

Put a little Sparkle and Frost into your holiday flourishes! These delightful Festive Flourishes are a joy to bring to life with the pointed pen. You will be amazed at the diversity and creativity in these sweet designs that are created with true offhand flourishing. We will use dark papers and bleed proof white in these intricate winter wonders. Let's anticipate the beauty of the season together as we flourish these sweet stars and snowflakes. All skill levels are welcome.

Recommended Supplies:

Your favourite pointed pen and pen holder

Pencil, ruler, eraser

Star and Snowflake cookie cutters are helpful, but guides will be provided

Dark Cardstock in any festive colour

Bleed Proof White with mixing brush and small water container

Any metallic inks or watercolours to add a touch of sparkle

Flourishing Basics:

The rules of offhand flourishing are very simple. Shaded strokes should not cross through shaded strokes. Hairlines may cross through hairlines or shaded strokes.

Shaded strokes should be very distinct. They should have clearly defined areas of taper and swell. They should begin with a hairline and end with a hairline to make them look graceful and refined.

The curves should be very graceful. You should always be aware of oval shapes while you are flourishing.

Be aware of the actual space of the area that you want to flourish. It is easy to start enjoying the process of flourishing so much that you start to exceed a visual boundary. The white spaces that you are creating around and inside your flourishes are as important as the ink lines being created.

Try to keep a sense of connectedness in your flourish. Visually, the strokes of your flourish should look as is if they are converging out of or are connected to something in your design. Avoid "rogue strokes" that look like they have no proper place in the flourish. Strokes should look as if they belong to the design. Study nature. See how a vine meanders, or how leaves and petals appear on a stem. Your flourishes do not have to obey the laws of gravity if the strokes themselves have a sense of purpose in the overall design.

There is a lot of paper movement when you are flourishing. Constantly adjust the position of the paper so you can make the best stroke possible. It is best to work on flat surface rather than a slant board. Remember that the paper serves the hand. Don't compromise hand position while you are working. Adjust the paper as often as needed. Always be aware of the wet ink that is on the paper while you are repositioning. You will be using quite a bit of ink on your flourish, and it does take some time to dry properly.

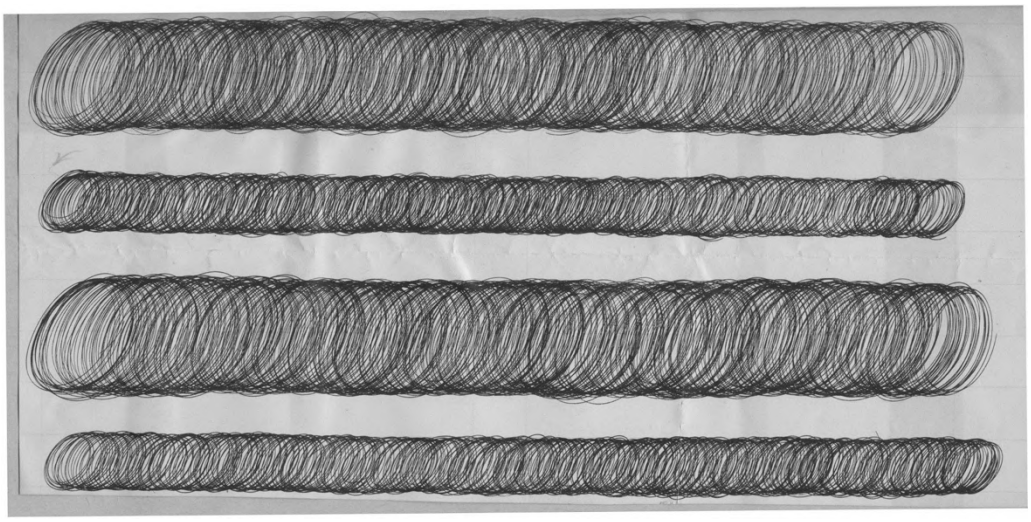
You will be doing larger strokes than when you are lettering. This does require a larger range of arm movement. The more you practice doing smooth arm and shoulder movements, the more smooth and graceful your work will appear. A daily warm up that utilizes shoulder movement will go a long way in helping your range of motion.

