

Number 10

THE MAGAZINE FOR MEMBERS OF THE LADIES RECREATION CLUB 3rd QUARTER 2021

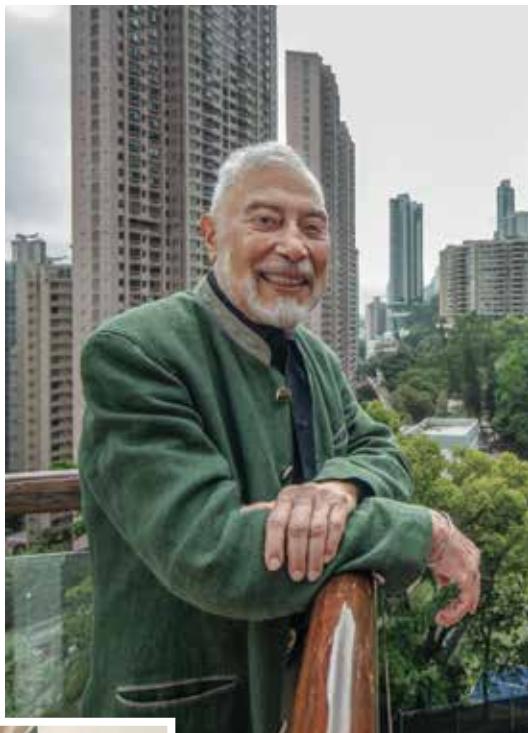
NUMBER 10

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Henry Steiner
Branding Hong Kong

3rd QUARTER 2021

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Henry Steiner. Branding Hong Kong

The life and times of Asia's most famous designer

Cover photo and above photo by Ringo Tang @agogofilm

CLOCKWISE
FROM LEFT

Photographer
Ringo Tang,
Evelyn Ng, Flora
Hui, Henry
Steiner and
makeup artist
Megumi Sekine

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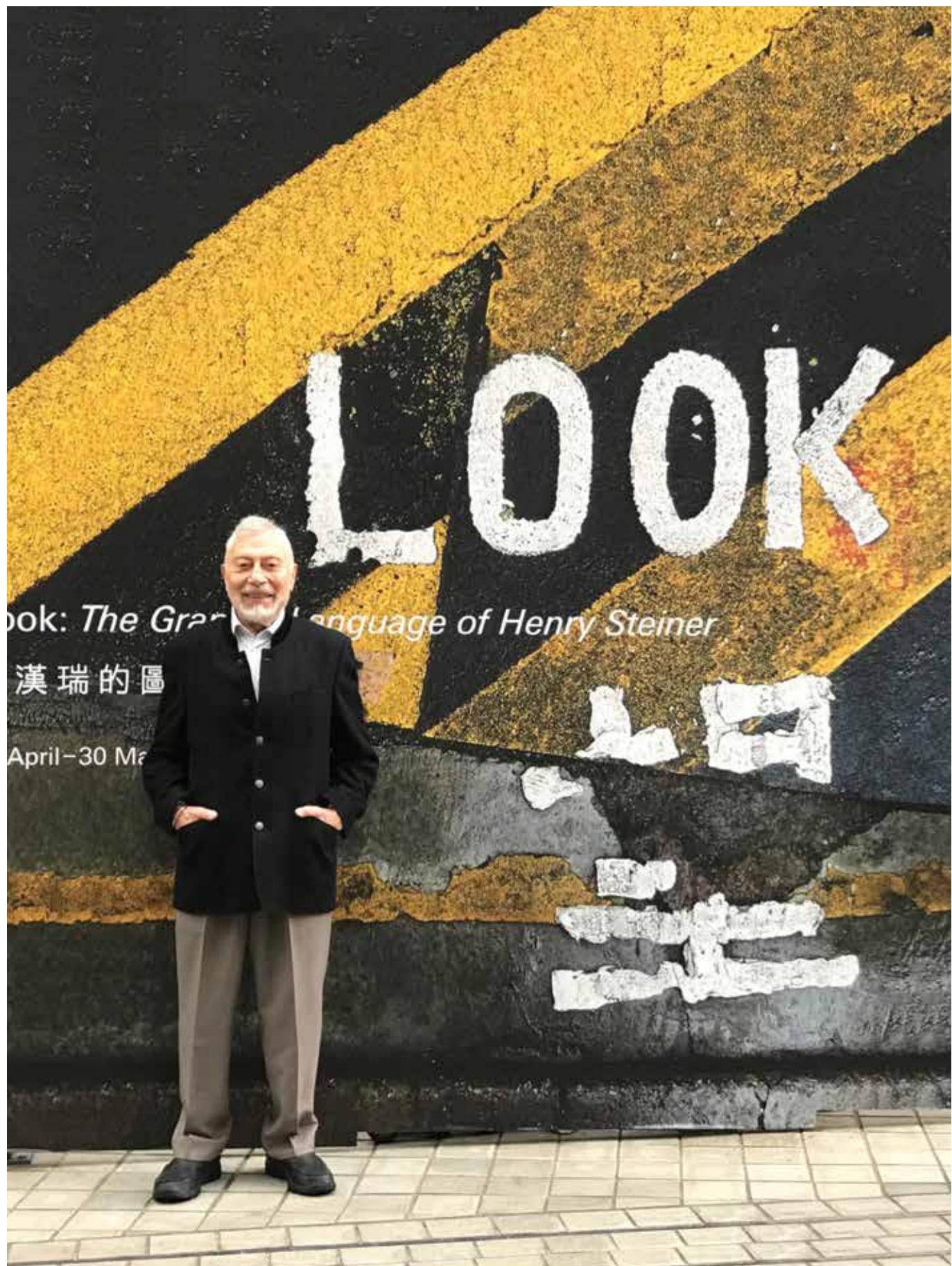


