Mitarai: An Edo-period Port Town Unchanged by the Tides of Time

The town of Mitarai was founded in 1666 during the Edo period (1603–1867), an era characterized by peace, prosperity, and the rise of the merchant class. This period was also characterized by isolationist policies that strictly limited Japan's contact with other countries. As a result, domestic trade became increasingly important, and official shipping routes were established to connect Osaka and Edo (now Tokyo) with the rest of Japan. The town of Mitarai, being positioned along a major shipping route, was an important port of call for trade ships carrying goods such as rice, alcohol, and salt. While the sailors waited for the tides to turn or the winds to change, local merchants restocked their ships with provisions and provided lodging, entertainment, and other services for the crews. Other businesses, such as teahouses and bathhouses (*sentō*) also catered to the visiting sailors. As a port town, Mitarai's fortunes were tightly bound to the overall domestic economy; as trade grew, Mitarai flourished.

In addition to merchants, important political figures also frequented Mitarai. Local daimyo stopped there when making trips to the capital, and during the tumultuous final years of the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1868), the port town's location relative to the domains of Hiroshima, Chōshū (now part of Yamaguchi Prefecture), and Satsuma (now part of Kagoshima Prefecture) made it a setting for political intrigue. One such event was the signing of the Mitarai Treaty, a secret agreement between the provinces of Chōshū and Geishū to form an alliance against the shogunate. This treaty was an important step in the fall of the shogunate, which led to the end of centuries of isolationism and the beginning of the modern period.

The advent of the Meiji era (1868–1912) was marked by rapid industrialization, including the modernization of the country's transportation systems through the development of a railway network. As maritime transport was replaced by rail transport, Mitarai's importance as a port town sharply declined, and its economic growth came to a sudden halt. As a result, much of Mitarai's Edo-period townscape remains unchanged to this day. In 1994, the national government designated Mitarai an Important Preservation District for Groups of Traditional Buildings.

Edo-period Architecture

Historic Mitarai has many narrow, maze-like streets, and its traditional buildings are characterized by wooden lattice doors (*kōshido*) and tile roofs typical of the Edo period. Houses built later in the period can be distinguished by their "sea-cucumber walls"

(*namako kabe*). These walls are covered with tiles and sealed with white plaster, creating a geometric pattern that is said to resemble a sea cucumber. Plastered walls are more fire-resistant than wooden walls, and during the Edo period they were commonly used in the construction of warehouses and storehouses. Another notable feature among Mitarai's older buildings is their lack of a full second story. The Edo period was marked by explicit class divisions, and it was considered disrespectful to live above street level and look down on samurai in the streets below.

Mitarai's harbors still regularly receive boats from the surrounding islands of the Seto Inland Sea, and its former glory is still reflected in the buildings of its historic district.

Wakaebisuya Teahouse

The Wakaebisuya Teahouse is estimated to have been built in 1724 and was the largest of four main teahouses (*chaya*) that operated in Mitarai during the Edo period (1603–1867). Far more than a place to drink tea, the teahouses of that time provided food, drink, and entertainment for the sailors and merchants who docked their ships in Mitarai. The success of the teahouses was considered a symbol of Mitarai's prosperous merchant culture. Wakaebisuya was the first teahouse in Mitarai to receive an official business license from the Hiroshima domain, and it is believed to have employed up to 100 female entertainers at the peak of its success. It is the only teahouse still standing in Mitarai today.

The Wakaebisuya Teahouse was a high-class establishment whose clientele included not only sailors but also daimyo from different regions, such as Kumamoto and Satsuma (now Kagoshima Prefecture), as well as foreign travelers associated with the Dutch East India Company. The teahouse had a close relationship with the Satsuma domain, as evidenced by the materials used in its construction. The ceiling and shutters (*amado*) of the tatami-floored guest room are built of *yakusugi*, ancient Japanese cedars taken from the island of Yakushima, in what is now Kagoshima Prefecture. At the time, Yakushima was controlled by the Satsuma domain, who regulated the export of *yakusugi* and required a special permit to obtain it. Likewise, one wall of Wakaebisuya's inner garden is decorated with volcanic cinder originating from the distant Sakurajima Peninsula, also located in Kagoshima.