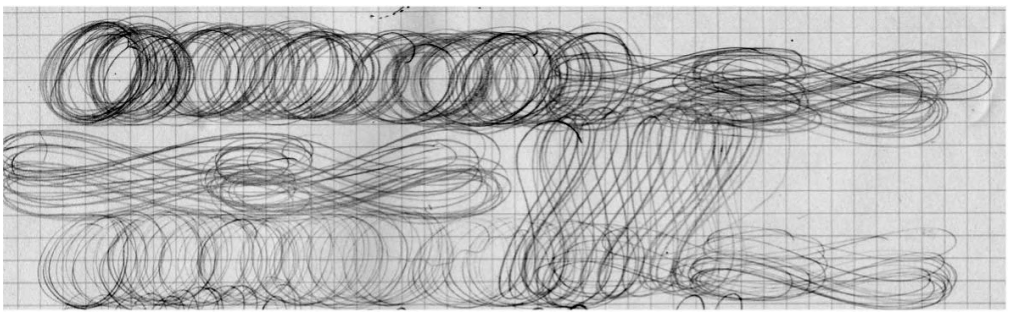
I work small and pull most strokes toward my body. Larger strokes on large pieces of work may require you to use a straight holder and throw strokes away from your body on the paper rather than pulling them toward you. You will become more familiar with your comfortable flourishing movements the more you practice.

The Importance of Warm Up:

I begin all my studio work whether it is writing or flourishing with the same warm up. The warmup is meant to not only wake up my muscles but also to prepare my mind for the task of writing. As calligraphic artists we are entrusted with work that is very meaningful to our clients whether it is an important quote, sacred verse, wedding invitation or commemorative gift. All our final work is very special to us and to our clients. I need to rid my mind of any stress or angst before I begin to work as the pointed pen can easily reflect any anxiety in our minds or bodies with shaky lines on the page. My warmup process takes me about 5-10 minutes every day. If I leave my studio desk for an errand or break, I often need to repeat a brief warm up to get me back into that writing mode.

My warmup is always the same progression of pencil strokes to pointed pen strokes. This will be demonstrated in the class. The warmup is based on a technique used in penmanship classes in the early 1900's. Mine are much more relaxed and target, breathing and posture as well as muscle memory. The image below is taken from a penmanship scrapbook from 1906. The oval exercise would have been timed, and the student would have aimed for accuracy in shape. One penmanship manual notes that the students should try to complete 200 ovals per minute. My technique is much more relaxed. While you are working on your oval shapes, lateral figure eights and upright figure eights, try to find the speed you need to create accurate shapes without any shakiness evident in the lines. The bottom image is typical of one of my warmups.





Defining The Flourish:

True Offhand Flourishing is done by putting ink directly onto blank paper without any preplanning. There are no pencil marks to help the artist. The process is spontaneous and meant to be done without first designing the project. The process is very meditative and peaceful but can be daunting to those just starting out. There is no substitute for the unique and organic nature of these designs. It is a wonderful and versatile skill to have in your toolbox.

Rendered Designs: These are far more common than true offhand flourishing. Pencil marks are added to help design the flourish. Some artists, completely pre-pencil their design before adding the inked strokes. These designs are usually far more complex in nature than offhand flourishing. This can seem to be the best path forward in flourishing, but it has definite pitfalls. The resulting designs can look "stiff" especially if the artist tries hard to re-trace their original pencil lines. The final flourish can appear rigid and lack some of the vitality and spontaneity of true offhand flourishing. I rarely employ this method of flourishing. The only time I will use this method, is if I need to duplicate an exact mirror image of a flourish on a border design of a large piece of work.

Constrained Designs: A constrained flourish allows pencil guides to act as a barrier and border for an offhand flourish. These designs are typically completed in true offhand flourishing manner without preplanning the design other that the basic shape or outline. Our cookie cutter flourishes are examples of constrained flourishes. They retain the vitality and spontaneity of our true offhand designs but are restricted to a shape of a design. These are usually a very striking evoke a sense of wonder.



The Progression of the Flourish:

1. **Establish your line:** Begin with a skeleton form of the shape of your flourish. This is usually accomplished with compound curves. The curves should be delicate and graceful. Shades should have a definite beginning and a definite ending. Try to avoid long, continuous, heavy shades. Your work will look much more delicate and graceful if the shades swell and taper distinctly. If you are going to use larger elements such as a bird or a plume, it is begun the same way. Establish the central shape. If you are going to do a floral flourish, you should establish your floral shapes at this point.

