



Henry Steiner

Interview with

Henry Steiner

How do you feel about being named the ‘Father of Hong Kong Design’?

I appreciate the recognition as long as I’m not held responsible for the actions of my ‘offspring’. I’d rather be known as the Father of Cross-Cultural Design; I wrote the book (with Ken Haas) in 1995.

Why did you choose Hong Kong as the base of your design career?

It wasn’t necessary to make a choice until recently. When I came to Hong Kong in 1961, it was to continue working for a magazine for which I had been designing in New York. The originally agreed nine months period was extended to two years and then to a retainer which enabled me to work for other clients. There was no reason to leave Hong Kong since my work was in demand locally. Since 1997 however there has been a downturn in the market for quality design and I had to decide whether to stay on or move elsewhere. I remained because Hong Kong is a convenient and comfortable place to be headquartered (low taxes, ease of travel, freedom of the press, rule of law, established professional services, etc.). Mainland Chinese companies

need sophisticated branding; they cannot continue to thrive on low-cost generic manufacturing. Hong Kong is an ideal location from which to serve them.

What do you want to deliver to your clients in your design? On the other hand, what do you want the public to perceive from your design?

Alan Fletcher said: “A designer tries to solve his clients’ problems. A painter tries to solve his own problems.” I relish working with clients. My specialty is brand creation and strategy. It’s satisfying to define a client’s personality visually in a clear, compelling manner. When you get it right it makes your clients’ communication with their market easier and more efficient. My branding for HSBC is a good example.

What is your opinion on the latest hot topic ‘Against Free Pitching’? Should the whole industry gathers up and oppose it? How to deal with those incomprehensible clients?

Being asked to give ideas away in competitions for contracts is unethical and disrespectful to our profession. I am

unequivocally opposed to the practice. I do not start my taxi before the flag is down and the meter running. The fact that this is still an issue in Hong Kong indicates a certain desperation in the design community.

How do you see the development of Hong Kong art and culture? For examples: West Kowloon Culture District and M+?

I believe that plans to bring culture to the masses by building museums in distant, largely inaccessible parts of Hong Kong is a subterfuge to support the construction industry. There are already 18 shabby government-run museums in Hong Kong, mostly empty except when patronized by bussed in groups of school children or retirees. These existing facilities as well as other serviceable buildings, like the Wanchai Market or the Central Police complex need little more than some whitewash and an inspired curator to supply the needs of our residents and visitors. Unfortunately, our Government understands development, not art. Perhaps they honestly believe that, “If you build it, they will come.”

The series of banknotes you designed for Standard Chartered Bank is a classic. There have been criticisms of the most recently designed Hong Kong banknotes. What should a good banknote design possess?

Thank you. Security is the most important feature of any item of currency. If it is not difficult to counterfeit it has failed. Some indication of national or cultural identity is desirable. I think you are referring to the Government issued \$10 banknotes, which are so universally disliked and ridiculed that there is little left to be said.

Is it a good atmosphere in the design industry? Is there any designer or project that we should pay attention to?

There are more competent designers in Hong Kong than discerning clients. Two exceptions to the latter are Douglas Young (G.O.D) and David (Shanghai) Tang. Among the designers I respect are Sandy Choi, Stanley Wong, and Pokit Poon. Not quite designers but of great interest are the cartoonist Zunzi and the abstractionist photographer Norman de Brackinche. I also appreciate the work of

Alan Zie Yongder but he’s now in Shanghai most of the time.

In Hong Kong, the prospective design students always want to find out how to learn good design? And where can they learn? Could you drop them some hints?

Graphic design is going through an awkward phase, in my opinion. I studied painting with some of the best artists of the New York School of Abstract Expressionism, yet felt dissatisfied and alienated. I had nothing I wanted to communicate through art and it wasn’t until I went to Yale for my Master’s degree in design that I discovered what made me tick. It was carrying out problem-solving assignments; Alan Fletcher’s formula, in other words.

My credo is:

1. Design is done for others. I have rarely done a design only to please myself. The exceptions might include a greeting card or letterhead for my own company.

2. Design communicates an idea. Paul Rand said you should be able to write on one side of an index card what your design was about. If you

couldn’t, then you had no idea and thus no design.

3. Design must contain contrast. This can be contrast of color, of expectation, psychological tensions, size, old vs. new, etc.

