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DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung

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From what we know, the Greek philosopher Diogenes (ca. 412 or 404 BCE–323 BCE) was a difficult and obstreperous fellow, to say the least. He subscribed to the simplest-possible lifestyle and was quick to criticize the cultural conventions of Athens where he had arrived after being exiled from his hometown of Sinope, an Ionian colony on the Black Sea. He saw society as corrupt and walked around in broad daylight with a lamp claiming that he was searching for an honest man. He made no secret of his disrespect for Plato, whom he blamed for distorting the philosophy of Socrates. He thought poverty a virtue and often slept in a large ceramic jar, or *pithos*, in the marketplace. For that reason, artists usually show him as living in a barrel. The Viennese painter and printmaker Carl Russ follows in this iconographic tradition with his 1810 aquatint depiction of one of the most famous episodes in Greek philosophical history.



The scene takes place in Corinth, where Diogenes, who described himself as a cosmopolitan, refusing to declare allegiance to any one place, had ultimately settled. His fame had spread to the point that even Alexander the Great came to visit him. Arriving at Diogenes's *pithos*, the Macedonian king offered to fulfill any wish the sage might have. To which Diogenes answered: "Could you move aside a bit and step out of my sun?" According to Plutarch, Alexander's followers laughed and joked about the philosopher as they went away.

These days, it sounds painfully familiar to read about obsequious sycophants surrounding a powerful man. But Alexander, for all *his* faults as a megalomaniac world conqueror, was also renowned as a cultured person, one who seemed to have gotten the point. Plutarch again: "He was so struck by Diogenes's answer, and admired so much the haughtiness and grandeur of the man who had nothing but scorn for him, that he said to his followers 'But truly, if I were not Alexander, I wish I were Diogenes.'"

The lasting relevance of this episode was succinctly summarized by the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk; in his *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983) he points out that what in classical antiquity was recognized as the true wisdom of philosophy was "an unerring sovereign spirit ... The wise man turns his back on the subjective principle of power, ambition, and the urge to be recognized. He is the first one who is uninhibited enough to say the truth to the prince. Diogenes's answer negates not only the desire for power, but the power of desire as such."

Carl Russ



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