

TOPICS



THE WORLD OF Itasha

A NEW VARIANT of *otaku* culture has sped onto the scene in Japan: the *itasha*. Itasha are cars that have their bodies decorated with pictures of characters from *manga*, *anime* or video games. The word *itasha* is a combination of the Japanese words *itai* (painful) and *sha* (vehicle). *Itai* here means painful as in “painfully embarrassing” because the car stands out when being driven on the road. The term connotes self-mockery and is also a pun on the word for Italian cars, similarly abbreviated in Japanese as “*itasha*.”

Customized *itasha* began to appear when *otaku* culture first started to gain popularity around 2000. In recent years, the *itasha* movement has enjoyed a subdued upswing in popularity, with the creation of an Internet community and the publication of spe-

cialty magazines such as *Itasha Road* and *Itasha Graphics*. The ItaG Festival exhibition was held in Odaiba this November, attracting approximately 400 *itasha* from around the country. Images of popular characters, such as Miku Hatsune, Haruhi Suzumiya and Rozen Maiden, adorned all types of vehicles, including sports cars, sedans and trucks. Cut-out stickers and air-brushed images appear on the hoods, doors and rear windows. Some car owners take it so far as to decorate the interior with printed cushions or figurines.

“Normally the aim of customizing a vehicle to enhance performance, but with *itasha* making the character stand out is the most important thing,” explains an ItaG Festival staff member. “It is a mode of *otaku* of culture that was initially driven totally by the individuals involved, but we want to increase its momentum through this type of event.”

EXHIBITION PHOTOS: Scores of *itasha* gathered for the ItaG Festival. The passion felt by the vehicle owners for their chosen characters is clear for all to see.