Though distant from the famous red-light districts of Kyoto and Edo (now Tokyo), the teahouse employed high-class courtesans (*oiran*) for its equally high-class patrons. The top-ranked courtesans, called *tayū*, were luxuriously attired, dressing in embroidered

robes on par with those worn by courtesans in the Yoshiwara and Shimabara districts of Edo and Kyoto, with lavish accessories such as black lacquer geta, tortoiseshell combs, and gold-and-silver hairpins.

The Ohaguro Incident

There is a Japanese ghost story about one of Wakaebisuya's *oiran* and her serving girl (*kamuro*). This story is referred to as the "Ohaguro Incident." *Ohaguro* is the practice of blackening one's teeth with a foul-smelling mixture of iron filings dissolved in boiling vinegar. During the Edo period, blackened teeth indicated that a woman was married, and since the courtesans at Wakaebisuya were considered "wives for a night," they blackened their teeth before receiving customers. One night, an *oiran* could not get the liquid to adhere to her teeth no matter how she tried. With customers waiting for her, the *oiran* grew more and more impatient, and in a rage, she poured the boiling liquid down her serving girl's throat. The girl began vomiting black blood into her hands, and when she tried to steady herself against the wall, she left a black handprint. She died soon after. From then on, the ghost of the *kamuro* haunted the woman who had killed her. It is also said that whenever the number of women employed at the teahouse reached 100, one of them would die mysteriously so that there were never more than 99 women working there at a time. Moreover, some claim that the *kamuro*'s black handprint high on the wall could never be hidden with paint and can still be seen today.

After Mitarai's economy declined, the teahouse closed, and in 1884 the building became a Buddhist temple. As a result, the second floor was removed to make room for the temple lecture hall. In 1953, the town of Mitarai obtained the building so that it could be renovated and restored to its original appearance as a teahouse. Today, it is a public space.

Flight of the Seven Nobles (*Shichikyō-ochi Iseki*)

The Takehara residence is known for its connection with the so-called "flight of the seven nobles" (*shichikyō-ochi*), an incident that occurred during the final years of the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1868). The name refers to seven officials who fled the imperial court in Kyoto to seek political asylum in the Chōshū domain (now Yamaguchi Prefecture). The mansion had originally belonged to the Tada family, who were influential merchants and served as town headmen of Mitarai during the nineteenth century.

The political turmoil of this period was sparked when U.S. Navy Commodore Matthew C. Perry (1794–1858) sailed a fleet of warships into Edo Bay in 1853. The United States

government had sent Perry to force Japanese ports to open to American trade, and this demand was backed by the threat of the clearly superior U.S. Navy. The responses to Perry's arrival differed among the various factions of the Japanese government. Some supported opening the country, while others preferred to risk war. Although the shogun was the de facto ruler of the country, many daimyo instead supported Emperor Kōmei (1831–1866), who favored a strict policy of maintaining the country's autonomy. Realizing that war with the Americans would invite an uprising, the shogunate decided to engage in diplomatic negotiations with Perry and the other American envoys while building a Japanese navy. These negotiations led to the signing of the Treaty of Amity and Commerce on July 29, 1858, which effectively ended the national policy of seclusion and split the shogunate along lines of loyalty.

As a result of this policy change, the political elite split into two factions: the "Union of the Imperial Court and the Shogunate" faction (*kōbu gattai*), who sought to bond the shogunate to the authority of the imperial court, and the "Honor the Emperor and Expel the Foreign Barbarians" faction (*sonnō jōi*), who demanded abolition of the shogunate, restoration of the emperor's power, and preservation of Japan's seclusion, through war if necessary. The events that led to the "Flight of the Seven Nobles" unfolded against this backdrop of a splintered government,.

On September 30, 1863, the pro-shogunate *kōbu gattai* faction expelled seven nobles from the imperial court in Kyoto. The seven, led by Sanjō Sanetomi (1837–1891), together composed a radical sub-group of the *sonnō jōi* faction, which was loyal to the emperor. These nobles fled Kyoto to seek protection from the daimyo of the Chōshū domain, another strong supporter of the *sonnō jōi* movement. During their escape, five of the seven noblemen passed through Mitarai, where they took shelter for two nights at the Takehara Residence before continuing on their journey to Chōshū. Ultimately, the *sonnō jōi* group was victorious, the shogunate was overthrown, and the emperor was restored to power.

