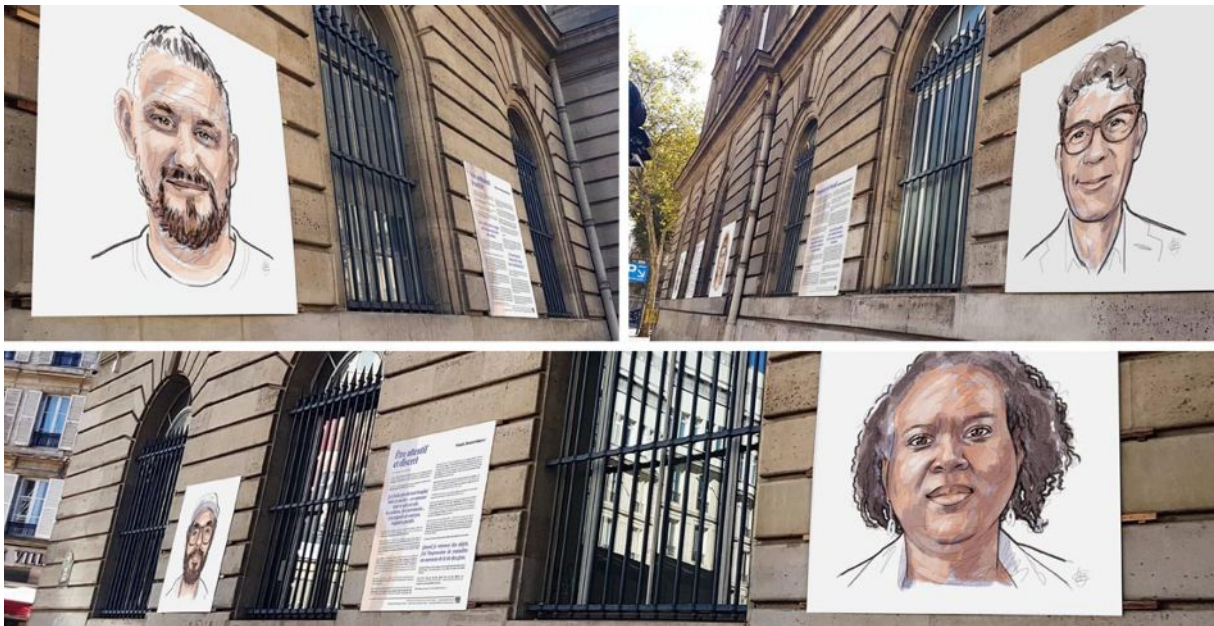


6 November 2023 - 8 January 2024

# *Behind the Scenes in My City*

**Hand-drawn Portraits and Stories of Paris Street Cleaners  
by Christine Boulanger, Creator of Visages d'en faces**

Facades of the Caserne Napoléon, Paris 4e  
place Baudoyer, rue de Rivoli, rue de Lobau



The exhibition "Les coulisses de ma ville" ("Behind the scenes in my city") invites us to reconsider the people we pass every day without really looking at them.

At first glance, this may seem a paradoxical title, as it refers to the cleaners of the City of Paris - the refuse collectors, drivers and waste disposal workers who help to make our city cleaner and more beautiful every day. Like us, they perform every day on the stage of the great theatre that is Paris, and they are dressed in green, so they are perfectly recognisable.

But seeing is not knowing. What do we really know about these men and women? And when we see them, how do we look at them? Reducing others to their profession, whatever it may be, and the status that goes with it, is to deprive us of some wonderful discoveries.

Christine Boulanger lives in Paris. She offers a different way of meeting and getting to know each other with [Visages d'en faces](#), an approach to portrait drawing and storytelling in the form of workshops and exhibitions. Since 2017, she has been working in companies, local authorities and schools, creating links, uniting people around a project and supporting individual and collective change.

Christine has already worked with refuse collectors, maintenance workers and local residents to get a different perspective on waste: since 2019, their portraits have been circulating in the streets of the 19th arrondissement, bringing residents together for readings, culminating in an exhibition in 2022 on the gates of the Buttes Chaumont park.

