

## Unrinji (“Cat Temple”)

Although Unrinji has been a Rinzai Zen temple for over 400 years, it is now widely known as Neko-dera, or “Cat Temple.” The temple was once a sub-temple of Tenjuin Temple, which enshrined Mōri Terumoto (1553–1625), the head of the Mōri family, who led the move of the domain’s headquarters to Hagi. Terumoto’s retainer Nagai Motofusa (d. 1625) committed ritual suicide following the death of his lord in 1625, and it is said that his cat bit out its own tongue in grief and died.

Although Unrinji’s historical connection to Motofusa’s cat is tenuous, as the legend grew more well known, the temple came to be called Neko-dera. Its main building contains a huge variety of cat-themed art, clippings from magazines and newspapers, photographs of pet cats, and religious artifacts with cat themes. Several cats have also made the temple their home.

Sumida Jisei became head of Unrinji in 1996 and uses cat-based stories and materials to teach the wisdom of the Buddha to the temple’s visitors. Sumida also performs Buddhist memorial prayers (*kuyō*) for deceased pets. Under his guidance, Unrinji has become a popular destination that receives visitors from around the world. Famous illustrators from Japan’s anime and manga studios have donated cat-themed artwork, and many of the sculptures that pack the temple grounds are the work of Yamaguchi-based chainsaw artist Takao Hayashi.

Unrinji has produced its own cat-themed votive tablets, protective amulets, and a copy of the Lotus Sutra featuring humorous feline illustrations. It also houses more than 800 statues of the bodhisattva Jizō that were discovered in a nearby village.