

Takachiho Yokagura: Masks and Sculptures

Masks play an important role in ritual and dramatic traditions around the world. Traditional Japanese performing arts such as *kagura* are no different, using masks to great effect. In Takachiho *yokagura* masks are known as *omote-sama*—the character for “omote” can mean either “mask” or “face.” Ranging in appearance from comic and tragic to dramatic or terrifying, specific masks have captivated audiences for centuries and have become clearly associated with specific deities. Mask makers, many of whom are members of family-run workshops, are highly accomplished in depicting each deity’s signature characteristics. Some workshops have been active for generations, carving masks out of camphor laurel and paulownia wood. Every step of the creation process is handled by one workshop, from felling the tree to carving and applying the final painting of the mask’s surface. It takes two days to carve the wood into the expressive features required and five more for the painting and glazing for a total production time of at least one week per mask.

Mask makers here are also considered sculptors, as their masks are also used for display on four sides of the sacred stage referred to as the gods’ garden (*koniwa*) as well as in Takachiho Shrine’s Kagura Hall and outside the homes where performances are held, with designs signifying such elements such as wood, fire, earth, and water. The finely crafted masks are also sometimes used as celebratory gifts, hung up for protection against evil spirits, and displayed as ornamental decor in public and private spaces.