



TRANSCRIPT

EPISODE 104

Hidden Beauty on West 28th Street: New York City's Flower District

Intro: Hi everyone and welcome to The Enchant Me Podcast. I'm Kim Selby and I'll be your host as we go looking for creative inspiration every day life. In each episode, we'll talk about a quick one or two hour excursion we go on that's meant to feed our creative spirit and refill our reservoir of internal inspiration. Our excursions are based on the concept of the 'artist date', one of the tools in "The Artist's Way", a book by Julia Cameron that's a great book to read if you're looking to bring more creativity into your life no matter what form you find it. So let's get started.

Hi everybody and welcome to Episode 104 of *The Enchant Me Podcast*. I'm Kim Selby and I just want to say thanks for being here and taking a listen. We hope you find some kind of enjoyment or nugget of inspiration from the excursions we are going on.

This week's artist date takes us back to New York City to a bustling and magical street that is pretty much hiding in plain site. It's a merchant district that never fails to delight, and is constantly changing with the seasons. It looks great, it smells even better - and a nice smelling street can be hard to come by in Manhattan, especially in the summer - and walking through it has a way of instantly transporting you to another time and place. Or another country. You might even think you are walking through a jungle or rainforest at times. This street was at one time an important part of city commerce as well as an important part of New York's history. Unfortunately, it also happens to be one of the city's Midtown merchant districts that has suffered over the last years due to rising rents and other factors contributing to iconic areas of Manhattan disappearing.

Have you figured it out yet? Yes, no, maybe? OK, I won't keep you in suspense any longer. This week's artist date takes us on a stroll through New York's City's Flower District.

I chose this excursion for my artist date because it is a place that you can really lose yourself in. It's a very unique space within a city surrounded glass, steel and concrete. You might even call it a real jungle inside a concrete jungle. It really does seem that the minute you turn onto 28th - especially if you are coming from 6th Avenue - you are in another land. You are immediately greeted with sidewalks lined with trees and greenery of all kinds, sizes and shapes that are out for sale. It feels like you are walking through a forest. All you see initially is green. And then all you see is an explosion of vibrant color, bustling - yet focused - activity and a seemingly endless displays of beautiful, blooming flowers.

I hadn't been there in a while, and it felt like the perfect fit for an artist date and I was hoping to be inspired and come away with some new ideas for color schemes and decor for a couple of DIY home projects I was about to begin.

The Flower District is one city block that runs along West 28th Street between 6th and 7th Avenues. The block is lined on both sides with wholesale flower distributors and other retailers catering to any and all floral needs and the minute you turn onto West 28th, you'll be captivated by the sites, sounds and fragrances. The shops aren't florists though, they are the businesses that sell the flowers to the florists. And the event planners. And the interior decorators. And the brides-to-be. And sales aren't just available to the professionals or their clients planning festive events. Most of the stores do sell to individuals, so if you are looking for that one perfect sunflower or rose to brighten your or someone else's day, this is the place to find it.

On any given morning, people begin filling the streets early - some shops open as early as 5 A.M. and sidewalks making selections and purchases, looking for ideas and inspiration, weaving in and out of the shops

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TRANSCRIPT

EPISODE 104

Hidden Beauty on West 28th Street: New York City's Flower District

where you will find no two that are the same. There are shops that are full of succulents displayed on shelves and artfully attached to walls. There are shops that are full of lush tropical plants. There are shops that are filled front to back with rose of any color and size you can imagine. There are also a couple of silk flower shops where the flowers are so lifelike, it's hard to tell the difference. It is quite a sight to see.

The day I was there, dozens of baby orange trees had just been delivered and employees were getting them ready for sale by wrapping the plastic buckets they were planted in and setting them out in neat rows. Their dark green leaves and tangerine-sized ripening fruit felt so completely out of place in the middle of the city. Every day new items are being delivered and on any day you will see different things available depending on the season. There is always something new to see even if you were to go more than once a week.