2. **Begin to fill out the design**: Once your skeleton form is established, start adding other flourish strokes around your central form. At this point there is often a repetition of pattern and movement in your flourish. Remember to keep a sense of connectedness in your design. You want to avoid "rogue strokes" that look out of place on your design.

3. **Add your accents:** This is the point where the design really starts to look complex and impressive. You can add your accent strokes, wheat flourishes, touches of colour, metallic accents, etc. At this point, you are adding shadow strokes as well. A shadow stroke follows along the path of any of your main strokes. Your main design is fully established and you add depth by mirroring those strokes. I often use a metallic to achieve this effect. You can experiment with how close you want to place your shadow stroke to your main stroke. Keep your touch delicate so the strokes act as shadows that compliment your main design.

4. **Know when to stop:** This is often difficult. It is so freeing and meditative to continue to add flourishes, colours, and sparkles that the drama of your initial design is lost. One of the most difficult tasks in flourishing is knowing when enough is enough.

5. **Begin again!!:** This is the key to flourishing- practice! Try it on the next envelope you must send out. Don't wait until you have something special to do. Dedicate practice time to this artform and you will watch it rapidly improve.

Thought Process: The process of flourishing is peaceful and meditative. You will reach a state of “flow” where you will no longer be aware of making analytical decisions for your flourish. Instead, you will be instinctively creating the designs. This happens once a “pathway for flourishing” is created in your mind. This comes with time and practice.

Basic Cartouche: Very few strokes are needed for these designs, and they can be very striking even in their simplest forms. They add a hint of decoration to your work without being overly elaborate. You can expand upon them and accent them with colour for extra depth.

1.Begin with the primary stroke or compound curve. The white spaces are as important as the inked strokes.

2.Add slender and gracefully curved strokes to the main strokes of the cartouche.

3.Observe the negative spaces created by the compound curves. The negative space should remain airy but can also have tiny accents strokes added. Observe your cartouche from all sides as you embellish the design with accent strokes.

Each time the pen goes to the paper, try to make the most beautiful stroke you can.



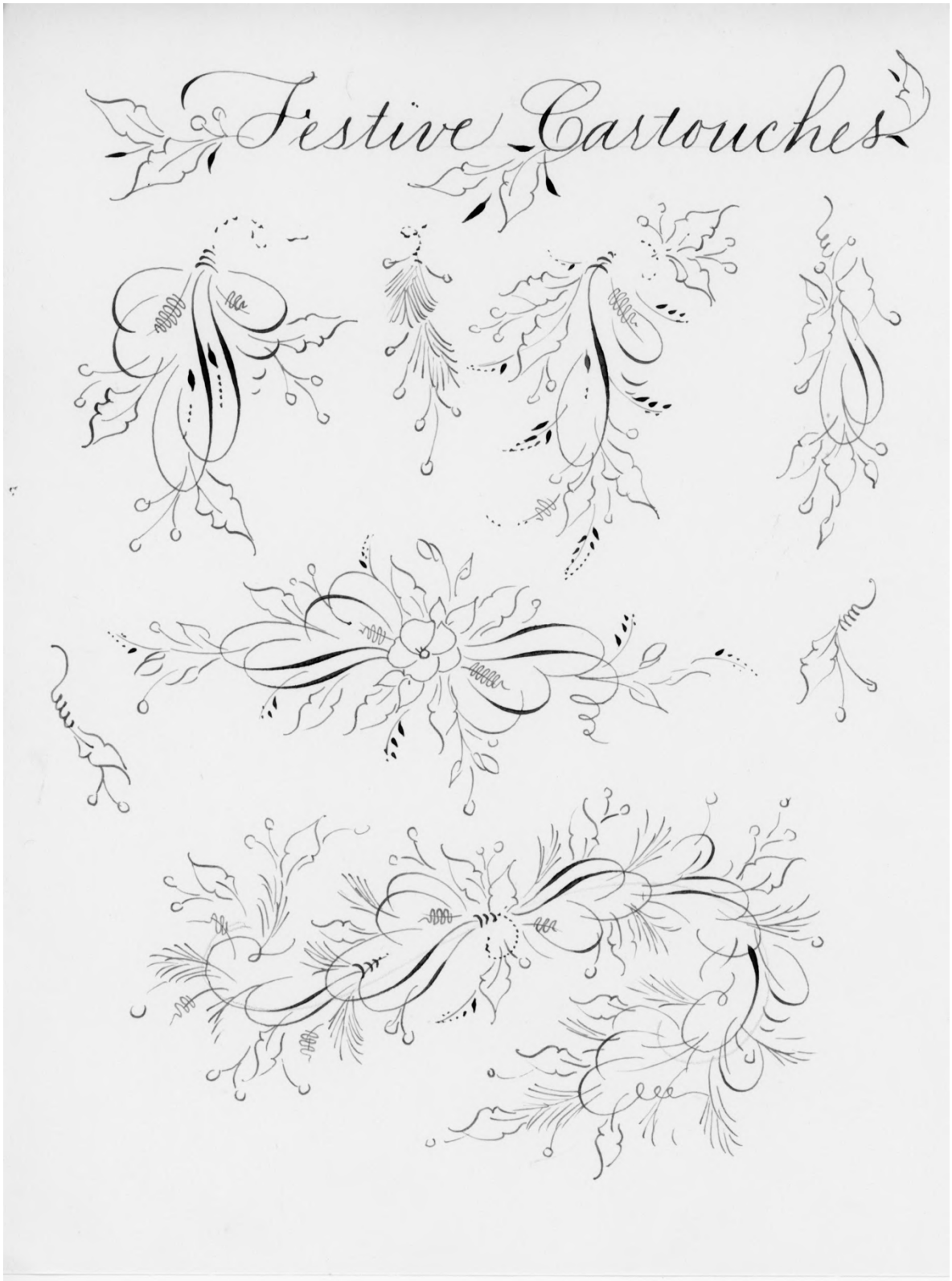
Simple Accent strokes can be added to your cartouche designs. Accent strokes are not rushed or created carelessly. Each one is created with a precise stroke from your pointed pen.



