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Thoroughly Modern Meiko: the adventures of Muriel Orr-Ewing

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Who is Meiko? An

introduction to the exhibit

I seem to have lived two lives always -- the one which the world saw -- which was really respectable, hard working -- almost admirable -- and the other -- the hidden, emotional one, revealed only in my diary and to the few people personally involved.

[Diary: 1976-1980 pg.105-106]

- From a very early age, Muriel Orr-Ewing (nicknamed "Meiko") was a prolific writer. Exhibiting an intense desire to capture her thoughts and feelings on the people, places and events in her life, Meiko wrote constantly over the course of her lifetime. Her writings provide a rare uncensored glimpse into the world of a modern 20th century woman.

Why are Meiko's papers so important to preserve? Often personal papers donated to archives are censored by the creator or their heirs. After pulling out documents they wish to remain hidden,

only the highlights are left. However, researchers find a lot of evidential value in history's trials and tribulations. Meiko's papers represent the full spectrum of her life through over 60 years worth of diaries, correspondence, photographs, and business records.

The Muriel Orr-Ewing Papers were donated to the University Archives by Meiko's son, UB professor Emeritus, Dr. Peter Boyd-Bowman. Dr. Boyd-Bowman left the collection intact with little to no intervention on his part. Therefore this collection represents a distinctive voice of the 20th century.

In this exhibit you will get hear Meiko's story told through her own distinctivte voice.

Who is Meiko? Well...

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Miss Muriel

Muschamp, 1900-1924

Muriel Emma Lucy Muschamp was born March 21, 1900 in Geneva, Switzerland. Her father, [Percy Allen Huntercombe Muschamp](#) was an Englishman and her mother, [Marie Marguerite](#) was Swiss French. In 1907 the Muschamps moved to a small town near Zurich when her father took over as headmaster at the [Institut de Stäfa](#).

In 1916 the [Muschamp family](#) relocated to England. Five years later Muriel secured a position as governess for the youngest daughter of the Comptons, a large upper-middle class family living at [Pailton House](#). It did not take long for her to become an integral part of the household even producing many plays and recitals starring the entire Compton family.

On September 22, 1921 she became engaged to [Dicky Hammerton](#) a friend of her eldest brother George. They were engaged for three years before Muriel began to feel

restless.

- In May she met [Cuthbert Boyd Bowman](#) (nicknamed "Boodh" by Muriel) at a small dinner party. She said of the meeting in her diary:

"I am in rather a devilish mood -- I feel I want to start an intrigue with Bowman."

Boodh and Muriel begin dating even though she was still engaged to Dicky. After months of carrying on two full relationships, Muriel made a decision: if Boodh got the "Japan job" she would marry him.

"Since yesterday I feel that if Boodh really is going to Japan in about a month, I'll go with him and burn my boats. God knows whether I shall regret it -- I don't feel happiness can ever be built on other people's sorrows" [1924 diary].

When Boodh secured a teaching position at the Koto Gakko in Matsue, Japan, she broke off her engagement with Dicky.

"Oh fool, fool, unhappy fool that I am -- tears are surging in my eyes and my heart is heavy with sadness. How can I, How can I ever hope to be happy while through me Dicky has suffered - - suffered to see the body he loved best given to another, his love, his great astounding love scorned and counted as nothing..." [1924 diary].

On March 25, 1924 Muriel married Boodh in a small service at her family's parrish in Leicester. A few days later Mr. and Mrs. Boyd Bowman boarded a ship bound for Japan.

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**Mrs.
Boyd**

Bowman in Japan, 1924-1931

On May 13, 1924 Muriel arrived at her new home in the quaint medieval town of Matsue.

"As I have often said before, Matsue is by far my favorite town in Japan, in fact, above all others it has come to represent Japan for me. This is not only because it is the most beautiful town I have ever seen, but also on account of the indescribable quality of its atmosphere"
[Speech: "Matsue-Bristol Sister Cities," circa 1955].

Right from the start she loved Japan and thoroughly [immersed herself in the culture](#). She joined local [music clubs](#), studied Japanese history and even handwrote her own Japanese dictionaries. Most of all she loved being a

[mother to Peter](#), born on October 29, 1924.

