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Report

## Detroit Museum Struggles to Maintain Identity, Attract New Art Lovers

The Detroit Institute of Arts completed a six-year, \$158 million makeover in 2007, including the addition of interactive exhibits and a spotlight on local artists. Jeffrey Brown reports on the new efforts to attract visitors and survive amid state economic woes.



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JIM LEHRER: Next, hard times in Michigan, and a shot at an arts renewal. Jeffrey Brown has our report.

CHILD: I open my mouth to roar.

MUSEUM TOUR GUIDE: When you think of an animal that roars, what animal do you think of?

CHILDREN: A lion.

MUSEUM TOUR GUIDE: A lion.

JEFFREY BROWN: At the Detroit Institute of the Arts recently, children played a new game, "I Spy the Artwork."

In another gallery at the DIA, as it's called here, a different group of kids experienced the art of dining, 18th-century style, enjoying via video a suckling pig, while learning how the actual objects in the gallery -- the centerpiece and candlesticks, for example -- were used in real life.

Everywhere you look in what's being touted as the new DIA, there's an effort to engage and entice the visitor. It's an experiment in which a grand but struggling museum tries to survive in a troubled city.

Graham Beal, a British art historian who's worked in American museums for several decades, is the director of the DIA.

GRAHAM BEAL, Director, Detroit Institute of Arts: The people come to us with very high expectations of the kind of uplifting experience we have to -- they want. We have to meet that, if not exceed it.

JEFFREY BROWN: The museum was born amid Detroit's boom era. The original building dates to 1927, when the auto industry provided the city millions of jobs and the dollars to import masterworks from abroad.

But with the racial explosions of the 1960s and a decades-long economic decline, the DIA has struggled along with its city, losing visitors, funding, even hours when it was open.

ANNOUNCER: Welcome to the new DIA. It's time to let yourself go.

### Revitalizing the museum



Graham Beal  
Director, Detroit  
Institute of Arts

“ We have such stark divisions in terms of ethnicity, and the museum is situated downtown in the middle of a city that's lost three-quarters of its population. ”

JEFFREY BROWN: Now the museum has completed a six-year makeover, at a cost of \$158 million, a mix of private and public funds, for renovations both outside and in by architect Michael Graves and a thorough rethinking of how it can bring people in to see its treasures.

GRAHAM BEAL: We need to integrate ourselves into our community. In the case of Detroit, it's particularly acute because of the history of the city itself or the whole region, because we have such stark divisions in terms of ethnicity, and the museum is situated downtown in the middle of a city that's lost three-quarters of its population.

JEFFREY BROWN: There is a lot to show off here. The DIA has wonderful holdings in many areas, ancient, African, Asian.

It has masterpieces like Bruegel's "The Wedding Dance" and the first Van Gogh to enter an American museum collection. It also has world-renown murals by Diego Rivera.

But how to get people to come once and want to come again? Beal and his staff spent a great deal of time thinking about how people experience art.

GRAHAM BEAL: We've been watching people doing what we call tracking and timing tests.

JEFFREY BROWN: You were tracking and timing -- you mean, watch people look at art?

GRAHAM BEAL: We follow people. We see where they go, how long they spend, where they first go into a gallery.

## Broadening the museum's appeal

JEFFREY BROWN: As a result, they took steps both large and small. Paintings were lowered by three inches, for example, to make them easier to see. Fewer objects are in each room, so as not to overwhelm viewers.

There are more signs, both explanatory and just to help people know where they are, but they're kept to no more than 150 words. And traditional art history terminology is out.

GRAHAM BEAL: Rubens didn't say, "I'm going to be a great baroque painter." Rubens was trying to capture the drama and the glory of life and of the supernatural, of God.

That tends to be obscured when you start explaining that Rubens was a baroque painter, and you're trying to get people to sort of learn terminology. And more often than not, actually, you're pushing people away from the works.

JEFFREY BROWN: Instead, art is now exhibited according to so-called big ideas.

GRAHAM BEAL: We step through to the Doge's arches, and you step into Venice.

JEFFREY BROWN: One example, the grand tour of Italy, which takes the visitor through five cities, just as a traveler might have in the past.

GRAHAM BEAL: When you look at our 18th-century Italian collections and say, "Why do these objects exist? For what human purpose were they made?"

