

Arthur Hacker, MBE - Life and Work (1932-2013)

Artist, Illustrator, Historian, Author, Collector

Arthur Hacker met his life's twin objectives: to stay in Hong Kong to the end and to try to make it a better place. Arthur was always fascinated by Hong Kong. He arrived here in December 1967 to work for the Information Services Department (ISD), having studied at the Royal College of Art in England and then worked on the Evening Standard in Fleet Street.

In Wanchai he found his creative muse, his pen and ink drawings, mostly curlicues, inspired by its seedy street life, mini-skirted-girls and bell-bottomed boys. He said that having lived the swinging sixties in London, he was now doing the swinging seventies, Hong Kong-style. News editor of the China Mail from 1968-73 Brian Blackwell, now in Brisbane, recalls the "late, late night drinks in Wanchai bars with Arthur. He was a great character. A legend". The Blue Sky Bar in Jaffe Road was a particular favourite.

The death of Arthur Hacker, MBE, from pneumonia on October 9, aged 81, marked the end of a phenomenally productive life. He was multi-talented: a renowned artist, illustrator, historian, author and creator of Hong Kong's favourite emblem of the 1970s, the anti-litterbug character Lap Sap Chung.

He was an avid collector of books, historic postcards and early Hong Kong and China photos, many featured in his book "China Illustrated. Hacker's Hong Kong" was just one of his many books, both humorous and serious. He also designed beautiful postage stamps for the Hong Kong post office. But it was for his litterbug monster, Lap Sap Chung, that local Hong Kongers remember Arthur.

In 1972 ISD launched its most successful campaign ever, to clean up Hong Kong. Arthur created public enemy number one in Lap Sap Chung, a menacing green, long-snouted monster with red spots and forked tail who was supposed to scare children into picking up rubbish. Colour TV had just arrived to show him in all his vile glory and to a generation of children he was their favourite folk villain.

Arthur also loved history. "He was passionate about it and he was one of the most talented and versatile artists and writers in Hong Kong," says Jonathan Wattis, who exhibited Arthur's work in his Hollywood Road gallery.

"He had a wonderful archive and contributed lot to our history. He did it with great humour, was delightful company and always the artist. He never chased the golden money. He was never going to be rich," adds Wattis.

Arthur was endearingly eccentric; his diet consisted chiefly of bacon sandwiches. He was delightfully politically incorrect. An FCC stalwart, it's hard to believe he will never return to his Friday night roost at the Main Bar, salty dog in hand, resplendent in army camouflage trousers, fisherman's jacket, battered hat nearby.

Despite his gruff exterior Arthur was unfailingly kind. A very private person, he never married. He was master of the one-liner. His approach to drinking: "Never get drunk on a Friday night - you should never have a hangover in your own time." He said he never got married because that way you avoid the tiresome business of getting a divorce.

"But he certainly had an eye for the ladies especially the ones in Wanchai, whom he referred to as "little darlings", recalls Jonathan Sharp. "One bar girl he liked in particular had the splendid tattoo: 'God Bless the Shropshire Light Infantry'," Sharp adds.

One September morning four years ago, I watched Arthur plodding up the hill from an FCC window. Over breakfast he seemed subdued, not himself. It was drizzling and the pavements were greasy. He was wearing his usual knackered old shoes. I reminded him to take care as he set off again. A few minutes later he slipped and fell, hitting his head on some steps. After months in hospital, Arthur was champing to get home to his "collection" in Discovery Bay, but discharge was only possible if he had help at home. Thanks to the efforts of his many FCC and other friends, he was back in own flat for Christmas.

This was also due in no small part to solicitor John Massie, who somehow persuaded the Immigration Department to allow Arthur to have a domestic helper, the devoted Marianita. Eventually, failing health made a residential care home inevitable. Of all the tributes, possibly the almost full-page obituary in the Chinese-language Apple Daily would have surprised Arthur the most. He would have been chuffed to think he warranted that.

By Anna Healy Fenton (The Correspondent, Nov - Dec 2013)