Monday -- I shall launder Peter's things and practice the piano

Tuesday -- practice singing and study Japanese

Wednesday -- write letters home and piano

Thursday -- do sewing and singing practice

Friday -- write this diary or Peter's or do other writing, the piano.

Saturday -- wash my hair and study Japanese

On **Sunday** all or more of these things.

[Diary, June 1, 1926 pg. 7-8]

It was during this time Muriel first received the nickname
 ■ "Meiko" -- a Japanese name [Peter](#) used as a term of endearment for his mother. Later her students and close friends would also call her "Meiko".

From the very beginning of their marriage, Muriel and Boodh often argued over money. She did not like the way he handled their affairs and as a result she physically distanced herself from her husband.

"We were never clear from the very beginning -- and that's been the curse. We married without a penny between us -- and with Boodh's salary had at once to furnish a house, pay huge doctor's bills, produce a baby etc. If once we were clear, we could easily manage I am sure... but now we always have to make new debts to pay older ones" [Diary, June 21, 1926 pg. 25].

In late 1927 she discovered she was again pregnant with Boodh's child. This time, Muriel was not happy. She wanted more children, but not with Boodh and not at that time.

On August 28, 1928 Muriel's second son, [Anthony Muschamp Boyd-Bowman](#) was born in Kanazawa, Japan. Much to her horror, the baby was born breach with a severe case of Downs Syndrome. She left Japan to bring Anthony to doctors in London.

"I was told by the greatest specialist in town that Anthony would never be normal. He is a so-called Mongolian imbecile -- devoid of thyroid glands -- the only consolation they could give me is that he would not be a criminal imbecile" [Diary, Arabian Sea, November 1927-Lusanne December 1930 pg. 85].

The specialists in England advised Muriel to put Anthony in a special home where he died in 1946 at the age of eighteen.

While Muriel was in England with Peter and Anthony, Boodh lost his job in Japan. In March 1930 he was hired to teach at the [Raffles Institute](#) in Singapore.

Although she was fed up with her marriage, Muriel decided to make one last ditch effort and got on a ship to Singapore.

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Austria during the 1930s, 1931-1939 *Part I:*

Debonnaire Sylvester

On board the S.S. Comorin bound for Singapore, Muriel met a young woman, [Debonnaire Metcalf](#), who was on her way to South India to marry [her fiancé, George Sylvester](#). Muriel was immediately intrigued by Debonnaire's intense personality.

"[Miss Metcalf] is slim, with a glorious way of holding herself, moving or standing -- not taller than I am. She is very very dark and... has black eyebrows that almost meet above her eyes... Her mouth is unique in shape -- expressive, smallish and vivacious. Her eyes are deep brown -- and can hold the world of expression. This is her body -- so different to mine in every way -- but our minds, all our thoughts and feelings are almost identical" [Diary, Lausanne 1931-Kitzbühel 1934, April 13, 1931 pg. 40].

During their few weeks on board the ship, [Debonnaire and Muriel](#) spent much of their free time together. The two grew very close.

"...For some reason I touched her hand and at once she got hold of it with the strongest grip imaginable. My pulses were simply hectic -- so was hers... and I suddenly realized that she loved me... How from being amused slightly at this unexpected event, then touched, then suddenly finding in my heart a quite extraordinary response -- I simply cannot explain" [Diary Lausanne 1931-Kitzbüchel 1934, April 13, 1931, pg. 43-44].

Even after she arrived in Singapore, Muriel could not forget Debonnaire. In the late fall of 1931 she decided to see her again. Boodh was devastated, but Muriel insisted and left Singapore to go to Debonnaire.

While in India Muriel was rushed to the hospital with an extreme case of sunstroke. The doctors made it clear: she needed to move to a cooler climate. Muriel and Debonnaire decided that they would start a life together in Kitzbühel in the Tyrol district of Austria.

Kitzbüchel Austria

"...the moment I set foot in Kitzbühel -- the moment I started climbing up through meadows absolutely wild with flowers... I felt the inexpressible atmosphere of peace... that was an almost visible haze over all the little valley, then I knew I would love Kitzbühel and would like it to be my home." [Diary, Lausanne 1931-Kitzbüchel 1934, pg. 178].