The awkwardness in which much current design is stuck I call “CyberDeco”. This is work dependent on style, on patterns, on ‘mood’. It’s an outgrowth of desktop publishing, whose templates pandered to the lowest common denominator of talent and insight: photographs without skill or point, typography without legibility or meaning, patterns and colors filling up uncomfortably empty spaces. You can see how my points 2. and 3. can be violated. It is not easy to teach design and there are not enough gifted design teachers. What is easy to teach is software. Thus foggy, vapid photoshopped images and meaningless, wandering patterns. Voila: CyberDeco!

My advice to aspiring designers:

Think carefully whether you want to be a commercial artist and not a painter. Are you interested in your clients and their businesses? You should get satisfaction

from the work and spend most of your time looking for designs, or at signs, or thinking about an assignment. Satisfaction must come from the work itself. Otherwise find another line of work because practicing design is not the path to riches.

What would you usually do when you fail to draw up any ideas?

When I'm asked "Where do you get your inspiration?" my reply is "from the deadline." Without clients and deadlines, frankly, I doubt that anything would ever happen in my case. To answer your question: ideas come from analysis. Interviewing the client. Free associating the problem, perhaps redefining it. Sometimes, in panic, I look anywhere for an answer and often they come from an unexpected place. That uneasiness of not making progress on a project is like constipation or pregnancy. The question is always with you and relief comes only when an idea clicks into place, most often when you've stored as much data as possible and then step away from it. That's why the most common times for inspiration are after sleep or in the shower.

What kind of plans do you have in the future?

China cannot continue indefinitely producing low priced goods anonymously for foreign entities who make the lion's share of profit through their own branding and marketing expertise. China must follow in the footsteps of Japan and Korea in creating branded products. My expertise in brand creation is proven. So my future is, I believe, branding Chinese companies on the Mainland.

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My Home, Hong Kong

Where is your favourite place in Hong Kong?

What is your least favourable Hong Kong culture?

What would you like to say to Hong Kong?

Sai Ying Pun is on the Western harbor shore of Hong Kong Island. A militarily strict street grid laid out in the 1840s now teems with busy people ambling happily in the middle of the roadways shared with forbearing drivers. They are civil and get through their chores with humor and efficiency. It's like Hong Kong in the 1970s, it's where I live, and is my favorite place. Hong Kong people tend to be down to earth; accommodating yet persistent. For fifty years in the middle of the last century they preserved and protected much of Chinese culture from the ravages of civil wars, invasions and revolutions. They have a becoming modesty which can often result in a 'cheap and cheerful' attitude. Sadly, much product, graphic design, and the film industry bear witness to this easy acceptance of bargain basement standards. There is a great deal of this humility mixed with subtle,

if not subversive wit in the work of many Hong Kong painters. Two examples are Wilson Shieh and Joey Leung Ka-yin. To compare Hong Kong and Mainland artists is like comparing early Paul Klee with late Joan Miro. There were newspaper articles recently warning of the disappearance of skilled furniture carpenters and printing engravers. Another story about the chopping off of century-old banyan tree roots can be seen as a metaphor for such loss of craftsmanship and indeed for many of the homely values which have served Hong Kong so well. Resilient Hong Kong has in its past much to be proud of. It should now raise its sights and standards with audacity.

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Standard Chartered Bank series 2004.

Brands



Lane Crawford, 1964



Hongkong Land, 1969



HSBC, 1983



Sungyong Group, Korea 1989



Hong Kong Awards for Industry, 1989



Gold Peak, 1994



ShanghaiMart, China, 1998



Hong Kong Jockey Club, 1996



Radio 3, 2004



AmCham, 1980-2006



Valiant Entertainment, 2007



Education First, 2007

Brands.



1.



2.



5.



6.