From May to September 2023, Christine met, listened to and drew 15 of the 7,000 men and women who clean our streets every day, in the workshops and garages of the Paris Cleaning Department.

The exhibition features drawings of their faces. Who are these people Christine has taken the time to sketch? Stories shed light on who they are and what they do. Written in the tone of a conversation, together they form a mosaic that reveals in a different way the day-to-day life of a profession, life paths, and illustrates in concrete terms values such as solidarity and caring for oneself, others and one's environment.

A big thank you to the portraitized for their trust, Anne, Emmanuel, Éric, Franck, Jean-Charles, José, Mebrouk, Nadir, Nathalie, Patrice, Sylvie, Sabrina, Sohayb, Stéphane and Thierry, and to the teams who helped make this project a reality.

Find more information on [paris.fr](#)

English versions are available on [Paris.fr](#)

[#LesCoulissesDeMaVille](#) on social media

[contact@visagesdenfaces.com](mailto:contact@visagesdenfaces.com)

Portraits: 3 examples

# *Doing something useful*

**Sylvie, waste center customer service agent**



“There are those who do it well: scrap metal on one side, rolled-up mattresses on the other... their car is impeccably tidy. And then there are the others - fortunately, they're rarer: everything mixed up, van full to the gills. You open the doors and it's a cascade of furniture, boxes, rubble...

There are also men who are clearly annoyed by my instructions. No matter how nicely I tell them that I'm not here to annoy them, that I'm here to help them, they become downright aggressive and confidently throw their rubbish in the wrong places.

I like tidying up, I get a kind of satisfaction from sorting. I feel like I'm doing something useful. I'm a receptionist at the Porte de la Chapelle waste collection center.

## ***I've seen a lot of things! Rusty fridges, old wooden coffee grinders, you know, with a crank on top, orange electric meat knives from the 1970s.***

My mother had one in Guadeloupe. We needed to use it twice and it ended up on top of a cupboard. It's quicker to cut with a sharp knife. And hoovers that might still work, but you look for the bags in the shop and they tell you they're not made any more.

When I see a piece of furniture that's just a little damaged, I suggest the addresses of second-hand centers. Or maybe it will end up in a theatre set. Schools can get their supplies here."

Sylvie shows me a container full of rubbish, an impressive heap of paper, cans, plastic bottles, cigarette butts...: "It's everything the vacuum cleaners have swallowed up in the streets of Paris. My colleagues also come to empty the skip trucks and the bulky items.

And in this room we put everything that's more or less dangerous: solvents, gas canisters, fire extinguishers, products for treating plants, others that I didn't even know existed... I learn all sorts of things. It doesn't make me any smarter, but I can still give you a few tips if you have a stain, a hole, cockroaches...

Last month, at the Neighbors Festival, I realized that many people didn't always make a clear distinction between what goes in the building's bins and what goes to the waste collection center. But now that they know what I do, they make an effort, they ask questions, they want to understand: What do we do with this? Where does it go? How is it treated? Some of them have children who help them sort because we've taught them at school.

I have a neighbor who is resistant. When she told me that she didn't have time to go to the waste collection center, I explained to her how the mobile sorting center works, a trailer that travels all over Paris. She can take her frying oil in a bottle, for example, to avoid clogging the drains... 'No time' is always her reply.

## ***'No time' is also what I hear from people who come in here with bags of new clothes, the labels still on.***

New sheets, new cutlery, new plates... A gentleman once said to me: 'The waste collection center is a treasure trove.' Sometimes I even think it's Ali Baba's cave.

The mobile waste collection center is particularly practical when you don't have a car. My colleagues meet lots of people, often elderly people. They told me about a very nice little lady who was bored at home. So one day she brings them a battery, another day a light bulb, or a piece of clothing she doesn't wear any more, or an old can of paint, or a curling iron... Well, sometimes it's a bit of everything and anything, things that could go in the bin. But after all, it's a good thing, because she gets out and sees people.

My daughter has also started sorting. And my sister and I have a ritual: when I come to her house, she puts a bag of batteries, ink cartridges and other items in front of me, so that I don't forget to take it home with me. In a way, I've become the family's mobile sorting machine!"

