the whole, my cli-

"A lot of Hongkong is taken in just by the surface - by wallpaper, by labels."

ents are delightful. This is mainly because they don't really get involved with aesthetics. They want to make sure they can trust whoever is handling their image.

"Once they know that I am not going to do something wrong, in other words that I am trustworthy, they want me to get on with things. Then there is no ceiling on what you can do."

"And the corollary of that is that I have been able to use to the client's advantage in really creative work of interest anywhere. So, in other words, there is still a great potential in Hongkong."

What about the emphasis on quality or style?

"You can look at style in two ways. There is the superficial, wallpaper way. A lot of Hongkong is taken in just by the surface - by wallpaper, by labels. It is almost as though they realise that it is not substantial, but that if it is a good imitation of something which is well known, then it is okay."

"There isn't this sense of basic integrity to a design. In that sense, style can mean that it is just an imitation of what is popular this season."

"In a deeper sense, of course, style means the whole approach to design, the handling, colour, typography and communication. I think there is, lately, a certain awareness of that."

"Now that we have some quite nice buildings, I think there is a realisation that there is more to architecture than just a box into which you shove shops and people and

becoming a film director, but I was not willing to start as an editor's assistant. I thought, maybe, at some point I could switch over.

"I don't know if that is still possible, doing some little films. Some of my colleagues have done that."

As a graphic designer, is there anything that has baffled him? "I can't understand fashion. That strikes me as one hundred per cent decoration, and arbitrary."

"There is something about women's drives, the need to attract, that makes them dependent on fashion. I really don't understand it."

"I find that it is a great human mystery rather than something I can set down as a design problem."

His soul-consuming hobby?

"That was a way of using the Chinese resources to say something in an appropriate way. Up until that time you sent out the red and gold stamped *Kung Hei Fat Choy* cards. Since then, this idea of having things based on ani-

mals, and doing them in a fresh creative way, has caught on."

"That eventually gave me the idea of changing my stationery every year based on the animal of the Chinese zodiac. That started with the tiger. Every year we would come out with a totally different look for our letterheads, envelopes and so on."

"I got to be a kind of game to see what changes we could make on the theme of Chinese animals. I continued until the last lunar year which was the ox and I have since decided to draw the line at this point, because coming up again is the year of the tiger. And I felt one cycle was sufficient. Otherwise, I either would have to repeat myself or start searching for new ways of expressing things. And I think the statement has been made. Now lots of people are doing it."

