

Johannes Gutenberg (l.c. 1398-1468) was the inventor of the printing press (c. 1450) who seems to have developed the device from wine and oil presses of the time. Gutenberg's printing press not only revolutionized book making but literally changed the world in that ideas could now be shared over long distances with a wider audience than ever before.

The Gutenberg press also suggested the concept of machines taking the place of human labor in delivering uniform products to a mass market. Prior to Gutenberg, books were copied by hand or made using woodblock printing, which was time consuming, expensive, and resulted in a product few could afford. Afterwards, books could be produced quickly, cheaply, and uniformly. Every copy of a book was exactly like any other and, in a world where scribal error could often change meaning, this was a significant innovation.

Anyone who could write could now have their works printed and distributed and anyone who could read and had some disposable income could buy those works. Gutenberg understood the value of his invention and believed it would make him a wealthy man, especially after he printed the Bible in 1556, but his chief investor, Johann Fust (l.c. 1400-1466), called in his debt early, seized the press, and turned the operation of it over to his adopted son (and son-in-law) Peter Schoffer (l.c. 1425-c.1503). Fust and Schoffer then continued to print the Bible as well as other works and took credit for the invention of the press.

GUTENBERG'S PRESS PROVIDED THE MEANS FOR MASS CONSUMPTION OF IDEAS ON A SCALE NEVER IMAGINED POSSIBLE BEFORE.

Although Gutenberg was recognized as the inventor of the press by the Archbishop Adolph von Nassau in 1465, and awarded a stipend, he died in relative poverty and was buried without fanfare in a church cemetery in Mainz. His invention is understood as one of the most significant contributions to world culture and understanding in history. The printing press in Europe enabled:

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An increase in the volume of books produced compared to handmade works

An increase in the access to books in terms of availability and cost

An increase in authors published, including unknown writers

Successful authors earning a living solely through writing

An increase in the use and standardization of the vernacular as opposed to Latin in printed works

An increase in literacy rates

The spread of ideas concerning religion, history, science, poetry, art, and daily life

An increase in the accuracy of canonical texts

Movements could now be more easily organized by leaders who had no physical contact with their followers

The creation of public libraries

The censorship of books by concerned authorities (Cartwright, 2020)

Gutenberg's press facilitated and empowered the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation, the Age of Enlightenment, and the Scientific Revolution by providing the means for mass consumption of ideas on a scale never imagined possible before.

Early Life & Education

Although the city of Mainz declared 1400 as Gutenberg's official year of birth in 1900, the date is unknown and generally held to be between 1394-1404. He was the second of three children born to the aristocratic couple Friele Gensfleisch zur Laden and Else Wyrich. His father was "of the House of Gutenberg", the name of his ancestors, and Johannes either took the name or shortened "Johannes Gensfleisch zu Gutenberg" to Johannes Gutenberg. Although the question of his name has been debated, it is unknown how or when he went by Gutenberg as almost nothing is known of his early life and very little about him overall.

Mainz Old Town

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His father was a wealthy goldsmith in Mainz and his mother came from nobility. Johannes is thought to have worked as an apprentice to his father in the mint. In 1411, when an uprising against the aristocrats of Mainz forced many into exile, Johannes' family moved to one of his mother's estates in Eltville am Rhein. In 1418 he is thought to have been enrolled at the University of Erfurt where he may have studied goldsmithing. A student by the name of Johannes de Altavilla is on record there for that year and Altavilla is the Latin form of Eltville am Rhein. By the time he was at Erfurt he would have already been literate in German and Latin, the two languages evident in his later work.

THERE WAS A DEMAND FOR BOOKS AMONG THE NOBILITY AS WELL AS THE EMERGING LITERATE MIDDLE CLASS.

His father died in 1419 and he received an inheritance, but nothing is known of his life between 1419-1434 when a letter dated March 1434 places him in Strasbourg. Court records for the year 1436-1437 suggest he broke a marriage agreement to a woman named Ennelin but who she was is unknown as are any details of this event. In 1439 he is on record as investing in a business venture involving highly polished mirrors. Christian pilgrims visiting sites in large numbers could not always get close enough to the holy relic to derive its spiritual power and so it was thought that mirrors, held up above the crowd to reflect the relic, could catch some of its essence.

The city of Aachen was planning a grand exhibit of relics from Charlemagne's collection and Gutenberg went in with some others to finance the production of a large number of mirrors they would sell to the crowd. A flood and plague canceled the exhibit, however, and Gutenberg and his associates were left with hundreds of mirrors no one wanted. There seems to be some suggestion that the mirror venture was Gutenberg's idea because it is said he needed to placate the others by promising to share with them a secret project he had been working on that would make them all wealthy men. This secret project is thought to have been the printing press.