# A graphic success

RAPHIC de- 1955 when it was called comsigner Henry Steiner, some design is typography, print might say, wears his making, photography, and so 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 design-

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

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

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

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 psy-

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

## "I drifted into art because I didn't obviously have a vocation."

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

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 design-

er, 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

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

mes.'
"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'.'

hat 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

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 Expres-

"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

"If you are going to be a painter, I think you have got to have a vision. Apparently, I

"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.' design was. This was back in

Rand, the teacher who put him on to it, also happened to be teaching that subject at Yale.

on.' Everything that I enjoy."
So that is what launched

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 Ameri-

can while I was in Europe; but Hilton. 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."

bout 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. ing became promotion director. He decided he needed to come out after a visit to Hongkong. And then he asked me to

The Steiner mercial art.
"My teacher said: 'Graphic on.' Everything that I enjoy."
So that is what launched
Mr Steiner on graphic design.
To his good fortune, Mr Paul
To the teacher who put him



# **VERNON RAM**

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

"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 mar-'So I designed ads, covers, lit- ket. He did the whole corporerature, the whole works. The ate identity for Hilton, the person with whom I was work- 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-

THE FLAVOUR OF '86

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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

worthwhile and persuade me

Mr Steiner had originally teresting to make the prospect forces a kind of progress on

n 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

the Ocean Terminal. I decided

there was nothing really hold-ing me back from doing good

work, that it was pleasanter to

are invited to make a presenta-

tion. I do have a reputation in-

ternationally, and that keeps

me honest as well in terms of

design. I know there are people

watching what I do, the things

"I had also by then done

Hongkong was fulfilling.

ive in Hongkong.

Chinese character for "food" with chopsticks and spoon replacing the upper strokes.

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

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

change of owners.
"Everything I had done un-

til then had an AH - Ameri-

can Hotel - and I could see

what was happening. So I liter-

ally cut two photostats in half

Mr Steiner's two-year stint

that come out in various design annuals.

Beyond that, I have a philosophy which I got from my teacher at Yale. Mr Rand, a heroic figure in American design who has just turned 75, taught me a couple of rules of

"One was the necessity for contrast. In a way this is similar to lateral thinking. For design to have life, it has to have within it some form of contrast, whether it be a contrast of expectation or a contrast with its environment, or a contrast with size.

'Therefore, whenever I look at the sketch of an idea, I think and ask myself: what will make it clearer or how do I get my message across basically

"I try, as much as possible. not to repeat myself which

done about it.

this process along."
What about the clients? done, but the sad thing is that the clients are not that demanding.

"Somebody comes to and things are totally different here, a sense of topsy-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 "And the corollary of that is that I have been able to use that to the client's advantage

words, there is still a great potential in Hongkong. What about the emphasis

in really creative work of inter-

est anywhere. So, in other

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 abels. 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 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 shelve shops and people and

ation is hopeless or ir- it was worth. People started putting antiques into their Apparently not. The good homes, and buying rather exnews is that something is being pensive things with the idea of living with them. They were "We are working on this. not worried about having to The Polytechnic is going into a leave at a moment's notice degree programme. I have and, therefore, would not have started a school with some col- anything in their homes that leagues to see if we can move they wouldn't mind sacrific-

"I had thought that, possi-"There is a lot of work to be bly, with the nervousness about the future, especially in 1983, things might change here. But I see they are still that way, people are buying Hongkong for the first time furniture, investing rather heavily on things which in our day was non-existent, things like interior design.

"In those days, Jens Munk was working at Lane Crawford, doing window displays, but at that time there was no money in really designing flats. Interior designers were people who mostly outfitted things, took care of chores like plumbing, painting, and plastering. That is one of the remarkable changes you now notice in Hongkong.

e other remarkable thing is that the idea interflow in graphic design, as Mr Steiner practises it, has not all been one-way.

As Mr Steiner puts it, he had a kind of "enlightenment," thanks to one of the photographers who was once on his staff, Australian John "I used to avoid things that

were too colourful, avoid exoticism, things I felt would vulgarise what I was doing. I tried to make things as much international as possible, broadly modern without any particular style or local colour. Then we had this one project in 1973 or 1974, and John

said: 'Why don't we make it look Asian and use gold and red?' These colours I had avoided like the plague before. It was then that something "From then on I started doing things differently, very

much treating Hongkong and Asia broadly, and using their huge storehouse of visual resources very much like they have in Chinese art. 'I started treating that as a kind of vocabulary and it

made a huge difference to my work because I worked with my environment, but treating it in a different way, as though polished and presented certain things new.