The shopkeepers are really helpful too. You can ask lots of questions about peak bloom times, colors, care, you name it. Any question that you might have - especially when making decisions for events - they were able to answer. I was particularly enchanted by something I found in Caribbean Cuts, a store selling probably one hundred different kinds of tropical plants. It is called a Monstera and is a single-stemmed cutting, with one dark green, very large, heart-shaped leaves. What I was going to do with it, I did not know. How I was going to get it home in one piece, I did not know either. I asked the man working there if I bought this, would it travel well - I was traveling by train - and could he wrap it. Instead of just selling it to me, he asked me what I was planning to do with it. When I said I wasn't sure, and that I just like the way it looked and would display it somewhere at home, he mentioned that although they look especially hardy, they might not hold their color and their stature for more than a week. I really appreciated his honesty and decided not to buy it.

And they let you take pictures. Everywhere you turned there were people snapping shots both inside and outside the stores. My guess is that many of these photos were destined to land on Instagram, but there were also people there with notebooks, taking notes and definitely seemed to be in research mode as much as posting mode. It actually seemed to be about a 50/50 mix of people like me, just strolling through and window shopping. Some obvious tourists. And then there were the people who you knew were on a mission. They were the ones with the notebooks and the ones taking pictures and texting them to others. A woman with some sort of linen, maybe a napkin or a placemat. It wasn't clear if she was the event planner or the dinner party host, but she was definitely there to find the exactly perfect blooms for whatever she was planning.

There were cardboard boxes being filled with arrangements that had just been freshly finished. Their destinations unknown, but from the look of them, the recipient would probably be happy to receive them. Everywhere you looked, there were flowers. Some displayed single-stemmed and standing tall in glass containers, meant for individual purchase. Some wrapped tightly in multiples inside what looked like corrugated wrapping or tissue paper, their buds not quite blooming, but certainly on the verge. Tulips. Lillies. Lilacs. Sunflowers. Orchids. Hydrangeas. Roses. Most of them I don't know their names. But you didn't need to know their names to appreciate their delicate beauty and enjoy their fragrance.

In one store, Associated Cut Flower Company, - which I understand is one of the oldest businesses on the block - you are simply overwhelmed by the rows and rows and seemingly endless shelves filled with bunches of hundreds of different types of flowers. The entire back of the store is filled with nothing but cut roses. I have no ideas how they keep so many flowers so well stocked and taken care of so well, when everyone knows how fleeting a flower in bloom can be. In fact, I was as much flabbergasted at the thought of how these



TRANSCRIPT

EPISODE 104

Hidden Beauty on West 28th Street: New York City's Flower District

businesses are run day after day when their product was so fragile and time-sensitive - as I was about the visual of the place. It's truly worth the trip to 28th Street just to visit this one store.

So, what were my takeaways from my visit to the Flower District?. Well, there were two main points that stuck with me.

First, There was something about watching these plants come off the truck, with the shopowner or employee helping to create the display that made me think of what it must have been like when shopkeepers of days gone by. The owners and delivery guys were interacting. Talking. Working together to unload and organize the deliveries. I half expected them to share a smoke and doff their caps to each other as they went about the rest of their day. The truth is, these merchant districts that were once such a driving force are now going extinct.

In a way, walking down 28th Street feels a little like walking through a movie set. A little bit *Crossing Delancey*, a little bit *You've Got Mail*, and a little bit *Adaptation*. In fact, Susan Orlean, the author of *The Orchid Thief* - which is the book that was being turned into a movie in the movie *Adaptation* - has been noted to have been a long-term customer of the Flower District*. She also authored *The Floral Ghost*, an homage to the district and its lush history.

When the book was first published in 2016, *Fast Company* wrote a review of *The Floral Ghost* and said in part:

"Though the flower district isn't dead yet, it's no longer as dense a stretch of urban greenery as it once was. Through *The Floral Ghost* Orlean seeks to preserve the memory of the neighborhood as she once knew it. "We all become sentimental about places which hold specific memories for us," she tells the *New York Times* in a recent article about the book. "New York, in many ways, used to be a place where things were made; and now, increasingly, it's a place where things are bought."