# *Seeing the job differently*

**Franck, truck driver**



“My father used to pick us up from school in his truck. It was his time with us, because at 4 a.m. my sisters and I were still asleep when he left for work.

But there was always this kid who'd tease me: ‘Ah, your father's a garbage man! He collects people's crap!’ When I saw him again years later, he wasn't earning any more than my father was. I wasn't happy about it, but there was a kind of moral to it.

Unwittingly, I followed in my father's footsteps. The first few days at the Eugène Poubelle center, when we were taken out into the field, I was apprehensive about being seen in my new garbageman's outfit.

*I didn't want that look,  
the way I imagine people look at this job.*

I'll remember it for the rest of my life, and my new colleagues and I talked about it: while we were in Montmartre and it was so busy, people would pass by without seeing us - no glances, no smiles, no hello. In fact, I had this strange sensation of not existing. We felt like ghosts, transparent. It was unsettling."

- When the trash collection truck is in front of us in traffic, we can see you!

"That's another story. Today, I drive all the big vehicles for the City of Paris, including the famous trash collectors, vacuum cleaners, scrubbers and, in winter, salt spreaders. At 5:30 in the morning, we clock in at the garage, the supervisor assigns us to such-and-such a workshop in such-and-such an arrondissement, and by 6 o'clock we're off: 80 drivers, the trash trucks first, then the BLMs\*, the vacuum cleaners and the scrubbers.

But we get in people's way: in the morning, we make a lot of noise, and in traffic, we cause traffic jams. I try to park whenever possible. Sometimes I hear: 'Can't you hurry up? Some of us are working!' And I think: 'Well, I'm not playing soccer here!' I don't get up in the morning thinking: 'Great, I'm going to piss off the Parisians!'

Having said that, yesterday I was picking up the contents of a vacuum cleaner that had been emptied onto the pavement because it was catching fire from a cigarette butt and then, I swear it's true, an old lady comes up to me and says: 'Thank you for what you do. Thank God you're here.' I looked at her and replied, 'What you said makes me so happy!' She left, and when she came back, she told me the same thing. That's so rare! It made my day.

When the kids wave at us, I turn on the flashing light and sometimes offer them a lift. I like that little bond with them. When we're children, certain adults leave a lasting impression on us through their kindness, and we don't see things the same way afterwards.

I was 14 when I started doing odd jobs after school: florist, window cleaner, cleaning for the elderly, and later security guard. The more happy I was making money, the more I felt I was wasting my time at school. I dropped out and now I regret it.

I'm a city kid. I like that expression, it's what we call those who started young at the City of Paris. I was 20 and I owe them everything: my HGV license, a stable job and a balanced life.

I pass on this balance to my pupils: I'm an English boxing coach in a sports association. I never leave a child outside. I've also been a neighborhood councilor, and guess what the city's number-one irritant is?"

- Cleanliness?

"Exactly. One day, I was letting people have their say - garbage cans never collected, dog droppings... Anyway - and I intervened: 'The bag of garbage in the street, did the town council or a local resident put it there?' 'Well, a local resident.' 'That's it. Every day, people ask me why I don't clean up, but what do you say to people who litter?'

*They looked at each other, as if to say,  
'Shit, what's he doing here?'*

So I explained to them that I was a driver for Paris City Hall, and that cleanliness is everyone's responsibility. Then we shared different ways of talking to people.

I love the area where I live in Bailly-Romainvilliers. But my city is Paris. I was born and raised there, and I go back there as often as I can to see my friends. My favorite times at work are when we're cleaning the quays of the Seine on the weekend. It's a real hassle, with garbage everywhere, but I love watching people at night going home and the day people coming on stage. It's almost poetic. I think of Jacques Dutronc, *'Il est 5 heures, Paris s'éveille.'* ('It's 5am, Paris is waking up.')

My wife has often heard me say that I'm not French but Parisian. And a cousin's Canadian wife is fascinated that I clean one of the most beautiful cities in the world, with views of Notre-Dame, the Louvre... She makes me laugh because she sees me as a superhero."