Mr Steiner is very fascinated by calligraphy. "I used the techniques I learnt to bring out what I had around me. I think that got me a reputation of being the China designer a designer who works with the Chinese idiom. "That was a big change for

me. All of a sudden the richness of the Chinese visual tradition got through to me. To be more specific about it, I sent out my first Chinese New Year cards for the Year of the

"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-



"I have a collection of Japbecoming a film director, but I was not willing to start as an anese prints which is another obsession of mine. I did quite editor's assistant. I thought, 'Gradually, I got into buymaybe, at some point I could

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

As a graphic designer, is there anything that has baffled

"I can't understand fashion. That strikes me as one hundred per cent decoration, and arbitrary.

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 hu-

man mystery rather than something I can set down as a design problem."

a bit of art at school. And if you have any feeling for art, and design in art, you inevitably come to admire the Japa-

His soul-consuming hob-

"It is now known, though when I studied Impressionism it wasn't so obvious, that most of French art, modern French art from the 1870s on, is due to the Japanese influence. People delightful. It is a different like Lautrec. Bonnard and world and visually it is very

"In 1970 we went to Expo in Osaka and I have a friend who is an American printmaker in Kyoto. I had some of his prints and I also had some with the impression of just prints by Utamero. The idea such a person, someone totally you could actually buy prints was amazing to me, and they totally aware of what is hap-

also weren't terribly good, as it

ing them and now we have a collection. I have done a couple of books on prints. I find they are very gratifying to look at and study. They are also quite musical in their organi-What does Mr Steiner do to

get away from it all?

"I do scuba diving which is Gauguin, and van Gogh, were exciting. When you dive, you totally influenced by Japanese are totally in the present. You don't think of the past or future but are totally aware of

what is happening. Mr Steiner, who will be 52 on February 13, leaves you were not too expensive. They pening around him.

## While that indeed may be "Originally, the Hilton was choice but to do it as well as I so, didn't it constrict him procan. My training is such that I the American Hotel and the fessionally and limit the chalhave a certain reverence to Mandarin was called The lenges he would have faced in Queens. "The Queens was changed things that are printed. other places? 'Another thing I got from Mr Steiner does not think to Mandarin because its man-Mr Rand was a sense of huso and he has a convincing aragement realised after some mour. If it is not funny, at least gument for that. researching that in North it should be witty in its expres-"I belong to a group which America the name did not was started in France in 1947 called AGI (Alliance Grafique have much resonance, and How does he view the American guests who came to A selection of familiar logos designed by Steiner graphic design scene in Hong-Internationale), a group of 200 Hongkong wanted something graphic designers elected into get as much money as quickly more vibrant and resonant of "In many ways," Mr Steiner said, "the picture is membership by their peers. as you can. the place. "Then the American Hotel, We have conferences once a Is that a sign that times still the same today. owned by a couple of Texans, have changed? "Professionally, it is not was sold to Hilton. I was called "They are the best practi-The short answer is yes. terribly stimulating. There is no basic standard that you tioners in graphics. Meeting one morning by the secretary But let's hear it from Mr to the manager who was build-ing the hotel. She also helpfulwith colleagues on that basis is "Up until mid-70s, Hongextremely stimulating in that can't get below. ly suggested that I read that you feel you have something There is no standard that kong was totally amateurish, is a sort of a baseline. Some of except maybe for one or two morning's copy of the SCM to show for what you have the things that get printed are Post which carried the anbeen doing. engineers. Everybody else was quite astounding in their lack nouncement about the hotel's "From time to time, you

have any training.

you. This is something which

is a personal obsession, not

something forced on me by the

You can get away with rather

mediocre work if you don't

have this drive yourself. It is

possible to succeed with any

churning out things.

thing in Hongkong just by

work as important. I don't do

that as a marketing decision. I

just get very much involved with what I do. I have no

"I can't help but treat my

"That is the whole point

market.



Steiner's 1974 Lunar New Year card. This was the last Year of the black suggesting a tiger's pelt

an entrepreneur. People learnof professionalism - advering on the job, apprentices, or tisements that are mis-spelt, whatever you may like to call television commercials that them, people who were fleeing have totally wrong words in from Shanghai and so on. "After that you started get-

ting 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 of people are doing it.' 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-

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

"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

"It 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

That would Mi Steiner have liked to be if he had not opted for graphic design? "At one time I considered