

“Seven deities of good fortune on a treasure ship heading for port”

(by Hiroshige the Third, 1878)



(Collection of the Currency Museum, Institute for Monetary and Economic Studies, Bank of Japan)

This *nisiki-e* (colored woodblock print) depicts the *Shichi-fukujin* (seven deities of good fortune) on a *takara-bune* (ship laden with treasure). The treasure ship, with a dragon as its figurehead, has the Chinese character 宝 (*takara*), meaning “treasure,” on its sail. With a fishing rod in one hand and a sea bream in the other, Ebisu (the deity of bountiful fishing and business prosperity), depicted in the center, is leading the crew in carrying treasure and happiness to the port. Bishamon-ten (a guardian deity), to the left of the sail, is protecting the treasure. Around the bow are Jurojin (the deity of happiness and longevity), Benzai-ten (the goddess of music, eloquence and wealth), Fukurokuju (the deity of longevity), Daikoku-ten (the deity of rice farming and bountiful harvests), and Hotei (the deity of affluence), all celebrating the happiness and prosperity of the people. The sunrise is depicted on the left side of the *takara-bune*, with Mt. Fuji on the right. It was believed that sleeping with such a picture of the *Shichi-fukujin* aboard a *takara-bune* under your pillow would make you happy with auspicious dreams.

The verse on the left is a *kaibun* (a palindromic verse), which reads the same forward and backward. It reads:

Nagaki yo no To no neburu no Mina mezame, Nami nori fune no Oto no yoki kana.

(From the deep sleep

Of a long night

Waking

Sweet is the sound

Of the ship as it rides the waves.)

During the Muromachi period (1336–1573), it was already a custom among the Shogunate family and people of Kyoto to sleep with a picture of a treasure ship under their pillow when wishing to have auspicious dreams. This custom was popularized during the Edo period (1603–1867). Ihara Saikaku, an Osaka-born author of many famous novels and plays, wrote in his book entitled *Nippon Eitaigura* (1688): “Placing the picture of a *takara-bune* under the pillow when sleeping...has now become a widespread custom, and everyone worships the deities of prosperity.” This passage shows how ordinary people in those days longed to become wealthy and successful.

In Edo (now Tokyo), *Shichi-fukujin-môde* (a short pilgrimage to visit the temples and shrines of the seven deities of good fortune) became very popular, and the residents of the city came to highly value *nishiki-e* depicting the seven deities aboard a treasure ship heavily laden with gold, silver, and bags of rice.

From the beginning of the Meiji period to this day (1868–), the motif of the seven lucky deities bringing wealth and happiness from across the sea has continued to be used for a variety of items including decorative objects, money boxes, ornaments, and posters, illustrating the unchanging desire of the populace to receive these gifts from the gods.