

Selections from NDL collections

*Shichifukujin kotobuki hashiradate no zu*

Artist: Utagawa Toyokuni III, publisher: Ebisuya, published in: 1853. 35×24 cm, three sheets.  
Owned by the National Diet Library, Japan \* Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#)

Illustrated in this *nishiki-e* are the Shichifukujin (seven gods of good luck): Ebisu (on the far right), Daikokuten (to the left of Ebisu), Bishamonten (top center), Jurojin (left of Bishamonten), Hotei (just below Jurojin), Fukurokuju (left of Hotei), and Benzaiten (on the far left). The worship of the Shichifukujin is thought to have begun in the Muromachi period (1336-1573), and came to be widely appreciated by ordinary Japanese in the Edo period (1603-1867). Accordingly, various customs arose. From New Year's Day to January 7th, the people of Edo made pilgrimages to various temples and shrines that honored the Shichifukujin. This custom was called a Shichifukujin pilgrimage. And since the first dream of the year was said to foretell the year's fortune, many people liked to sleep with a picture of the Shichifukujin aboard a treasure-ship under their pillows. People believed that this would bring them a good dream. Thus the Shichifukujin were strongly associated with the New Year. In the center of this *nishiki-e*, there is a scaffolding made of logs, on which the Shichifukujin are trying to assemble a large structure in the shape of the Chinese character "壽," which stands for felicitations.

The design in which a large word is being built by combining large parts was a traditional design dating back to the Muromachi period. At the left of the picture, a crane is dancing in the sky and a boy has a *minogame* (tortoise) on a leash. Cranes and tortoises, especially *minogame*, are both symbols of longevity. Surrounding the title of the work in the top right are symbols of the Shichifukujin, such as the fishing rod of Ebisu and the stringed instrument of Benzaiten. With all these auspicious motifs, it is a picture full of good luck.

Utagawa Toyokuni III (1786-1864) was an *ukiyo-e* artist of late Edo period, and was a pupil of Utagawa Toyokuni I. He first called himself Kunisada, and succeeded to the name Toyokuni in 1844. (Although he claimed to be the second Toyokuni, he was actually the third.) He was splendid in drawing portraits of actors, beautiful women, and illustrations for picture books. Skilled in bringing fashionable elements into his work, Toyokuni gained popularity as an *ukiyo-e* artist.

(Translated by Shihoko Yokota)