"But like many of the city's industrial districts, gentrification and rising real estate prices have pushed floral merchants out over the past decade. In *The Floral Ghost*, a new art book out from Planthouse Gallery, author Susan Orlean and artist Philip Taaffe pay homage to the diminishing flower district with an essay and accompanying silk-screen illustrations."

If you want to learn more about the history and sadly, the ongoing demise of the Flower District, there are a couple of good articles that you can find on the internet. One is from the *New York Times*, and although it was written a few years ago, the main tenets of their story still hold true.

There's also a blog called *Jeremiah's Vanishing New York*, written by Jeremiah Moss, that for the last decade or so, has chronicled many of the ways many of the most "New York" parts of New York have been disappearing for a long time, mostly due to redevelopment. It's really sad. He wrote a more recent post - from July, 2017 - about how hotel builders are pushing their way into this street in particular. This street is a hidden gem and is worth a visit - and patronage - before it too disappears. How many of these hidden gems do you know of? See them, shop them, buy from them before it's too late.

Second, as I wandered down 28th Street, I wondered why, back a few years ago, when I was working in New York City every day, did I not visit this street more often. I worked only a few blocks north - on 44th and 6th Avenue - for years. And I regularly walked this part 6th Avenue. In fact, back when I was in city every day - OK,

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TRANSCRIPT

EPISODE 104

Hidden Beauty on West 28th Street: New York City's Flower District

now that I quickly did the math, it's actually been about 13 years since I worked in Manhattan - the merchants with the trees were lined up on 6th Avenue and you had to walk right through them to get to where you were going. Sadly, this is a realization of even more evidence of how number the businesses were decreasing. The district used to run up 6th and then continue on 28th, not just on 28th.

So why did I not wander here more often? I knew the district was there. I walked right through by it consistently. Probably always "meant" to walk through. I think there is a saying or a quote - I can't quite remember what it is - about how we are inclined to put off doing things or going places that are easily within our reach. For example, for all the time I spent in NYC, I never have been to the top of the ESB. Maybe it's less of putting off doing something or going somewhere, and more like we take those things for granted. And then we wake up one day and we don't work there anymore and we wonder why we didn't go when it would have been so easy to do so.

Ben Franklin famously said: "Do not put off till tomorrow what you can do today," and Henry David Thoreau said: "The world is but a canvas for our imagination" I think the quote I am thinking of is a mashup of the two. But basically, what I am trying to not so eloquently say, is that what I am taking from this is excursion to remember not to take for granted the things that are in our closest proximity just because we may see them or walk by them every day without a second thought. Go do the things, visit the places and see the people while they are there, while you can. Don't assume that access will always be granted so easily. The District is disappearing. Many iconic areas in NYC are disappearing. What else in your life may be disappearing before your very eyes?

I hope you've enjoyed our latest excursion. If you're interested in reading more about the Flower District, I've the links to the articles I mentioned, along with a few photos I took. If you happen to find yourself in NYC with an hour or so to spare, go and check it out. Here are few tips:

- Plan to go early. Some shops open as early as 5 A.M. and close as early as Noon. Most shops are open Mon-Sat, but doublecheck before you go.
- Take your time if you are planning on purchasing. There are many, many choices and it's easy to want to buy the first thing you see. Take a swing through and then decide.
- Ask questions. Employees are knowledgeable and happy to help.
- Have fun and find something ENCHANTING!

Well thanks for listening, we really do appreciate you taking the time you spent with us today. If you like the podcast, we encourage you to tell a friend, as word of mouth is the best way for our pod to be found by others who might be looking for a little inspiration. You can find us on Apple Podcasts, or on your favorite podcatcher.

Outro: So that's it for this episode of The Enchant Me Podcast. Please join us next time as we again go looking for creative inspiration in every day life. Don't forget, you can always visit us at theenchantmepodcast.com. You can follow us on Twitter @theenchantmepod, or on Instagram @theenchantmepodcast. The Enchant Me Podcast is produced by Kim Selby and Storm Your Brain, LLC. Thanks again for listening. We hope to see you again on the next episode of The Enchant Me Podcast.

* Per the Fast Company article.

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