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Henry Steiner: *Branding Hong Kong*

Brenda Scofield

It's 1939 and a four year old Jewish boy is standing with his mother before the immigration officer at Ellis Island waiting for entry into the United States. The Immigration Officer looks down and asks,

"What is his name?"

"Hans".

"That sounds too German. Call him Henry."

And so, with that kindness from the officer began a new life for the young Henry Steiner who would come to be known as the Father of Hong Kong Design. Europe was in the grip of Nazi influence. "My mother, Lilly, could smell that things were going badly and was desperate to get out of Austria at a time when the three K's *Kinder, Kuche und Kirche* (Children, Kitchen and Church) were being promoted in Nazi propaganda as the appropriate primary concerns for women. We left in 1939, just under the wire."

Henry's mother, a determined woman, had approached an Austrian American film producer to give her an affidavit to allow them to enter the

States. He at first refused, having had many such requests but on showing him a photograph of the four year old Hans he replied, "How can I say no to this little Chinese boy?"

Henry says, "I do look somewhat Chinese and that saved our lives. She got me, my father, her mother and her brother out. Sadly, most of the rest of the family probably ended their lives in Auschwitz or Dachau."

Henry's father had been a well-established dentist in Vienna but his qualifications were not recognised in the US and he was reduced to working as a dental mechanic. Eventually this took its toll and he began drinking. Henry's mother had become a seamstress in the garment district on Seventh Avenue and after the marriage had ended she took Henry to a new home in Manhattan where he lived for fifteen years. "The school system was good and I turned out to be a reasonable student, always drawing. I wanted to be a cartoonist". Henry did drawings for his Stuyvesant School year book, later for Hunter College. These extra