They were actually souvenirs. They were made to satisfy very, very wealthy Europeans who finished their education by going on a nine- to 18-month tour of Italy.

JEFFREY BROWN: And so here a portrait of an English gentleman is shown near the kind of Italian painting he might have brought home with him.

GRAHAM BEAL: It's going on vacation. That's the shared experience that we have. Everyone knows the pleasures and the excitements of vacation and the precious quality of the things that we bring back with us. And that's what these are here.

VALERIE MERCER, Curator, African-American Art, DIA: OK, in this room, we have work by African-



Valerie Mercer  
Curator, African-  
American Art - DIA

“ I think Detroit calls for very different things. It's a very unique situation, a city that is 85 percent African- American. We really had to do something different. ”

American artist...

JEFFREY BROWN: Curator Valerie Mercer is in charge of another dramatic change at the DIA: Five galleries are now dedicated exclusively to African-American artists.

In the past, at most a dozen works by black artists were exhibited among the larger collection. Now, nearly 80 have their own space, with works ranging from the 19th century to very recent times.

Mercer says the move was aimed at addressing the ever-present issue of race in Detroit head-on.

VALERIE MERCER: I think Detroit calls for very different things. It's a very unique situation, a city that is 85 percent African-American. We really had to do something different.

## Adding African-American works



Tyree Guyton  
Artist, Heidelberg  
Project

“ Everybody here, some folks here, they won't go to the DIA, so how do you expose them to art? In my case, I decided to bring it to them. ”

VALERIE MERCER: We want African-Americans to come here and have a great sense of pride, because they do see their culture on view. I mean, for so often when you're African-American, you go to cultural institutions, and you really can feel quite disconnected, no matter how broad your interest may be as an individual. But you very seldom see your culture reflected in those institutions.

JEFFREY BROWN: Two works now featured here are by a local artist, Tyree Guyton. And, again, the hope is that this will help connect the museum to the local community.

Guyton has received international attention for his ongoing Heidelberg Project, named after the street on which he grew up. For several decades, he's used discarded objects, everyday items, and splashes of color, in an attempt to use art to transform two of Detroit's blighted blocks.

For Guyton, this is a kind of open air museum, as easy to visit as taking a walk or drive down the street.

Guyton says he's pleased to be in the DIA and is glad for its attempt to reach more people, but he's making an even more direct connection.

TYREE GUYTON, Artist, Heidelberg Project: That's an institution for the world to come in to see. This is also an institution for the world to come to see. Everybody here, some folks here, they won't go to the DIA, so how do you expose them to art? In my case, I decided to bring it to them.

JEFFREY BROWN: Bring it to them?

TYREE GUYTON: Bring it to them.

## A new focus on visitors

JEFFREY BROWN: These days, there are some signs of life in downtown Detroit: New townhouses for sale and new ballparks have been bringing in crowds.

It's still an open question whether the DIA and other museums in Detroit's so-called cultural center can help revitalize this part of the city. It's also an open question whether the changes at the DIA will work.

The user-friendly approach immediately brought questions in art circles of whether this is little more than art-lite, a dumbing down of the museum experience.

For his part, Beal says his museum is merely taking lessons from the success of blockbuster exhibitions and applying them to the permanent collection.

He's also perfectly willing to look elsewhere for inspiration, as was clear when I asked about the focus groups and audience testing.

JEFFREY BROWN: These are things we'd hear about with a theme park, a mall, any place where people come together. It sounds a little unusual for a museum.



Graham Beal  
Director, Detroit  
Institute of Arts

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way, it is all about the art, with this great repository of the art, but in the end it's about the visitor. If the visitor doesn't get something from the art, then it's a failure. ■■

GRAHAM BEAL: Well, I think it is, to a degree. I mean, the example I've always given -- rightly or wrongly, having visited Disneyland with my children and seen them line up for an hour to go on a ride because the last experience was so good, they were that compelling.

JEFFREY BROWN: I'd imagine when you say the word "Disney" and "museum," a lot of people in your world would just cringe.

GRAHAM BEAL: Everything that we're doing here, in a way, it is all about the art, with this great repository of the art, but in the end it's about the visitor. If the visitor doesn't get something from the art, then it's a failure.

JEFFREY BROWN: In other words, the Detroit Institute of the Arts wants to keep the connoisseurs, but hopes everyone else will also like what's now being served up at the museum.

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