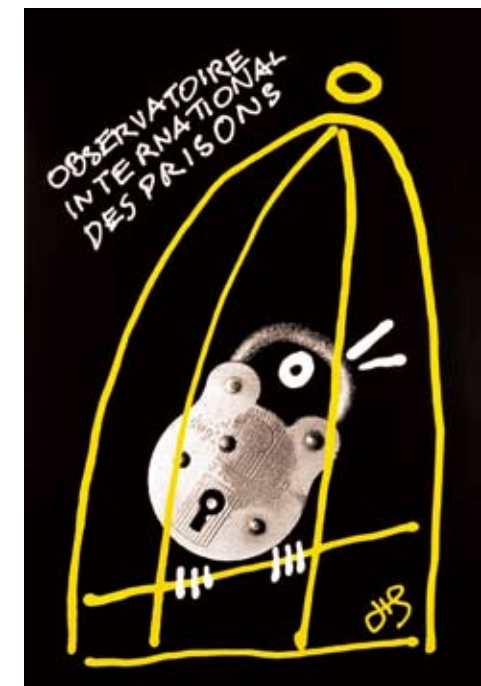
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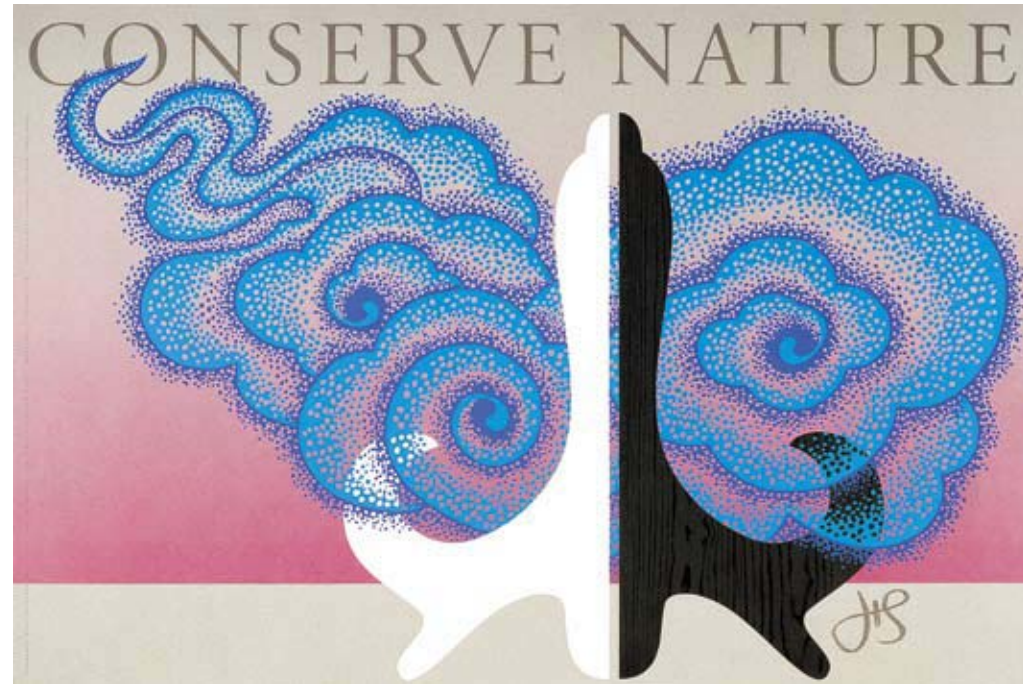
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8.

1/ Servus Hong Kong book cover 2004. 2/ Homage to Toulouse-Lautrec centenary France 2001. 3/ Hong Kong Print Awards 2000. 4/ Design98Show 1998.

5/ The Earth-Triumph in Plastic Japan 1997. 6/ Cross-Culture Design-cover and spread 1995. 7/ The Joy Luck Club-Shanghai 1993. 8/ Observatoire International des Prisons France 1992.



1.

