With 70—that’s right, 70—duck stamps to his artistic credit, representing 15 states and the federal contest, it’s no surprise that Robert Steiner is considered ‘top quack’ in the duck stamp world. There are state officials who credit him with helping the duck stamp program survive in their part of the country, while others say that for the past 25 years, Steiner has been in the forefront of a movement that has transformed the early years of the “plain Jane,” rather dull variety of stamps, with the ducks outlined on a relatively flat background, into works that today “are bona fide, legitimate, collectible pieces of fine art.”

It’s hard to think all that could have been lost if he had starved to death in a locked refrigerator railroad car on a Utah siding, as he almost did, and it is a long way from hawking pen-and-ink San Francisco street scenes for $3, which is what he did to raise rent money. And it is even further away from his “first saleable works”—battlefield scenes, complete with soldiers and tanks—which he traded for baseball cards among fellow fifth-graders who couldn’t draw their own battlefields.

“Do you remember those days?” Steiner reminisced in his San Francisco studio. “We would draw these battle-
fields and then have streams of bullets flying across the paper with lots of bang, bang, bangs, and boom, boom booms, and scribble out a soldier who was hit or a tank that was blown up. Lots of kids couldn’t draw the battlefield scene, so I would sell them a scene and they could put in their own bullets and bangs.”

Steiner considers himself to be exceptionally fortunate. He has been able to take three things about which he is passionate—waterfowl hunting, art and environmental conservation—and turn them into an extremely successful business with millions of dollars being raised to buy and conserve waterfowl flyway areas. “I’m sure there are people who think that it was all driven by the chance to build a business, but it is actually the other way around—the business grew out of finding that there was an enthusiastic market for what we are trying to do in the duck stamp world.”

Four Stamps in One Painting

And this year, his work is being honored in an unusual way with the states of Alaska, Oregon and Washington commissioning him to do a four-part stamp painting, one part for each of the three states and the fourth part as a tribute to his 25 years of duck stamp painting. “I have set an entire year aside for this commission and I am absolutely thrilled by it. I want it to be the best piece of work I have ever done,” says Steiner, sitting at his desk in the bay window of an old San Francisco row house not far from Presidio Park and the Golden Gate Bridge.

On his desk is the early outline for the piece, which will measure 23 inches across by 17 inches high. It is scheduled to include a mixed flock of 24 birds, including mallards, pintails, wigeons and green-winged teals. “I know it’s unusual, but those birds do sometimes flock together.” What he is creating, says Steiner, is an “in your dreams” experience for duck hunters—something they would love to look through their gun sight and see, maybe just once in their life.

Steiner has taken a tortuous path on the road to becoming an artist. His father favored business while his mother painted briefly as a hobby. “I believe she had talent. She only did 15 paintings in the two years she painted, but they were good. The talent was there; it just didn’t get developed. I’m sure that whatever abilities I may have for art came from that side of the family,” he says. A third-grade teacher told Steiner he had an aptitude for art, but he was completely unaware of it until two years later when he was turning battlefields into baseball cards.

Born in Philadelphia in 1949, Steiner says his grandfather fostered an early love of the outdoors, taking him hunting and fishing on Chesapeake Bay, and in his early teens when the family moved to Miami, he wandered the Florida Everglades, expanding his knowledge and appreciation. Art featured little in his high school years, except toward the end, when he won an award for best artist in his high school and came in second in a competition for the best artist in the Miami-Dade County School District. A scholarship from Scholastic Magazine took him to the Rhode Island School of Design, which he considered a top undergraduate school. “But the undergraduate years were a complete waste. I am one of those students who got trapped in the college world where the faculty could only focus on abstraction. I remember it: I was standing there throwing paint on the floor out of a Coke bottle,” he says, shuddering at the memory.

Drama on a Freight Train

With a bachelor’s degree in hand, he unsuccessfully trudged the streets of New York City, looking for work, “until I decided that if I was going to be homeless and hungry, I might as well do it in California where it was warm,” he says, and where (in 1971) artists were much more widely accepted. Stuffing everything he owned into a backpack, Steiner hitchhiked to Sidney, Neb., where he met two other hitchhikers, and they hopped a freight train (the first time in his life) headed for Cheyenne, Wyo.

“We dropped off after about 10 miles to look for a train going west and found one that had no boxcars, just refrigerator cars. Because the doors could be closed and locked from the outside, we decided to have someone on watch, but on my watch, I fell asleep. About 3 or 4 a.m., I heard what I thought was some hobo—really, it was like a scene from the Grapes of Wrath—but someone slammed the door shut and it became pitch black. Fortunately, the refrigeration was turned off. We shouted and banged but nobody heard us. Every time the train stopped we would make as much noise as we could to wake them.”