Muriel, Debonnaire and Peter lived together in their home at [Zum Waldschützen](#) living off of paying guests and the [few English boys Muriel tutored](#).

Unfortunately, in only a few years Muriel and Debonnaire ended their relationship after a series of fights. They continued to live together at Zum Waldschützen causing them to become more and more disrespectful towards each other.

In the fall of 1935 things got worse. Muriel finalized her divorce to Boodh and tried to end her relations with Debonnaire. She suffered a nervous breakdown and was sent to a sanatorium to recuperate. Afterwards she fell into a deep clinical depression which quickly spiraled out of control. Feeling an overwhelming loneliness and hopelessness, Muriel one evening took a huge amount of pills intending to end her life. A doctor was quickly rushed in to pump her stomach.

She was immediately checked into a nerve clinic in Innsbruck to calm her "fits." Although a harrowing experience, Muriel experienced a transformation during her ordeal.

"...it seems as if everything has passed, has just been an advanced price to pay for the extraordinary thing that has happened -- the most beautiful, loving thing, even though it has its moments of sadness" [Diary, "London 1935 to Kitzbühel 1936" pg. 14].

While in the nerve clinic, Muriel met the head of clinic, neuro-psychotherapist, Dr. Franz Xavier Schmuttermayer.

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Austria during the 1930s, 1931-1939 *Part II: Franz*

Schmuttermayer

In late 1935, Muriel was treated at the Innsbruck nerve clinic by neuro-psychotherapist, [Dr. Franz Schmuttermayer](#). There was an immediate connection between the two and it was not long before Muriel was in love. In her diary she wrote (using the French form of Franz's name):

"François -- will it be the same when we meet [again]? Will you be the ardent, passionate François of your letters -- whose every word made me vibrate? Will you make me vibrate? Oh I want us to talk to each other, with time before us, soon -- I want to know just how things are with him -- what he is planning -- how his difficulties are shaping, but above all I want to know if the same thrill will be there for both of us when we are together" [Diary, "London 1935 to Kitzbühel 1936" December 21,

1935, pg. 52].

While she was with Franz, Muriel started to shake off the depression that had caused her so much pain. Although she was still in contact with Debonnaire, she felt less and less affected by her former partner's behavior. In March 1936, Muriel agreed to marry Franz and on September 11th, Muriel became Frau Schmuttermayer.

The family which consisted of [Muriel, Franz, Peter and Franz's mother](#) lived all together in Franz's small apartment in Innsbruck. Although head of the clinic, Franz's salary was barely enough for the four of them to live on. [Muriel and Franz](#) managed to get by.

An Occupied Austria

Everything changed when in March of 1938, German Nazi troops marched into Austria. In three days they formally occupied the country.

"My God, my God what a day. The whole of Austria has become National Socialists and German troops have entered the town -- aeroplanes flying all day over us. We don't know what to do. One hardly does go out of the house for if one doesn't wave a flag or wear a swastika, one gets molested. And our thoughts for the future are the blackest" [Diary, 1938, March 12, 1938, pg. 96].

Life in Austria was dangerous and Muriel wanted to leave. But since she had married an Austrian man her British passport was no longer valid. She was now [an Austrian citizen](#) and could not easily move back to England.

Elsa Sebald

[Elsa Sebald](#), a friend of the Schmuttermayers, played a large role in the end of Muriel's time in Austria.

Elsa was a 40 year old children's portrait painter married to a member of the German Consul. The couple had a fourteen year old son. After the rise of the Nazis party,

things became very difficult for Elsa because she was Jewish while her husband was not.

"Moreover, he was an enthusiastic adherent of Hitler. The boy, too, was a fanatic Nazi: he simply refused to accept that he was half-Jewish, and he wanted to repudiate his mother" [Short story and memoir, "Elsa Sebald and the Blue Lovebird", 1972].

One night Elsa came to Muriel's home, extremely distraught. That evening both her husband and son had told her they could no longer take the stigma of living with a Jew. Her husband felt he hadn't been promoted at work because of it and her son said he was despised at school for having a Jewish mother. They wanted her out of their lives immediately.