*\* BLM : a truck with an arm that lifts up trash dumpsters*

# *Make your dreams come true*

**Nadir, neighborhood manager**



"My father was an oilfield fireman. When I was 4, he took me with him. I discovered the desert in southern Algeria and a whole host of languages and music. He worked for American, South African, Dutch, and French companies... I listened to the expatriates talk and play Elvis on the guitar. And when we went into the villages, it sounded like blues, mixed with Bambara, Sarakolé, Wolof...

Later, I lived with my grandmother in Marrakech. Tourists would come to see me: I was a well-dressed, polite little kid, and I spoke all the languages - English, French, Arabic, Spanish. So I'd take them to the kasbahs, the pasha's palace, La Mamounia, the Majorelle gardens... In the evening, I'd come home with my pockets full of pesetas, French francs, escudos, Italian lire... I'd put it all on the table: it was for my grandmother, my second mother.



***Here, on the streets of Paris, I've rediscovered  
that freedom: working in an open environment  
keeps my mind open.***

I like to meet the stranger, the friend you haven't yet met, as an Irish poet once said.

Perhaps you've seen me before? I wear an orange jumper that says 'Neighborhood Officer' on it. I've been working for Propreté de Paris for twenty-two years, always in the same area, from the 1st to the 4th arrondissement. It's funny: I watch children grow up and get married, and their children come up to me and give me a kiss when we bump into each other.

I provide information to tourists and I'm there to improve the quality of public spaces. It doesn't happen by magic, and I know a thing or two about that: I first worked as a refuse collector behind a skip for ten years. I was impressed by how much the machine swallowed. I used to say to myself: 'In my neighborhood, on my route, we have all this... What must Paris be producing?' I'd never seen so much rubbish.

I was also very afraid of falling off the step on a bend or losing an arm or my head in the hopper, as has happened to some refuse collectors. Now we've made the lorries safe.

When I started sweeping up, it wasn't as hard. And I always had a cigarette, coffee, or hot soup in winter for the homeless. They knew I was cleaning the street and paid attention. Today, I train young refuse collectors in ways that save them from suffering too much. And the older people I've taught to read and write call me Uncle.

If you see a problem that concerns cleanliness, but also safety, green spaces or roads - it could be a missing paving stone on the road, rats in a square, a broken or burnt rubbish bin, burnt-out motorbikes, vomit in front of a shop... you can tell me about it or report it via the 'Dans ma rue' app. After that, response times vary: a street cleaner will quickly deal with a puddle of vomit, but replacing road signs or a bus shelter is bound to take longer.

I could give you so many other examples: a pharmacy that wants to create a green space, a bar that would like to add tables on the pavement... I check in regularly with the departments concerned and with the mayor. I also run exhibitions on waste recycling and water management.

When I swapped my computer and pen for a skip and broom - I used to be in charge of the international after-sales service at Roissy airport - I never regretted it: becoming a refuse collector allowed me to fulfill my dreams. My passions are the desert, expeditions, concerts, and exhibitions.

***At 4am I'm up, by 2pm I've finished work:  
back home, lunch, a nap, time to get ready  
and then I join the artists.***

Here in Europe, I introduce musicians, visual artists, singers and dancers from the Sahara and the Ténéré..."

- Do you often miss the desert?

“Yes, of course I do! When I arrive in Marrakech, I take off my shoes and give them to the first poor person I see. He probably thinks I'm crazy, but I need to feel the ground, the sand, the heat.”

- It's chewing gum that I felt when I wanted to walk barefoot in Paris. Have you ever walked around Paris without shoes?

“Yes, I have. Sometimes I leave home barefoot, buy my baguette and go back upstairs.”

- No! And do you go with peace of mind or do you look at the ground?

Nadir shows me a photo of himself with two men, all barefoot:

“See these nomads? He's a musician, the other's a camel driver. I learn a lot from their wisdom. Being barefoot keeps you connected.”

- Come on, let's get crazy! Let's all walk barefoot in Paris! And then maybe we'll be more careful about what we leave on the pavements?

Nadir, courteous, who may also think I'm crazy:

“My word, it's true! Why not?”