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Elisée Reclus
Art and the People
1904, 1927

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Art and the People

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At the closing of the Salon, one of my friends, an amateur connoisseur of beautiful things, came to me quite desolate. He had been ill and had taken a journey away from Paris. Now he returned too late for the Exhibition and so he lamented not having been able to see these multitudes of marbles and paintings which special reviews kept him conversant with.

The dear comrade may reassure himself. A walk upon forest-paths, on fallen leaves, or one moment of repose upon the brink of a pure fountain-if he can find one still fifteen or twenty leagues from the boulevard-will console him for having missed his visit to the habitual museum where there is shut up every year temporarily that which is called the "belles arts".

Certainly I do not want to decry the fine arts. In my childhood I have always admired the wonders of the fairs, the beautiful ropedancers, the jugglers around whom whirled plates, the tricksters who broke watches and changed them into bouquets of flowers. At the Salon I continue to admire in all naivete like a very ninny. There also do I see the artist prestidigitators who manipulate and mix colours with an incomparable dexterity, who blend in a thousand ways lights and shadows in a hash which is entirely unexpected

and who succeed in making a stunning light spring up from the darkest depths. All this seems to be very fine, or rather surprising, and I applaud the virtuosi of the pencil in all sincerity.

Nevertheless, I am not at all satisfied. Is it this indeed which is true art? Do I find therein the consolation of sorrows, the respites from the weariness of daily life and profound woes which accompany us for all our lives ? Can all these paintings, sculptures, engraved or embroidered objects make me forget the sordid misery outside and the presence of the armed policeman who, yonder, near the door, or in the room itself, can crash his weapon upon a peaceful citizen and fracture his skull? No, all this multi-coloured art that accumulates its incongruous products in rooms lent by the State can only be a false and lying art, for it is not the work of a free people.