Promising to help however she could, Muriel insisted Elsa stay with her until they could figure things out. Through her mother's connections, Muriel eventually managed to get Elsa a work visa in England. The next morning Muriel took Elsa to the train station and watched while she got on the Arlsberg Express and escaped to England.

Although now safe in England, Elsa was miserable working as a domestic. She longed for the days before the Nazis when she had a husband and son who loved her. Muriel was sympathetic but could not help Elsa's situation any further. But she still was shocked when her mother called a year later to tell her Elsa had committed suicide.

Muriel later discovered that Elsa's husband had been so sure once Elsa was gone he would rise in the Nazi party. But that didn't happen.

"Things started deteriorating for him seriously; he was given a very minor position in an insignificant town in Czechoslovakia. [Her son], too, was being scorned as a half-Jew, and his aggressive pro-Nazi attitude was often ridiculed. I don't know what finally triggered off the climax: one night Elsa's husband went to his son's room, shot him and then shot himself" [Short story and memoir, "Elsa Sebald and the Blue Lovebird", 1972].

This news hit Elsa very hard. In the end her husband had placed the blame on her because she was Jewish. After

receiving the news, Elsa checked herself into a small hotel and took a large over-dose of pills.

"She was found the next morning, lying peacefully on her bed, a photograph of her son in her hand... On the table she had left a letter for me... Shall I ever cease feeling guilty about her?" [Short story and memoir, "Elsa Sebald and the Blue Lovebird", 1972].

Escaping Austria

Back in Austria in late August 1939, Muriel attended a formal party given by her neighbors, a Nazi Colonel and his wife. During the party, many of the German officers received calls for active war duty.

After the party ended, the Colonel went to the Schmuttermayer's to speak directly to Muriel. He urged her to leave for Switzerland immediately taking nothing but a suitcase as if going on a short trip.

"Although you have many friends among us," he said, "none of us will be here in a day or two's time, and couldn't help you, should difficulties arise. The authorities here do know that you are anti-Nazi and that you have even helped Jews escape" [Short story and memoir, "Elsa Sebald and the Blue Lovebird", 1972].

Frightened by this news, Muriel decided to take Peter and flee Austria. But Franz would not join them. He had his mother to look after and he could not leave his position at the clinic and start over in England. He was sure the Nazi invasion would not last.

"When I spoke my fears to Franz, he laughed and said there was absolutely no possibility of Hitler ever succeeding in Austria... I never quite understood how Franz's mentality worked... But I have come to think that he was just incapable of facing facts: he couldn't admit their reality... Even when both his clinics were taken from him and given to members of the Nazi party, he still couldn't really believe that this situation would last" [Short story and memoir, "Elsa Sebald and

the Blue Lovebird", 1972].

In the early morning hours on her second wedding anniversary, Muriel took Peter to the train station and quietly stole out of Austria not knowing if she'd ever see Franz again.

"I feel so desolate, so desperate. Nothing but a miracle can stop war now at this stage... No money -- no money at all, or means of earning any, that's the hopeless situation I am in... When I think of Franzl, my heart breaks... I can hardly bear it: my books, my piano -- all my diaries, photographs -- pictures... Rang up Franzl at night -- but worried so I could hardly speak" [Diary, 1938, Sept. 14, 1938, pg. 282].

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London in WWII, 1940-1946

After fleeing Austria in the late fall of 1938, [Muriel](#) returned to England. For the next couple of years she worked at establishing a

school. In April 1940 she rented a house at 34 Carlyle Square in London for her first official preparatory school.

As acknowledgment to Muriel's capabilities as headmistress, Dr. Margaret Lowenfeld, a renowned child psychologist periodically recommended the school to her patients. 34 Carlyle Square successfully opened on May first with eight students.

Peter

Soon after the first day of classes, Muriel returned Peter to his boarding school about ninety-five miles away from her in London.

Peter has returned to Stowe -- I fear I shall miss him terribly, for I could discuss almost anything with him and now I am alone again, even

though... surrounded by people"
[Diary, 1940, May 3, 1940, pg. 136].