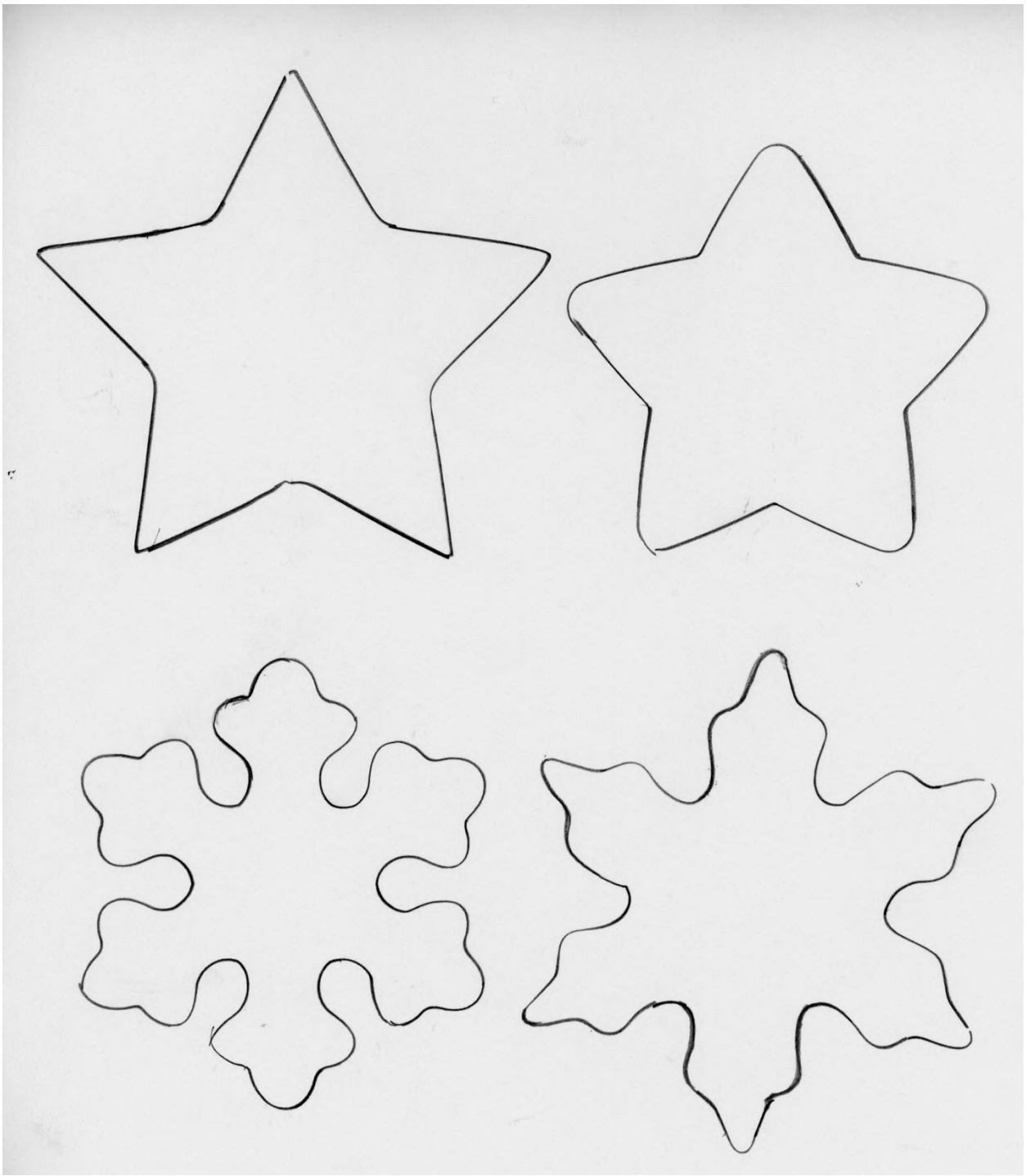
Festive Accent Strokes can be augmented with a touch of colour. Colour will add visual weight to your flourish designs. It can also add a lovely touch of sparkle when done with metallic inks or watercolours.

