

Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849)
Japan
Daikoku Lifting a Rice Bale
1825, Edo period (1600-1868)
color woodcut (*surimono*)
21.2 x 18.3 cm
Gift of William Bridges Thayer Memorial
0000.1394

Essay by Myenghee Son

Daikoku, one of the Seven Gods of Good Fortune (*Shichifukujin*), lifts a heavy rice bale with his two feet, on which a mallet and a rooster are piled. In addition to this acrobatic pose, his ostentatious red robe and hat make him look like a street entertainer. In contrast to the rooster that sits peacefully atop the mallet, Daikoku grimaces, looking upward as if it is too painful to struggle to balance the weighty burden. At a glance, this exquisite print created by Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849) seems to be just a humorous picture. However, a careful analysis of the print reveals its enjoyable but challenging intellectual dimensions as well as Hokusai's gifted design talent for *surimono*, which are privately published woodblock prints combining image and text.

Daikoku, literally meaning "Great Black One," can be traced to two Indian deities, Mahākāla, a protective deity and adversary of the forces of evil who Buddhist monasteries assigned a special role as guardian of the kitchen, and Kubera, a god of abundance and wealth, protector of travelers, guardian of underground treasures, and deity of productivity. The typical iconography of Daikoku seems to have been derived from images of Kubera, frequently portrayed as a chubby, stocky, and smiling dwarf with fat earlobes and a mustache. The oldest existing images of Daikoku in Japan, which are dated to the late Heian period (794-1185), have serious and fierce expressions, reminding us of his role as a protective Buddhist deity who repels evil. The Buddhist Daikoku was assimilated with the native deity Ōkuninushi, and by the Kamakura period (1185-1333) the iconography depicting Daikoku

dressed in secular Japanese garb had become well established. From the Muromachi period (1392-1573) on, Daikoku became an object of popular veneration as the god of prosperity, worshiped among villagers as the god of the fields and protector of rice crops, and by merchants as one of the seven gods of good fortune.

In Japan, the popular form of Daikoku is a chubby and smiling man seated or standing on bales of rice with a large sack full of riches on his shoulder or with the sack next to him, being nibbled by rats. He often brandishes a mallet of prosperity, called *uchide no kozuchi*, in his right hand. This mallet can miraculously produce anything desired when struck. Thus, his image, which is popularly venerated, is often worn as a good luck charm. Hokusai's depiction of Daikoku is obviously distinctive from its typical iconography, as Daikoku is lying on his back. The reason can be found in the relationship to the print's poems, which is a distinguishing feature of *surimono*.

The first poem by Denkakutei Yoneji describes the curled shoot of a tiny bracken fern rising from the earth: "Raising the golden ore of earth with bold strength, thrusting forth its fist: a bracken fern" (*Aragane no tsuchi o sasagete isamashiku chikara kobushi o idasu sawarabi*). The second verse by Yomo Utagaki sings about tiny pines: "We pile them up; they seem as tall as an eternity of years; the tiny pine trees from the Rat Day; the rice bales stacked like cedar trees" (*Tsumiagete chitose no takasa kurabe min ne no hi no komatsu suginari no yone*). Both of the poems deal with themes signifying spring. *Surimono* were a fashionable and sophisticated means of celebrating the New Year among the literati, especially *kyōka* poets. The New Year was significantly regarded as the rebirth of nature in spring. Accordingly, the verse component of *surimono* usually focuses on the related celebratory themes of early spring established in *waka* (court verse) as in the poems of this *surimono*.

It is challenging for artists to combine different poems in tone and approach into a

single image when poets commissioned a *surimono*. Hokusai displays his ingenuity in designing an image to link these different two poems. He cleverly adopts Daikoku, the god associated with the day of the rat and with rice bales, as a main motif for the illustration. Unlike the typical iconography of Daikoku, Hokusai transforms him into an acrobat thrusting his feet upward to balance a golden rice bale. This posture is reminiscent of the bracken fern rising from the golden ore of earth in the first poem. Also, Hokusai, in turn, piles up his other attribute, a magic mallet, and also a rooster on the rice bale “as tall as an eternity of years.”

