



King of the Duck Stamps

Talented artist Bob Steiner continues his reign as the premier of state waterfowl stamps.

by Chuck Wechsler

About the time you read this, Robert Steiner will push his chair back from the easel and give a last few discerning looks to his acrylic painting of black ducks lifting off the quiet waters of a cattail marsh. Then, once the paint is completely dry, the California artist will carefully package the 6 x 9 1/2-inch painting and send it all the way across the country to wildlife officials in tiny

Rhode Island, where it will be reproduced on the state's ninth annual duck stamp.

Creating yet another image for yet another duck stamp has become pretty much routine for the talented 47-year-old artist. But this painting is unique for it will be his fortieth state waterfowl stamp, a record that is unlikely to ever be broken.

Born in Philadelphia in 1949, Steiner was introduced to the outdoors by his grandfather who took him fishing and hunting on Chesapeake Bay. Then, when he was in his early teens, Steiner's family moved to Miami where he was able to observe wildlife in the Florida Everglades.

Steiner was only 18 when he won his first art competition, which net-



ted him a *National Scholastic* magazine scholarship to the Rhode Island School of Design.

"I thought I was a sort of Jackson Pollock in those days," Steiner recalls. "The art teachers hardly mentioned realism during my first three years at Rhode Island; instead, they usually emphasized abstract theory and practice. I spent many an hour throwing paint out of a Coke bottle onto the canvas. I'm more surprised than anyone to see what I'm doing today, though as a kid I did countless drawings of animals."

Steiner graduated in 1971 and immediately set his sights on New York where he tried in vain to land a job in commercial illustration. Finally, after weeks of

disappointment and frustration, he decided to head for warmer weather in California. Problem was, he didn't own a car and had very little money.

Squeezing all of his few meager belongings into a backpack, Steiner set out walking and hitchhiking to Sydney, Nebraska, where he hopped a west-bound freight train to Sacramento. But even in California jobs were difficult to come by for an inexperienced artist, and so he began drawing pen-and-inks of seascapes and tourist attractions such as the Golden Gate Bridge and Fisherman's Wharf and selling them on the streets of San Francisco.

Within a few years Steiner grew tired of his itinerant, starving artist's lifestyle and enrolled at San Francisco State University, where he earned a master's

degree in print-making in 1976. After that he accepted a part-time teaching position at a college, and began doing freelance illustrations for magazines and books. He also created complex surrealist paintings, one of which won an award from the National Academy of Arts and Letters and was exhibited in prestigious shows around the country.

In 1979 Steiner had also begun to draw and paint animals, but in a somewhat surrealist context and often with grandiose themes. And then he read an article about the Federal duck stamp contest and the overnight acclaim – and million dollars in earnings – that invariably came to the lucky winner.

"It was too late to enter the Federal that year," he recalls, "so I decided to enter the California duck stamp contest, though I really didn't know what I was doing. I went out and photographed some pintails on a lake near my home. Then back in my studio, I painted a drake pintail and what I thought was a hen, though shortly after completing the piece, I realized it was actually a drake in eclipse plumage. I decided to send it off anyway, and I was amazed when it placed second among the seventy entries."

Bolstered by his strong showing and by the burgeoning interest in duck stamps, Steiner spent much of the next twelve months studying and painting waterfowl. His next entry in the state contest, an acrylic painting of two canvasbacks, won the 1981 California Duck Stamp competition and a career was born.

"That win changed my life," he proclaims. "I did my first art show that year and received a great response from collectors. Besides doing prints of the California stamp, I sold three or four of my original paintings, and at

Bob Steiner is now closing in on his fortieth state duck stamp. Left: His dramatic '97 Oregon Duck Stamp is more like a miniature painting than the stiff, graphic design typical of duck stamps in the past.

prices that were three times what I had been asking."

It didn't take long before Steiner's realistic paintings were appearing on several state duck stamps each year. "I kept on teaching art until 1986, but I quit freelance illustration, which I didn't really enjoy because all the artistic decisions were made by someone other than me. At least with duck stamps all the decisions were mine – I either won or I didn't."

Steiner's remarkable success with duck stamps also led to more commissions for his original paintings of waterfowl and other wildlife, while spurring a demand for his own limited edition prints. At one point collectors had to wait 18 months for one of his remarked prints and four years for a commissioned piece (the wait is even longer today!).

Over the past 16 years Steiner's images have since appeared on waterfowl stamps and prints in Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Michigan, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Oregon, Rhode Island and Utah. His art has graced an unprecedented seven California duck stamps, including the 25th Silver Anniversary issue. He's done three "first of state" designs, more than any other artist in the country, and he also painted the 1995 California Upland Game Bird Stamp Print.

