

LEISURE & ARTS

Hong Kong's Design Guru

By MARIE MYERSCOUGH

Hong Kong

Spending a day in Hong Kong without seeing at least one image created by Henry Steiner, the colony's best-known graphic designer, would be a challenge. Even the money that changes hands in this cash-driven society bears his mark.

Mr. Steiner creates images for corporations in Hong Kong through trademarks and identity programs, annual reports, packaging and publications. Among the better-known are Hong Kong Telephone's vibrant orange logo, based on a traditional Chinese bell; the Hilton Hotel's astrology-inspired "HH"; Hongkong Land's Chinese-derived longevity symbol; Hongkong Bank's ubiquitous red-and-white hexagon logo; and the Duty Free Shoppers' symbol.

The Steiner method, an eclectic mix of high art and the commonplace, East and West, endows his work with a graphic quality more often associated with the sophisticated work of the Japanese. His award-winning design of a Ming woman reflected in a mirror as a punk—with orange hair and wild outfit—for an Australian business seminar, and the Indonesian Jawa Express's kris- and batik-inspired trademark have spread Mr. Steiner's name and reputation overseas. With the trend in the corporate world to internationalize companies and brands, the designer's blend of Western and Oriental images—already well-received—is becoming even more popular.

Born in Vienna and raised in New York, Mr. Steiner has long been fascinated by the Orient, particularly its aesthetic effect on the West. The design of Japanese family crests influenced Western trademarks early in this century, and the colors in woodblock prints impressed van Gogh in the late 19th century. Computer graphics owe something to woodblock techniques—an exciting odyssey that Mr. Steiner dubs "from Edo-to-Silicon Valley."

A renowned collector of Edo prints, which span the 17th to 19th centuries, Mr. Steiner's passion often is expressed in an unlikely commercial form. Typical is the cover of the current San Miguel beer company's annual report modeled on *ukiyo-e*, or Japanese woodblock prints, in paneled pictures.

That cover is a far cry from the work Hong Kong's design world was producing when Mr. Steiner first arrived in the early '60s. Invited to be design director for the Asia Magazine, the region's first color Sunday supplement, he recalls "a few illustrators and commercial artists doing hand-lettering for posters and neon, and primitive printing and typography." So new was the concept of graphic design that he was constantly asked to define the term.

His list of local clients now reads like a corporate roll of honor: Asiaweek, Dairy Farm, the Far Eastern Economic Review, Hongkong and Shanghai Hotels, the Hong Kong Tourist Association, the Hong Kong Trade Development Council, the Jardine Group, Kowloon-Canton and Mass Transit Railway Corporations, and Shui Hing.

His design studio, Graphic Communications Ltd., is the territory's oldest and will celebrate its 25th anniversary next year. Mr. Steiner has made himself somewhat of a local institution through his connection with corporations, his involvement in local design education and exhibitions.

The local graphic arts industry has matured (though it still lags behind Japan). There are now some dozen local graphic-design companies, 1,000 graphic-arts professionals and design courses for students. Mr. Steiner welcomes the competition. "The more good people you have, the better for raising the level of taste," he says.

Asia's traditional exotic visual vocabu-

lary is Mr. Steiner's strongest inspiration. He plays with images and Chinese letter forms to create modern trademarks. The Dah Sing Bank logo has the Chinese character for "large" superimposed on two abacus counters; the Jade Creations logo incorporates the Chinese character for precious stone. The stars and stripes of the American flag turned into a junk sail aptly represent the local American Chamber of Commerce; old coins, a geometer's wheel and almanac unite to create art out of a Jockey Club betting slip.

Reversing the process, Mr. Steiner has produced Roman letter logos for Asian companies. South Korean conglomerate SsangYong, which is renovating Raffles Hotel in Singapore, announces itself by a double "S" logo, reflecting both the com-



Hongkong Bank's annual report

pany name, meaning twin dragons, and its new international identity.

Mr. Steiner says cross-cultural design requires sensitivity, deep knowledge of the culture and its symbols, and the ability to anticipate what will work with Western images. Drawing an Oriental squiggle or an Eastern bazaarlike image is not the way to create a lasting trademark, he says. "Rather, it is the result of long research into local culture, the company's history and personality."

One of Mr. Steiner's solutions, his unique "split image" combination, is best exemplified by the divided face gracing the covers of some Hongkong Bank annual reports—the Statue of Liberty half-face juxtaposed with that of a painted Chinese opera singer (see illustration); other reports show popular symbols from New York and Hong Kong: half a "big apple" joined with "the pearl of the Orient."

Indeed, inter-cultural design can be tricky for the unwary—the subject of his book to be published next year. Taboos abound. Take color, for example: The blue-and-white combination, which in the West suggests strength and serenity, in Chinese culture is associated with death and funerals.

Most of these taboos originate in religious practices surrounding Buddhism, Asia's dominant religion. Images depicting the Buddha at ground level are taboo: The icon must impose on high. Mr. Steiner recalls one poster in New York in which an image of bare human feet before a Buddha created a furor almost on an international scale. Conversely, Christian sensibilities were offended a few years ago by a painting of Leonardo da Vinci's "Last Supper" used to advertise a Ginza restaurant in Tokyo.

In Hong Kong, where the ultimate symbol of success is money, Mr. Steiner has made his mark. Whether it be with his Chinese mythology-designed bank notes or Hong Kong's most widely used ETC cash card, his works pass through the hands of several million people daily. There can be few graphic designers around the world whose work reaches so many and whose portfolio so snugly fits into a wallet.

Ms. Myerscough writes on the arts in Asia.