

## SPOTLIGHT REVIEW

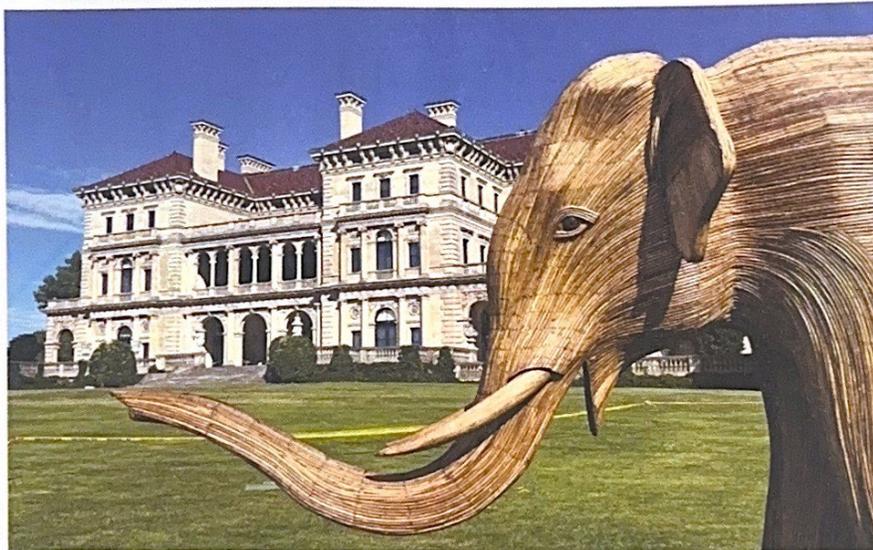
# The Great Elephant Migration

The Breakers, Salve Regina and Rough Point Museum, Newport, RI • [thegreatelephantmigration.org](http://thegreatelephantmigration.org) • Through September 2, 2024

Summer visitors drawn to one of Newport, Rhode Island's most popular destinations, the Cliff Walk, a three-and-a-half-mile trail perched atop the city's rugged coastline were treated to an even grander sight on their seaside stroll: The Great Elephant Migration, a traveling exhibition composed of one hundred life-size elephant sculptures meandered along on the emerald green lawns of some of the city's most opulent Gilded-Age mansions.

Matriarchs, babies and juveniles ambled behind lead Tuskers, all seemingly frozen mid-step in their sojourn. Whether viewers happened upon the exhibition by chance or on purpose was impossible to discern, yet what was obvious is that no one walked past the exhibition. Some lounged with dogs in the shade cast by the sculptures' ample girth, others peered into the elephants' trunks discovering the tiny tongues such massive pachyderms possess. Everyone took photos. "If you squint your eyes, it really looks like a herd of elephants," said a visitor. Another commented, "If you look really closely, they have toenails!" With names like Jiya, Sagarika, and Nanu, the sculptures exude personality. The Coexistence Collective, a group of two hundred Indigenous artisans based in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, home to India's largest Asian elephant population, spent five years constructing the entire herd of sculptures. Each individual artwork takes three to four months to complete and is based on a live animal that members of the collective, and/or members of their tribes, have interacted with in their quest for coexistence near their homeland of Tamil Nadu, India's most southern state. "Prior to the creation, each of the real wild elephants on which the sculptures are based are studied and photographed extensively and detailed drawings are created for reference," said The Coexistence Collective co-founder, Ruth Ganesh. Ganesh and another co-founder Tarsh Thekaekara conceived of the project while Shubhra Nayar, a set and puppetry artist, created the designs upon which the elephants are based.

The elephants are constructed from lantana camara, an invasive weed choking thirty percent of the habitat for the estimated 8,000 elephants in southern India. Removal of the weed is one of the main uses for the money raised by the sale of the sculptures, which range in price from \$8,000 to \$22,000. Said Jim Donahue, curator of historic landscapes and horticulture at The Preservation



Society of Newport County, "I thought it was a win-win that they used invasive lantana vine to create their sculptures. It removes it from the landscape in India, where it's problematic, and uses it in a good way. It's a very clever use of the lantana vine."

The massive sculptures "were delivered three or four at a time on flatbed trucks, so it was multiple trips the entire length of the island to get them to Bellevue Avenue," explained Donahue, who oversaw the installations at Salve Regina's McAuley Hall, The Breakers mansion, and Rough Point Museum. In terms of scale, he added that "this is probably the largest sculpture exhibition outdoors that we have attempted."

The artistic herd began its journey in London in 2021. Newport was the first destination of the traveling art exhibition's 3,500-mile migration on its year-long trek across the U.S. "I always loved the idea of Newport being the starting point. I loved the symbolism of the elephants crossing the ocean before landing on American soil. Newport's dramatic cliffs and coastline make it the perfect place for the migration to begin," said Ganesh, who also is a trustee for the organization sponsoring the ambitious exhibition, The Elephant Family USA.

After closing in Newport on September 2, the exhibition will head to the Meatpacking District in New York City; Miami Beach, Florida; and Blackfeet Nation buffalo pastures in Browning,

Montana, before reaching its destination in Los Angeles, California.

Displaying the sculptures on the lawns of Newport's most popular historic mansions underscored the exhibition's coexistence theme according to Donahue: "I think the fact that we have put these elephants smack-dab down in a very highly traveled tourism area does speak to what's happening in India in that the live elephants are running up against people and people are running up against elephants in a very similar way. We're lucky enough that it's a fun tourist attraction but for the people who live there, it's a serious issue—and for the elephants that live there it's a serious issue as well. I think they're well placed. It raises that whole conflict."

Not only that, they also looked beautiful. Said Ganesh, "There is a parallel iconography in the majesty of both the houses and the elephants. The herd complements landscape and backdrops of each location in Newport beautifully and vice versa. In India, elephants can be seen in back gardens, often trying to access grain stores in houses—one of the negotiations of coexistence—so placing the elephants in proximity to buildings and people helps us bring their story to life." — Pamela Ellertson