INFLUENCE

The Printing Press

Perhaps no other invention has changed the world as much as the invention of the printing press. The rapid spread of Renaissance ideas was made possible when Johann Gutenberg (1399–1468) of Mainz, Germany, invented the mechanical printing press around the mid-1400s. It used movable type that could be set in forms called blocks and print two side-by-side pages at a time.

The Chinese had been printing for centuries, using limited movable type. They had also invented paper. Knowledge of both these inventions moved along the Silk Road. Islamic civilization had a paper mill operating in Baghdad as early as 794. Gutenberg took knowledge of movable type and applied it to the Roman alphabet to create an efficient printing press that printed quickly on both paper and vellum.

The first European book printed was the Gutenberg Bible, around 1454 or 1455. The ability to mechanically print books meant there were many more books in circulation; it was much faster than copying a book by hand, the process that had been used since writing began. Books made humanist ideas and classical Greek and Roman texts easily accessible. As books became increasingly accessible, more people began to learn to read and write. Soon, people wanted books printed in their own native languages rather than just Latin. They also wanted books on a greater variety of popular topics, such as travelogues and romances.

By 1500, there were more than 200 printing presses in Venice, printing presses in 250 German towns, and presses in nearly all the cities of the Netherlands. The main book publishers, Froben (the Netherlands), Estienne (France), and Caxton (England), set such high standards for printing and publishing that they have rarely been improved upon to this day.

This portrait of Gutenberg by André Thévet, a French artist, was printed in 1584, almost 100 years after Gutenberg died. How would the artist have known what Gutenberg looked like?

vellum: fine parchment made from the hide of calves

English citizens in 1500 spoke dozens of regional dialects with different words and spellings. As William Caxton began translating and printing books, he chose to use the East Midland dialect, thus beginning the standardization of the English language as we know it today.
There was much controversy over the first printed books.

- First, there was the problem of accuracy. Often books that had been copied by hand were full of errors or omissions. These errors had to be carefully edited before the books could be published. Many did not agree with the changes to the texts.

- Not everyone liked the appearance of the printed books. In fact, some wealthy patrons hired scribes to hand copy printed books, as had been the method of creation for centuries before. Hand-copied books were written on calfskin parchment and often beautifully illustrated. Some printers initially left room at the sides of each page for artists to illustrate. However, because most books were printed on paper, the illustrations were not as beautiful as those done on parchment.

- Some leaders of the Roman Catholic Church did not want the common people to have copies of the Bible in their own language. They believed people might think they no longer needed priests to interpret the Bible for them.

An illuminated page, Gutenberg Bible. Gutenberg Bibles, the first substantial books printed with movable type, were printed at Johann Gutenberg’s shop in Mainz, Germany, and completed in 1454 or 1455.

The beauty of the printed books was in the fonts. Aldus Manutius (1450–1515) was the first publisher to develop and use italic type and to publish books in pocket-sized editions. Today, Aldus type fonts are still used in document production. A major design and layout software company that developed PageMaker and InDesign programs chose Aldus, in 1985, as its corporate name.

**Reflect and Respond**

1. Do you think people appreciated the first printed books? Consider the perspectives of different people: authors, scribes, the wealthy, church officials, scholars, common people.

2. Think about how ideas, such as new musical styles, new technologies, and new words, spread throughout today’s world. Choose one of these ideas and use a pictorial model to illustrate the spread of music, technology, or new words.

3. How would the invention of the printing press have helped to create a sense of identity and self-esteem among specific groups of people?

4. Discuss with your classmates whether you think the invention of the silicon microchip used in modern computers might have changed human worldviews even more than the invention of the printing press.