

(Modified translation from the original German language Profile by Elisabeth Woditschka in Forbes Austria, February 2016.)

The Real Steiner

In the Chinese New Year of the Fire Monkey, everything seems about money. Austrian-born Henry Steiner is responsible for the design of a set of Hong Kong banknotes. Forbes Austria met the designer in Hong Kong.

"I was working for New York agencies and studios during the Mad Men times. The US television show well depicts what Madison Avenue was like as the center of the advertising universe," said a laid-back Henry Steiner, when we met him in the lobby of the Shangri-La hotel in the heart of the Hong Kong metropolis, where he has resided for over 50 years.

To talk with him is to relive the glory of that era. The elegance and clarity of his language and manner explain vividly how the Manhattan of that period felt.

Henry Steiner has come a long way, even though he had anything but an easy beginning. A Jew born in 1934, he spent his first years in the comfortable Baden suburb of Vienna. He and his parents escaped the Nazis in late 1939 just before the country was sealed off. Asylum for the Steiner family was, as for many others the same destination: America, specifically, New York. There he grew up in extremely modest circumstances. He studied graphic design at Yale University and returned to work in New York afterwards. He also spent two years in Paris on a Fulbright Scholarship at the Sorbonne. In 1961 he left New York for Hong Kong, recruited as Design Director of *The Asia Magazine*, a weekly supplement.

During the interview we were struck by Steiner's depth of thought and feeling. His spontaneity creates a cosy ambience in the bustling atmosphere of the hotel lobby. He remains calm, despite the celebrities hurrying by and the commotion of Croatian state visitors being escorted by the concierge. Whether talking about his work or life, Steiner is imperturbable. Every now and then he drops the names of his world famous colleagues, such as his classmate and founder of the Pentagram design studio in London, Alan Fletcher, whom he remembers with great affection and respect. Or his professor at Yale, Paul Rand, who influenced his work profoundly. Rand taught him much, especially the importance of visual and psychological contrast: "Show them something they know and something they don't know." To this day he employs to Rand's invaluable methodology.

Steiner studies as much about his clients' culture and their audience as possible. This approach has informed his great success with cross-cultural communication. His list of clients, honorary doctorates, professorships and publications is impressive. HSBC, the American Chamber of Commerce, the Hong Kong Jockey Club, Unilever, Standard Chartered Bank and Jardines, are just some of the big names he's worked with. "HSBC was an important client. I worked with them for 18 years and created their red and white Hexagon identity." He also designed classic, award-winning annual reports for the Bank and many other corporations. Steiner has consulted for many firms in the financial industry. At the moment he is rebranding a number of private equity companies and his dramatic designs for Standard Chartered's series of banknotes have met with much acclaim.

How did he manage to be so successful in a foreign culture? "Perhaps I was lucky", the native Austrian suggests modestly. His enthusiasm, empathy and wide ranging education are the pillars of Steiner's achievements, especially his ability to integrate Western and Asian themes in his designs.

Steiner retrieves one of the Hong Kong Dollar banknotes from his wallet. The theme of the series contrasts Chinese cultural heritage with modern technology. The banknote front depicts a powerful Chinese dragon, while on the reverse an ancient coin is juxtaposed with the smart chip of a debit card, expressing dramatically how means of exchange have advanced through the ages.

Again - modesty: "You know, I agree with Alan Fletcher's insight that designers are not artists: a designer tries to solve his client's problems; while an artist tries to solve his own problems."

"Design's function is communication, to be easily understandable," Steiner says. He explains that any designer who cannot communicate vividly and clearly is lost at the start. "My aim is if someone sees my work, he won't say 'Look that's a Steiner', rather he should say, 'Oh, that's HSBC'; it's not important to me if somebody knows I created a particular design." Steiner believes that today anyone can create layouts and logos on a computer. What matters is to have discriminating clients who value compelling graphic design.

"When I moved from New York to Hong Kong, it was like a journey from the future into the past. I saw that what I'd learned at Yale and practiced on Madison Avenue was still missing in the British Colony of that time. China is now catching up in design matters, though a lack of competition on the Mainland has delayed areas of brand design creation." He is, however, relaxed and explains that he has no problems adapting to the Asian business environment.

Early on Henry Steiner never dreamt of living in China. "When we planned our escape to America we needed somebody to vouch for us, in case of financial problems. There was a neighbor who worked in Hollywood and spent his summers at a villa in Baden. My mother knocked on his door and asked him to sponsor us. But he said he received many such requests and couldn't help everyone. Fearing refusal my mother fetched a photo of me, a four year old boy with big, black Asian eyes. The man looked at it and told my mother: 'Despite the many requests, how can I reject this little Chinese boy?' In hindsight, it seems destiny brought me to Hong Kong."

Steiner laughs, no hint of bitterness - and not a hint of alienation from the country of his birth. He loves Vienna's mix of sarcasm and sentimentality. "Austria has been good to me and I am Viennese with all my heart."

At the end he thanks me, in surprisingly fluent German, for the interview smiling impishly, the charmer and Mad Man.

From Steiner's portfolio:

The designer's prominent clients and important work.

Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation

Steiner worked together with HSBC over eighteen years. During this period his designs included their trial blazing annual reports and the renowned hexagon logo.

Hong Kong Jockey Club

Among other high profile clients, Steiner has worked with the exclusive racing club for which he created a new corporate identity system. The Club's equestrian events attract many punters resulting in it being a major source of tax revenue and prominent charitable entity.

American Chamber of Commerce

Steiner was also responsible for the branding of the Chamber, with its imagery combining a section of the US flag and a junk sail. He has similarly consulted with the Austrian Chamber of Commerce, Trade Commission and Consulate.

Hong Kong banknotes

The paper currency of Hong Kong is issued by three private banks and controlled by the Monetary Authority. Steiner is also expert in banknote production having created designs for both HSBC and Standard Chartered Bank. The latter's latest series features an exciting juxtaposition of technologies; Chinese traditional heritage and Western contemporary.