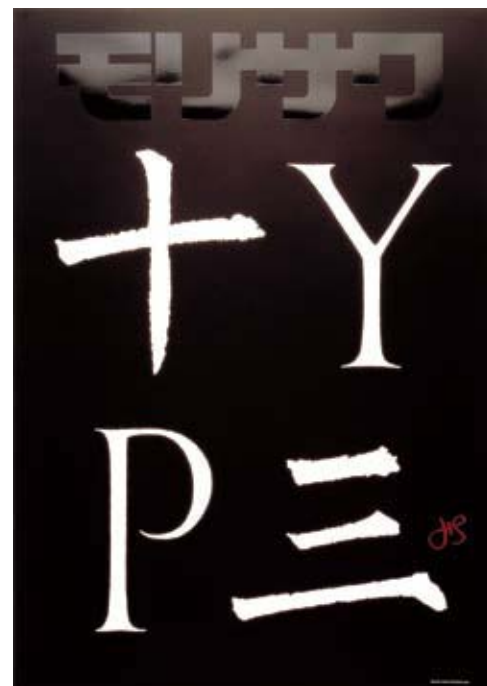


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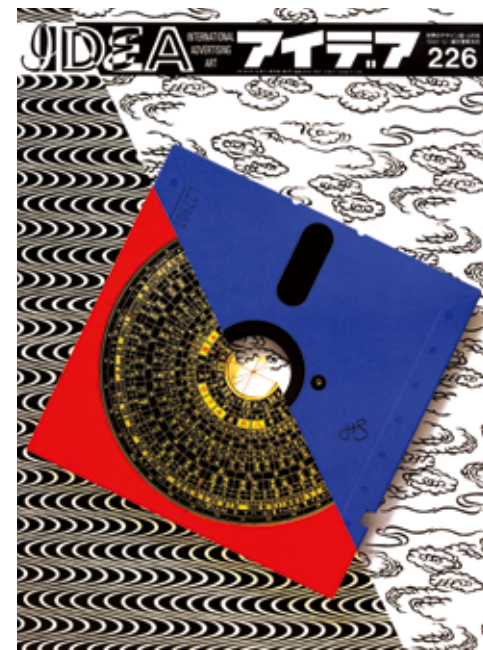


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2.



3.



6.



1/ Conserve Nature 1992.
2/ Type Morisaua Japan 1991. 3/ Idea magazine Japan 1981.

4/ Amoy peanut oil package design 1979. 5/ Sing Tao newspapers 1972-73 annual report cover.
6/ HSBC 1976 annual report cover.

Interview with

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大家都稱你為香港設計之父，你有何感想？

我很感激你們的肯定，但希望我不需要為我的「子孫」的任何舉動而付上責任。我比較喜歡被稱為「融合文化設計之父」；我曾經在 1995 年跟 Ken Haas 合作寫了一本書名為《Cross Cultural Design》。

為何當年決定以香港作為你的事業基地？

其實直到最近才需要真正作出選擇。我在 1961 年到香港，當時是因為工作需要，要為一本紐約雜誌繼續設計的工作。本來九個月的期限被延長到兩年，之後在逗留期間更讓我為其他的客戶工作。當時本地的設計需求很大，所以沒有選擇離開香港。但自從 1997 年以後，設計行業陷入低迷，那時候我必須作出去留的決定。我最後決定留下，因為香港是一個方便而舒適的地方，很適合作為總部，它不但課稅低，地區方便，擁有新聞自由和法規，更有完善的專業服務等等。中國大陸公司需要考究的商標，它們不能單單靠低成本製造而興旺起來，香港便是一個理想的地方為他們供應所需。

在你的設計作品裡，最想帶給客戶的是甚麼，對於大眾，你最希望他們留意的是甚麼？

Alan Fletcher 說：「一個設計者試著解決他客戶的

問題；一個畫家試著解決他自己的問題。」我喜愛和客戶工作。我的專長是商標創造和策略，很興奮能使用視覺把客戶的個性以清晰又無法反駁的方法，盡情顯示出來。當你做對了的時候，它能使你的客戶在市場更容易和更有效率地溝通。我為香港上海匯豐銀行所作的便是一個好例子。

對於現在業內的熱門話題「抵制免費 Pitching」你有何意見？業內應聯手抵制嗎？有何方法應付頑劣客戶？

為了爭取合同而被要求獻出設計意念是不道德和不被尊重的。我是十分反對這件事。正如在計程車旗子和咪錶落下前，我不會開車一樣的。事實上這反映出香港設計界中某種的沮喪。

你如何看香港藝術文化發展？如西九？M+？

我相信，興建一些遠離市區的博物館未必能把香港藝術文化帶給大眾，這只是一個藉口去支持建築業。香港已經擁有 18 個只有學生和退休人士會到的破舊的公營博物館。除了現在的設施，還有其他現用的建築物，例如灣仔街市或中環警局，都需要一些粉飾和一位有能力給予香港市民及旅客所需的館長。很可惜，我們的政府不懂藝術，只懂發展。他們可能真的認為「只要我們把它建成，他們必會來參觀。」

你過去為渣打銀行設計的鈔票

成為香港設計的經典，對於近期的香港鈔票設計受到評擊，你認為好的鈔票設計必須具備甚麼條件？

謝謝你。安全措施是貨幣中最重要的一環。如果它能輕易被偽造，它已經失敗了。把一些國家或當地文化融入設計當中是理想的。我想你是指政府發行的拾元鈔票，經過如此廣泛地討厭和嘲笑，我也沒有什麼可說的了。

你認為香港設計界的氣氛好嗎？有那些設計師或設計案例你認為是設計人需要留意的？

香港有能幹的設計師比有眼光的客戶多。兩位比較例外的後者是楊志超(住,好,啲)和鄧永鏘(上海灘)。在設計師之中，我欣賞蔡楚堅、黃炳培和潘保傑。還有漫畫家尊子和抽象派攝影師 Norman de Brackinghe。我也欣賞施養德的作品，但是他現在大部分時間都在上海。

