



Master Makers of The Book

*Being a consecutive Story of the Book from
a Century before the Invention of Printing
through the Era of the Doves Press*

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I · FORERUNNERS OF ALDUS

Why the Printed Book Came into Being

Books have become so intimate a part of our everyday life that few of us stop to realize what it would mean to be without them. As long ago as 1672 Thomas Bartholin wrote, "Without books, God is silent, justice dormant, natural science at a stand, philosophy lame, letters dumb, and all things involved in Cimmerian darkness." Yet books, as we know them, came into being less than five centuries ago. The manuscript volume of the sixth century, or even of the fifteenth, was a book, but, because of the cost involved in its production, its usefulness in disseminating knowledge and culture was limited to the class which really required it least. Until the invention of printing liberated the Book to the masses, civilization was held in check by the wealthy princes and patrons of art, whose prestige and power rested in perpetuating the ignorance of the people whom they ruled.

To the ancients, the magnificent handwritten, illuminated volumes were far more than objects of

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art or things of beauty: they were the tangible tribute paid by the cultured class to the thought of the author in its passage to the reader, using the written page as vehicle. This gem of thought was to them far more precious than any costly jewel. These true booklovers gave permanence to it by employing accomplished scribes to write it out, letter by letter, on the leaf of parchment; they enhanced its beauty by adding illuminated embellishments executed by famous artists; and they gave protection to it by enclosing the written and enriched pages in sumptuous bindings, in which gold, silver, and even precious jewels were sometimes actually inlaid.

This was the approach to the Book on the part of the old-time collectors; but there was also a practical use to which the handwritten volume was put. In it were inscribed the basic truths upon which rested the spiritual welfare of the world, and by its means the Church recorded and disseminated those doctrines which received its approval.

Thus a large percentage of the original manuscript volumes were duplicated by scribes in religious establishments. The primary object of this duplication was the desire to secure, by exchange, copies of other original manuscripts owned by other monasteries. At first, the copying was done by

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individual monastic scribes, who devoted six hours a day, as a part of their religious duty, to the laborious task of writing out on parchment the text of the original which lay in front of them. In the cloisters of Gloucester Cathedral the windows which were assigned to these scribes are still pointed out to interested visitors. No artificial light was permitted, for fear of injury to the original manuscript. Later, the more important monasteries established *scriptoria*, or writing rooms, and this greatly increased the facilities for producing additional copies of important manuscripts. It has been said that more than half the literary work of Europe was executed in religious houses.

The *scriptorium* was usually a large room located over the chapter house. In it were placed twenty to thirty writing desks, at each of which a monk would seat himself, with a sheet of parchment spread out before him, upon which he inscribed the words that came to him from a reader who sat upon a raised platform, assigned to this duty because of his peculiar familiarity with the subject matter of the volume. An "edition," in those early days, was limited to the number of desks the *scriptorium* could contain. Silence was strictly enforced, such inter-communication as was required being accomplished by means of an elaborate system of signs. If a scribe required a missal,

for instance, for the purpose of reference, he extended his hands and made the motion of turning over leaves, adding the sign of the cross; if he desired some pagan volume, he supplemented his movement of turning leaves by scratching his ear like a dog!

It is easy to understand how so many errors crept into the early manuscript volumes: the air in the room became heavy, the voice of the reader became tired, the hand of the scribe became cramped from continued use. All this is of importance when we come later to a consideration of the printed book, which in many cases was put into type directly from the handwritten volume, because it emphasizes the necessity of the editorial work which had to be done by the early printers upon the manuscript in order to secure even comparative accuracy.

As time went on, the wealthy collectors desired to add to their libraries volumes which were not ecclesiastical in nature, and this resulted in encouraging secular scribes to take up the art of handlettering. The volumes thus produced, as a rule, are finer examples of the art, having been executed under more favorable conditions. The work was done by scribes and illuminators who adopted the profession because they loved it, instead of by those who performed it for six hours a day as a part of their religious routine.

The development of the handlettering in the various volumes is a story in itself. The earliest books in Western handwritings show the Roman capitals, with which we are familiar from the inscriptions on ancient monuments. In the seventh and eighth centuries, handlettering assumed national characteristics, out of which came the Merovingian style in France, the Lombardic in Italy, and the Visigothic in Spain. All these were involved and complicated, and thus impractical. It remained for Emperor Charlemagne, at the end of the eighth century, to establish the Carolingian School at Tours, with Alcuin of York at its head, from which came the alphabet with its capitals (majuscules) and lower-case letters (minuscules) as we know it today.

This is of supreme importance in the evolution of the Book, as the Italian scribes of the fifteenth century developed the Carolingian hand to its highest point of excellence, and the early Italian printers, in turn, based the design of their first types upon this handlettering. Germany alone held out against the Roman style, developing, during the next century, the angular and less legible Gothic letter. The Gothic design, as seen in the early German examples, is a definite and direct echo of the German handwriting. It seems curious that Charlemagne should have summoned an Eng-

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What John Gutenberg really discovered was not the art of printing from type, but rather the fact that individual types might be joined together to form words, and individual words so combined as to form sentences. As a matter of fact, the only thing he actually invented was the composing stick to hold the type in the hand after the letters were arranged in proper sequence. He devised the method of casting movable metal type, and improved the mechanism of the hand press (already in use for half a century in printing blocks) so that larger sheets could be worked.

Centuries before Gutenberg the Greeks and the Romans had printed from stamps, and the Koreans had even cut individual characters in metal. If any one of these peoples had possessed the wit to join these individual stamps into words, as Gutenberg did, printed books would have come into being several hundred years earlier. In that case, the art of printing would inevitably have found its way to Constantinople, and it is quite conceivable that the Renaissance should have applied itself to the East rather than to the West.