As the days went on, Muriel became more and more worried by the news of German troops. She did not like being separated from Peter with an encroaching war.

The news is so alarming -- and one seems to be expecting the worst -- and yet we just *must* win the War! How could there be any sense in the world or in life at all if the Nazis were to dominate and ruin everything. Oh how gladly I would give up life to rid the world of Hitler" [Diary, 1940, May 27, 1940 pg. 160].

Concerned for Peter's safety, Muriel decided to send him overseas to Canada out of the way of almost certain war. She wrote to his headmaster at Stowe, J.F. Roxburgh and asked for his advice. Roxburgh agreed with Muriel it was best to send Peter out of harm's way.

"I want Peter to come tomorrow and stay the weekend -- for if I am really going to part with him, I want to talk to him so badly. There have been a variety of plans... The Canada one is the best idea" [Diary, 1940, July 3, 1940, pg. 197].

On August 9, 1940 Peter left for Canada. Muriel was so upset she was unable to even write a word about his departure in her diary.

Due to his education at Stowe School, Peter was too advanced to enter the Canadian public school system. So at the age of sixteen, [Peter was enrolled](#) spring semester 1941 at Trinity House, University of Toronto where he excelled in Modern Languages.

"Mother, I need your advice on this matter: Would it be better for me to continue taking German next year, or for me to drop it and take up

Italian?

You see, it is not possible to take all four languages together. The timetables would clash most horribly, and I would only be able to take Spanish at the expense of the other three. And I am loath to give up my German, because I want to keep up a high standard, I emphatically won't give up French, and I'd see the whole University in HELL before I surrender my Spanish -- and yet I would rather like to do a little Italian!... Dilemma. Question: WHAT AM I TO DO?" [Letter: Peter Boyd Bowman to Muriel Boyd Bowman, May 11, 1941].

The Orchard

During the 1940 London air raids, 34 Carlyle Square was bombed. Fortunately no was harmed, but Muriel was shaken by the experience. She immediately searched for a new location for the school. In September 1941 she rented The Orchard in Kings Langley which she converted into [a preparatory school](#) to prepare children for their public school entrance examinations.

That year, Dr. Lowenfeld sent one of her patients, Hamish Orr-Ewing, to the Orchard for schooling. Muriel was almost immediately taken by Hamish's father, Captain Hugh Orr-Ewing. Hugh later moved into the Orchard causing a great scandal as both of them were still married to other people. It would not be until 1947 when Muriel was able to obtain a divorce from Franz that she could marry Hugh.

[Two of Muriel's students from the Orchard became her life-long friends](#). Valerie Daniel was a troubled teenager who looked to Muriel for encouragement. They corresponded for many years and Valerie asked Muriel to be her

daughter's godmother. Another student, Adèle Leigh, became a well known British opera singer. Muriel often took her future students to see [Adèle sing](#) at Covent Gardens.

In 1945, Muriel lost her lease at the Orchard. She searched for a property that could be the perfect spot to start a girls finishing school. In late 1946 she purchased The Grove, [an estate located near the town of Sevenoaks just outside of London](#).

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Life at the Grove, 1947-1969

The [Grove Finishing School](#) opened in the fall of 1947. A school "for the individual coaching of girls in subjects of post-school education

and for vocational guidance," Muriel and her staff taught girls from all over the world courses in art history, music history, English literature, foreign languages, [Ikebana \(Japanese flower arrangement\)](#), cooking, elocution and secretarial courses.

While aiming at giving the same advantages of the usual finishing years on the Continent (with particular emphasis on modern languages and special courses in art and music), [Mrs. Orr-Ewing] can at the same time provide sound instruction in secretarial subjects, and girls can obtain the Pitman Secretarial Diploma at The Grove... Girls are helped to acquire social *savoir-faire* and a sensible understanding of domestic economy [The Grove Finishing School prospectus, c. 1955 pg. 3]

To help teach the girls at the Grove culture and society, Muriel involved them with the many charities, societies and associations events hosted at the Grove. See some of

the Grove group portraits: [1947](#), [1953](#), [1958](#), [1965](#)

Prince Akihito of Japan visits the Grove

In 1953, His Imperial Majesty Emperor Hirohito sent his young 16 year old son, Prince Akihito to represent Japan at the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. While on tour of Britain, [the Prince spent an evening at the Grove](#) playing table tennis with Muriel's second cousin, Michael Muschamp and dancing with the Grove girls at a ball in his honor.