在香港，喜歡設計的學生總愛問如何學好設計？那裏？怎樣？態度？你能為大家解答嗎？

依我之見，平面設計正在經過一個困惑的階段。儘管從未跟 New York School of Abstract Expressionism 中一些最好的藝術家學習畫畫，我仍然感覺不滿而且孤獨。我當時沒有想透過藝術去傳達的東西，直到我去耶魯修讀碩士

學位才發現什麼使我啟發。這就是實行解決問題任務——換句話說就是 Alan Fletcher 的公式。

我的教義是：

1. 設計是為了其他人。我很少為了使自己高興做設計，除了為自己公司設計賀卡或信箋。

2. 設計是為了傳達一個想法。Paul Rand 曾說，你應該能夠在索引卡片的一邊上寫你的設計是什麼。如果你無法這樣做，這表示你沒有想法更沒有設計。

3. 設計一定要包含對比。這可能是顏色、期望、精神的緊張、大小，又或者舊與新的對比等等……

現在的設計都被困在一個困惑的環境裡我叫它「CyberDeco」。這些作品過於著重風格、圖案和情緒。它是一個桌上型出版業的自然發展，這類樣式迎合最低才能和最低眼光：沒有技術或中心思想的相片，含糊或無意義的印刷工藝，圖案和顏色不安地填滿空間。你能見到上文我的觀點 2 和 3，如何被違犯吧。教設計不容易，而且沒有有足夠天賦的設計老師。使用軟件可以使教學更容易。所以一些模糊及無趣的 photoshopped 影像和一些無意義的圖案等於：CyberDeco！

我對積極的設計者的忠告：小心地想想你是否想要成為一個商業的藝術家，而不是一個

畫家。你對你的客戶和他們的生意感興趣嗎？你應該從工作中得到滿足，並利用大部份時間放在尋找設計，指示或思索功課上。滿足感一定要來自工作本身。如果你想利用設計增加財富，那麼你們要找尋另外的工作。

遇到腦袋一片空白時，你會做甚麼？

當我被問到：「你的靈感來自哪裏？」我會答覆：「是從截止日期來的。」坦白說，沒有客戶和截止日期，我相信什麼都不能成事。回答你的問題：靈感是來自分析，例如接見客戶，自由地結合問題，也許重新定義它。有時當在恐慌的時候，我會在任何地方找尋答案，它們會往往從意想不到的地方出現。計劃進度被阻延就好像便秘或懷孕，問題總是在你身邊，但解決方法會在你不以為然的時候出現。所以最有靈感的時候是睡醒後或沐浴中。

未來你有甚麼新計劃嗎？

外國大部分利潤都來自自己的商標和市場上的專門技術，中國不能夠持續為外國體系生產低價貨物。中國必須跟上日本和韓國，製造自己商標的產品。我在商標製造的能力有目共睹。因此我相信我的未來大計將會為中國大陸公司製造商標。

我的家，香港

最喜愛的香港文化是甚麼？最討厭的香港文化又是甚麼呢？

你給香港的話。

在香港，你喜歡到那裡？

西營盤在香港島的西部海岸上，有著 1840 年代嚴厲軍事的格調，現在卻充滿一些既快樂又忙碌的人，在馬路與有耐心的駕駛者從容漫步。文明的他們用幽默和有效率的方式進行他們的例行工作。它是最喜愛的地方，因為它就像 1970 年代的香港，亦是我現在住的地方。

香港人是傾向樸實，善於適應新環境又堅持不懈。在上世紀中的五十年，他們保護許多的中國文化免於內戰、侵犯和革命的破壞。他們變得節制，亦演變成「便宜又快活」的態度。很可惜，很多的產品，版

面設計和影片業都見證了這低標準的接受度。

香港有很多畫家都是謙遜又細心的，他們沒有從事顛覆的機智。兩個例子是石家豪和梁嘉賢。要比較香港和大陸藝術家就好像對早期的 Paul Klee 與後期的 Joan Miro 作比較。

最近有報紙文章警告指出家具木匠和印刷彫刻師的數量漸少。另一個故事關於百年菩提樹樹根被截斷，被隱喻為技藝將會失傳。

靈活的香港在它的過去中被引以為傲。它現在應該擴闊眼光和大膽的提升標準。

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