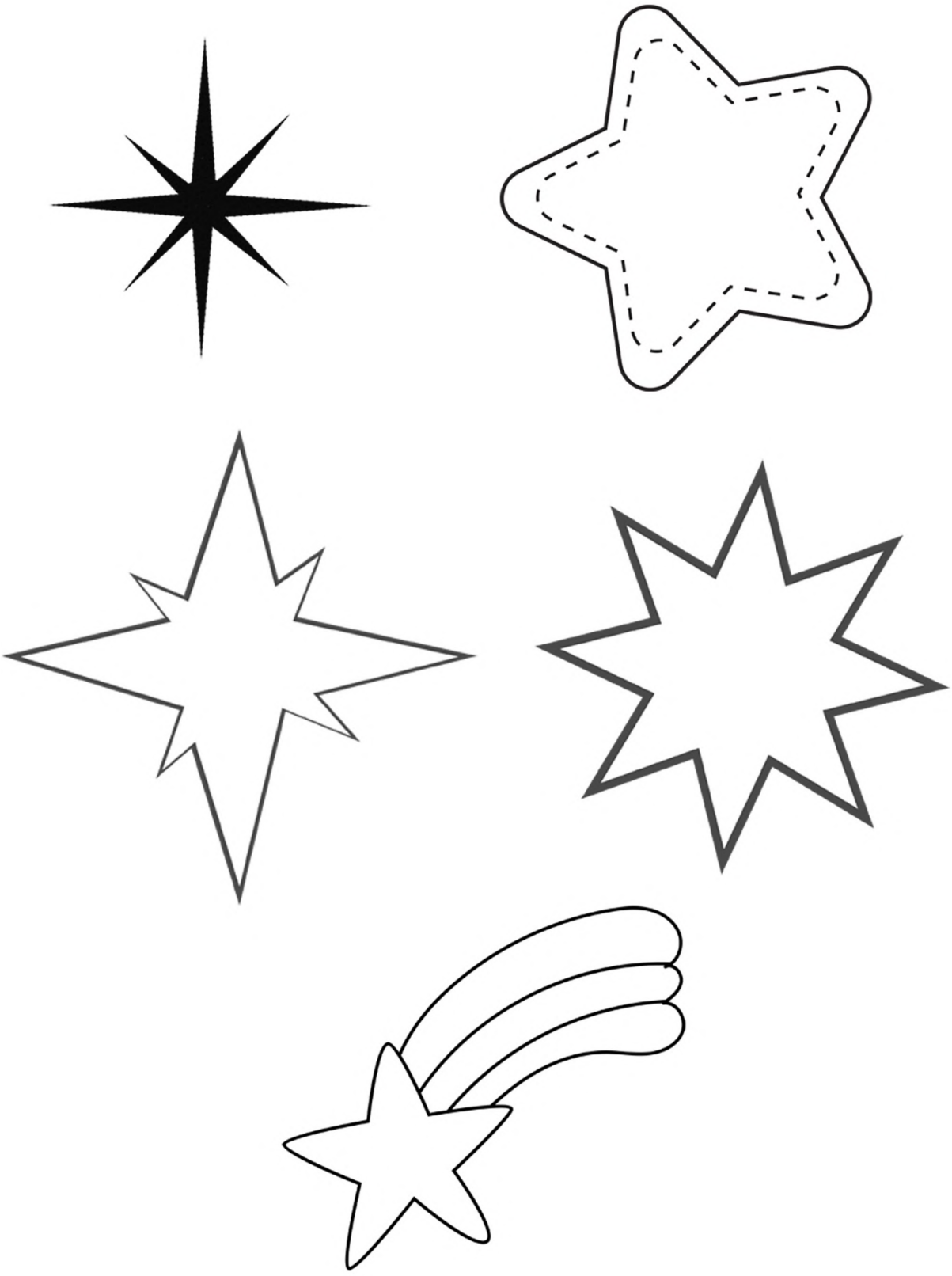


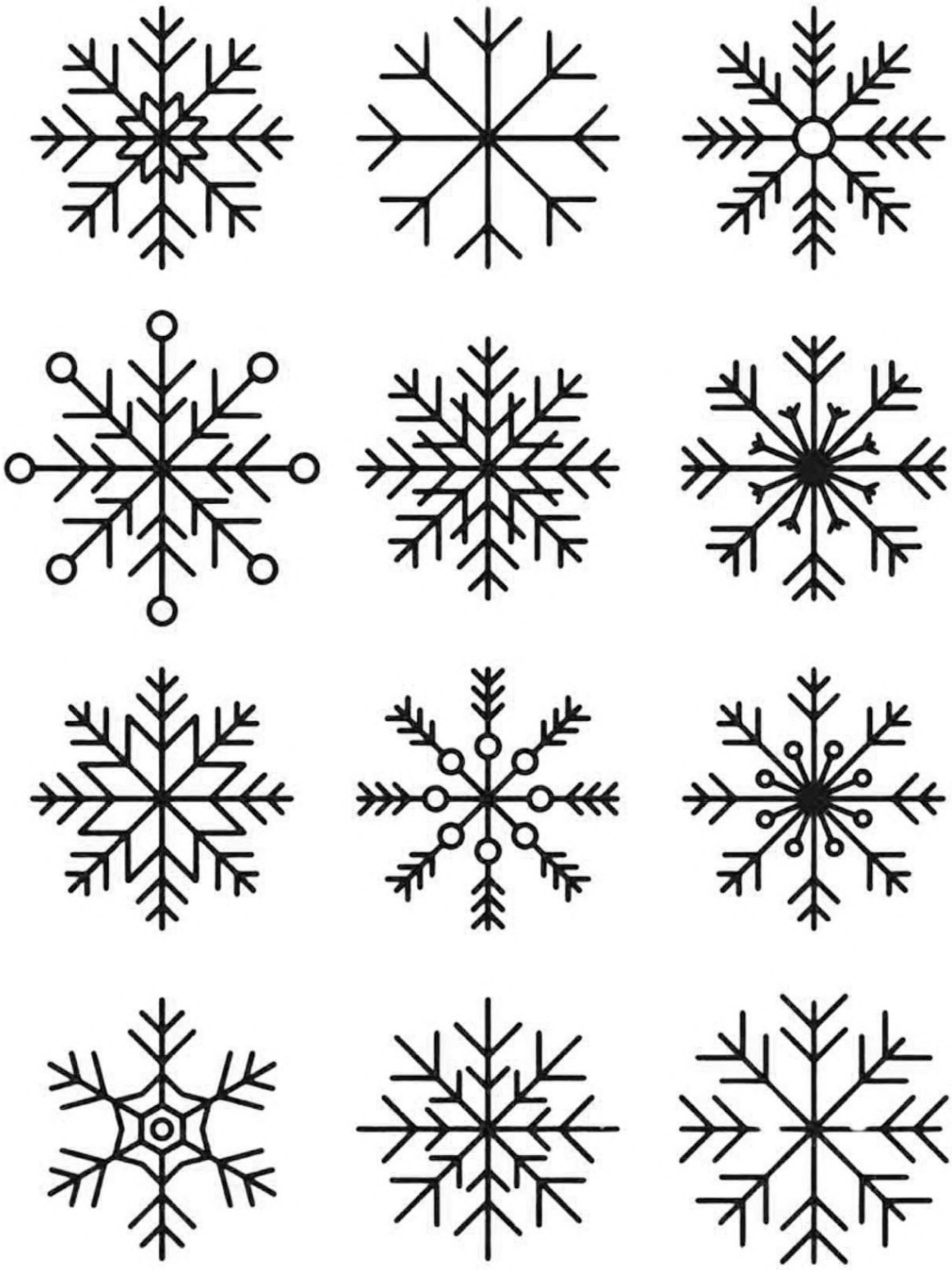
Create multiple pages of cartouche explorations. The cartouches will make your flourishes dance on the page. As we progress through the projects, you will begin to see the importance of the cartouches. Keep playing and experiment with different Festive accent strokes.