Steiner has designed this in-progress painting of a mixed flock of 24 birds so that it can be ‘quartered’ into four separate stamps. Three will be for the states of Alaska, Oregon and Washington, and the fourth will be used by all three states to pay tribute to Steiner’s 25 years of duck stamp art.
Steiner won the 1998 Federal Duck Stamp Contest with this painting of a Barrow's goldeneye.

next year I won with a hen and a drake in breeding plumage.” And Robert Steiner, duck stamp artist, took wing.

Since the mid-1980s, he has created a steady stream of successful duck stamps, including three “first of state” issues—1989 Rhode Island, 1990 Colorado and 1991 New Mexico—culminating in 1998 when he won the Federal Duck Stamp Competition.

Career Shifts to Ducks

Steiner was doing a little teaching, along with some freelance illustration work, when he found a magazine article explaining how to sell offset prints by the thousands, and the most popular item at the time was the Federal Duck Stamp. “I talked with other artists who said they weren’t interested, but it seemed like a great idea to me,” even though he had never done a painting of a duck. He was too late for the federal competition (in 1980) so he entered the California Duck Stamp Competition and came in second, even though he’d painted two drakes instead of the more customary drake and a hen. “When people pointed this out, I didn’t admit that the plumage had fooled me. I just mumbled something about trying a little different approach. But I was thinking, ‘Wow! Second among 80 entries on my first try!’ The
Steiner, an avid duck hunter who has a room filled with stuffed birds that he uses for models, most shot by himself, with a collection that includes a pair of almost every North American waterfowl except for some of the most rare. "It used to be that hunters judged the stamps, and they like to see a bird landing toward them, offering a great shot, rather than flying away or sitting on the water. But today, judges come from all walks of life and every bird position has an equal chance of winning, in my view."

The duck stamp, which hunters must buy in order to hunt waterfowl, started in 1933, when a Des Moines, Iowa, newspaper cartoonist, J.N. “Ding” Darling, saw that waterfowl were disappearing as a result of drought and the Dust Bowl. He proposed to President Teddy Roosevelt that the stamp be issued to raise money to help the birds survive and Roosevelt said something to the effect that it was a terrific idea, go for it, you’re in charge. Darling drew the first stamp himself—a hen and drake mallard landing on water with a rather flat, washed-out background, which set the tone for duck stamps for many years.

From Stamp to Art

Today, the stamps are collectibles, not just as duck stamps, but as examples of art. And though many artists have contributed to this change, “I think it is fair to say that Bob Steiner has been at the forefront of this movement over the years,” says Patricia Fisher, chief of the Federal Duck Stamp Office. "It is true that while other artists have made major contributions in helping move the stamp forward, Steiner has been the prime mover in evolving the stamp from its rather simple early beginnings to the..."
legitimate art collectible that it is today,” Fisher says. “As an art collector, I have found myself looking at a stamp and realizing that I am not looking at it as a stamp, but as a piece of fine art.”

For Steiner, who has won more duck stamp competitions than any other artist, the program has an element of “artistic competition. You don’t just do a painting and put it out there to see if people like it. For each stamp, you go head to head with other top artists and you either win or you lose,” he says. It’s rather like going for the ‘best of show’ in each contest.

Steiner believes that the "magic of painting" is to create a convincing three-dimensional image on a two-dimensional surface. He has worked on “volumizing” the birds, until today they look ready to fly right off the stamp into your living room. Flocks of birds, including mixed breeds, have taken over sometimes from the popular pair. Steiner considers his 1984 winning Nevada Duck Stamp to be a watershed moment in stamp art. In an open competition that drew more than 300 entries, Steiner decided to set the birds against a realistic landscape instead of the customary vague backdrop. In succeeding years the landscape evolved and is still evolving. In his 2002 California stamp, with a flock of pintails flying over a marsh with reeds in the foreground and middle distance, and hills in the background, all areas of the painting are equally sharp.

“I love crispness, but I recognize that I can further enhance the bird by developing a distinction between soft and sharp edges within the painting. And at the same time, I am focusing on the clouds. I may take different routes to get to the same painting goal, but along the way, subtleties emerge, and the more I paint, the more I realize that the difference between good and great painting often lies in those subtleties, subtleties that most people may not even see.”

Today Steiner stands largely alone, but not lonely, on a plateau he has created atop the world of wildlife duck art. But he chuckles as he grabs a pencil and says, “Just now and then I think, wouldn’t it be fun to do a few of those old battlefield scenes?” Sure—or maybe hop a freight train.”

This golden retriever graced the 1991 New Hampshire Duck Stamp.