It is recorded that, after the residence was vacated by the Takehara family, it once again became the site of political intrigue. A Dutchman by the name of Thielemann lived there while smuggling shipments of weapons to the Satsuma domain.

Ebisu Jinja Shrine

Ebisu Jinja Shrine is the oldest shrine in Mitarai. It dates back to 1666, when the town

was founded. Ebisu is the Shinto deity of fishermen and is said to bestow bountiful catches and safe sailing. He is often depicted holding a fishing rod in his right hand and a sea bream in his left. One local legend states that this shrine was built to commemorate a miraculous event: a fisherman noticed a strange light that appeared in the water close to the Chisago Breakwater each night, and when he tried fishing in the illuminated water, he hauled up a statue of the deity Ebisu.

Due to the close relationship between ships and merchants, Ebisu is also worshipped as the deity of commercial prosperity and is one of the Seven Deities of Good Fortune (Shichifukujin). Rows of warehouses for storing the goods brought by merchant ships to Mitarai were built in the vicinity of the shrine, and subsequently this area became the most prosperous part of the town.

The shrine's torii was built at the edge of the pier, where it faces out to sea to greet arriving merchant ships, whose crews could pay their respects directly upon arrival. In recent years, this torii has gained a reputation as beneficial for matchmaking, and it is said that if you stand facing the sea and shout a wish through the gate, it will come true. Additionally, a small shrine alongside the worship hall contains a "stone of rejuvenation" (*wakagaeri no ishi*). The magical stone is believed to return to this spot no matter how many times it is thrown into the sea, and it is believed to have the miraculous power of similarly returning youth and vitality to people who pray to it.

Ebisu Jinja's main sanctuary (*honden*), where the deity resides, was constructed in 1723; the current worship hall was rebuilt in 1746. Both structures were designated Important Cultural Properties of Hiroshima Prefecture by the national government in 1996.

Sumiyoshi Jinja Shrine

Sumiyoshi Jinja Shrine was built in 1830 as a guardian shrine for the Chisago Breakwater. It enshrines three deities known as the Sumiyoshi Sanjin who are associated with sailing and the sea. According to legend, the Sumiyoshi Sanjin are the three main stars of the constellation Orion, and their connection to sailing possibly originates from the importance of those stars in maritime navigation.

To build the shrine, the Hiroshima domain's magistrate solicited funding from Kōnoike Zen'emon (1806–1851). Zen'emon was the ninth-generation head of a wealthy Osaka merchant family that would later establish what is now United Financial Holdings of

Japan (UFJ), one of the country's largest banks. The magistrate did not seriously expect Zen'emon to contribute to the construction of the shrine, but Zen'emon happened to be at the unlucky age of 25. Per Japanese tradition, disaster is thought more likely to strike during certain inauspicious years of a person's life (*yakudoshi*), but catastrophe can be averted by performing meritorious acts, such as visiting shrines or temples. It is said that Zen'emon donated the funds for building Sumiyoshi Jinja with the hope of counteracting the effects of his *yakudoshi*.

Sumiyoshi Jinja's main sanctuary (*honden*) is an exact half-scale replica of the *honden* of Sumiyoshi Taisha Shrine in Osaka, the main shrine for all Sumiyoshi shrines across Japan. The component parts of the *honden* were built in Osaka and later assembled in Mitarai. Both the *honden* in Osaka and the one in Mitarai are constructed in a unique style called *sumiyoshi-zukuri*, characterized by a flat roofline and surrounding stone fence.

The fence around the shrine precincts is inscribed with the names of merchants from around the country who made donations toward the shrine's construction, a sign of Mitarai's nationwide renown. Other donors recognized here include high-ranking courtesans (*oiran*) who worked at the local teahouses.

In 1991, Typhoon Mireille completely destroyed Sumiyoshi Jinja's worship hall, but it has since been rebuilt. The *honden,* however, remained nearly untouched by the typhoon, and in 1996 it was designated an Important Cultural Property of Hiroshima Prefecture.

