

Wooden Cat Masks and Carving of Amabie

These wooden cat-head masks (*kibori kaburimono*) embody the approach that head monk Sumida Jisei has taken to sharing Buddhism at Unrinji. He says that “Having cat figures at the temple is a way for people to get to know the Buddha.” Head monk Sumida has cooperated with many Japanese artists, illustrators, photographers, and sculptors to create artwork featuring cats as a way of bringing his Buddhist teachings to a larger audience. The wooden masks are among the most popular pieces of artwork on display in the temple.

The helmet-like masks are carved from locally sourced cedar by Yamaguchi-based chainsaw artist Hayashi Takao. Hayashi has achieved fame both in Japan and overseas, winning the Japan Chainsaw Art Competition three times and the US Open Chainsaw Sculpture Championship twice. Visitors are encouraged to try on one of the masks, which are surprisingly lighter than they appear.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, Hayashi Takao created a chainsaw sculpture of the mythical *amabie*, a Japanese mermaid with three legs. It is said to emerge from the oceans in times of abundant harvest or terrible disease. Naturally, this version has the face of a cat, and soon received the nickname *neko-bie*, a portmanteau of cat (*neko*) and *amabie*.