

Otomeza Theater

The Otomeza Theater was built in 1937 as a venue for stage plays and, later, movie screenings. The theater was privately funded by Mitarai's mayor, who named it after his mother, Tome, and added the prefix *o*, which indicates respect. The name "Otomeza" can also be read as the name of the constellation Virgo. Some say that the decorations on its façade resemble the eyes of a weeping woman.

Although Mitarai is known for its many historic buildings that date back to the Edo period (1603–1867), the Otomeza Theater offers a glimpse of the style of a slightly later period. The early years of the Showa era (1926–1989) were marked by a cultural movement called Showa Modern (*shōwa modan*), the adoption of an eclectic mix of Japanese and Western elements. When comparing the theater's façade with those of Mitarai's Edo-period buildings, the Western influence is plainly apparent.

Over the years, the theater gradually shifted its focus to movie screenings. After it closed in the late 1960s, the building was used as a place for sorting mikan oranges, a local specialty. To make room for the fruit and the trucks that transported it, the entrance was widened, the interior was stripped of all furnishings, and the interior walls were demolished to create a large, open space. In 2002, after requests from Mitarai's residents, the remaining structure was torn down and fully rebuilt according to the theater's original design. Since there were no blueprints to work from, project planners interviewed Mitarai's oldest residents and reconstructed details of the original theater from their memories. During this process, great attention was paid to replicating the atmosphere that patrons experienced when the theater first opened in 1937. For example, the audience section contains no chairs; instead, theater-goers remove their shoes and sit on a tatami-mat floor. The walls of the renovated theater are also lined with red and white paper lanterns and decorated with posters of movies that were screened there in the past.

Today, the Otomeza Theater continues to serve as a venue for theatrical and musical performances, as well as film screenings. The theater has even appeared in dramatic works itself, such as episodes four and eleven of the anime series *Tamayura* (2011).