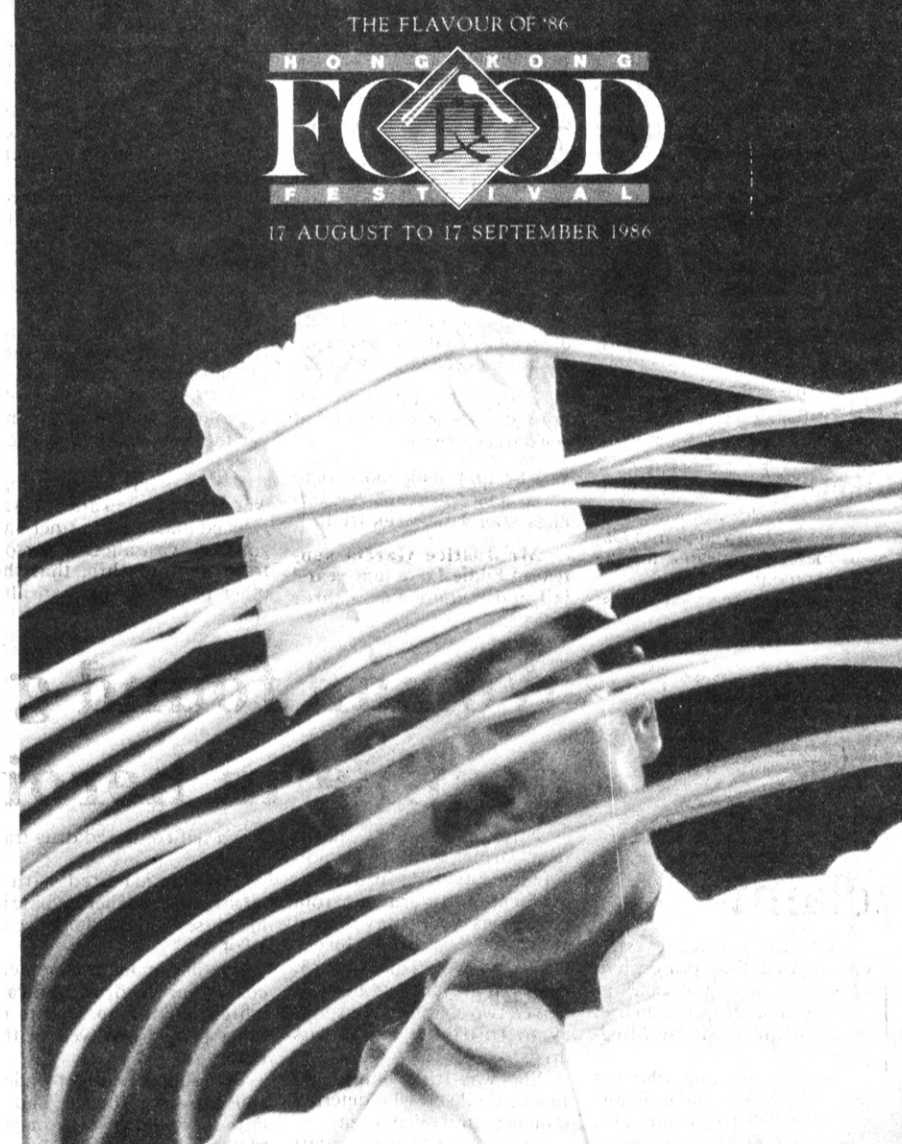
What would Mr Steiner have liked to be if he had not opted for graphic design?

"At one time I considered



"The bird songs are loud and I love the whole ambience." Henry Steiner pictured at breakfast time in a Mongkok dim sum restaurant.

Picture by BENNO GROSS.



The cover for a folder for the Hongkong Food Festival, an event being organised by the Hongkong Tourist Association. The logo was designed to be bilingual, incorporating the Chinese character for "food" with chopsticks and spoon replacing the upper strokes.

Mr Steiner had originally intended to come out for nine months. That extended a bit.

"I was with the magazine for two years, and then I met my wife, Leela, who had come out from New York at about the same time. It has just stayed that way now for close to 25 years."

Mr Steiner's two-year stint with *Asia Magazine* gave him the time and opportunities to do some freelance work. And a plum job to come his way was the Hilton with a story all its own.

"Originally, the Hilton was the American Hotel and the Mandarin was called The Queens."

"The Queens was changed to Mandarin because its management realised after some researching that in North America the name did not have much resonance, and American guests who came to Hongkong wanted something more vibrant and resonant of the place."

"Then the American Hotel, owned by a couple of Texans, was sold to Hilton. I was called one morning by the secretary to the manager who was building the hotel. She also helpfully suggested that I read that morning's copy of the *SCM Post* which carried the announcement about the hotel's change of owners."

"Everything I had done until then had an AH - American Hotel - and I could see what was happening. So I literally cut two photostats in half



A selection of familiar logos designed by Steiner.

get as much money as quickly as you can."

Is that a sign that times have changed?

The short answer is yes. But let's hear it from Mr Steiner.

"Up until mid-70s, Hongkong was totally amateurish, except maybe for one or two engineers. Everybody else was an entrepreneur. People learning on the job, apprentices, or whatever you may like to call them, people who were fleeing from Shanghai and so on."

"After that you started getting the merchant bankers in. The interesting change that happened about that time was this phenomenon. For example, IDL at Lane Crawford brought in antique furniture and people started buying expensive, imported furniture."

"Before that you got some rattan furniture and cushions and stuck a Balinese painting on the wall. Everything was sort of temporary."

"At that time, and it was synonymous with the arrival of the merchant bankers, you had more of a sense of stabil-



Steiner's 1974 Lunar New Year card. This was the last Year of the Tiger and the colours in the original were orange and black suggesting a tiger's pelt.