The rooster perched on top of the mallet displays the multi-layered complexities of *surimono*. A rooster usually has no association with Daikoku, and it is not referenced in the poems. Its depiction can be understood in the context of the New Year. The rooster explicitly signifies that the *surimono* was published and distributed in the Japanese Year of the Rooster. Also, a rooster itself is a symbol of the New Year. In ancient China and Japan, on the first day of the New Year’s period, it was customary to sacrifice a rooster and spread its blood on one’s gate for protection against evil spirits. This practice was explained in connection with the cock’s crow ushering in the New Year. Therefore, a rooster atop the pile can be interpreted as a visual sign saying that the New Year of the Rooster has come! As another connection to the rooster, a hen and chicks nibble rice bales behind Daikoku, instead of rats, which are typically associated with him.

Given the use of *surimono* as gifts and congratulatory greetings for the New Year, the representation of Daikoku, one of the Seven Gods of Good Fortune, delivers a blessing of the New Year for luck and wealth to the recipients. Also, this *surimono* prays for peace in the year for them. Here, the oversized magic mallet of Daikoku is transformed into a signal drum, with the addition of the cock on its top, which has the decoration of a geometric pattern symbolizing *yin* and *yang* on its surface. In the legendary times of China, a large drum was kept on the main gate of the palace to assemble the troops. Under the rule of the famous

Emperor Yao (traditionally c. 2356-2255 B.C.E.), peace being prevalent, the drum fell into disuse, and became a roosting place for fowls. Afterward, the cock on a drum became a symbol of peace. On close inspection, the triple *tomoemon* pattern, three curled tadpole shapes inside a circle, reveals three *daikon* radishes, Daikoku's favorite food. Thus, Hokusai successfully combines the verses, the Daikoku cult, and the ritualistic features of *surimono* into a single image.

This creative design shows Hokusai's genius as a *surimono* artist. Even though Hokusai achieved world-famous renown for his great commercial prints, especially, "The Great Wave" from the series *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji*, he was in fact the most sophisticated, prolific, influential and popular *surimono* artist. During his seven-decade-long career as an artist, he designed more than one thousand *surimono*. Most of his *surimono* were produced during the years in which he used his most famous art name, 'Hokusai,' from 1798 to 1810. However, this square-shaped *surimono* with vivid color is distinctive from his smaller, oblong *surimono* in pale color created during this period like the *Queen Mother of the West*, which is also featured in this exhibition. This type of *surimono* was popular between the mid-1810s and mid-1830s.

This *surimono* has an inscription signed "Zen Hokusai Iitsu Hitsu," meaning "painted by Iitsu, changed from the former Hokusai." Hokusai frequently changed his art names and seals, and each major change coincided with a significant shift in his style, direction and even self-perception. Hokusai used "Iitsu," literally meaning "One Year Old Again," from 1820, when he reached the age of sixty, until 1833. In East Asia, the number sixty means accomplishing one sixty-year calendar cycle and starting another one, indicating one's longevity. Thus, "Iitsu" was an appropriate art name for sixty-year-old Hokusai who began to live another cycle. It was during the "Iitsu" period when he designed the various series of polychrome prints best known to the public today: *Thirty-six Views of Mt. Fuji*, *A Tour of*

Waterfalls of the Provinces, Unusual Views of Celebrated Bridges in the Provinces and others.

During the early “Itsu” period, however, he refocused on non-commercial *surimono* in the square *shikishiban* format that usually measures approximately 21 by 19 centimeters, as in this print. He created almost ninety designs until 1825, and then he left the production of *surimono* prints to his pupils. Thus, this print for the Year of the Rooster, 1825, might have been one of his last *surimono*, revealing his mature skill in *surimono* design.

In addition to Hokusai’s innovative design, *Daikoku Lifting a Rice Bale* catches the viewer’s eyes with the remarkable craftsmanship as well as high-quality materials.

Embossing, used with sophistication in the patterned areas like Daikoku’s clothing, rice bales, and feathers of the rooster, creates texture, giving a three-dimensional effect. The rich use of finest quality colorants and the thick paper of the *shikishiban* format reflect features of the heyday of *surimono* prints. With its extraordinary attention to its materials and design, this *surimono* was a most appropriate New Year ritual gift, as it displays bright and vivid colors, fine paper, felicitous subjects, and propitious motifs of the New Year.

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