Heritage, Museums And Tourism

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While working on World Bank projects in the underdeveloped regions of China, the writer came across what appeared to him to be priceless but somewhat neglected artefacts created by the ethnic minorities there. They include costumes, textiles, ornaments, decorative objects, and religious paraphernalia. They particularly appeal to us urbanites, who, on encountering them for the first time, appear to be mesmerized by their unique beauty that is quite out of our experiential modern world.

Not far away from these settlements, there is a fairly well-developed tourism spot frequented by both domestic and foreign tourists. As usual, souvenirs on sale are aplenty, but most of these appear to be poorly and hastily produced. And because labour is cheap, they are sold cheaply; and because they are sold cheaply, they are badly made. Tourists are not impressed, and are unwillingly to take them home as coffee-table souvenirs. An excellent opportunity to make money is lost. An arena to showcase their unique heritage is missed.

Here are two case studies to explore:
1. The best of the originals were religiously produced for special purposes. It might be an offer to the gods. It might be a show-piece to impress the family members, the future life partner, or even the dead. Or it might be something to decorate the humble dwelling which the creator of the art had lived for generations. To the creator, art has to be a serious if not sacred matter. It has nothing to do with our modern concept of professionalism: rather, it is dedication, self-sacrifice,
pride, or even personal honour. Thus, to us, such artifacts should be collected, preserved, and exhibited in the museum. And because beautiful works are not easy to come by, they should be digitalized and made instantly available to all with the gentle movement of a computer mouse. A team is currently working on this project: collect, preserve, and digitalise for future appreciation and research.

2. On a mundane level, the writer is also in favour of drawing inspiration from these art objects to produce heritage-inspired but creatively-crafted modern souvenirs for sale to tourists as well as art lovers. To achieve this, trained professional artists and creative designers must be enlisted to do the necessary research and creation. Media and marketing specialists should also throw in their lot to make heritage or cultural tourism an economic success.