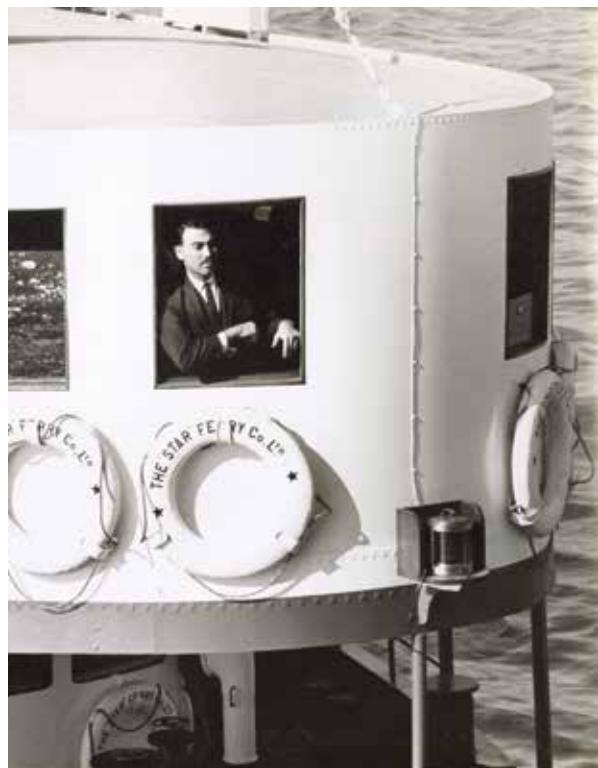
In Vienna, 1939

curricular activities claimed much of his attention.

After winning a scholarship which required him to stay in NY state, Henry chose to study at the Manhattan campus of Hunter College which had a good art department. “It was a hotbed of abstract expressionism at that time.” He was mentored by a Hungarian print maker, Peterdi Gabor who, by coincidence, arrived in the States in the same year as the young Henry. Gabor told him he also taught in Yale and asked Henry if he’d like to come and study in a new department called *Graphic Design*. “I said, OK, what is it?” And so began the great adventure for Henry. Two years and a Master’s later he had discovered his passion, his interest sealed by the great Paul Rand, a visiting professor in the design department at the Yale School of Art.

“I’d never seen myself going to Yale, but why not?” A year in advertising on Madison Avenue after graduation and it was France on a Fulbright Fellowship.

Paris and the Sorbonne did not excite the young



On Star Ferry, 1963

designer. “They were behind the design times in Paris and they had nothing to teach me. They were professionally backward. I returned to New York and worked for The Asia Magazine.”

Eventually Henry transferred to the Hong Kong office and spent some time there while exploring freelance opportunities, including the creation of the Hilton Hotel’s graphics. He met his Sikh wife, Leela during this period. Henry’s admiration for Sikhs is evidenced by his still wearing the traditional Kara, one of the five items beginning with K which all Sikhs should carry. The kara is a simple steel bracelet which symbolises restraint and gentility and reminds the wearer to aim for these qualities. Indeed Henry does embody these attributes. Over the years spent in his company sharing meals at the LRC I have been struck by his sense of calm consideration. He has the old world manners of a European, refreshing and very welcome. Now whether this extends into his business life is a matter for conjecture. The Henry Steiner of Steiner&Co. didn’t become the huge success that he is without determination and chutzpah surely?



With creative staff, 1965

He has a firm belief in his talents, knows his worth and what he has done for graphic design in Asia yet speaks about his achievements without arrogance. It's simply the truth that you see Steiner everywhere. You probably carry his work in your wallet, pass his iconic logos countless times on a simple trip into Central, in a mall or on an airplane.

His clients form a roll call of the most famous brands you can imagine and many which are simply part of our everyday lives. Hilton Hotels, HSBC, Standard Chartered Bank, Lane Crawford, Hongkong Land, Wellcome, Dairy Farm, IBM. The list seems endless, probably because it could be. "A designer can only be as good as his clients and if you've got a designer who's creative and ambitious then use him." Henry has been branding Hong Kong since 1961, and doing so with a respect for both the Asian culture of Hong Kong and the multicultural aspect of our city. Henry's armoury of design has two weapons: concept and contrast. His generous nature has prompted him also to employ these in the pro bono support of charities and organisations as varied as the Hong

