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Collection Summary

Repository: Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries

Creator: Oyama, Suteematsu, 1860-1919

Title: Suteematsu Yamakawa Oyama Papers

Dates: 1872-1983 (bulk 1882-1919)

Quantity: 0.6 cubic feet (2 boxes)

Abstract: Papers created by and relating to Suteematsu Yamakawa Oyama, "Princess Oyama," the first Japanese woman to receive a college degree.

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Biographical Note

Suteematsu Yamakawa was born February 23, 1860, in northeastern Honshu, the largest of the four main islands of Japan. Twelve years later, Suteematsu (sometimes referred to by the Anglicized and more phonetic "Stematz") became one of five young women to arrive in the United States with the Iwakura Mission, a diplomatic group from Japan's new Meiji government sent abroad to strengthen political ties and educate Japan's leaders regarding western modernization. The five girls, aged 6-14, were to spend ten years in the United States then return to their country to become exemplary mothers in a modern Japan.

Shortly after her arrival in the United States in 1872, Yamakawa was placed with the family of Rev. Leonard Bacon in New Haven, Connecticut. Yamakawa spent the remainder of her childhood with the Bacons, becoming a cherished member of the family and best friend to youngest daughter Alice. After graduating from Hillhouse High School, Yamakawa was accepted at Vassar College, as was Shigeko Nagai, another student from the Iwakura Mission. Both were popular and did well academically. Nagai, who later became the Baroness Uriu, studied for three years as a Special Student in music. Yamakawa was president of her class, an active member of many clubs, and graduated with honors in 1882. She was the first Japanese woman to receive a college degree.

After Vassar, Yamakawa briefly attended nursing school in New Haven, but soon returned to Japan. She searched for teaching or government work, but because she could speak Japanese but had never learned to read or write the language, her job prospects were dim. Marriage seemed her only option. In 1883, she married Iwao Oyama, a 42 year old widower, father of three, and the Japanese Minister of War. After her marriage and a series of promotions for her husband, Suteematsu Yamakawa became Countess Oyama, and later, Princess Oyama. She took on roles common to government officials' wives, but also met with the Empress to give advice on western style and customs, encouraged upper-class women to volunteer as nurses (previously considered a menial occupation), and furthered the cause of women's education as a trustee of the Peeresses' School in Tokyo and co-founder of the Girl's English Institute (Joshi Eigakujuku). In 1919, Suteematsu Oyama fell victim to an influenza epidemic that swept Tokyo. She died just five days short of her sixtieth birthday.

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Chronology

23 February 1860	Born in Aizu-Wakamatsu, Japan
15 January 1872	Arrived in the United States as part of the Iwakura Mission
June 1882	Graduated from Vassar College
8 November 1883	Married Iwao Oyama
18 February 1919	Died in Tokyo

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Scope and Content of the Collection

The Sutematsu Yamakawa Oyama Collection includes correspondence, published material, photographs, Vassar College Class of 1882 records, and miscellaneous realia, including autograph cards and the wedding announcement of Yamakawa and Oyama. The first half of the collection includes letters Oyama wrote to her American friends after her graduation from Vassar; in them she discusses her voyage home and her life in Japan before and after her marriage. The main correspondents are her Vassar classmate, Jessie Wheeler, and the daughter of her first U.S. sponsor, Alice Bacon. The rest of the collection consists of magazine and newspaper clippings covering the period 1872-1983, with the bulk from 1882 to 1919. Also in the collection are a letter from Sutematsu's daughter, Hisako, to Anne S. Wyman (VC 1882), thanking Mrs. Wyman for her condolences on the death of Princess Oyama; and a small series of letters of the Vassar Club to the Japan Society regarding Vassar College's donation of Princess Oyama's court robe to the Society.

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Access and Use

This collection is open for research according to the [regulations of the Vassar College Archives and Special Collections Library](#) without any additional restrictions.

Restrictions on Use

Permission to quote (publish) from unpublished or previously published material must be obtained as described in the [regulations of the Vassar College Archives and Special Collections Library](#).

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Related Material

Related Materials

- [Caroline Furness Papers, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries.](#)
- Kuno, Akiko. *Unexpected Destinations: The Poignant Story of Japan's First Vassar Graduate*. Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1993.
- [Shigeko Nagai Uriu Papers, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries.](#)
- [Yamakawa, Stematz \(Sutematsu Yamakawa Oyama\). Vassar College Alumnae/i Biographical Files \(AAVC\), Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries.](#)

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Subject Headings

Names:

- Bacon, Alice Mabel, 1858-1918
- Oyama, Iwao, 1842-1916
- Uriu, Shigeko, 1861-1928
- Wheeler, Jessie F., 1858-1946

Organizations:

- Vassar College--Students

Subjects:

- Japanese students--Foreign countries
- Japanese students--United States
- Marriage--Japan
- Women college students--New York (State)--Poughkeepsie
- Women in war
- Women--Education

Document Types:

- Clippings
- Correspondence
- Photographs
- Postcards

VCL Categories:

- East Asia, South Asia, and India
- Vassar College
- War and War Crimes
- Women's History

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Encoding Information

Encoded by Laura Streett, October 2005. Updated by Emma Gronbeck, August 2024.