Former Shibaya Residence

The Former Shibaya Residence was built during the late eighteenth century for a member of the Takahashi family, a family of wealthy merchants who served for several generations as headmen of the nearby town of Ōchō (now Yutakamachi-Ōchō) and respected elders of Mitarai. The name Shibaya is a "house name" (*yagō*), which were usually given to residences or merchant stores to identify a family or business lineage. This tradition emerged to differentiate families during the Edo period (1603–1867), when commoners were prohibited from adopting official family names. The Shibaya Residence was designated a Tangible Cultural Property by the city of Kure in 2004, and the building now serves as Mitarai's town museum. Its exhibits include vintage items from everyday life, such as a non-mechanical refrigerator (icebox), an antique bathtub, and ceramic containers used for storing provisions.

The Shibaya Residence faces Tokiwa Street, which has the largest collection of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century buildings in Mitarai. Visitors may notice a lack of utility poles anywhere in the neighborhood. To preserve the traditional ambience of the town, power lines were installed underground.

Like most of the buildings lining the street, the Shibaya Residence has a low second-floor ceiling, as well as wooden lattices covering its windows and entrances. Tiled roofs and black tile walls covered in a grid of grayish-white plaster (known as *namako kabe*, or "sea-cucumber walls") make these buildings more fire-resistant than the shingle-roofed wooden structures of earlier times. The narrow façades and long, skinny dimensions of the buildings also earned the architectural style the name "eel bed" (*unagi no nedoko*). The style is believed to have developed because of a system of taxation and compulsory labor that determined each household's tribute partially by the width of its façade. The fact that the Shibaya Residence is wider than many other homes on Tokiwa Street reflects the relatively higher status of the Takahashi family.

The famous cartographer Inō Tadataka (1745–1818), who is known for carrying out the first complete survey of Japan's coastline, stayed at the Shibaya Residence for three days in 1806 while drafting the coastline of Ōsaki Shimojima, the island where Mitarai is located. This event has been captured in the *Inō Tadataka Mitarai Cartography Illustration* (Inō Tadataka Mitarai Sokuryō no Zu), notably one of only two illustrations that depict Tadataka in the process of his cartographic work. It is also the only illustration in which he is clearly identified: the picture came with a note stating that Tadataka is the man wearing black socks and holding a black umbrella. The original illustration is displayed at the Irifuneyama Memorial Museum, and a copy is kept in the Shibaya Residence's detached study, along with other charts and records of Tadataka's work. The view of the coastline from the study window is still recognizable as the one depicted in the 1806 illustration.

Former Kaneko Residence

The Kaneko family were wealthy merchants who held great influence as town headmen of Mitarai, particularly during the final years of the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1868). They built this residence in 1823 as a place to entertain their many illustrious guests, among them writers, artists, and political figures. The building was designated a Tangible Cultural Property by the city of Kure in 2011 and renovated between 2014 and 2018. It is now open for use by the public.

The Former Kaneko Residence contains several small, tatami-floored rooms that look out on a traditional Japanese tea garden and an attached tearoom with an adjacent *mizuya* (kitchenette). The tearoom and *mizuya* were constructed in Kyoto in 1823. After being disassembled for transport, they were brought to Mitarai by ship and reassembled at the residence.

Attendees of a tea ceremony first rinse their hands and mouth at the stone basin in the garden, then walk across the stepping-stones, pass through the inner gate, and enter the tearoom through the low, square *nijiriguchi* door. This door forces all guests to bow low when entering the tearoom, symbolizing the equality of all participants. The Kaneko family, wanting to express special reverence for their more esteemed guests, built a second, slightly taller entrance that connects the tearoom directly to the external corridor running alongside the garden. Such a feature is rarely seen in teahouses. When the teahouse is used today, guests are able to enter from either of the two entrances.

Because of Mitarai's pivotal location along the sea routes connecting Hiroshima, Chōshū, and Satsuma domain, the Kaneko Residence was the site of important political meetings, most notably the arrangement of the Mitarai Treaty. In September of 1867, the three daimyo who controlled these domains formed an alliance against the shogunate in Edo (now Tokyo). Two months later, on November 26, Hiroshima's militia commander, Kishikyū Be'e, and Chōshū's chief retainer, Mōri Takumi, met at the Kaneko Residence to finalize their allegiance and draft a concrete strategy for dispatching troops to Edo, where they would topple the shogunate and restore the emperor as sovereign ruler. That same night, warships departed from Mitarai heading for Edo. The agreement between Be'e and Takumi would later be known as the Mitarai Treaty. The signatories to the treaty were ultimately successful in their endeavor, and the restoration of the emperor's authority was announced on January 3, 1868, marking the beginning of the Meiji era (1868–1912).

