



The Matrix Mission

Johannes Gutenberg and the printing press

Gutenberg's great invention

Johannes Gutenberg played an incredibly important part in the history of Europe. His great invention was a printing press that could use movable type. 'Movable type' means that the blocks used for printing the letters can be moved around and used more than once, so that you can use the same letter blocks to print lots of different books quite quickly.

Copying it out

Before Gutenberg's invention, in Europe, books were always written by hand. Even quite a short book could take months to write, and a long book like the Bible could take several years. And even when you had finished writing it all out, you still only had one copy of the book. If you wanted another copy, you would have to write it all out again ... Gutenberg's invention speeded up the process and meant that it was easier, quicker and cheaper to make books than ever before.



Fact Millennium man

In 1999, Gutenberg came in at number 1 in a competition to vote for the most important people of the millennium. (You can see the full list at <http://rhsweb.org/library/1000PeopleMillennium.html>). But when Gutenberg died, in 1468, almost no one had heard of him. He didn't make very much money from his amazing invention, and none of the books he printed even had his name on them.

Ingredients for an invention

Working with metal

We don't know very much about Gutenberg's life, but we do know that he worked as a goldsmith before he became a printer (and many people think that his father was also a goldsmith). So he knew a lot about working with metal, which may have helped him to make the metal 'types' - the letter blocks used in printing.

Pressing wine

We also know that Gutenberg lived for many years in the German city of Mainz, which is in a wine-producing region. He would have seen wooden wine-presses which were used to squeeze the juice out of grapes in order to make wine. These too might have helped to give him the idea for his printing press.

The perfect paper

The other ingredient Gutenberg needed for his invention was paper! During Gutenberg's lifetime, paper that is like the sort we use nowadays started to arrive in Europe from Asia. By the time Gutenberg was grown up, there were several paper mills in Mainz producing the paper he needed for his printing press. So the time was right for his great invention ...

Did Gutenberg invent printing?

Gutenberg was probably the first person in Europe to invent a printing press that used movable type.

However, Gutenberg was not the first person in the world to print books this way. In about 1045 - over 400 years before Gutenberg - a Chinese inventor called Bi Sheng was printing books using movable type. Bi Sheng's type was made of porcelain (a sort of fine china). And as early as 1234, printers in Korea were using movable type made of metal, rather like Gutenberg's.

So why was Gutenberg so important?

The idea spreads ...

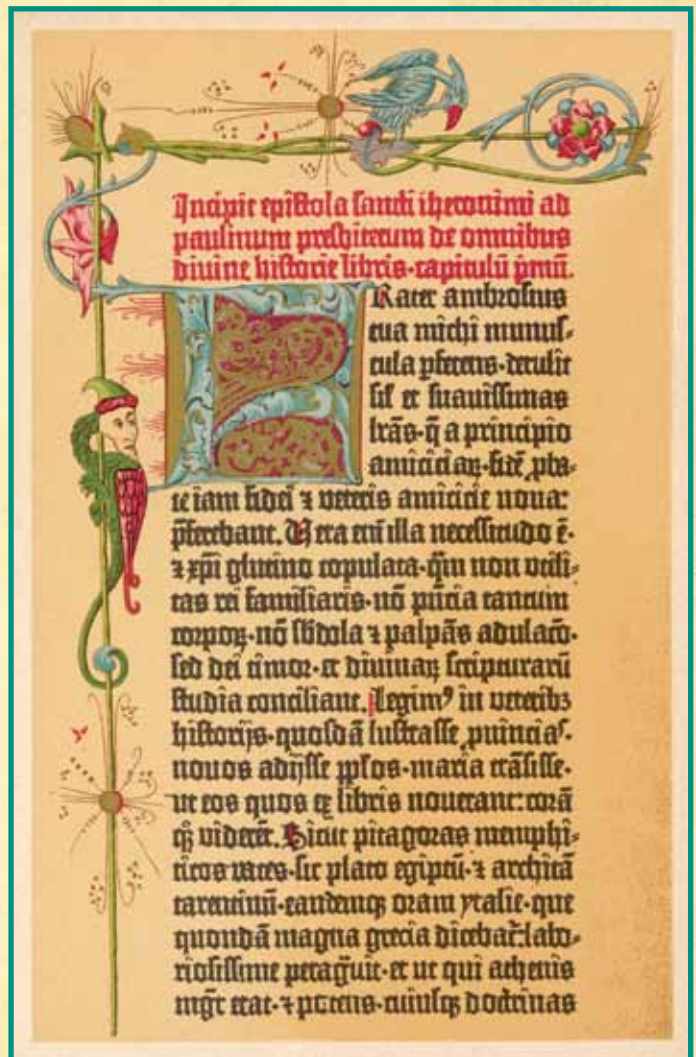
Even though Gutenberg may not have been the first person in the world to have the idea of a printing press using movable type, his invention was still extremely important. Nobody knows whether Gutenberg had heard of the Chinese or Korean printing presses - it is quite likely that he came up with the idea for his printing press on his own. After Gutenberg had invented his press, other people quickly saw how useful it was and developed their own printing presses. (In fact, Leonardo da Vinci suggested a number of small improvements to the press's basic design.) After this, printing spread through Europe very fast.

Books for everyone

Early printed books were still very expensive. For example, a copy of Gutenberg's Bible, printed in 1455, cost about three times as much as an ordinary worker such as a clerk could earn in a year. However,

printed books were still much, much cheaper than the old handwritten books, and in quite a short time, books became cheaper still. This meant that ordinary people could read or even own books. And because of this, even poor people began to learn to read and write, which meant that they could improve their lives.

Before Gutenberg, only very rich people could own books. But now, because of Gutenberg's invention, books and knowledge have spread throughout the world.



Some more websites to explore

- A website with information about Gutenberg and printing, including the chance to look at pages from a Gutenberg Bible: <http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/exhibitions/permanent/gutenberg/>
- A webpage with information about Bi Sheng, the Chinese inventor who invented movable type over 900 years ago. <http://history.cultural-china.com/en/50History6061.html>