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Administrative Information

Preferred Citation

Sutematsu Yamakawa Oyama Papers, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries.

Acquisition Information

Gift of various donors. Letters from Oyama and other correspondents to Alice Bacon given in 1994 by Jean Bryant, a grandniece of Alice Bacon.

Additions made May 2009. (M2009-011)

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Series List

[Series I. Correspondence \(Box 1\)](#)

This series includes letters from Sutematsu Oyama as well as a set of letters about her from the Baroness Hisako Oyama Ida (her daughter), Prince Kashiwa Oyama (her son) and one letter from Shigeko Nagai Uriu to Alice Bacon. Of particular interest are the letters to Alice Bacon, 1882-1919, which describe Oyama's life after graduation from Vassar College.

[Series II. Printed materials \(Box 2\)](#)

This series includes a number of articles and newspaper clippings about Sutematsu Oyama both while she was alive and after her death in 1919.

[Series III. Miscellaneous materials \(Box 2\)](#)

The material in this series includes photographs, Vassar College realia and class records, as well as Oyama's wedding announcement, autograph cards and a guest list for a dinner party.

Container List

SERIES I. CORRESPONDENCE

Letters by Sutematsu Oyama

Folder 1.1	Sutematsu Oyama to Alice Bacon, 1882-1883 (11 letters)
Folder 1.2	Sutematsu Oyama to Alice Bacon, 1884-1894 (4 letters)
Folder 1.3	Sutematsu Oyama to Alice Bacon, 1899-1903 (11 letters)
Folder 1.4	Sutematsu Oyama to Alice Bacon, 1904-1918 (12 letters)
Folder 1.5	Typescripts of Sutematsu Oyama to Alice Bacon, 1882-1919
Folder 1.6	Sutematsu Oyama to J. B. Sargent, Esq., 1904 (2 letters)

- Folder 1.7 Sutematsu Oyama to Jessie F. Wheeler, 1882 (5 letters with 2 transcripts, 2 postcards, 1 annotated note by Wheeler)
- Folder 1.8 Sutematsu Oyama to others, circa 1885-1905 (3 letters, 1 postcard)

Letters relating to Sutematsu Oyama

- Folder 1.9 Baroness Hisako Oyama Ida (daughter of Sutematsu) to Alice Bacon, 1903, undated (1 postcard, 1 letter)
- Folder 1.10 Baroness Hisako Oyama Ida to Anne Southworth Wyman, 9 July [1919] (1 letter)
- Folder 1.11 Prince Kashiwa Oyama (son of Sutematsu) to Jessie F. Wheeler, 17 September 1941 (1 postcard)
- Folder 1.12 Shigeko Nagai Uriu to Alice Bacon, 7 July 1908 (1 letter)
- Folder 1.13 Miscellaneous correspondence relating to Sutematsu Yamakawa Oyama, 1924-1966 (1 transcript, 1 memo, 5 letters)

SERIES II. PRINTED MATERIALS

- Folder 2.1 Articles published about Sutematsu Yamakawa Oyama, 1872-1882 (photocopies)
- Folder 2.2 Articles published about Sutematsu Yamakawa Oyama, 1904- 1983 (photocopies)
- Folder 2.3 Newspaper clippings about Sutematsu Yamakawa Oyama, 1878-1932 (photocopies)

SERIES III. MISCELLANEOUS MATERIALS

- Folder 2.4 Portions of the Record Book of the VC Class of 1882; History of the Class of 1882, prepared for the 50th reunion, 1932 (photocopies)
- Folder 2.5 Biographical information collected by the VC Alumnae Office, undated
- Folder 2.6 Autograph cards of Sutematsu Oyama, 1881, undated
- Folder 2.7 Wedding announcement of Sutematsu Yamakawa and Iwao Oyama, 1883
- Folder 2.8 Goodwill message from the Women's Patriotic Association of Japan, December 1918
- Folder 2.9 Handwritten guest list of dinner in Tokyo honoring Jessie Wheeler, 20 April 1928
- Folder 2.10 Photographs of Sutematsu Yamakawa Oyama while at Vassar, circa 1878-1882
- Folder 2.11 Photographs of Sutematsu Yamakawa Oyama before and after Vassar, circa 1872, 1882-1900
- Folder 2.12 Photographs of Sutematsu Yamakawa Oyama's friends, family and others, 1928, 1932, undated

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