Not all of Steiner's duck stamps were selected in competition. Some states commission an artist to paint one or several consecutive annual duck stamps. "Generally, the art is judged as a separate aspect and then combined later with a royalties package that covers the sale of prints," he explains.

"Theoretically, anyone can enter, but





if an artist isn't involved with a publisher and hasn't the wherewithal to make a reasonable royalty offer to the state, then they're essentially excluded."

Steiner has no problem with a state wildlife agency publishing limited edition prints of his work. "Those funds go for wetlands restoration and for that reason, I consider those duck stamp prints to be superior to most other wildlife art which only benefits the publishers and artists."

At first, Steiner looked forward to these contractual arrangements, because he did not have to compete

with other artists. Then he discovered that he often had to submit ten to twenty sketches before one was selected. "Some states respect my expertise and just kind of let me go, but others want to get more involved in the design process," he says. "In fact, I prefer a competition because I can paint what I want."

At this writing Steiner had just completed his acrylic painting of pintails for the '97 California; up next was his painting of black ducks for the state of Rhode Island.

"That will make forty in all, which I believe is more than any other artist," he says. "I'm told that Phillip Crowe has done about that number of state conservation stamps, but not as many waterfowl stamps."

Alter so many years of almost dominating the state duck stamp scene, Steiner has watched – indeed, championed – the evolution in the design

and composition of waterfowl stamps. "When I started out in 1981, the typical duck stamp was a very graphic design, almost like a logo. It usually depicted ducks or geese set against flat-blue skies, because the state wildlife agencies didn't want anything to interfere with the birds. Back then, there was so much competition among the artists that we were reluctant to do anything subtle or different in the background."

Then, in 1983, Steiner decided to break from tradition. For his entry in the '84 Nevada, he painted a drake and hen pintail gliding down onto a large marsh framed by barren desert mountains. He further enhanced the beauty and mood of the setting by painting the marsh grasses and clouds in warm shades of tangerine and gold. Steiner had once again played "the duck stamp game," as artists had come to call designs which emphasized the birds' size, but with a notable difference. This time the colorful background gave the painting the look of a miniature landscape.

It was a daring approach to take for the most competitive state duck stamp contest in America, one that was widely known as the "mini-Federal." Yet Steiner's painting came out on top among the 314 entries, which to this day is still a record among all the states.

"I like to think that my '84 Nevada started the trend toward full landscapes," he says proudly. "Today, I don't see any difference between gallery pieces and duck stamps. They've evolved into complete paintings in

Left: In his '96 Oregon, Steiner dared to be different by mixing three species: wigeon, mallards and snow geese. Above: His 1994 Utah Duck Stamp.





which the backgrounds are almost as important as the birds themselves."

Steiner's '97 Oregon reflects this new direction. It's a spectacular scene of canvasbacks descending on the wind-swept waters of the Columbia River. In the lead is a luminously painted "bull" can that's about to fly right out of the picture and into your lap. All of the birds are bathed in a dazzling yellow glow that makes them stand out in brilliant contrast against the dark storm clouds. It's a scene straight from the hunter's heart.

"I think it's the best duck stamp painting I've ever done," Steiner told me, without any hint of braggadocio. "I've done more with the clouds and sky and trees than in any painting I can remember."

While his feelings about duck stamp design and composition have changed, Steiner still uses acrylic paints and Masonite panels for almost all of his work. "I'd guess that 90 percent of my entries are in acrylic," he says. "I

like the medium because it's bright and lustrous, and it enables me to impart a lot of detail. I learned how to paint in oils and I always hated the smell of turpentine, but with acrylics, you use water as a solvent.

"In the beginning I was more of a graphic artist – my natural skills were toward composition and contrast," Steiner reflects. "But over the years I've been able to develop and refine my color schemes and to improve in other areas of my painting.

"I'm still a realist, but I hope to bring new things to my art all the time. That's what kept me going and that's what I look forward to in the future."

Shortly after winning the Florida duck stamp in 1986, Steiner made the decision to publish his own limited editions. Today, Steiner Prints, located just a few blocks from the Presidio in the Inner Richmond district of San Francisco, has 13 full-time employees who sell and distribute more than 5,000 prints a year.

Steiner composed his '95 California image so the scene could be divided into four different stamp images. The set of four, called the se-tenant edition, is now a valuable collector's item.

"Everyone knows that the market for wildlife art softened during the last recession, but my sales have doubled in recent years," he notes. "We now have the names of more than 4,000 avid collectors of my work and we keep getting new ones every year.

"I've definitely found my niche in the art world," says Steiner, who along with his wife Boots, son Marc, 12, and daughter Katie, 9, makes his home in San Francisco. "I love my subject matter; I enjoy the challenge in creating each new composition; and I take pride in the fact that my art has helped to preserve wetlands and the environment.

"But someday, I'd like to retire knowing that nobody will match my record, at least not for a long, long time."