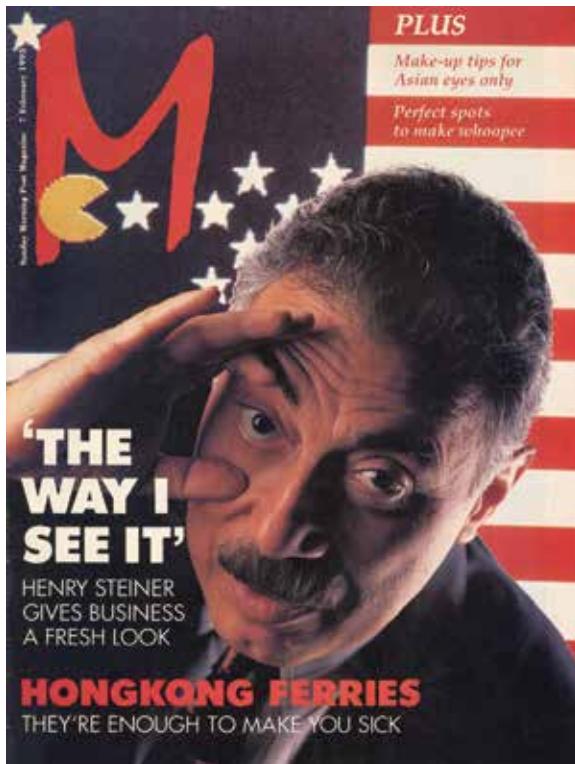


Idea magazine cover, 1980

Kong Girl Guides Association, Helping Hand, Hong Kong Chamber Music Society and the Samaritans. Naturally, the Yale Club of Hong Kong features in the extensive list.

In April and May Henry had an exhibition staged by the Hong Kong Design Institute Gallery in Tseung Kwan O, a beautifully lit space worthy of the Steiner style. Any long term resident of Hong Kong could engage with the exhibition as a visual history of their experiences. Entitled *Look: The Graphic Language of Henry Steiner* it reminds us, as Henry says, that "looking is not merely seeing." Henry perceives objects in many different ways; for example, he sees negative spaces and understands their importance.

But there is something which Henry cannot always see in ways which the majority of people can. And that is colour. Henry has a unusual type of colour blindness which makes it difficult for him to distinguish between some colours. Violet and blue, tan and green present challenges for example, but generally Henry has found ways to work around



SCMP magazine cover, 1993

this interesting quality of looking in his design work. Henry notes with irony that he might have evaded his service in the National Guard had he thought to declare his colour blindness. One of his two sons has inherited this condition. Henry's sons are now living on opposite coasts of the United States. He made sure they had Austrian names, Karl and Kurt. It seems that Austria is still in Henry's heart although he loves Hong Kong. "I really don't want to leave."

He hands me a memo as we finish the interview with MJM written on it. Is this the beginning of another design? No, it's to remind me of his three artistic heroes, Magritte, James Joyce and Mahler. Magritte for his visual punning and qualities as a conceptual artist, Joyce for his wit and the music of his writing and Mahler because he was "passionate and a Jew". Henry recalls his introduction to Mahler's music whilst in Yale. It was *The Song of the Earth*, its text originating in Chinese poems of the 8th century T'ang dynasty.

Our interview continues into lunch at the Lotus



At former family home, Vienna, 2004

Bistro. LRC has been in Henry's life for decades of course, as a quiet place to enjoy lunch although he bemoans the tangle of private cars in the upper entrance when his taxi needs to come in. What does he think of the LRC logo? The lettering is OK but Henry's not too keen on the dragon, "I think it's too cutesy, a Gweilo's rather 'magnanimous' nod to Chinese culture." But of course there are aspects of the LRC which please Henry. He likes that it's set in an oasis of verdant nature. He points out to me the patterns of the flutterings leaves.

At 87 Henry still keeps regular hours at his Conduit Road office, but somehow for a man of Henry Steiner's brilliance and commitment we shouldn't be surprised. He's still looking, seeing and solving his clients' problems.
