

Greeting Cards.

March and April beat me up. Within this two month span I have 7 birthdays, one anniversary, one and a half loooong weeks to amuse my kids as they are paroled from school for spring vacation and oh yes April 15th. How do I dig myself out of this morass? Greeting cards! All right, all right the IRS has not appreciated my efforts but my kids and my ever-growing group of friends and family born under the sign of the ram do.

By now we've all seen those family photo greeting postcards that are so prevalent. You know the ones, half or two thirds of the card is a picture of the family or the new baby or the new dog, cat or hamster, the other part is some holiday greeting.

Why not get a little more creative? With today's desktop printers, easy to purchase blank greeting cards and Photoshop you have the tools to produce highly professional looking cards and perhaps create something truly original.

One of my son's best friends birthday was on the horizon. He is passionate about dragons so we thought we would create a unique card just for him. I am lucky enough to have a very talented artist in my son so together we designed and drew Leon's card. He thought a dragon on a bed of flames with the phrase "Leon, He's not just cool – He's Hot" would be just the thing. I told him to work on the dragon and we would try the flames on the computer.

Here is what we came up with.



Phil and Killian Mansfield's greeting card effort.

Pretty awesome!

First we scanned the dragon drawing in at 300 dpi and saved it as a tiff. JPEG would have been okay too. He originally drew it on an 11"x8" piece of paper with the dragon itself about 9"x5". I could set the image size with the scanner software but I prefer doing that in Photoshop. We named it "Leons' Amazingly Awesome Dragon" – (what can I tell ya', egos run big in this family), and we saved to a folder on our drive called "Family projects."

We opened it in Photoshop. The first thing I wanted to do was separate the dragon from its white background. Remember when your scanner scans it includes the paper too; it does not separate your image from its background. I could add the other components of our project directly to this layer but I knew I wanted to play with layer styles and create different effects for each separate element of card.

I created a duplicate layer of the dragon by going to the Layer palette and dragging the background layer to the new layer icon at the bottom of the Layer palette. We named it dragon background and color-coded it green in the layer dialog box.

Choose **Layer>Layer Properties**.

Much to my shame I don't always name and color code layers in my photo work but on art projects like this the layers can add up very quickly. Color coding and naming Layers helps me stay organized and that keeps the creative juices flowing a little better while working in Photoshop.

To separate the dragon I used the Color Range dialog box.

Choose **Select>Color Range**.

I selected the white background and worked with slider until I was satisfied with the selection.

Click **Okay**.

Part of the dragon needed to be deselected. I used the lasso tool while holding down the Option key. I clicked and dragged around the parts I wanted to remove from the selected area and released the mouse. Now to separate it and give it its own layer:

Choose **Select>Inverse**.

Choose **Layer>New>Layer via copy**.

Choose **Layer>Layer Properties**.

I named it “dragon” and color-coded it green.

Next we created the flames. We opened a new layer and named it “fire” and color-coded it orange. To get the flames my son and I just played with layering different shapes from the pen and marquee tools and adding various styles, filters and gradients to each separate layer until we were happy with what we had created. After you select a shape try clicking on the **Add Anchor** point tools and stretch your shape using the anchor points and direction points. Filters from the distort group can create some wild shapes. Also work with your opacity sliders. When making fire I like this improvisatory approach. If I find something I really like I save it with all its layers so I can bring it up for future projects.

When we had a fire we liked we merged all the fire layers together. Make sure the top most layer of the group of things you want to merge is selected in the Layer palette and that the dragon layers are not visible.

Choose **Layer>Merge Visible**.

For the text we decided to split the caption. “Leon He’s not just cool” on the outside with the image and “He’s Hot” on the inside of the card.

We chose a font called “Nyx.” I am always looking for fonts when I am surfing the web. There are many web sites out there that sell fonts, almost all of them have a few for free too. I typed on the dragon layer and immediately a text layer was created. We added a drop shadow by using Layer Styles.

Choose **Layer>Layer Styles** and click on drop shadow.

We set our opacity at 45%, our angle at 130, distance at 38px, spread at 29 and size at 8px. I then clicked on the color picker box in the layer styles box and sampled from the dragon’s green skin for a slight tint to the shadow. I then clicked on bevel and emboss. From the **Structure** box I selected an inner bevel with a hard chisel, depth 100%, direction up, size 98px. From **Shading** box I entered an angle of 135 altitude of 30, used a global light, and once again I sampled from the dragon to give the highlight a hint of color.

I created a new document for the inside of the card. Using the same font I used on the outside of the card I also used all the same drop shadow settings except I gave the shadow a reddish tint. I also added a gradient to it from the gradient drop down menu in the layer styles box.

Almost done. My son and I were getting quite impressed with ourselves now. As we brought all the layers into view we both felt something was missing. It was lacking a certain something on the cool-o-meter. That was solved by giving the dragon and the flame layers their own little drop shadows and a hint of bevel and emboss. This seemed to make our dragon jump off the page! I saved the whole thing unflattened so I could use it as a template for future cards, not that my son does not enjoy artistic indentured servitude.

Now to the printing, I work with two printers at home an Epson 2000p for my work that needs to be archival and a fairly inexpensive HP photo printer. For our card I used the HP. The image quality is just fine for our purposes. I would still use the same printer even if I were printing a photo card — hey ink’s expensive!

I had picked up the greeting cards a few months ago at one of those big office chains. Being the frugal freelancer I am I always look for sales on paper stock. I found a package of twenty cards and envelopes on sale for three bucks each package. Needless to say I picked the shelves clean.

The hardest part of this project for me is the printing. Remembering which side and what direction the paper needs to be facing in order for the outside and the inside of the card to be aligned is harder than you might think, (if it’s not hard for you please save me the embarrassment and don’t show anyone else this article). I learned the hard way to do test runs on scrap paper folded like the greeting cards and I always use the printers “draft” mode for the first few prints. Getting your image to be perfectly centered can take a bit of work, especially if your printer doesn’t output borderless prints. My printers don’t have any settings for folded greeting cards so I have to position the images by “hand.” Use your print preview when you can and save any settings when you do get it just right. I like to print the inside of the cards first and then, when the ink has set, I flip it over and print the image on the card’s front.

Leon liked the card so much he asked if we could make him a small poster. Since we had saved the entire file in our “Family Projects” folder, it was no problem. We put all the “copy” on the one page and resized it in Photoshop as an 11"x14" poster. Now if only I could resize my IRS bill.