

FLANEURING

Flâneur (pronounced flah-NUR) is a term popularized in 19th century Paris to describe a man (usually) who while wandering through the city at a leisurely pace, absorbs sights and sounds. Flâneuring implies not merely getting from point A to point B, but savoring the journey and unexpected encounters it can bring. In his essay "The Painter of Modern Life" (1863), Charles Baudelaire described the flâneur as a "passionate spectator":

[Monsieur G] goes out and watches the river of life flow past him in all its splendour and majesty. He marvels at the eternal beauty and the amazing harmony of life in the capital cities, a harmony so providentially maintained amid the turmoil of human freedom. He gazes upon the landscapes of the great city — landscapes of stone, caressed by the mist or buffeted by the sun. He delights in fine carriages and proud horses, the dazzling smartness of the grooms, the expertness of the footmen, the sinuous gait of the women, the beauty of the children, happy to be alive and nicely dressed — in a word he delights in universal life.

Baudelaire's Monsieur G was a painter who had purpose beyond casual strolling for after having absorbed the cityscape, he would return late in the evening to his *pied-à-terre* and draw what he'd seen:

Few men are gifted with the capacity of seeing; there are fewer still who possess the power of expression. So now, at a time when others are asleep, Monsieur G is bending over his table, darting on to a sheet of paper the same glance that a moment ago he was directing toward external things....

In our time when, like Baudelaire's Monsieur G, we unclutter our mind by whatever means, we are free to contemplate new things. Getting away from home or work place or the news or demands of the day can enable creativity; after all, inspiration often strikes when one is not looking for it. Flâneuring can be practiced anywhere or anytime; Indeed many of us flâneur without even realizing — perhaps while ambling along a hiking trail or on a beach just admiring the scenery. Although the term generally applies to the act of walking, mental detachment can be achieved by such non-physical activities as meditation or yoga, or making music or art.

I don't deny the potential health benefits of exercise, but in my late 80s, and especially since the Covid pandemic altered certain habits, I've developed a morning routine that, although different from what Baudelaire encouraged, provides some of the same benefits. After morning coffee and ablutions, I get in my car and set off alone for — nowhere in particular. Most often I head north on the Palisades Parkway — a favorite route is through uncrowded stretches of Harriman State Park. While driving along country roads my mind wanders and I contemplate fresh ideas and projects. Indeed, flâneuring in any form can be both inspirational and therapeutic.



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