Berthe Grimault

In 1957 Muriel offered a Grove scholarship to 14 year old Berthe Grimault, a poor French farm girl who had achieved fame for publishing her first novel. When Berthe arrived, Muriel was horrified to find her half-illiterate. She then discovered the majority of Berthe's book was actually written by the local village postmaster. The media rushed in when they learned about Berthe's scholarship calling her a "[pig girl amongst the debs](#)". After Berthe left the Grove in 1958 she published another novel with the village postmaster called *Berthe in Paradise* -- a surrealist fantasy based on her experiences in England. Muriel was asked to write the preface. On the inside flap of the [book jacket](#) it reads:

Berthe Grimault has now written a novel about an English school. No doubt many readers familiar with the circumstances of this young girl's recent life will regard it as auto-biographical, but it would be truer to call it a fantasy.

As Mrs. Orr-Ewing, Berthe's former headmistress, points out in her generous preface, no school was ever quite like this, even if some of the events can be traced directly or remotley to actual experience.

The book will however appeal to those who are interested in the author either as a phenomenon, or as a novelist. For the first group, it throws some light on the extraordinary mystery of a poorly educated

French peasant girl who, with the aid of Eliézer Fournier, the village postman, has now written three very unusual novels; for the second, it is a fascinating experience to inspect a small English community through the special eyes of a girl who found herself suddenly transported to paradise.

[Inside dust jacket flap, *Berthe in Paradise* by Berthe Grimault, W.H. Allen, London 1960]

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Community activism, 1949-1974

Cha-no-yu

Cha-no-yu is the ancient Japanese tradition of preparing a bowl of tea for honored guests. Muriel first saw [Cha-no-yu](#) in 1925 while living in Japan. She was so impressed that she found a tea master to teach her the ritual. In 1929 Muriel received her certificate granting permission to perform the tea ceremony. [She often performed it](#) for friends and guests at lectures, charity events and private parties.

British Association of Women Executives

In 1953 Madame Yvonne Foindant, head of the European women in business group, Les Femmes Chef d'Entreprises, asked [Tinou Dutry](#), a Belgium business woman living in England, to start a British branch for the organization. Muriel responded to Tinou's letter and in 1954 she became the first President of the British Association of Women Executives. Muriel was very active with the group, chairing meetings, organizing fund raising events and representing Britain at the Annual International Congresses.

Japan Society of London

In 1949 after a long period of inactivity, the Japan Society of London was revived by [Sir Robert Craigie, Major-General Roy Piggott, and Colonel J.W. Marsden](#). Remembering Muriel from Japan, Major-General Piggott specially asked her to become a member. She was very involved with the Society lecturing on Japanese topics such as Geisha, Cha-no-yu, and the History of Japanese Music. She also put on performances such as [Fujito, a Japanese Noh play](#) which Muriel translated herself.

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A new home in Buffalo, 1974-1994

In 1969, Muriel sold the Grove and moved to London where she continued to be active on many committees. By 1974, things were

getting difficult, so when her son, Peter called from the States inviting her to Buffalo, Muriel jumped at the chance.

Muriel readily took to Buffalo. She enjoyed performances at Artpark in Lewiston, NY and at the Chautauqua Institution. And she was very active with many UB Women's Club groups including the History of Art, History of Music and Bookclub. She died on April 15, 1994 in Buffalo, NY.

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Exhibition Events

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 » [Images from the special reception, March 21, 2007](#). The reception featured a demonstration of Cha-no-yu (the art of Japanese tea) to celebrate Meiko and her study of Japanese culture. Peter and Margit Boyd-Bowman were the honored guests.

» [Read a special brochure about Meiko and Cha-no-yu](#) [pdf file]

» [Images of the exhibit cases in the Special Collections Research Room, January 8 - April 30, 2007](#)

» [View a video of Meiko performing Chanoyu at the Grove, circa 1955](#) (video made available by Marvin Frankl)

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