***Funayado* (Shipping Agencies)**

As Mitarai's port developed, local merchants began to establish *funayado*, businesses that provided lodging and entertainment to ships' officers while their ships were in port. As domestic sea trade grew during the Edo period (1603–1867), *funayado* also began offering additional services as shipping agencies that restocked vessels with provisions, supplied new crew members, and provided weather reports. They also assisted in

negotiating trade deals or finding buyers for the ships' goods, essentially taking on the role of wholesale intermediaries. One of these *funayado*, called Wakamoto-ya, was previously owned by the Kimura family and now belongs to the city of Kure. In 1994, it was designated a municipal Tangible Cultural Property.

During the late Edo period, some *funayado* came to specialize in serving the ships owned by the daimyo families of individual domains, which required a special permit from that family. Today, only three of the buildings used by these exclusive *funayado* remain: Wakamoto-ya, which served the Ōzu and Uwajima domains (now part of Ehime Prefecture); Takehara-ya, which served the Nobeoka domain (now part of Miyazaki Prefecture); and Waki-ya, which served the Kagoshima and Kumamoto domains. When lodging at one of these exclusive *funayado*, the members of these illustrious families would announce their presence by hanging their domain's banner above the entrance.

Around the same time, the wealth and power of the merchant class began to surpass that of lower-ranking samurai families. Aristocratic families typically received tax revenues in the form of rice, and they were therefore strongly affected by the decreasing price of rice during the late Edo period. In contrast, merchants were growing more affluent and, consequently, more influential. Outfitting and financing a trade ship was an expensive process, and some samurai families had difficulty bearing those costs. In response, the merchants running the *funayado* began offering a new service: loans to their ruling-class clients.

Manshūji Temple

According to legend, Manshūji Temple was founded after the military commander Taira no Kiyomori (1118–1181) was saved from a storm by repeatedly chanting the name of Amida Buddha. To express his gratitude, Kiyomori enshrined a statue of the eleven-headed manifestation of Kannon, an emanation of Amida Buddha, and that shrine eventually became Manshūji Temple. Oddly, according to temple records, the Kannondō hall was erected in 1718, centuries after Kiyomori's death. After the hall was built, a bell tower, temple kitchen (*kuri*), and stone steps were added to the complex, and in 1751, the Hiroshima domain officially licensed Manshūji as a Buddhist temple of the Shingon school.

The temple grounds also include the tombstone of haiku poet Kurita Chodō (1749–1814) and a stone monument inscribed with a poem by haiku master Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694).

The presence of these monuments is a testament to the culture of haiku poetry that flourished in Mitarai during the Edo period (1603–1867) and that was furthered by interactions with poets from the Ryūkyū Kingdom (now Okinawa Prefecture). Ryūkyū became a vassal state of Japan after the Satsuma domain invaded in 1609, and throughout the Edo period, it paid tribute to the Tokugawa shogunate by sending groups of distinguished scholars, artists, and poets to the shogunate in Edo (now Tokyo). On their way there, these delegations sometimes passed through Mitarai. The amicable relationship that developed between the Ryūkyūans and the community of Mitarai is immortalized in an artistic temple nameplate that was presented to Manshūji by a delegation in 1806 and which is now preserved in the Kannondō hall.

The stone wall surrounding Manshūji Temple was built in the mid-eighteenth century. Although there is no clear record of its origins, the location and structure of the wall suggest that it was likely a naval defense, as it is situated on what was once Mitarai's coastline and was built by fitting stones of various sizes together. This technique, called *midarekizuki* (literally, "random construction"), was commonly used to build military structures during the Warring States period (1467–1568). The most popular theory on the origin of the wall is that Katō Kiyomasa (1562–1611), a general and cousin of warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598), built it as a frontline defense during Hideyoshi's Shikoku campaign in 1585. Due to the wall's unusually large scale and the size of the stones used to construct it, the wall was designated a Tangible Cultural Property by the city of Kure in 1999.