Simple Templates: Be on the lookout for different shapes and sizes of star and snowflake cookie cutters. They are wonderful starting places for our flourishes.





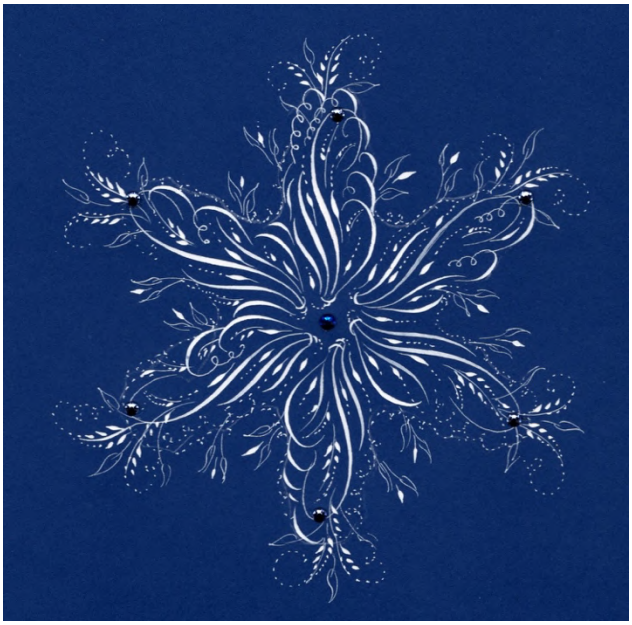


Oh, What Fun! If you want to include lettering in your Festive Flourishes, the star design is a great place to begin. I used two different sizes of cookie cutters to create the edges for the star design. The counter spaces between the two sizes of the templates helped me to establish the x-height for the design. I find that I have an extra bounce in my calligraphic lettering throughout the holiday season. Find whichever words suit your design and really play with the possibilities. I used Stickles Holiday Red glitter flue for the sparkle effect in the composition. I think it would have been overwhelming to use Swarovski crystals, but the central star could have been augmented with crystals.



Believe in the Process: You have your own vision and a unique voice in this wonderful world. When you are learning a new skill, it is easy to give in to doubt and uncertainty and get frustrated. I can assure you that my work in offhand flourishing has come with time on task and dedicated practice. I failed many times. But the Festive Flourishes are a wonderfully simple way to build up confidence and explore different designs. Snowflake cookie cutters were the templates for these designs. When incorporating words into the flourish, they should be done before any of the flourishes. Every time we do a flourish, a fresh design can emerge. Each of these flourishes were done with Bleed proof white on blue cardstock, but each one is completely different and unique.







Sparkle and Shine: The key to understanding offhand flourishing is repetition. The Festive designs featured on these pages are a great place to begin and perfect the art form. Enjoy the process! Have a beautiful Holiday Season. May you Flourish!

Heather Victoria Held, 2025