Curiously enough, John Gutenberg is a much more mysterious figure than many of his contemporaries who contributed less to the welfare of mankind. We know that he was born in 1397 or 1398 of a noble family of Mayence, his father,

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Frilo Gutenberg, holding the position of Tax Receiver, or General Accountant, of that city. His youth was passed in the small village of Eltville, whence he went to Strassburg. Here, in 1440, he established himself in the manufacture of looking glasses, and was soon recognized by his neighbors as an inventive genius and a man of scientific attainments.

During his business association in Strassburg Gutenberg was hard pressed for money, and from the court records it is apparent that he found it much easier to borrow than to repay. It is by means of the accounts of the numerous litigations in which he became involved that we gain most of our authentic information. When his partners in Strassburg brought suit against Gutenberg to recover certain advances, the complaint states that he is believed to have devoted the borrowed money to experiments in "a certain art," and this art is supposed to refer to the art of printing.

By 1448 Gutenberg was back again in Mayence, and two years later he entered into his famous contract with John Fust, a wealthy goldsmith of that city. By this time Gutenberg was evidently prepared to disclose the nature of the invention upon which he had been engaged. Fust undertook to loan him 800 golden gulden at six per cent. interest, which sum Gutenberg agreed to use in estab-

lishing a printing office, pledging the contents of this workshop to his creditor by way of security. When the amount advanced proved too little to accomplish its purpose, Fust added an additional loan of 800 golden gulden.

The continuing delays caused Fust to become impatient, and in 1455 he brought suit against Gutenberg to recover his original advance. Gutenberg was without resources, and, in spite of his vigorous protests, this earliest established printing office passed out of his hands into those of Fust. Some say that Fust's motive in foreclosing was not highly altruistic — that Gutenberg had already demonstrated by the uncompleted work in his shop the importance and commercial value of his invention, and that Fust opportunely exercised his legal rights to secure fame and profits far beyond the meager six per cent. interest.

Working with Gutenberg in the printing office was a young artisan named Peter Schoeffer, of whom no details are recorded beyond his connection with this early adventure. Fust, perhaps in anticipation of his unfriendly litigation with Gutenberg, brought about Schoeffer's marriage with his daughter, Christina. Thus, having disposed of the inventor, the worthy (or unworthy) goldsmith provided himself with the practical association necessary to continue the work which

Gutenberg had begun, and the famous partnership of Fust and Schoeffer was established.

We may assume from the dates that the so-called *Gutenberg Bible* was well under way at the time the earlier partnership was dissolved, and that Gutenberg is entitled to the credit for its type, its presswork, and the general *format*; but there is no definite evidence to confirm this. The volumes bear no printer's signature, the date of 1456 being established only by a rubricator's note on a defective copy now at the Bibliothèque Nationale, in Paris. Gutenberg's name appears on no example of printing in existence.

When Gutenberg's *Bible* was produced in 1456, it was looked upon as an extraordinary mechanical achievement, but no one could have foreseen its full significance. The obstacles which at that time surrounded the printing of books must have seemed almost insurmountable. Each type letter had to be especially designed (based upon the hand letter of the scribe) and then cut in wood or metal. The compositor himself had to be taught how to combine the letters in his composing stick, struggling with the difficulties of maintaining regularity in the distance between the stems of the various characters, as required to produce a harmonious appearance upon the printed page. There were no iron chases, such as are used today, in which the

locked up and held rigid for the press, and the method then known was to bore holes in the various type characters, through which a brass thread was run, and then tied as tightly as might be to hold the forme in place.

Fust and Schoeffer continued their business with success, while Gutenberg is said to have made unavailing efforts to reestablish himself. In 1460 he became one of the equeries of Alphonso II, Elector of Mayence, and he is supposed to have died in that city about 1468. A long controversy, intended to deprive the unfortunate Gutenberg of even the fruits of discovery, has been waged by bibliographers who have claimed that Laurence Koster, of Haarlem, was the real inventor of the art of printing. The preponderance of evidence, however, seems to show that Koster's books were printed from wooden blocks on which the letters were cut by hand, rather than from movable types, which form the basis of Gutenberg's discovery.

In spite of the advantage of priority gained by Fust and Schoeffer, and the other printing establishments which immediately sprang up in Germany, supremacy in the art of printing quickly passed to another country. Italy, in the last half of the fifteenth century, had become the home of learning and was the natural objective for workmen, who, having served their apprenticeships in

Germany, sought out the country where princes might reasonably be expected to become patrons of the new art, where manuscripts were already available for copy, and where the public was both able and willing to purchase the products of the press.

Credit for introducing the art into Italy, in 1464, is due to Juan Turrecremata, Abbot of the Monastery of Saint Scholastica, in Subiaco, a small hill town about thirty miles from Rome. Turrecremata became Abbot of Saint Scholastica in 1455. In the monastery at that time were several German monks, who, before leaving their home country, had learned of Gutenberg's discovery that movable letters might be placed together to form words, and words so combined as to form sentences, as put into practical operation by Fust and Schoeffer in Mayence. Through these monks, the learned Abbot became interested in the possibilities of the new art, and he made overtures to two German printers, Conrad Sweynheim of Mayence and Arnold Pannartz of Prague, to establish within the monastery what became the earliest printing office in Italy. These two printers are supposed to have been fugitives from Mayence after the siege of 1462, and they may even have been employed by Gutenberg himself. Sweynheim was a wood engraver by trade, so it is supposed that the responsi-