Tenman Jinja Shrine

Tenman Jinja Shrine is said to mark the location of a visit by renowned scholar, poet, and aristocrat Sugawara no Michizane (845–903). While traveling from Kyoto to the Kyushu region, Michizane is believed to have stopped in Mitarai and washed his hands at a well. This episode became the origin of the name "Mitarai," which literally translates to "honorably washing one's hands." After his death, Michizane was deified as Tenman Daijizai Tenjin, the Shinto deity of scholarship and writing. The first Shinto shrine dedicated to Tenjin in Mitarai was built in 1755 on the grounds of Manshūji Temple. In 1871, a new shrine was built next to the well at which Michizane is believed to have washed his hands, and the statue from the original shrine at Manshūji was moved to its current location at Tenman Jinja Shrine. The current shrine building was constructed in 1917 using donations from the residents of Mitarai.

A torii gate stands at the entrance to the shrine, marking the transition into sacred space. The path is lined with cherry trees. Facing toward the shrine, on the left side stands the traditional washbasin for rinsing one's hands and mouth before praying. This washbasin is shaped like a large inkstone to symbolize the temple's connection to scholarship and writing. Alongside the washbasin is a *fudezuka*, a memorial for worn-out calligraphy brushes. Memorials like it are often found at shrines to Tenjin. To the right of the path is a large stone monument dedicated to Michizane that has been engraved with one of his poems. The text expresses his deep humility and respect for the people who helped him in life. A second stone monument honors Nakamura Harukichi (1871–1945), an adventurer born in Mitarai who traveled around the world by bicycle between 1902 and 1903 and was rumored to be a spy.

Stairs lead up from the pathway to the shrine's worship hall and main sanctuary (*honden*), where Tenjin is enshrined. A tunnel called the "gate of possibility" (*kanō-mon*) passes below the *honden* and leads to the back of the shrine precinctsand the well in which Michizane is rumored to have washed his hands. Wishes made while walking through the *kanō-mon* are said to come true, although each visitor is only allowed one wish per visit. Additionally, it is said that using the water from this well to write the traditional auspicious kanji character at the start of the New Year will improve the calligrapher's penmanship.

Chisago Breakwater and Lighthouse

During the nineteenth century, Mitarai's dominance as a port town was threatened by the development of an increasing number of rival harbors across the region. The dominant sea route also changed, and ships that once hopped from port to port along the southern coast of Honshu instead followed the northern coast of Shikoku, approaching Mitarai from the southeast rather than the northeast. To attract ships sailing this new route, Mitarai added a breakwater on the south side of its harbor. Funding from the Hiroshima domain for this large-scale construction project was repeatedly delayed, and Mitarai finally completed the breakwater in 1829 by funding it through a locally organized lottery, which had been legalized just a few years before.

The Chisago Breakwater is 120 meters in length, the largest breakwater in the Chūgoku region. The breakwater was also technologically advanced for its time: the builders employed *gobōzumi*, a method used to build castle ramparts, in which large, uncut stones are stacked together without mortar. A curved wall was added to the outside of the

breakwater to reduce the impact of the waves. In 1830, Sumiyoshi Jinja Shrine was built as a guardian shrine for the breakwater to add another dimension of protection for the harbor. The well-engineered breakwater remains in use today, having withstood the test of time and many typhoons.

A number of lighthouses have stood at the tip of the breakwater to guide ships approaching Mitarai. The first lighthouse was a wooden structure, but it was badly damaged by a series of storms. In 1832, a stronger, stone lighthouse funded by the Kaneko merchant family replaced the wooden one. The new lighthouse was 6 meters high and built in the traditional stone-lantern style. This stone lighthouse remained in use until 1879, when it was relocated to the path leading to Sumiyoshi Jinja. In its place, a concrete lighthouse now occupies the tip of the breakwater. It was built in a style that replicates the architecture of the original stone lighthouse.

The large stones lining the breakwater are used for securing ships, and they have kanji numerals carved into them. At the foot of the breakwater wall, a turtle and a crane have been carved into the stone. Both animals are symbols of prosperity and longevity, and together they express hope for Mitarai's prosperity as a port town for many years to come. Touching these carved stones is said to bring good fortune. The Chisago Breakwater and its lighthouse are important symbols of Mitarai's past and present, and the view over the harbor still looks much as it did during the Edo period (1603–1867).

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).