From that sketch a deal was born - dubbed the “Grand Bargain” by the Detroit Free Press - that saved both the pensions and paintings. Ultimately the deal included $350 million from the state of Michigan, $370 million from private foundations and a promise from the museum to raise $100 million. Despite being seen “through the lens of the city’s urban disaster,” Beal insists that the DIA is “a very normal place.” And his aspirations are modest: “I don’t want to be the Met, I don’t want to be the Louvre. I want to be a place people come to because it means something to them.”

That seems to be happening. In 2012, voters in three counties approved a property tax to fund the museum, getting free admission for themselves in return. Attendance has since risen from 460,000 to 786,000 annually - not that Beal cares only about numbers. If he did, he said, he’d bring in Egyptian or Impressionist shows and watch the lines form. Beal and other museum executives have come under fire recently for accepting raises and bonuses. Beal says the money was a standard part of his compensation, but regardless of that controversy and other challenges, at least the art is safe for posterity. And if you care to see what all the fuss was about, here are some highlights from the DIA collection.

Diego Rivera: Detroit industry murals
These murals were done in the 1930s by Diego Rivera as a tribute to Detroit’s manufacturing industry. Rivera spent time studying the Ford River Rouge car factory as preparation for the 27-panel fresco cycle, which fills an enormous room called Rivera Court. The murals are laden with symbolism - like a baby growing in the bulb of a plant - but they also depict workers, bosses, equipment and both the benefits and dangers of industrialization.

Renaissance treasures
The museum’s most acclaimed works include “The Wedding Dance” by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, showing a joyous, almost cartoon-like peasant celebration, and “Annunciatory Angel,” by Fra Angelico, a gold leaf-and-tempera piece that shimmers with light. Tintoretto’s “The Dreams of Men” is installed in a ceiling that was designed specifically for it. The Italian government made it a condition of sale that the painting could never leave the building - which made the prospect of a forced sale even more untenable.

Ahead of its time
In 1922, the DIA became the first US museum to acquire works by Vincent van Gogh and Henri Matisse. Van Gogh’s “Self-Portrait” (1887) shows him in a broad-brimmed hat and full red beard. Matisse’s “The Window” (1916) depicts a drawing room with chair, table, bowl of flowers and a view through a curtained window to a green garden and tree, all in muted colors.

Modern times
From the museum’s contemporary collection, don’t miss Andy Warhol’s “Double Self-Portrait.” In the African-American collection, look for Tyree Guyton’s “Caged Brain,” a mixed-media work by the artist behind Detroit’s Heidelberg Project, an open-air installation in which abandoned buildings are turned into urban art.

Around the world
The museum’s Dutch collection is one of the finest in the country. Educational displays point out that the paintings often depict luxury goods from around the world, showing how global trade affected everyday life in Europe in the age of exploration. In the African collection, look for “Nail Figure,” a late 19th century wood- en figure pierced by more than 300 nails, screws and other objects, each one symbolizing the resolution of a problem in the community.

Innovative and fun educational displays
In 2007, the museum launched new ways of presenting art, providing written context to explain why each work is important. Beal says they were accused of “dumbing down and Disney-fication,” but he believes it helps visitors engage more with what they’re seeing. A display of female figures by Picasso challenges viewers to match each painting with a photo of the woman who inspired it. And the “Art of Dining” is a mesmerizing video in the gallery of 18th-century decorative arts, simulating a three-course feast for aristocrats. —AP